

THICH NHAT HANH THEN AND NOW

by **Daniel J. Adams**

I

It has been twenty years since that last day of April 1975 when Saigon fell and the Vietnam War finally came to an end. On April 30, 1995 there were celebrations in Vietnam and sober reflection in the United States. One of the major architects of the war, then secretary of defense Robert McNamara, publicly admitted in a recently published book that the war was a tragic mistake. This was a war that deeply touched my generation. Some of my friends fought in that war, my nephew was seriously wounded, several of my childhood friends were conscientious objectors, and one of my friends was captured by the Vietcong while on a reporting assignment and later forced to live in exile in Canada as a draft resister for a number of years until granted a presidential pardon. Most of my graduate school education took place against a background of antiwar demonstrations, draft card burning protests, confrontations with riot police, and simmering campus unrest.

This was also a war that deeply touched Thomas Merton, and this was most obvious in his encounter with the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. During a trip to the United States in 1966 Thich Nhat Hanh visited Merton at Gethsemani and the two men immediately found that they had much in common. Both were monks, both were dissidents who strongly opposed the war, and both were contemplatives with an openness to each other's religious tradition. Merton was so moved by this encounter that he wrote a brief essay entitled "Nhat Hanh is My Brother" in which he stated that he felt more of brother to this Vietnamese Buddhist monk than he did to many American Christians. Fearing for Thich Nhat Hanh's safety when he returned to Vietnam, he appealed for others to support him in every possible way.

Thich Nhat Hanh gained considerable international fame with the publication of his book, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, in 1967. During that same year he was nominated by Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize. The professor at the University of Saigon and noted poet soon became known as a leader in the Vietnamese peace movement. Later he assumed the role of chairman of the Buddhist delegation to Paris peace talks which sought to negotiate an end to the war. Then, in 1975, the war finally came to an end, but what became of Thich Nhat Hanh?

II

Because of his strong opposition to the war Thich Nhat Hanh was not acceptable to the South Vietnamese government. However, he fell out of favor with the North Vietnamese government as well due to his forceful criticism of totalitarianism and the suppression of religion. Like so many dissidents before him, Thich Nhat Hanh was forced into permanent exile. He eventually settled in southern France and founded "Plum Village" where other Vietnamese exiles and western student of Zen meditation live in community. In addition to his teaching in "Plum Village," Thich Nhat Hanh has also found time to write at least sixty books and make occasional lecture tours to other countries. Included were periods of teaching at such well-known universities as Columbia and the Sorbonne.

Thich Nhat Hanh has become well-known in Buddhist circles for the simplicity of his teaching which stresses three major themes. The first is being mindful of the present moment. His views are somewhat similar to Paul Tillich's concept of "the eternal now." According to Thich Nhat Hanh the present is ground-

Daniel J. Adams lives in Chonju, Korea, where he serves as Associate Professor of Theology at Hanil Theological Seminary. He is the author of *Thomas Merton's Shared Contemplation: A Protestant Perspective* (1979). He is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and is a member of The International Thomas Merton Society.



DANIEL J. ADAMS

ed in the past and the future hinges on the present. Therefore, the present moment is what is most important. We must always be mindful of the present moment if we wish to take care of the future.

In a recent lecture he suggested that husbands and wives should always take time to breathe deeply three times before speaking to one another after a day's absence. This slight pause will make both husband and wife aware of the present moment and the impact that it will have on the future. Thich Nhat Hanh believes that many arguments and hurt feelings could be avoided if we take the time to be mindful of the present moment.

The second theme in Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching is that of walking meditation. Buddhist meditation in general and Zen meditation in particular is usually associated with long periods of sitting. While not abandoning this more traditional form of meditation, Thich Nhat Hanh believes that there is no reason why one cannot meditate while walking, much as Christian monks sometimes do when walking in the cloister. He has led numerous retreats at Buddhist temples and meditation centers throughout the world teaching others how to engage in walking meditation.

Walking meditation is particularly significant in bringing about an awareness of the third theme in Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching, what he refers to as Inter-Being. Inter-Being is much like the concept of ecosystem. He cites two examples to illustrate the meaning of Inter-Being. The first is that of an orange. If we look deeply at an orange we soon discover that there are many non-orange aspects of being that make the orange possible. Some of these are sunlight, water, time, space, etc. This illustrates the interconnectedness of being. The second example is that of the emotion of happiness. He speaks of the happiness that exists between father and son or husband and wife. Happiness is corporate and comes about because of our relationship with other beings.

One should not be surprised, therefore, to discover that Thich Nhat Hanh has brought these three themes together in a profound concern for ecology. Even as the Vietnamese War brought violence and destruction to the culture and people of that country, so too is the ecological crisis today bringing violence and destruction to the earth upon which we live.

III

From 17-28 April 1995 Thich Nhat Hanh visited Korea to promote several of his books that have been recently translated into Korean. During his eleven day visit this sixty-eight year old man who has been a monk for fifty-three years kept a rigorous schedule that would have exhausted many men half his age. In Seoul he gave lectures at Dongguk University, Chogyo Temple, Lotus Lantern International, and Academy House. He was also interviewed with the Korean poet Ko Un on cable television. In Taejon he gave a two day retreat on walking meditation at Kongnim Temple near Chongju. Koreans and westerners, Buddhists and Christians participated in this retreat. He also visited the southern city of Pusan and such temples as Tongdo temples in the south and Haein Temple in the central part of the country.

One of the highlights was his dialogue with over thirty religious leaders and members of the literary community at Academy House in Seoul. Included were Buddhists, Won Buddhists (A reform movement within Buddhism), Catholics, and Protestants. Thich Nhat Hanh spoke on the role of religion in solving the ecological crisis. He said that it was imperative for the religious traditions of the world to cooperate together in solving this and other global crises. He was particularly emphatic that there should be more Buddhist-Christian dialogue and cooperation.

It was when speaking of Buddhist-Christian cooperation that Thich Nhat Hanh mentioned Thomas Merton. He said: "I have met so many Christians who have compassion and tolerance" and he cited Merton as an example. "Merton," he said, "was a very open person." Thich Nhat Hanh went on to say: "My Buddhism has been one without boundaries, not imprisoning myself in every narrow, locked space."

Thich Nhat Hanh left Korea on April 28. At 12.20 a.m. in the wee hours of May 7, the Munhwa Broadcasting Company, one of the three major television networks in Korea, aired a one-hour documentary on Thich Nhat Hanh's visit. May 7 was, appropriately, Buddha's birthday and a national holiday in Korea. It was also the Fourth Sunday of Easter. In the aftermath of Thich Nhat Hanh's all-too-brief visit to Korea, I must conclude that Thomas Merton was absolutely correct in 1966. Thich Nhat Hanh *is* his brother.