



DHARMA TEACHER ORDER

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Sitting with Thay by Sondra Kaighen



I have long been planning to interview our teacher, “Thay,” Thich Tri Hoang. With impermanence in mind, I wanted to learn about the formation of this man who has influenced my life in such a profound way, and share what I learned with all of you. While I know most of you know his “credentials” and his history as it relates to his path of “monkdom,” my intention for this interview was to learn more about the human development within the teacher. I had actually planned this project some 3 years ago, while going through my Residency. However, the conditions were not ripe to bring it to fruition. But now, as we are on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the Dharma Teacher Order, I visited this project with much more vigor and resolve.

Thay was born Trùng Văn Bình in Quảng Nam in Vietnam on May 2, 1949. His family of origin consisted of nine children, his parents and grandmother. His father was a truck driver. His mother was described as the “most influential person” in his young life. His home also included a furry friend, a nameless dog that his mother doted on. Thay’s nickname as a child was “Bình Móm.” He recalls being a mostly sad child, due to his fears of the sounds of war, ever present in his childhood. Thay attended Da Nang High School and his best friend was Ly. Thay had the good fortune to reconnect with Ly, some 30 years later when he learned Ly lived only a few miles away from Thay in Texas.

Thay admits that initially his favorite subject to study in school was Philosophy. He then became interested in Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism and Christianity, which he learned through a 7th Day Adventist’s correspondence course.

When asked when he first recalled seeing the Buddha, he stated “as a child, while going to Temple with my grandmother”. Thay’s extracurricular activity that he enjoyed as a child was the five years he was a part of the Boy Scouts, from age 9 to 14 years. He further cited his most influential novice friend “Sa” of Pho Da Temple in Da Nang. He recalled his school years with great fondness, citing 50+ students in each class. Thay also shared the story of his “secret” mala he always had in his pocket as a student. He would use the mala to silently chant the Amitabha Buddha, until one day when his friend pulled his hand out of his pocket, with the mala clasped tightly in his hand, as his friends laughed. Thay’s favorite musician was Trinh Cong Son, who was a very influential composer as well as a peace activist. Thay described his older sister as the one who he was closest to within his large family. When asked about a story that might surprise others, he stated that he began asking to leave home to become a novice at 12 years of age. His parents were not in agreement, believing that this was a phase that he would grow out of.



However, after converting to a vegetarian at that young age in his family of meat-eaters, his family finally relented, realizing his commitment to his aspiration.

Thay’s description of his life within his family of origin, he stated proudly, “my family were all very supportive of one another, and I cannot imagine being born in a different culture, or within a different family.” When recalling a “significant story” from his childhood, Thay reminisced about a maternal uncle that had worked for the Independent movement in war-torn Vietnam, then finding himself incarcerated as a result. Thay stated

that when he was 6 years old, he vividly remembers the uncle returning after his release from prison.

Thay did not know who the man was, but recalls his grandmother and mother crying in joy at the uncle's return. Thay was told the story of this uncle and states that it was the happiest moment celebrated by his entire family. He sadly reports that he had already lost 6 family members to death.

When Thay was looking for a way to further immerse himself in the study of Buddhism, he saw a sign for just such an opportunity in India wherein a scholarship was being offered. He was granted that opportunity when he learned that no one else had applied, as most of the Vietnamese population considered India "too poor" to visit. Thay then spent the next year in India pursuing that education opportunity.

Thay's secondary education culminated in a double major Bachelor of Arts in Letters and Buddhism 1972. He received his Doctorandus in 1984 in Leiden, The Netherlands also in Buddhism. His most memorable college experience was his assistance in the anti-war movement. Through this educational experience, Thay also became fluent in English, Mandarin and Dutch in addition to his native tongue of Vietnamese. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Thay was being supported by a Christian community, however he was becoming more and more solid in his Buddhist foundation, and wanted to leave the Christian community. However he felt obligated to them for their support. He said this was the most difficult time in his life, feeling alone and cut off from his native land and peoples. He then wrote to his teacher, Thich Tri Thu, and asked for advice. His teacher told him to follow his heart and spread the Dharma wherever he went. Thay then struck a deal with his benefactors, agreeing to give them one year of labor to repay them for their kindness. Thay was convinced that his journey was to study Chinese so that he could work on translating the Tipitaka.

In 1994 Thay joined Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village Community for a period of one year. During that monumental year, Thich Nhat Hanh had written 3 volumes of the history of Vietnamese Buddhism, and asked our Thay to write the 4th volume (from 1963 to the present), however, Thay left Plum Village prior to that being realized. Thich Tri Thu was Thay's mentor and hero. Thich Tri Thu happened to also be Thich Nhat Hanh's teacher.

Six of Thay's siblings and his father moved to Texas (Dallas and Wichita Falls area) in 1980. In 1995, Thay immigrated to the United States. However, Thay did not go to Texas initially, as he was invited to join a temple in Connecticut, where Thay remained for the next 12 years. This is also where the Dharma Teacher Order (DTO) was conceived and born. After Connecticut, Chuang Yen Temple in upstate New York invited Thay to come and stay. While Thay's time in Chuang Yen was eventful, due to a disagreement between the Theravadan Abbot and Thay over whether lay persons could be ordained as priests, Thay left Chuang Yen, moving to a temple in Boston prior to arriving in Pearland, Texas in 2009. Thay requested his biological sister and also now a female monk, Phap Nghiem, look for property to purchase in the area in order to build Phap Nguyen Temple and preside as Abbot there. Thay has remained in Pearland since that time, however he remains connected to all of the other American temples in which he has lived, leaving his footprint in each place through the DTO seeds he has scattered.

When asked where Thay feels most at home, he stated "it doesn't matter where I am. Wherever the Temple is, that's home to me." He also confessed that without the war in Vietnam, he would never have left his homeland.

Thay also credits President Bill Clinton as probably the most influential figure in helping post-war Vietnam. He said that both the President and first Lady, Hillary, fought tirelessly to help Vietnam out of poverty. He suspects that the Vietnamese people will mourn the death of the Clintons, whenever that time comes, as staunch supporters of this highly political couple.

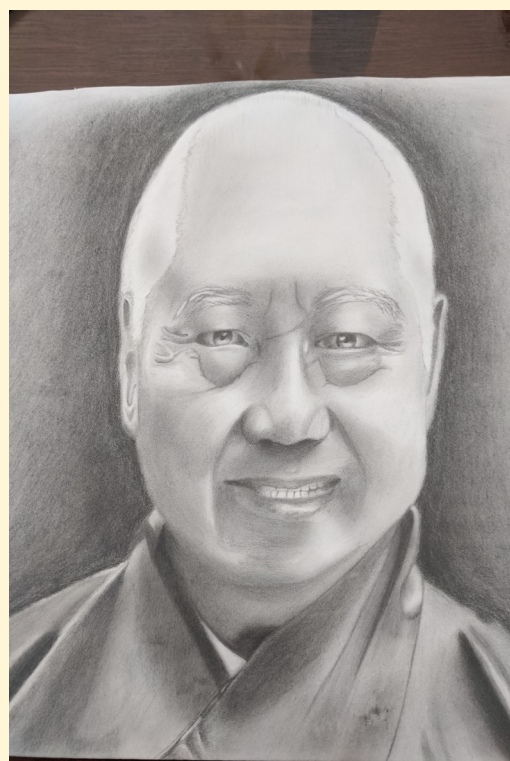
Thay's first job was writing a Vietnamese-Dutch dictionary for Refugees, a project that took him 2 years to complete. This compilation can be found online at

<https://www.bol.com/nl/f/vietnamees-nederlands-nederlands-vietnamees-woordenboek-tu-dien-viet-hoa-hoa-viet/37720938>.

However, Thay's "favorite" job he recalls was working in the refugee camps in The Netherlands and Hong Kong. He replied that his "worst" job, was the one year labor job, cited above.

Thay defines his happiness as "living without desire, hatred or ignorance." He cites reading and writing as his favorite pastimes and would like to write another book one day. He names his teacher, Thich Tri Thu, as the single biggest influence on his life as a Buddhist monk, and his greatest fear as the sounds and experiences of war, which took him more than 10 years to free himself of.

Thay envisioned the creation of the DTO as a result of his students', Richard Zipoli, Richard and Adrienne Baksa and Noble Silence, desire to "deep dive" into the study of Buddhism, back in 1996. This dream was realized in 2000 as the formation of the DTO as it is known today. Thay's proudest creation and hope is for the sustenance of the DTO, and the Prison Project (including the Buddhist Correspondence Course, the traveling prison ministry created as a result, as well as all of the mentors and participants in these projects). Thay's vision for the continuation of the DTO, simply stated, is the continuation of spreading the Dharma and including lay people in the propagation of same. Thay also announced that he wrote an article on the occasion of Thich Tri Thu's death, summarizing Thay's work in America and with the DTO. He has since learned that this article has inspired similar work of spreading the Dharma in Vietnam as well. Lastly, when asked what legacy he would like to leave to all of his students, he simply stated, "try your best to share the Dharma." And, when asked if he could meet the Buddha today, what question would he pose to him, he laughed and stated "how is that it took you 49 days to achieve Enlightenment, yet I have been meditating for more than 49 years and still have yet to reach Nirvana."

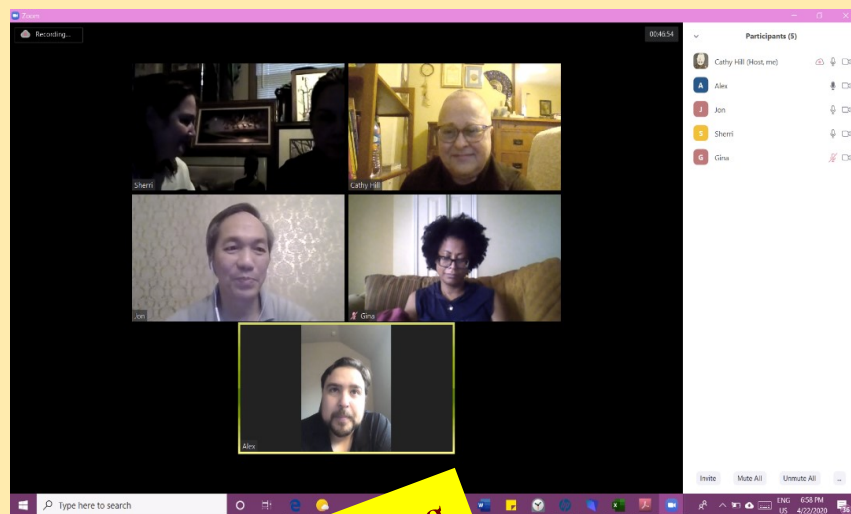


Wednesday Evening Meditation in Texas with Alex Quiros

I have attached a link to the Dharma Talk given by Alex Quiros, who is a BCC Mentor and an ordained Dharma Teacher in the Dharma Teacher Order. The topic is "Peace."

Submitted by Sister Pháp Lan

<https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/uJduJbXQ3T1IZaORtUuBBIx9HJvFaaa80CgZvZYmh3sXvkveLETMtKSJzrjXrww?startTime=1587598309000>



There are more Wednesday evening meditations coming up. Look for the invitation in your in-box from Sister Pháp Lan.

Links to check out:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkeeiEyNPMo>
- [This page on their website](#) has more info on the app and links to get it.

“The moment you wake up, right away, you can smile. That’s a smile of enlightenment. You are aware that a new day is beginning, that life is offering you twenty-four brand-new hours to live, and that’s the most precious of gifts.”

Thich Nhat Hanh