

***Respected Venerables,
Brothers, sisters and friends,***

In this moment, each one of us is embracing the loss of Thầy in our own unique way.

To us, his disciples, Thầy is a teacher whom we dearly love, respect and always take refuge in. Even those of us who have been by Thầy's side for many years, we still feel like a child—a young, innocent and often unskilful novice. In more than 60 years of practising and teaching the Dharma, at key moments, Thầy would usually write a letter or a poem to encourage or support his disciples. In this solemn and sacred moment of the cremation ceremony, our wish is to receive such a letter from Thầy.

While preparing for Thầy's funeral, we read through the old letters Thầy had written, full of love and care for his disciples. Throughout his whole life, Thầy never stopped transmitting the Dharma. These Dharma gems are as majestic as jeweled mountains, and deep and wondrous as the vast ocean.

In 2020, on the occasion of commemorating our ancestral teacher Master Nhat Dinh, we asked Thầy for permission to select some gems from his old letters and compose one just like the ones he used to write to us in the past 60 years.

May this letter - a garland of Dharma gems- be a torch that shines and help us overcome our most difficult times.

Today, when our collective consciousness and the sacred flame of the Cremation ceremony are infused in the realm of no birth and no death, we humbly ask the Most Respected Venerables, our brothers and sisters and friends from all over the world, to allow us to offer Thầy this garland of gems - a letter to all his disciples, his continuation.

Climbing together the hill of the century

Deep Listening Hut,

Từ Hiếu Temple, Huế

20.11.2020,

To all my beloved children - monastic, OI and lay members¹ near and far.

Today is the memorial day of the ancestral teacher who founded Từ Hiếu, our root temple. His first name is Tánh and his second name is Thiên, but he is also known by the name of Nhất Định². Today it is sunny, and in the freshness of Huế's mid-autumn, thousands of descendants of our ancestral teacher, from all over the country, have returned to the root temple in order to pay respect to him. In the previous days, hundreds of people had also come to the root temple to rake leaves, tidy up the garden of the monastery, clean up the stupas and prepare for today's ceremony. The descendants of our ancestral teacher all over the world are also turning toward him during the day of his memorial. Our Sangha is very wide, and it is present in all five continents. Thầy is so happy to see that our Sangha is continuing the career of the Buddha and of our spiritual ancestors³.

Lighting up our heart of gratitude

Thầy has often taught that with gratitude in our hearts, we can be happy right away. In the past few days Thầy has so much gratitude for the Buddha and spiritual ancestors for offering such a beautiful and clear spiritual path, a path for us to go on for our whole life⁴. Vietnam is a very beautiful country, with beautiful people⁵. I am very grateful to the country of Vietnam and to my blood family for having given birth to me. Two years ago, this country has once again opened her arms and welcomed me to return to teach the Dharma where I was born⁶. In the past two years, I have been

¹ This letter was compiled by Thầy Pháp Ân, with the agreement and witness of Thích Nhất Hạnh, together with the support of Thầy Pháp Ứng, Thầy Pháp Niệm, Thầy Pháp Khâm, sister Chân Không, sister Định Nghiêm and sister Linh Nghiêm. It is compiled from the raw material of Thầy's teachings, books and from the letters he wrote to his disciples. Particularly from his words of guidance contained in the Vietnamese collection of letters entitled, "*Tay Thầy Trong Tay Con*" (*Thầy's hands in your hands*).

² From the Vietnamese book, "*Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận*" (Treatise on the History of Vietnamese Buddhism), Vol. 2, Chapter 25.

³ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, "*Nắm lấy cơ hội*" (Taking opportunities), p. 68

⁴ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, "*Hạnh nguyện*" (Aspiration), p. 37

⁵ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, "*Khởi hành*" (Departure), p. 34

⁶ From Thầy's trip to Vietnam in 2018. Announcement given on the 2 November 2018. Letter to the respected elders and the disciples of the root temple Từ Hiếu.

so happy living with my brothers, sisters and disciples on the ancestral land. I often visit the room of my teacher, or do walking meditation down the half-moon pond, together with my young disciples, where some nights we watch the moon rise above the gate of the monastery. The path from the main hall of Từ Hiếu going down to the half-moon pond, round the Morning Star pond and up the Dương Xuân hill or back to Lăng Viên, has already become a legendary path⁷.

Do you know that my happiness is very great? Sometimes it is so great that I have the feeling I don't have enough strength to embrace it all⁸. Whenever I see my students attending me, my heart is filled with love and gratitude. I am deeply grateful for all my students⁹. I think that our Sangha should renew the practice of The Four Gratuities (gratitude toward parents, teachers, friends and all living beings), so that they become The Five Gratuities. In it, we can add the gratitude for descendants and disciples. This includes monastics, OI and lay members who have helped Thầy and the spiritual ancestors to realize the work of spreading the Dharma and helping living beings.

Not only have my attendants brought me a lot of happiness, but all of you—wherever you are and whatever you are doing to transform suffering within yourself and others, to engage and offer your services to humanity—each and every one of you has offered me so much happiness. This is why I am so grateful to you. I can see very clearly that wherever you are, you are my continuation, and in one way or another, you are carrying me into the future¹⁰. We, teacher and student, will continue to climb the hill of the century, offering our love, understanding, freedom and solidity to the world, today and ever after. And, do you know? When our mahasangha climbs the hill of the century, the scenery is truly spectacular¹¹.

Sangha is a beautiful community

Among you, there are monks and nuns; monks, nuns or lay members are all practitioners. “Xuất” - the first part of the word “xuất sĩ” for monastic in Vietnamese means going forth. Going forth here means to go join a monastic community. As a member of the monastic community, we go wherever the sangha needs us to go; we do not have a permanent residence. Among you, there are lay practitioners. “Cư” – the first part of the word “cư sĩ” for “lay practitioner” in Vietnamese, means staying. Another word for lay practitioner in Vietnamese is “xử sĩ”, which means that you have not gone forth to become a monastic because you have family or other obligations. However, as lay practitioners, you still have the opportunity to practice. With the presence of lay practitioners, we can

⁷ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Con đường huyền thoại” (Paths of Legend), p. 27-28.

⁸ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Đất ruộng tim về với nông dân”, p. 208.

⁹ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Ta đang còn có nhau” (We are having each other), p. 211.

¹⁰ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Thầy thở con thở” (Thầy breathes, you breathe), p. 183.

¹¹ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Con đường huyền thoại” (Paths of Legend), p. 22.

have a complete multi-fold sangha. The monastic sangha and lay sangha **rely on one another, support one another, practicing to transform and serve all living beings.** “Sangha is a beautiful community, walking together on the joyful path, practicing to liberate ourselves, and to bring peace and happiness to the world¹².” Taking refuge in the sangha is our basic practice, helping us to overcome our worries, fears and anxiety.

Although life is impermanent

Although there is birth, sickness, old age, and death,

Now that I have a path of practice,

I have nothing more to fear¹³

Human rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. yearned to build a beautiful community - a happy community, with solidarity and capacity for activism and engagement. He called such a community “The Beloved Community”. Unfortunately, he was assassinated at the age of 39 in Memphis, so he could not realize his beautiful dream. We are more fortunate. We have been able to set up sanghas everywhere, and so wherever we go, we can feel at home. (“The Sangha body is everywhere, my true home is right here.” We have continued that aspiration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and every day, our practice is to generate brotherhood and sisterhood, to cultivate joy and the capacity to help people. This is a concrete way to realize and continue that dream.¹⁴ But more than that, the problems of our time have become global. The Buddha of the 2nd century can no longer manifest as an individual, “One Buddha is not enough.”¹⁵ If Maitreya - the Buddha to be born, will manifest in this century, Thầy believes that he will manifest in the form of “A Beloved Community.”

Recommendations

Today is the day to commemorate our ancestor who established the Root Temple, and Thầy would like to remind you again about his true aspiration so that we, as teacher and disciples, can continue to climb the hill of the century together. Thầy is very happy whenever he remembers that in the present moment, we are climbing the hill of the 21st century together. We have climbed together for

¹² Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Con đường huyền thoại” (Paths of Legend), p.18

¹³ Chant “*Nourishing Happiness*”, Daily Chanting Book, p. 46 (translated from “Nhật tụng Thiền Môn” – Daily Chanting Book in Vietnamese published in 2015, Southern publication, Thích Nhất Hạnh, Hồng Đức Publisher)

¹⁴ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “The legendary path” (« Con Đường Huyền Thoại »), p.19

¹⁵ ‘*In order to save our planet Earth, we must have a collective awakening. Individual awakening is not enough. That is why one Buddha is not enough*’, Thích Nhat Hanh

<https://naturalwisdom.blogspot.com/2016/11/one-buddha-is-not-enough.html>

21 years (it is 2021 this year). By the year 2050, we will stand on the peak of the hill and the view from there will be very beautiful, no less beautiful than that of the Vulture Peak.¹⁶

Bodhicitta – Greatest Aspiration – Deep Love

First and foremost, Thầy wants you to remember that bodhicitta—the mind of love—is the deep aspiration, the dream of a true practitioner. Once the mind of love is eroded we have no energy to realize our dream¹⁷. We ordain in order to generate great love, great understanding, acceptance, forgiveness, inclusivity, and we are ready to offer ourselves at the service of our fellow humans and all living beings. We ordain in order to free ourselves from craving, attachment, hatred, fear, doubt, misunderstanding, ignorance and wrong perceptions—about ourselves, about people and life. And beyond that, as Zen Master Linji had put in his opening speech of “Teachings for the Sangha”, we ordain in order to transcend birth and death, to set foot on the path to vast horizons, and to go beyond the Three Realms.¹⁸

We must take care of our bodhicitta, to keep it bright and beautiful. We should not lose ourselves in consumption, nor be satisfied with holding certain positions or status in the sangha or in society. We must learn to see ourselves as a drop of water in the river of the Buddha and the multi-fold sangha. We are the continuation of the Buddha and our ancestral teachers, among them Trúc Lâm Đại Sĩ, Zen Master Linji, Zen Master Liễu Quán and Zen Master Nhất Định. We are flowing together as a river and at the same time, climbing the hill of the century with great joy¹⁹. However busy you may be, train to be present for one another during the formal meals, to recognize your place in that river of liberation, and to practice living harmoniously with all of your brothers and sisters, and with the OI and lay members who come to take refuge and practice with us. Practice so that you do not become a drop of water separated from the river. Not being caught in status, money, praise, position, knowing how to go as a river, we have a bigger chance to realize our dreams.²⁰

¹⁶ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Mountain Cliff Robe” (Áo vách núi), p.102

¹⁷ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Hạnh nguyện” (Aspiration) – p.44

¹⁸ Records of Master Linji – part of Teaching the Sangha:
<https://langmai.org/tang-kinh-cac/tai-lieu/lam-te-ngu-luc/day-chung/>.

¹⁹ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Áo vách núi” (Mountain Cliff Robe), p. 104

²⁰ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Hạnh nguyện” (Aspiration), p.49

To Light Up the Awareness of Love

We must truly nourish our brotherhood and sisterhood, and our love for humanity. We must truly love one another as siblings in a blood family, learning to respect our elders and yield to our younger. At times we may be unskillful and inadvertently hurt one another. *Thầy is sometimes unskillful but Thầy knows that you are always willing to forgive me.* Thầy feels deeply grateful to you. You have given me a lot of happiness, and Thầy's happiness grows bigger each day when he sees that you are able to love and forgive one another. Each one of us knows that the more we love and are in harmony with one another, the more we are able to heal and become a place of refuge for many people. Thầy sees that every one of us has made a lot of progress on the path of practice and transformation. Whether that progress has been quick or slow, we have all experienced transformation.

The practice of eating formal meals together not only helps us to integrate into the river of the Buddha and the multi-fold sangha, it also nourishes our humility and our deep vow to serve living beings, so that we—monastic, OI or lay member—can continue as true descendants of the Buddha and ancestral teachers. The monastic life is both humble and simple.²¹ Your Great-Grand Teacher, Zen Master Thanh Quý, was someone of great humility. In the old days, there were venerables who would hesitate to bow in greeting our Great-Grand Teacher because he would bow back very deep and low to express his humility and respect for them. He did not like others prostrating to him, but as a teacher, he had to let them do it. When Venerable Chí Niệm built the stupa for Great-Grand Teacher, he had asked the venerable to put a statue of the Buddha at the very top of the stupa so that when anyone came to prostrate they would be prostrating to the Buddha and not to him. At Từ Hiếu, everyone knows this story well. *We must learn that kind of humility from our Great-Grand Teacher Thanh Quý.* That virtue of humility will always allow us to stay true to ourselves.²²

The stupa of interbeing and interpenetration

We did not ordain in order to gain respect and donations from lay people, nor to live in luxury or have power and status. In fact, it is quite the opposite, because we understand clearly the nature of interbeing and interpenetration. We appreciate, love and respect all the different manifestations of life. *“Reverence is the nature of my love.”* We have ordained because of the true joy and happiness that comes from being liberated from our suffering, from our wrong views and perceptions. Life is impermanent, but we think that it is permanent. And the biggest mistake is to see ourselves as a separate self entity, not interbeing with the whole cosmos and all beings.²³

²¹ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Khởi dậy Ngọn lửa thiêng” (Rekindling the Sacred Fire), p. 230

²² Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Khởi dậy Ngọn lửa thiêng” (Rekindling the Sacred Fire), p.229

²³ Manifestation Only – verse 13: Inter-being and interpenetration

In the past, the venerable nun Đàm Nguyên had built for Thầy a stupa at Đình Quán Temple in Hà Nội. She had already built it, so Thầy instructed her to inscribe a few words on the front saying, “There is nothing inside.” Because for sure Thầy is not lying in there. If people do not understand, then there should be another sentence, “There is nothing outside either.” And if people still do not understand, then the last sentence should be, “If there is anything, then it is in your footsteps and in your breath.” For Thầy, the practices that can help to transform and to heal the people of our time *is* Thầy’s stupa. At Pháp Vân Temple or the Root Temple Tổ Đình Từ Hiếu, or at any Plum Village meditation practice centre in the world, there should be such a stupa. A stupa not made of brick and mortar, but a stupa made of practice. Everyone who comes, whether a monk or nun, an OI member, a buddhist or friend of Plum Village, will be invited to enter this stupa. Meaning, they have to learn to walk in mindfulness, to drink tea in mindfulness, to speak using loving speech and to listen deeply.

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Thầy does not want to have a stupa because he sees clearly that he does not have a separate self, and there is not a single moment that Thầy stops manifesting. In the poem “Please call me by my true names” Thầy wrote:

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow - even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving, to be a bud on a Spring branch, to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings, learning to sing in my new nest, to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower, to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry, to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death of all that is alive..²⁵

Two years ago in Thailand, Thầy taught the elder brothers and sisters that when the time has come for Thầy to pass away, you will organise a Funeral of the Heart for Thầy according to the spirit of this poem. During this time we will have a Noble Silent Retreat so that everyone can contemplate Thầy’s manifestation in every second and every minute. So you can see that Thầy will always be present in every manifestation of life. Thầy really hopes that all of the monastics, Order of Interbeing members, Buddhist and friends of our community will build for Thầy a stupa made of your own practice in every setting of your daily life. In this Noble Silence Retreat we will walk in mindfulness, drink tea in mindfulness, and use loving speech and deep listening. After the Cremation

²⁴ Thầy’s message on his Continuation Day of 2012

²⁵ *Call me by my true names*, Thầy’s poem

Ceremony, please bring my ashes to spread on the Earth to nourish the grass and trees. Don't stop the continuation of my ashes²⁶

During the teaching tour in China in the autumn of 2001, at Peking, Thầy received news from Sister Trung Chinh that Brother Giac Thanh, the Abbot of Deer Park Monastery was on his last breaths. Thầy had written this gatha for Brother Giac Thanh and sent it just before he passed away:

*That you are a real gentleman is known by everyone
The work of a true practitioner has been accomplished
When your stupa has just been raised on the hillside
The sound of children's laughter will already be heard²⁷.*

Thầy had comforted and offered guidance to Brother Giac Thanh with a lot of love and trust. Thầy had said, "You just take your time to rest. You and I will meet each other again, and we will work together again, holding each other's hands to climb the hill of the century."²⁸

In the past Thầy had spoken these words to Brother Giac Thanh, and today on the commemoration day of our Ancestral Teacher who founded the Root Temple, Thầy also wants to tell you this. The Buddha, our ancestral teachers, you and I, we will continue to hold each others' hands to climb the hill of the 21st century.

*Look again, you will see me in you and in every leaf and flower bud. If you call my name, you will see me right away.
Where are you going? The old frangipani tree offers its fragrant flowers this morning. You and I have never really been apart.
Spring has come. The pines have put out new shining green needles. And on the edge of the forest, the wild Plum Trees have burst into flower²⁹.*

²⁶ Thầy's message on his Continuation Day of 2012

²⁷ [Mindfulness Bell magazine, summer 2007](#)

²⁸ [Lá thư Làng Mai 2002 – Plum Village Newsletter of 2002 \(in Vietnamese\)](#)

²⁹ *A Teacher Looking for His Disciple*, Thầy's Poem, [Mindfulness Bell magazine, winter 2000](#)

Thầy sees in you Thầy's continuation, Thầy will never die.

Thầy prays that the Buddha watch over you all so that you can be protected in body and mind, and be able to nourish your joy and be a refuge for the Sangha and for all who come. Thầy sees clearly that you are the continuation of the Buddha, the ancestral teachers and of Thầy. Through you, Thầy is immortal. Thầy has faith in you, and this faith is so solid and unshakable. Thầy holds you all in his heart, with all his love and trust³⁰. May the Buddha and Ancestral Teachers offer you great strength and energy.³¹

With love and trust,
Thầy

Coming and Going in Freedom

*Don't you know the wind still soars
As the rains afar continue clouds overhead
And drops of sunshine touch down from above
Earth opens up to a clear blue sky.*

*Still, I come and go in freedom
Unconcerned with being or non-being
Come home and relax in your mindful steps
Neither waxing or waning is the moon.*

³⁰ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Đất ruộng tìm về với nông dân”, p.207

³¹ Aforementioned Vietnamese collection of letters, “Năm lấy cơ hội” (Taking opportunities), p.68