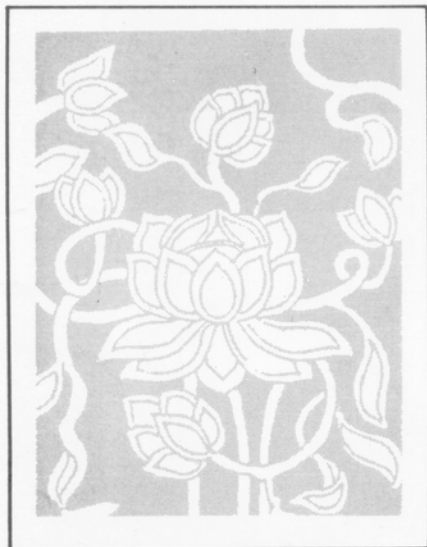


# BASIC BUDDHISM

by  
♦ THICH MANGIAC ♦



*This book is dedicated to the memory  
of Ven. Dr. Thich Thien An  
On the tenth anniversary of his passing*

*In gratitude of Ms. Jenny Hoang  
Who is the responsible for  
the achievement of this book*



# **BASIC BUDDHISM**



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by

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## PREFACE

*The teachings of Buddha are no lifeless literature contained in the tripitaka - the three baskets of discourses, precepts, and commentaries - displayed on bookshelves that adorn meditation halls and Buddhist pagodas. They are not the books offered for sale in Buddhist bookstores in large cities.*

*The teachings of Buddha are neither the contents of sutras in Sanskrit, Pali or Chinese that cause the reader to quiver with fear for they seem out of reach for man's limited sapience.*

*The teachings of Buddha are the river with its water always flowing, like the lifeblood of an immense system. They are the breath, the breeze*

*whispering through the curtain on a cool afternoon. The teachings of Buddha are joy, sorrow, love, hatred, peace and anger of man. They are a rose blossoming with the first sunrays, when birds begin to sing and when patches of white clouds wander in the blue sky.*

*That is the way I understand Buddhism. And since 1978 until now, 1990, in those terms I have been explaining Buddhism in various talks here and there to American friends. Those talks are now fathered in a collection entitled Basic Buddhism. hopefully, the reader will find in this little book the essence of Buddhist philosophy, and some thoughts about meditation perceived in the tears and laughters of human life.*

*Little time was allowed for the preparation of be manuscript before sending it to the press. My apology for any resulting error. May the Lord Buddha be with us always.*

*Los Angeles, August 20, 1990*

**THICH MAN GIAC**

# WHAT IS BUDDHISM?

The first Buddhist Sangha was formed with sixty disciples. Before Lord Buddha sent them away, he addressed them as follows:

*"Go! O Monks, and wander forth for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, in compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, for the welfare of gods and men. Proclaim the Doctrine glorious, preach a life of holiness, perfect and pure."*

Such is the goal of Buddhism. From all points of view, everybody wants happiness and tries to avoid sufferings. Yet the world is full of misery: hunger, thirst, cold, disappointment, sickness, old age and death are common to all beings; be he rich or poor, be he a king or a beggar.

Food cannot remove hunger forever, money cannot stop death and old age, fame cannot cure illnesses. Buddhism aims at a complete and final freedom from all human miseries. It is more than a doctrine, or a philosophy; it is a way of life, it is an attitude toward life itself. The spirit of Buddhism is

rational and positive. Lord Buddha once said:

*"Whatever, according to your own experience and after thorough investigation, agrees with reason, and is conducive to your own welfare and to that of all other living beings, that accept as Truth and live accordingly."*

Like the physician who first observes the symptoms of a disease, then diagnoses what abuses those symptoms before he orders the right prescription that would remove the whole illness, Lord Buddha first saw the world as endless successions of gain and loss, hope and disappointment. It is like a soft and pleasurable bed with painful thorns on it. This is known as the First noble Truth.

The Second Noble Truth deals with the cause of suffering. Lord Buddha said the cause of our suffering is our desires and our attachments to those desires. Whenever there is desire, there is longing for its realization, successes and failures, hope and disappointments; thus the process of life goes on with attachment as its guiding factor. It goes on even after the death of the physical body; therefore it is also the cause of rebirth. The only way to get rid of suffering is to be aware of our attachments and let go of them.

The way to liberation is therefore the Third Noble Truth. The Third Noble Truth tells us how to conquer our desires and how to let go of our attachments.

Lord Buddha compared desire with a burning fire; this desire-fire is fed by our negative habits and our self-indulgence. To stop this fire from getting stronger and stronger, awareness and self-discipline are necessary. Let's take the instance of a man whose desire is to be the boss in his house; he wants to dominate and possess his wife, and he indulges himself in drinking. What happens is that the more he drinks the more he becomes violent and mean toward her. He loses self control, becomes irresponsible, and his marriage is endangered. In that case, Buddha would advise three practices: First, recognize the desire and curb it with disciplining the bad habit. Second, practice meditation to bring out the qualities of understanding and love for his wife. Finally, by realizing the highest wisdom, the desire will be completely eliminated.

With the suppression of desire, comes the liberation from all sorrows and sufferings. That is the state of nirvana, or the Fourth Noble Truth.

The sermon that Lord Buddha gave for the first time on The Four Noble Truths was very significantly named "The Turning of the Wheel," which has

revolutionized religious thinking among the epicureans and the ascetics of the time.

So, as a good physician, Lord Buddha has prescribed the cultivation of positive healthy habits, and a strong dose of altruistic love. But from where can one get the motivation for these practices? In other words, where should one go to get this miraculous medicine? The answer lies in the realization of wisdom, the highest understanding of the laws of the universe.

Wisdom is the inner light that comes into being when one is open to the teachings and when one's mind is calm and clear of dualistic thoughts. When the inner light shines, darkness disappears by its own accord. One begins to see the fleeting nature of all things: nations grow and die out; empires are founded and lost; palaces are built and left in ruins; flowers bloom then wither; names are forgotten; enjoyments and achievements are but a stage. All is illusion, a dream within a dream, a reflection in a body of water, a magical act. Due to our ignorance, we believe that things are everlasting and permanent, we get attached to them, and we identify ourselves with them. As a result, we feel insecurity and fear. But by realizing the Truth about impermanence and by contemplating it, we pave ourselves the way for the

qualities of the heart Compassion of altruism is the foundation of Buddhism. This compassion which is uncondition love for others, also comes from the understanding that nothing has any substance of its own. Even what we call our personality is only part of the psyche which is our mind. Lord Buddha said:

*"All states arising have mind for their cause mind for their master. And their offspring are also of mind."*

Mind flows like a flux from the conscious to the unconscious, and vice versa. A man who practice meditation and has trained the conscious to be steady and one-pointed will gather more power to exercise over the unconscious. The Buddhas have trained their consciousness so perfectly that they can even experience past lives and foresee their own death.

As human beings endowed with high mental and intellectual faculties, it is time that we become aware of the nature of the mind, of its projections which mistake the unreal for the real, chasing a shadow in sorrows and anxieties. It is about time that we should put ourselves together, put our egos at the service of the human family, for were I not for the sake of others, our own enlightenment would not have had any meaning at all.

## **PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH BUDDHA**

There are several enlightened beings in the world today who are excellent spiritual teachers, but masters who can make disciples like themselves are rare. A teacher supplies the students with necessary data and information they need to know. The teacher does not change anything in the student except maybe adding more light to what is already there. A master is one who works beyond words, who **TRANSFORMS** the disciple, who may turn him around 180 degrees. A master does not add anything to the disciple's knowledge; instead, he strips him down to reveal to him his true nature. A master uses his inner power to transmit his "shak-ti" to the disciple; in other words, he can awaken the dormant energy inside each of us, the energy that once awakened will work on the karmic forces and open the heart to love and compassion. It v give one insights into one's own

nature and develop divine wisdom. Buddha is such a master one of the greatest. The relationship between each Buddhist and Buddha is a master-disciple relationship. Not only does he teach us, but he puts us into situations which force us to experience what he teaches. He does not take words seriously After having been teaching for 49 years, he was known to have said, "I haven't said a word!"

Before he passed away, at the last and most important meeting with his disciples, he stood in silence. Not a word had been uttered. At last he made a small gesture, showing to all a flower he had in his hand. The crowd held their breath. The suddenly Mahakasyap, the great Mahakasyap Buddha's favorite oldest disciple, smiled. Buddha then gave him the flower and said, "Kasyapa, you have understood. Please continue the teaching after me."

We all have the responsibility to carry on Mahakasyapa's work, to be like him, to learn and to grow and to share with others. We have the responsibility to cultivate ourselves so that we can imbibe the teachings the way Mahakasyapa did

How do we do that? What should we do to cultivate ourselves? Buddha's teachings are like sunlight ; it is there for everybody. All one has to do is open one's eyes, unconditionally obey the

instructions, not asking what and why, for one can not ask to be given light before one opens one's eyes.

It is also scientifically demonstrated that high consciousness moves with unmeasurable speed, speed that no men-made device can detect, and which no ordinary mind can conceive. Buddhas and high beings constantly ride on that level of consciousness; they are aware of events and things at we would never have heard of since our level consciousness is latent compared to theirs and the frequencies of its radiations are far lower. In order to tap that source of mystery available and now inaccessible to us, we have to raise our level of consciousness close to theirs by meditation, prayer, and by leading an unpretentious life, a life of right understanding of the laws of nature and last, but not least, the nature and function of the human mind. By meditation and by the spirit of prayer, the true mind will arise. The true mind has no substantial self of its own; it is only a state of expansion that gives the experience of contentment and fulfillment. We all have that experience when we feel we have love and peace inside.

The relationship between a master and a disciple is also a bond of love and gratitude. Buddha is the finger pointing to the moon, the raft which takes us to

the other shore. If we can see the moon and enjoy it, if we arrive safely to the other shore, who should we thank but the pointing finger and the raft? But again Buddha kept telling us to forget the finger once we see the moon and to forget the raft once we get to the other shore. His compassion is infinite. When one burns an incense stick, and bows down in front of the altar, what does one say to oneself? How does one feel toward a being as such? Reverence and gratefulness cannot convey enough the willingness to be one with him and the joy to be there to receive the experience. The love between a master and his disciple is free and unattached. From one comes the total giving, from the other the total openness to surrender.

Buddha has passed away, but through the glory of his teachings, he maintains a personal relationship with each of the devotees in the Buddhist community. His presence is felt amidst the ranks of the members of the Sangha. Practicing his teachings, identifying ourselves with other's needs instead of with our own projections, brings his spirit to life. Buddha's concern for human sufferings was such that he devoted his whole life to finding the cure. How could we repay him enough?

## LOVE AND CHARITY

Love, or compassion (Karunā), and charity (metta) (which naturally has compassion as its origin) are the core of Buddhism. An awakened or enlightened being is one who has seen the world as it is, and who has realized the source of all pleasure and pain, which is nothing but one's own expectations. When one projects one's selfish desires onto others and demands that they be fulfilled by others, one is like a man who runs away from his shadow while looking back, thinking that his footsteps are chasing after him.

This state is like sleeping, like dreaming and having nightmares. A man who is in the awakening state or who has been in the awakening state once, naturally feels boundless compassion arise within his heart when he sees his equals running around madly,

clinging to something they never had. For Buddhism regards everyone as absolutely equal, supposing that we are all actors engaged in the play of the mind.

I would like to take a minute here to get some clear definition on the word "love" and to see how it relates to the Buddhist spirit of **compassion**. Webster's dictionary defines love as a deep affection or attachment to something or someone. Well, affection and attachment are not the kind of love that we are talking about. It is rather the love of equanimity, without conditions, without demands, and without components. It is total acceptance of things and people as they are, and as they are not. It is total support and assistance without judgments and separation. In Buddhism, this spirit of love is symbolized in the performances and deeds of the Bodhisattva Kwan Yirt, the thousand-handed, thousand-eyed greatly compassionate enlightened being who contemplates the sounds of the world. Kwan Yin can be thought of as both male and female, for he carries within him the heart of a mother who cares for her children. Kwan Yirt, with his unlimited universal powers of selflessness, is able to manifest in innumerable ways, in innumerable forms, just to help all sentient beings overcome their karmic obstacles. This compassion flowing from the heart is

our Buddha nature, our own mind when it reaches the purest state.

Compassion inspires charity, which again has to be practiced with patience and be completely devoid of the idea of self. The Diamond Sutra says:

*"Charity should just be a happening in which there is no donor, no receiver; there is neither the thing given, nor the act of giving or receiving."*

By that, this ancient sutra means that charity is to be done from the highest possible state of consciousness in which one is free from the impressions of "I" and "mine", "you" and "yours" that only lead to either vanity or guilt. On the level of our daily life, this understanding is very useful in our practice. It is important for one to see that one is responsible for building a healthy society and a joyful world. It is absolutely vital to see where greed, anger and lust come from. They do not come from Outside but from our ordinary mind in our day-to-day existence. Spiritual practices aim at stilling that mind so that from within the pure mind will arise. When the ordinary mind is still, one will feel very humble and contented. When the pure mind arises, good qualities and aspirations for unity will lower in a feeling of expansion and fulfillment.

Charity is but the natural fruit of that state of Mind. One of the best ways to perform charity is to give kindness. I have never seen anyone who isn't longing for some kindness. I have never met anyone who does not appreciate kindness. This is because loving kindness cannot be bought with-money, cannot be taught at any school, cannot be taxed by any government, and cannot be destroyed by earthquakes. Of course, material gifts are necessary too, but material gifts given without kindness only feed the giver's ordinary mind with pride. Pride brings momentary gratification, while kindness brings fulfillment.

There are physical sufferings and mental sufferings. In a progressive society like ours, physical sufferings are, to a certain degree, taken care of. Yet mental and emotional sufferings are more painful. Thus, alleviating suffering depends entirely on our mind. Cultivate good and healthy seeds that will bear the fruits of inner satisfaction. Throw away the bad seeds that only carry the germ of diseases and problems. Lord Buddha said:

*"He who shares his money, jewels, clothing, food, shelter, and all his possessions with others will accumulate uncountable merits in this life and the next. Yet his merits are nothing compare to the merits*

*of those who comfort, sooth and relieve mental sufferings with kind words and caring gestures."*

Let's look at the baby sitting on his mother's lap. He looks so happy and contented because he feels her body's warmth and experiences her love.

Charity is just making the space of experiencing love available all the time for oneself and for all living things. Charity is taking a minute to listen without interrupting. Charity is a hand on someone else's shoulder, be it a dog, a cat, a horse or a plant. Charity always finds its way through when one means it — even in a smile to a strange just because one feels expansive, or in a handshake given only because one appreciates the other being there. The whole universe is suffused with the spirit of charity. The rain, the sun, mountains, rivers, tables and chairs—all give. Shouldn't we?

However, the very best we can give is not material, nor is it mental. It is not to relieve distress or sorrow, although! these gestures are of rare quality. The charity that Lord Buddha values the best, as is mentioned in the ancient sutras. is the intention to and the act of awakening or enlightenment with them. Only then, from very deep within the unconscious, are the very root of all sufferings removed. And that root is fear. Lord Buddha calls this the gift of fearlessness.

Until one is awakened, one cannot give the gift of fearlessness. That does not mean that one cannot share the willingness to get there and share the ups and downs while one tries! Lord Buddha has mentioned that studying the sutras, and talking about the teachings to others are in themselves the first step toward giving the gift of fearlessness.

I would like to close this wonderful time of sharing love and charity by quoting one of the greatest beings of all times: his Holiness, the Holiness Dalai Lama of Tibet:

*"It is in dependence upon sentient beings that one first generates this altruistic aspiration to highest enlightenment, and it is in relation to sentient beings that one practices the deeds of the path in order to achieve enlightenment, and it is for the sake of sentient beings that one achieves Buddhahood. Therefore, sentient beings are the object of observation, the basis of all of this marvelous development, therefore they are more important than even the wish-granting jewel, and one should treat them respectfully and kindly."*

# PRAYERS

There are 450 million malnourished people in the world in 30 nations where the per capita income is less than \$100.00 per year. You may ask, what does that have to do with prayers, or the religious act of praying? Shouldn't we all go out there and do something about it to help relieve some of those misfortune? Shouldn't we send some money or organize development agencies and programs and activities? Or shouldn't we get together to sit down and pray? We certainly should. However, there is something more essential than the acts of sending money or sitting in silence or reciting prayers begging or asking for miracles. For praying is a state of mind in which all the doing and sitting and asking are allowed to happen. It's like the piece of string that threads through all the beads to hold them together in a necklace. Prayer is where you come from when you ask for something. It's the space from where you start

out your doing. Have you ever noticed how you eat when you are angry? And what is the outcome of such eating? An *upset* stomach? Indigestion maybe?

In all religions, prayers are the most important form of worship. They are expressions of gratitude, and above all, they bear within themselves the seeds of altruistic feelings planted in a selfless soil. Nhat Hanh, in his world famous book **The Miracle of Awakening** goes on to describe his early years spent in a Buddhist monastery as a novice. He was given a little manual in which were listed all the things he had to say to himself every time he did something. For instance, when he washed his hands, he would say to himself, "I wish everybody will have enough water," or he would say, "may all sentient beings be washed out of their egocentric misunderstanding about the truth of the universe." When he turned on the light, he would wish that the light of wisdom be with everyone. And such went his daily routine. This may not make sense to a lot of people, but think of all the time that we only think of ourselves, do honor to ourselves, making ourselves the center of the world-some-times so much that self-centered habits become stiffened, squeeze our consciousness, close our eyes, our lips, and our hearts. Just as it takes time a habit to form, so it will take time to get rid of And it takes even more

time to replace it by another one. We have gotten into the habit of working only as our self-interest dictates. In order reverse the process and get to work for the benefit of others, we surely need an intensive train-to which we should give all our attention. That kind of training consists of religious practices, of which prayer plays an important role. Attention is expression of our willingness to expand our consciousness to include everyone and to keep light of wisdom ever steady and bright.

The force behind prayer is the force of concentration pulled toward an object of concentration. It should be constantly nurtured by one's 'intention of transcending one's limited self so that good qualities will have a chance to come out. What happens during the process of praying is that first the body gets settled. The five senses block outside disturbances. The flow of the breath slows down and regulates itself into a peaceful rate, If the mind quiets down, all its wanderings here and there stop. The mind is usually like a playful monkey, jumping from branch to branch, unable to keep himself still for one moment. Unless we give mind an idea, an image or object on which to concentrate, it won't stop hopping from one thought to another, separating, comparing, judging, liking and disliking,

wanting, and clinging. Pleasure and pain are the natural offspring of clinging.

Prayer can only be done in a meditative state of mind in which pleasure and pain are transcended. The body is relaxed with the spine erect, the mind concentrated on the object of prayer, be it a name of Buddha, a mantra, or the recitation of ancient teaching sutras. This is called the one-pointed mind. Before one sets out to pray, it is very important that one gets into this state of one-pointed mind which is most uplifting and powerful.

An ordinary mind is like a pendulum in restless motion. Its energy is dissipated and wasted. When the mind is focused on one thing only, its energy converges toward that thing and the power is stored there. Now a question may be raised as to why the object of concentration should be Buddha's name or a mantra? Could it be just any idea? Any object? Like a pencil, a bathtub, or some abstract concept like goodness, wisdom, etc? The answer lies in the fact that when the mind is concentrated on something, sooner or later identification will take place. Suppose one's mind is occupied by the image of a bathtub. What will inevitably follow are considerations about what kind of bathtub it is, what color, the shape it has, how much one likes it or dislikes it, and of course,

what is better and what is worse. In other words, what follows is the mind's routine of judging and comparing which ultimately leads again to clinging.

A Buddha's name is a designation of the Buddha himself, an awakened being, devoid of attributes and dualistic thinking and therefore beyond any judgmental concept. A Buddha is all-pervading, omnipresent and all peace and compassion. It's the purest of all states of being, capable of creativity and miracles. Mantras are essentially sounds. Sounds carry radiations or wave lengths which, if one is open enough to receive their vibrations, can expand one's consciousness to a higher level of perception. For one's mind is also like a radio or a television set. One needs to tune it into the channel on the station one wishes to hear or to see. When the TV set is off, it does not mean that the shows are not on. It does not mean that Channel 11 is not having the News Break at 6:00 o'clock, as usual.

Creative high energy is prevalent all over the universe. Prayer is one of the devices used to tap the source of that creativeness, that intuitive wisdom which knows exactly what to do and how to do it appropriately each moment, at certain places. This creative energy where Buddha comes from is all powerful also because it is immune from self-interest.

It is powerful, because it is free and it liberates.

At the end of each chant or invocation we do at the Buddhist Temple there is always a little prayer that says, "What I have done so far, please let it be for everyone. Whatever merit I have reaped so far, please allow me to give it to all sentient beings. May all be realized."

Prayer is not very far from meditation. We pray to the Buddhas to show our veneration and our gratitude. We pray to purify our body, mind, and speech, to lift ourselves up to be like them and from the space where they dwell, we vow to live our ordinary lives as we chose to create them, with compassion and equanimity.

# **BUDDHISM AS A WAY OF LIFE**

Buddhism is considered to be one among the four major religions of the world. It is also true that the great majority of people in Asia embrace it as their guiding principle in all parts of their lives. However, Buddhism is not a religion in the traditional western definition of the term, since Buddhism does not believe in the concept of "God" as is understood by the Judeo-Christian tradition to be the creator who brought into being this universe, who guides its course and who presides over the destiny of man. Although the ultimate goal of the Buddha-the founder of

Buddhism is of a soteriological nature, his methodology is rationalistic rather than theistic. In other words, although the ultimate concern of the Buddhists is to attain liberation from the sufferings (dukkha) of this world, the liberation is not attained through the grace of savior-God but by realizing the true nature of man both physically and spiritually. In other words! liberation consists in the realization of the nature (man in both his reality and ideality). This kind of realization consists of what is called the enlightenment experience of the Buddha in the Buddhist tradition. Thus, the Buddhist outlook since its inception is analytical and scientific rather than pious; and "numinous"—to use Rudolf Otto's terminology.

To put it differently, the nature of the Buddhism outlook is philosophical and not anthropological as in the case of the Judeo-Christian religion. The Buddha's enlightenment experience consists in his analytical knowledge of the nature of man. It is *only* through this knowledge—which is called "wisdom" (jnana) in Buddhist terminology—that man can attain liberation or enlightenment (bodhi). In this connection, man is considered to be an aggregate of five psycho-physical factors and processes. It is through these processes and that man is caught in his own activities, and subsequently, his universe—which is called samsara

(cyclic existence) in Buddhist terminology. However, the kind of wisdom or enlightenment experience that Buddhism aims at is not to be attained merely through intellectual endeavor, but through a double process which includes both ethical and sapiential nations. In Buddhist terminology, this consists in the understanding of the twelve links of dependent origination and the practice of the noble eightfold path.

Thus, Buddhism is an encompassing way of life since it aims at knowing the true nature of man realizing his utmost potential. In this context, it is obvious that Buddhist soteriology is not an otherworldly asceticism as Weber has remarked. The noble eightfold path is a holistic way of sloping human nature both individually and socially. These eight right methods (1. right understanding, 2. right thought, 3. right speech, 4. right speech, 5. right livelihood, 6. right effort, 7. right mindfulness, 8. right concentration) constitute the three main categories of the Buddhist path, i.e., cal conduct (sila), mental discipline (samadhi) | wisdom (prajna). These three categories are encompassing and have the characteristics of both antidote (to ignorance) and a development (of enlightenment).

Historically, we have witnessed that in every

country which espouses Buddhism as the main way of life, Buddhism has influenced or even initiated the development of that country's philosophy, science and arts.

Viet Nam is no exception to this. The Vietnamese have been embracing Buddhism as a way of life for almost two thousand years. Anybody who has only a modicum of knowledge about Vietnamese culture can see clearly how Buddhism has helped shape many aspects of our cultural, political and spiritual life.

Since Buddhism is not an anthropological religion, its spirit and ethics can easily be assimilated by a country that adopts its teachings. Fortunately, the spreading of Buddhism in Viet Nam is well-documented. It came to Viet Nam around the first century A.D. when the land was still under Chinese domination. Since the beginning, Buddhism had pervaded all levels of life in Viet Nam and gained its independence for the first time in the tenth century A.D., the early emperors of the Dinh and Le Dynasties had to turn to the Buddhist San-gha (the Congregation of Monks) for assistance in political, educational, and even military matters. The Sangha by then had been centers of learning and culture, and the monks had been instrumental in rural life. They played the roles of educators, physicians, astrologers,

technologists, etc. (Even nowadays, in Thailand, the monks are still well versed in some traditional technological skills and actually supervise village people in tasks such as building bridges, dams, etc) although it is not the place to discuss this issue in detail, it is necessary to point out that the idea that monks are absolute world renouncers should be reconsidered.

Language and metaphor in Buddhist scripture also made a palpable impact from the exclusivity of a provincial monotheism, it can easily assimilate the indigenous culture and creeds. Most of the time, the Eastasia Buddhists have been successful in moulding a syncretic way of life that helps them to keep their national culture and the new philosophy (Buddhism) in harmony. This, as we have seen, is due to the fact that Buddhism is a holistic way of life. It covers every facets of life because it is mainly an understanding of man in his entirety. Ever since the Ly Dynasty (1010-1225) accepted Buddhism as the state religion (or more correctly, the state ideology). In Vietnam, Buddhism has always played an important part in the life of the majority of the Vietnamese. In times of crisis, history has shown that Buddhism has always responded timely and appropriately. And the majority of the Vietnamese still look at the Buddhist Temple as

a symbol of their culture, their spiritual guidance, and their refuge. It is as Tru Vu, a well known Vietnamese poet. Once wrote “ Ngoi chua con do que huong van con “ (as long as the temple exists our country still exists).

## LAUGHING AND CRYING

It's very hot today and, like yesterday, nearly 100 degrees in the shade. Yet you have come here to listen to the Dharma, to sit in Zazen, and to be attentive to my lecture on Zen. Your effort to come on such a day should be commended. This is the Zendo. It's a matter of course that you would come for a Zen talk and to practice, although Zen is not simple matter. It's both profound and sublime. It is a matter that permeates into the spiritual life of one's self, or, in other words, it's life itself. I have focused my talk today on the subject of laughing and crying because, just that, laughing-crying has been with us all our lives, and it is an experience that none of us could have been spared. Could of you here, sitting here, being here, could any one of you tell me that he or she has never once laughed, never once cried?

The very first moment of one's life on earth is marked with a cry, the newborn's cry. There you are:

my proof to what I have just mentioned, that laughing-crying is very close to us, is with us, is within us because it is life itself, so close that we often, if not always, tend to forget that it exists. Because it is within us, it is tangible; because it is tangible, it is a means to lead us to Enlightenment. Thus Zen is both sublime and ordinary.

Laughing is Zen; crying is also Zen; and both are nothing else except Zen. The rose is Zen. Its thorns are also Zen. Do not make the distinction. Do not make preferences. Because, remember, every day, every week, we come to the Zendo to seek quietude for our mind. What do we seek but that non-distinction, non-preference, to reach the Truth, the Truth unconditioned by the extremes? It's essential that you should realize that laughing and crying are two sides of our lives, like the two sides of our hands, of a coin—just like summer-winter, day-night, black-white, cold-hot etc. Without the one, there isn't the other. The one conditions and is conditioned by the other. Make no choices between the two. Do not prefer laughing and condemn crying, for both are necessary and essential for our lives.

But, first, we'll find out about laughing, that is laugh or to smile, or just simply a smile, a laugh. Why do we laugh? We laugh when we are happy as when

we are unhappy, we cry. In our lives, all experience happiness and unhappiness all time. Therefore, laughing and crying underlie own ego, our self, the self that we have to transcend to realize the first principle which our lord Buddha has taught us two thousand and five hundred years ago, that is, there is no self, no ego, anattma. Once anattma is realized, we also realize Truth, Enlightenment. Thus, Enlightenment is not something away or beyond our self, for it IS our. Why do we laugh? Because we are happy, because we are satisfied, because we love life, so laugh.

But is there any laughter that could have surpassed a laughter of two thousand and five hundred years ago, when, at the dawn of one morning, a prince burst out laughing and enlightened laugh that awakened the whole universe witness the Truth he has just realized and to recognize him as having become Buddha? Yes, that was the laughter of our beloved Buddha who, after 49 days meditating under the Bodhi tree, realized the Truth and gave out a satisfying laughter *that* still impresses us today, a laughter that trembles the whole universe of three thousand worlds. Whose laughter could have surpassed that one? Tell me.

Not long ago, I came here one morning to join you in a meditation session. It was still dark when we began. The air was very fresh, the morning very still. We all sat in silence while dawn was breaking. The sun was coming up on the horizon. Did any one of you then realize that we, at that moment, were also having a sun shining forth from within ourselves? For, when we are beginners, we await the Light, the Light of Truth, coming into ourselves. But after a certain period of conscientious meditation practice, the Light of Truth will shine out from within ourselves, because Truth is found nowhere else except within ourselves. Any one of you here realized that Truth? Truth is the Inner-Light within each one of us. Do not seek elsewhere.

There is an anecdote that has become a Zen kung-an about a light and the LIGHT that I would like to share with you now.

Zen Master Hsuan Chlen of Te Shan (781-867 A.D.), when still a novice, one called on Zen Master Hsin of Lung Tan and said: "Long have I heard of Lung Tan (which means Dragon Pond), but now that I have arrived here, there is no pond to see and no dragon appears." Master Lung Tan then came out from behind the screen and said: "You have already arrived at Lung Tan." Te Shan bowed and withdrew.

During the night, Te Shan entered Lung T'an's room and stood in attendance till late night. Lung Tan said: "Why don't you go?" Te Shan bade farewell, lifted up the curtain, and went out. He saw that it was dark outside, so he turned around and said: "It's dark outside." Lung Tan lit paper lantern and handed it to Te Shan. As soon Te Shan took it, Lung Tan blew it out. At that moment, Te Shan was at once enlightened. (From **Pi Yen Lu, Bich Nham Luc**, IV).

I believe that when the lantern was blown out, both Lung Tan and Te Shan bursted into laughter, a hearty laughter, a laughter of Enlightenment that only masters of Zen when realizing the Truth could understand. The lantern was lit to light the dark. it when your Mind is lit with the Light of Truth, you no longer need the outside light of the lantern, for you have already known the inner Light of Enlightenment. *"You are the torch unto yourself"* is exactly the meaning which the Buddha has taught us,) thousand five hundred years ago, and is and still be applied now and forever. Both Zen Master Lung Tan and the Zen adherent Te Shan were happy. Their understanding of the Truth was expressed through that enlightened laugh, which was a continuation of the laugh that the Buddha have out after 49 days meditating under the Bodhi tree, when the Buddha

first attained Enlightenment himself. The Zen laugh has never ceased, has never been disconnected, from generation to generation and from one master to another. Is there any laugh more sublime, more profound than this Zen laugh?

Now we come to crying. Why do we cry? Because of sorrow, of disappointment, of separation from our beloved ones, we cry. Any one of you sitting here, have you never shed a tear in your life Tell me! Amidst the laughing of a happy crowd, man bitterly cried. Everybody present was astonished; they thought he was mad. But no, he was the famous Attitha, the seer whom people revered as a prophet; therefore, his *crying* must mean something important. And this is the reason "Prince Siddhartha of the Gautama clan was born today. I know he is destined to become Buddha the World-Honored One. But I am now too old to see the day he becomes enlightened. That's th reason for my crying." What a cry! And what a prophecy!

Another person who cried when everybody was enjoying their ephemeral happiness was the poet Ch'en Tzu-ang (661-702 A.D.) of the T'ang dynasty. More than a thousand years ago, with insight, he composed this famous poem:

*Before me, the man of old came and went.*

*After me, who'll recognize the newcomer?*

*Only heaven and earth remain pensively vast and azure.*

*I alone /n anguish of sorrow, while tears silently roll down my face.*

How lonely he was-just a grain of sand in the desert, a drop of water in the ocean! And, yet, he could not escape from the chain of life and death. He was sitting alone in this place where the man of thousand years ago used to sit, where in a thousand years' time someone else will sit. Though he was very proud to be unique in this world, he wondered who he was and who he will become. Who knows? Then, when, for the very first time, the revelation of the True Nature of life-and-death came to him, it enlightened him and made him cry, not from pain, but from joy and happiness.

But not all cries are like those of these two awakened men of old. More often we cry from pain, from unhappiness, from sorrow, from discontent, or from separation from the ones we love, such as in the case of the deaths of the two hundred people in the Korean Airline incident when the plane strayed into Soviet air space. No one can help crying, least of all the bereaved relatives. So YOU see, one minute earlier, they were all alive; in blink, they were all dead.

We cry for them; we also cry for ourselves, for death can come at any time. Because in life itself, death exists. But who can realize that fact when each one of us sees the duality of things in existence, of life and death, of laughing and crying, of night and day, of black and white, etc. in a different manner in accordance with varying levels of understanding? We also perceive that duality from different angles and attain " Buddhahood at different times. That is the meaning of life, life-and-death, for which we come here today to seek an answer for our Enlightenment, to see Enlightenment itself.

The understanding of the duality of things is comparable to different people looking at a cup of water at the same time. For the ordinary person it's just a drink to quench his thirst. For the scientist, however, it is a chemical compound. And to the poet, ah, it's a romantic symbol of a river running between banks, a place to keep a tryst with or to bade farewell to one's beloved. So each one of us peers at this cup of water from a different perspective, just as we look at life-and-death from differing levels of understanding. The main question remains: How can we transcend that duality to reach the One, the One that encompasses both the one and the many, so that we can attain Enlightenment and become Buddha?

To understand that both extremes, both opposites, are not contradictory but complementary means that you call transcend the duality to realize the One just mentioned, so as to become enlightened. That's what Zen is all about. So, do not say that laughing and crying are the opposites of each other; do not make a preference for laughing over crying, for both are necessary and essential for awakening our Mind to the Truth. Both are the Truth. Try to accept both of them as One, and you will be proud of being a Zen adherent.

Thank you very much for listening to this Zen talk

A Zen talk at  
International Buddhist  
Meditation Center  
Los Angeles, August 1981

## **KWAN-YIN BODHISATTVA**

Needless to say how happy I am to greet yo all here, at this Temple, on this very auspicious day I am deeply touched by your devotion to the Dharma and by your love for each other. It has been almost 8 years since we left our country; we have gone through many hardships but we never gave up hope; our struggle for survival on a foreign land and our loneliness in this strange country could not deter our faith in the Dharma and in the goodness of human nature. I sincerely pray for all sentient beings and invoke the blessings of all Buddha onto their health and their daily-life activities. would like also to thank our distinguished guest who have come today to share with us the joy of celebrating the most valuable quality of the heart: Great Compassion, embodied in the form of the kwan-Yin Bodhisattva.

We are blessed with having the sacred statue the Kwan-Yin Bodhisattva here in Sacramento. The inauguration of this statue is celebrated with love and gratitude. I would like to remind you of histories related by boat people who escaped unthinkable dangers just by reciting Her Name. At times, the

Bodhisattva would appear as a big white whale to guide the boat to safety. The Bodhisattva would always protect boats with members of the Sangha in it. The Bodhisattva is the noblest image he perfect Mother who selflessly helps Her children; She actually is the symbol of kindness that is within ourselves waiting to reach out to others. As the child calls his Mother for help, and because the call comes from the innermost purity of his mind, it automatically becomes the essence of what the Mother symbolizes: Compassion. The mother and her child become one. Love between the Mother and her child knows no limits.

In the sutras, it says that when Kwan-Yin Bodhisattva hears sentient beings cry, She would take form of the unfortunate in distress in order to *help* them. It is that Oneness, that non-discriminate- and unconditioned Love that characterize the Bodhisattva's Great Compassion. So, she is called Goddess of Mercy.

Although we love the Bodhisattva and are grateful to Her, we almost forget Her as soon as we are out of danger. This is the time for all of us to reflect upon this *to seek a direction and a purpose* for our life. Bodhisattva Kwan-Yin is the Love within ourselves that needs to be nurtured constantly, with

each breath of our life energy, with each step in our daily-life. Respect life in whatsoever form you encounter it in your life, deceive no one, and the Bodhisattva will be right there with you. She resides inside your being: She is You.

This is not only true for us Vietnamese; the whole world is longing for mutual assistance and tender loving care. One likes to call one's country the Mother Land. Christians worship the Virgin Mary, Indians pay tribute to the Mother Earth; the first word a baby utters is Mother. The Compassion that the Bodhisattva inspires in us is the food for all lives on earth: it is the source of every action, every thought, every experience for every one of us. Without Compassion, this planet would be dead like a dry stick. We wish to share the truth of Compassion with each other, we also wish to share it with our American friends who have genuinely welcomed us to their homeland. This is the least we can do to contribute our part in building a better world. There are many people who devote themselves to peace and justice in the world, who fight against hunger and suffering, who would gladly appreciate this wonderful tradition of love and help. This unconditioned love and desire to help others has been incarnated by countless sattvas aeons of

kalpas ago; it is our responsible to preserve it, to nurture it and to propagate the wind carrying the seeds of compassion and love to the ten directions.

I would like to stop here on that thought. May the Buddhas be the witnesses to my prayers and to our aspirations for peace and love for all. May this green planet be forever green and the flowers of harmony and understanding bloom in our in heart. May the Bodhisattva Kwan-Yin hear our prayer and respond accordingly.

Namo Kwan-Yin Bodhisattva.

Thank you.

The Most Ven. THICH MAN GIAC

## THE BRANCH THAT GLEAMS IN THE DARK

*On June 12, 1985, the Most Venerable Thich Man Giac gave an address at the Dharmadhatu in Los Angeles, the text of which is excerpted here. (The Vajradhatu Sun)*

I take for granted that you know everything about Tibetan Buddhism and also Japanese Zen and Chinese Chan, so what I can bring you today is a little taste of Vietnamese Buddhism. Viet Nam is a very small country, but it is a bridge between two very big countries. On one side is India, and on the other side is China. I believe that the spiritual role of Viet Nam in bridging different cultures and different religious beliefs is not small.

When we speak of Vietnamese Buddhism, we speak of the combination of three traditions Japanese Zen and Chinese Chan is one, and the Tibetan tradition, and the Pure Land tradition. The *other* two. I was in Japan for quite a while, and what I noticed was that in each temple or in each school of Zen, they keep their practice very secret very different from each other, but in Viet Nam not quite so. In Viet Nam the blend of the three traditions is very interesting. In the morning, when gets up in the monastery, there is always a session of zazen meditation. After that follows a session of chanting long mantras, as in the Tibetan tradition. Imagine a little novice of 11 or 12 years old who sits down and recites a long series of mantras that he does not understand. But he has been told by his masters not to try to understand it just to focus his attention on saying it. Buddhism is not to be understood intellectually; just by reciting the mantras that way one could get to the true knowledge.

There are certain wonders that happen when you do that, when you chant the mantras without your brain getting in the way. The novice enters monastery at a very young age, and he grows up with morning chants. He imbibes the chants without knowing what they mean. If we talk like that in the world today, nobody thinks it makes any sense, but in fact that's

how the novice grows up and one day becomes a master. That's what enlightenment is all about.

When I was teaching Indian philosophy at the university, I often told my students to imagine the Himalayas, and on the Indian side of the Himalaya offer themselves as an obstacle, they would sit there and contemplate and contemplate and contemplate, and because of that contemplation, the knowledge overcame the obstacles. They were able to go beyond the Himalayas, in a way. Civilization has now explored everything in the world, but the masters who sat at the foot of the Himalaya have known much more, beyond.

In essence, the three traditions of Buddhism have taken root beautifully in Viet Nam. On the other hand, after 1963, after the Buddhist revolution in Viet Nam, not only did the three traditions blend in essence, but in form the two biggest schools of Buddhism-the Theravada school and the Mahayana school-also got together. I'm no saying that we are better than anybody, but I'm very glad that it happened in Viet Nam.

In 1964, a friend of mine was invited to go to the United States. At that time I was in Tokyo, and he wrote to me and asked me how to ride an escalator. He said if he were in Tokyo and he made a fool of himself on the escalator, nobody would laugh

because they are Orientals, but here you might laugh and he would feel very embarrassed. The Buddhist masters from India, when they wanted to go to China, they always stopped in Vietnam to learn Chinese. It was a very happy coincidence that we got the masters first and the Chinese got them later. Since King Asoka's dynasty a number of Buddhist priests have been sent out India. That was before the first century, so the glory of Buddhism in Viet Nam began long ago, with the Indian masters coming to China through Vietnam.

From the second century on, Buddhism in Vietnam put down pretty solid structures. In about the fifth century, an Indian master came from China who was the third patriarch of the Chinese dynasty. At that time Viet Nam was like a satellite of China. All the Vietnamese learned and wrote Chinese, so because of that, we had the chance to welcome all the Chinese patriarchs and all the masters.

Have you seen an empty shell? When people eat clams, they throw away the shells in the garbage, and if it rains, some of the rain water gets into empty shell. If you look inside that shell, the whole universe is in there. I always think the same thing of Viet Nam. It is such a small country, but it opens itself up, and all the good things from all traditions pass by and reflect

themselves there. By that example I wanted to tell you not to think of yourself as small. You are small, but like an empty shell, if you open yourself up and welcome all the wonders of the universe, you become the universe, you become great.

Japan is another example. It is very small. A thousand years ago Japan sent for a Vietnamese Buddhist master to come and teach them Buddhist music. Now all Japanese music has a little taste of Vietnamese. Viet Nam has lost that Buddhist music; Japan got it. I learned that from Prof. Hajime Nakamura who mentioned in a lecture he delivered in 1973 that a Japanese scholar made a study about it.

In the books it's always related that the sixth patriarch, Hui Neng, was Chinese, but I know he was Vietnamese. Scholars who have done a lot of research agree. Before he became the sixth patriarch, when he first came to the fifth patriarch to ask for the teachings, do you remember what the fifth patriarch said? He said, "You barbarian from the south, what do you know?" The sixth patriarch replied, "Buddha nature is in everyone, so what's the difference if I live in the south?" So he was sent to the kitchen. But the fifth patriarch had already known him as great. China in the old days called itself Zhung Quo, which literally means Country of the center." For them it was the

center the universe. They were very proud about their civilization, so whoever lived outside of that center is a barbarian.

Dr. Suzuki talked a lot about the sixth patriarch and the Zen spirit. Without the sixth patriarch, we shouldn't have what we know as Zen today.

The special thing about Vietnamese Buddhist monks is that they are all poets. In 1963 the self-immolation of a Venerable Thich Quang Duc and other monks in Viet Nam showed their power of meditation. In November 1975 the communists were shoved out when they heard that 12 monks immolated themselves all at once to protest that non-humanitarian regime.

Has any body smoked in this room? Even the burned end of a cigarette, when you touch it, you *feel* it. When it is time for the novice to be officially ordained into the monkhood, he undergoes the burning of three pieces of incense on his head.

There once was a girl from a wealthy family who visited the temple often and there she fell in *love* with a monk. The monk was very handsome, but he was also a very good monk. She was heartbroken, and in her frustration she went out with a servant in the house. When she became pregnant, she told

everybody that the monk was the author of her being with child. The community whose Buddhist regulations of behavior are very strict, gave the monk a heavy beating and excommunicated him. When the girl gave birth to the baby, she brought the baby to him. He was sure a good monk, although he was hated by everyone that he accepted the baby with a good heart any he carried the baby around asking other people for milk. That made things worse for him because everybody pointed fingers at him and insulted him and chased him away. Imagine anybody being able to do that, were it not for Buddha's compassion! When the baby was six years old, the men died. When they washed him and changed his clothes, they discovered that he was a woman, in the old days, women were not allowed to participate in the Sangha's life. That girl was so eager to practice meditation, and there was no other way for her to enter except to disguise herself as a man. Because she was a woman disguised as a man he was very handsome and graceful. That is a story about patience. It is a story that is on the tongue of every Vietnamese. They say that she was the incarnation of Kwan Yin.

A thousand years ago in Viet Nam there was a Buddhist master named Man Giac, and a thousand years later I was born and I got his name. He was a

poet, and I also like to do poetry. One of his very famous poems talks about the coming and going the seasons. When spring comes all flowers bloom, and when spring goes all flowers go. It's like one person's life - when you are young you have dark hair; when you grow old white hair appears. When spring ends there's nothing left, but there is always one thing left, something that is not subject to the law of impermanence. This is what said: "Yet, don't think that when spring ends there is nothing left. Last night in the front yard a inch of plum gleamed in the dark."

Tonight what I can offer you is that branch of plum that gleams in the dark. In the midst of birth and death, there is something undestroyable, and that is within each of us, that is our nature.

Somehow, by coincidence, Tibetan Buddhism and Vietnamese Buddhism have something in common. We are all victims of some ideology. The Lamas from Tibet had to take exile in India, and we Vietnamese monks had to leave our country to come here. I have the privilege and blessing of being here in Los Angeles, so I was able to welcome the Dalai Lama many times, and also the Kar-pa.

A Tibetan tourist in 1235 visited the Nalanda university, which then was nothing but a big heap of bricks. He saw an old Indian Buddhist master

teaching Buddhism on that heap. Like the destruction and the reconstruction of Nalanda University Buddhism has its ups and downs, and we are here to share the joy and the sadness of those.

My hope is that one day we will together be able to build something we can call American Buddhism. An American Buddhism would catch the real meaning of what Buddhism is all about. I'm not saying that to give you a compliment, but I have been watching carefully the education system in this country. Children, when they reach a certain age, always look for an independent life. A person who has an individual sense of being himself would come to Buddhism very successfully. I am sure that American Buddhism will have very special aspects, because you are in very favorable, very happy circumstances, so you can welcome and receive everything that comes your way. You will choose what's good for you and you will disregard what does not work. I am very happy that Buddhism has chosen this country to stop by.

In 1963 in Viet Nam, when we buried the monk who immolated himself, we found out that his heart was still intact. His heart was not burned. So it is kept now in the temple as a relic. It is called the "indestructible heart" and the word has become a

common term that has entered the dictionary. It's also like the analogy that when winter comes nothing is left, but there is the plum flower. So don't think that I come here just to talk about Vietnamese Buddhism. I come here to bring you a plum flower. Thank you all for coming tonight.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thich Man Giac was born on September 29, 1929 in the ancient capital city of Hue, Central Vietnam. He left home to become a monk-novice *at* age 10.

Graduated from the Buddhist Academy of Bao Quoc, Hue, 1952.

Obtained a Master of Arts degree in Literature Toyo University, Tokyo, 1964.

Entered the Graduate School, Indian Philosophy Section, Division of Humanities, Faculty of Letters, University of Tokyo, Japan.

Completed the Graduate Class of Doctor o Literature, Toyo University, Tokyo.

Conferred the Ph. D. Degree from the University of Oriental Studies, 1979.

## **POSITIONS HELD**

Full-time Associate Professor, Faculty of Letters, University of Saigon, South Viet Nam, 1965-

Taught Indian, Chinese, and Oriental Philosophy, Faculty of Letters, University of Hue, 1965-1975.

Taught Asian cultures, Oriental Philosophy and Buddhist Philosophy at the Van Hanh University, Saigon, South Viet Nam.

Dean of the Faculty of Buddhist Studies and Oriental Philosophy and Vice-Rector of Van Hanh University.

## **OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS**

Thich Man Giac, pen name Huyen Khong, has authored over 20 books in Vietnamese, including 4 books of poetry. He is presently the publisher-editor of the Buddhist Magazine Phat Giao Viet Nam (Vietnamese Buddhism).

He is also a Zen Master. Has taught meditation to many Buddhists friends, and college students over the years.

“A direct charming pointing-the-way of Buddhist  
teaching for Westerners”

**Gary Snyder**