

Thich Nhat Hahn, At Home in the World: Stories and Essential Teachings from a Monk's Life

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At Home in the World

In 1968 during the Vietnam War, I went to France to represent the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation at the Paris Peace Talks. Our mission was to speak out against the war on behalf of the mass of Vietnamese people whose voices were not being heard. I was flying back from Japan, where I had been to give a public talk, and stopped in New York on the way to see my friend Alfred Hassler, of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an organization working actively to end the Vietnam war and promote social justice. But I didn't have a transit visa, so when I landed in Seattle I was taken aside and led to a room where I was locked in and not permitted to see or speak to anyone. The walls were covered with Wanted posters picturing wanted felons. The authorities took my passport and wouldn't allow me to contact anyone. It wasn't until several hours later, when my flight was about to leave, that it was finally returned to me and I was escorted to the plane.

Two years earlier, in 1966, I was in Washington, DC, for a conference when a Baltimore Sun reporter informed me of a dispatch from Saigon urging the governments of the US, France, the United Kingdom, and Japan to no longer honor my passport because they felt I had been saying things opposing their efforts in the war against Communism. The governments complied, and my passport was invalidated. Some of my friends in Washington, DC, urged me to go into hiding, but to stay in the US would have meant risking deportation and jail.

So I didn't go into hiding and instead sought political asylum in France. The French government granted me asylum, and I was able to obtain an apatride travel document. Apatride means you don't belong to any country; you become stateless. With this document, I could travel to any European country that had signed the Geneva Convention. But to go to countries like Canada or the US, I would still need to apply for a visa, which is very difficult to do when you are no longer a citizen of any country. My original intention had been to only leave Vietnam for three months in order to give a series of lectures at Cornell University, and to make a speaking tour of the US and Europe to call for peace, and then to go home again. My family, all my friends and coworkers—my whole life—was in Vietnam. Yet I ended up being exiled for almost forty years.

Whenever I applied for a visa to go to the US, it would be turned down automatically. The government didn't want me to go there; they believed I might harm the US war effort in Vietnam. I wasn't allowed to go to the US and I wasn't allowed to go to England either. I would have to write letters to such people as Senator George McGovern and Senator Robert Kennedy asking them to send me a letter of invitation. Their replies read something like this: "Dear Thich Nhat Hanh, I would like to know more about the situation of the war in Vietnam. Please come and inform me. If you have difficulties obtaining a visa, please telephone me at this number..." Only with such a letter could I get a visa. Otherwise, it was impossible.

I have to admit that the first two years of exile were quite difficult. Although I was already a forty-year-old monk with many disciples, I had still not yet found my true home. I could give very good lectures on the practice of Buddhism, but I had not truly arrived. Intellectually, I knew a lot about Buddhism: I had trained for many years in the Buddhist Institute and had been practicing since I was sixteen, but I hadn't yet really found my true home.

My intention on the speaking tours in the US was to bring people information about the real situation in Vietnam that they weren't hearing about on the radio and in the newspaper. During the tour, I would only sleep one or two nights in each city I visited. There were times when I woke up at night and didn't know where I was. It was very hard. I had to breathe in and out and remember what city and country I was in.

During this time, I had a recurring dream of being at home in my root temple in central Vietnam. I would be climbing a green hill covered with beautiful trees when, halfway to the top, I would wake up and realize that I was in exile. The dream came to me over and over again. In the meantime, I was very active, learning how to play with children from many countries: German children, French children, American children, and English children. I was making friends with Anglican priests, Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, rabbis, imams, and others. My practice was the practice of mindfulness. I tried to live in the here and now and touch the wonders of life every day. It was thanks to this practice that I survived. The trees in Europe were so different from the trees in Vietnam. The fruits, the flowers, the people, they were all completely different. The practice brought me back to my true home in the here and now. Eventually I stopped suffering, and the dream did not come back anymore.

People may think that 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. Nevertheless, when it was time to leave my native country again, I didn't suffer.

The expression, "I have arrived, I am home," is the embodiment of my practice. It is one of the main Dharma seals of Plum Village. It expresses my understanding of the teaching of the Buddha and is the essence of my practice. Since finding my true home, I no longer suffer. The past is no longer a prison for me. The future is not a prison either. I am able to live in the here and now and to touch my true home. I am able to arrive home with every breath and with every step. I don't have to buy a ticket; I don't have to go through a security check. Within a few seconds, I can arrive home.

When we are deeply in touch with the present moment, we can touch both the past and the future; and if we know how to handle the present moment properly, we can heal the past. It was precisely because I did not have a country of my own that I had the opportunity to find my true home. This is very important. It was because I didn't belong to any particular country that I had to make an effort to break through and find my true home. The feeling that we are not accepted, that

we do not belong anywhere and have no national identity, can provoke the breakthrough necessary for us to find our true home.

Drawing of the Buddha

When I was a small boy of seven or eight, I happened to see a drawing of the Buddha on the cover of a Buddhist magazine. The Buddha was sitting on the grass, very peacefully, and I was impressed. I thought the artist must have had a lot of peace and calm within himself at the time to be able to draw such a special image. Just looking at the drawing made me happy, because so many people around me at the time were not very calm or happy at all.

Seeing this peaceful image, the idea came to me that I wanted to become someone like that Buddha, someone who could sit very still and calm. I think that was the moment when I first wanted to become a monk, although I didn't know how to describe it that way at the time.

The Buddha is not a god; he was very much a human being like the rest of us. Like many of us, he suffered greatly as a teenager. He saw the suffering in his kingdom and he saw how his father, King Suddhodana, tried to reduce the suffering around him, but seemed to be helpless. To young Siddhartha, politics seemed ineffective. Even as a teenager, he was searching for a way out of suffering. Although he had been born a prince, all the material comforts were not enough to make him happy, at home, or at peace. He left the palace where he was raised in order to find a way out of suffering and to find his true home.

I think that many young people today feel the same as the young Siddhartha. We are searching for something good, true, and beautiful to follow. But looking around we can't find what we're looking for and we become disillusioned. Even when I was very young, I had that kind of feeling in me. That's why, when I saw the drawing of the Buddha, I was so happy. I just wanted to be like him.

I learned that if I practiced well, I could be like a buddha. Anyone who is peaceful, loving, and understanding can be called a buddha. There were many buddhas in the past, there are buddhas in the present moment, and there will be many buddhas in the future. Buddha is not the name of a particular person; buddha is just a common name to designate anyone who has a high degree of peace and who has a high degree of understanding and compassion. All of us are capable of being called by this name.

The Hermit and the Well

When I was growing up, I lived in the province of Thanh Hoa in North Vietnam. One day, our schoolteacher told us that we were going on a trip to the top of a nearby mountain called Na Son. He told us that on top of the mountain there lived a hermit—a monk who lived alone and sat

quietly day and night to become calm and peaceful like the Buddha. I had never met a hermit before, and I was very excited.

The day before the trip, we prepared some food for our picnic. We cooked rice, rolled it into balls, and wrapped them in banana leaves. We prepared sesame seeds, peanuts, and salt to dip the rice in. We also boiled some water to bring along. Early the next morning, we set out for a long hike to reach the foot of the mountain. Once there, my friends and I started to climb as quickly as we could. We did not know how to practice walking meditation yet. We walked very fast all the way up the mountain.

When we reached the top, we were very tired. We had drunk all of our water on the way up. I looked around for the hermit but did not see him anywhere. I only saw his hut made of bamboo and straw. Inside I discovered a small cot and an altar made of bamboo, but no hermit. Maybe he had heard us coming up the mountain and was hiding somewhere away from the noise and the many children.

It was time to have lunch, but I wasn't hungry. I was so disappointed that I hadn't seen the hermit. I left my friends and started climbing further up the mountain hoping to find him. As I walked deeper into the forest, I heard the sound of dripping water. It was a beautiful sound. I started to climb in the direction of that sound, and soon I found a natural well, a small pool surrounded by big rocks of many colors. The water was so clear that I could see all the way to the bottom. I was very thirsty. I knelt down, scooped some water in my palms, and drank it. The water tasted so good. I had never tasted anything as good as that water. I felt completely satisfied; I did not need or want anything at all—even the desire to meet the hermit was gone. I had the feeling that I had met the hermit. I imagined that perhaps the hermit had transformed himself into the well.

I was tired. I lay down on the ground to rest so I could spend a few more minutes with the well. I looked up and saw the branch of a tree against the blue sky. I closed my eyes and soon I fell into a deep sleep. I don't know how long I slept. When I woke up, I didn't know where I was. Then I saw the branch of the tree against the sky and the wonderful well. I remembered everything.

It was time to go back to join my classmates. Reluctantly I said goodbye to the well and began to walk back down. As I walked out of the forest, from deep within me a sentence came to my mind. It was like a one-line poem: *I have tasted the most delicious water in the world.*

I sat down to eat with my friends. They were glad to see me and asked me where I had been, but I had no desire to talk. I wanted to cherish and keep my experience to myself a little longer, as it had touched me deeply. I sat down on the ground and ate my lunch quietly. The rice and the sesame seeds tasted so good.

It was many years ago that I climbed that mountain. But the image of the well and the quiet, peaceful sound of the dripping water are still alive inside me. You too may have met your hermit. Maybe as a rock, a tree, a star, or a beautiful sunset.

That was my first spiritual experience. After that I became calmer and quieter. I didn't feel the need to share what had happened. I wanted to keep it in my heart. My intention to become a monk became stronger. At the age of sixteen I received my parents' permission to enter Tu Hieu Temple near Hue and practice as an aspirant and then as a novice.