

## **“What Tracks Will We Leave On This World?”**

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UU Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

The great and humble teacher and student of mindfulness and meditation Thich Nhat Hanh passed from this plane of existence into the next this week at his home at Plum Village in Vietnam. He was 95 years old, and spent most of his life living in exile, primarily in France. He was ordained as a Buddhist monk in 1951 and traveled to the US to study and teach through much of the 1960s. When he asked the US government to stop bombing Vietnam, he was exiled and forbidden to return home. France granted him asylum in that year – 1966 – and he kept working as a peace activist, poet, teacher, author, and proponent of mindfulness practices. He was allowed to return to Vietnam for a visit in 2005, and in 2007 was permitted to return to support Buddhist communities and to lead programs to help the nation and its people heal from some of the lingering wounds of the terrible war in the 1960s and 70s. After suffering a stroke, he returned to his root temple of Plum Village in Vietnam in 2018, where he spent the last of his days.

In contemplating his death, members of his temple family desired to build a shrine for his ashes at Plum Village. The humble monk opposed the idea of a shrine to the remains of a single man, writing these words:

This body is not me.  
I am not limited by this body.  
I am life without boundaries.  
I have never been born,  
and I have never died.

Look at the ocean and the sky filled with stars,  
manifestations from my wondrous true mind.

Since before time, I have been free.  
Birth and death are only doors through which we pass,  
sacred thresholds on our journey.  
Birth and death are a game of hide-and-seek.

So laugh with me,  
hold my hand,  
let us say good-bye,  
say good-bye, to meet again soon.

We meet today.  
 We will meet again tomorrow.  
 We will meet at the source every moment.  
 We meet each other in all forms of life.

*contemplation on no-coming and no-going - thich nhat hanh*

Thich Nhat Hanh's death prompts us to consider the legacy he left behind: hundreds of monasteries, countless peace activist groups and organizations, relationships with hundreds of thousands of people around the world, a life lived in pursuit of peace, seeking ever to remain humble, even as the world showered him with accolades and adoration.

His legacy is as deep as it is broad and wide, having touched the hearts and lives of millions of people around the globe, for over 70 years of public life. It has been said that Thich Nhat Hanh made the eastern practice of Buddhism accessible to the western masses who were seeking a spiritual experience beyond the dominant Judeo-Christian culture of their world. In a century that saw the rise of such profound consumerism, Thich Nhat Hanh taught simplicity and modesty. In a century that emphasized and celebrate individualism, achievement, and personal liberties, Thich Nhat Hanh taught about living in community, sharing resources, and our responsibilities to others in the world.

On this week in 1967, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize with these words:

January 25, 1967

The Nobel Institute  
 Oslo, NORWAY

Gentlemen:

As the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate of 1964, I now have the pleasure of proposing to you the name of Thich Nhat Hanh for that award in 1967. I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle Buddhist monk from Vietnam.

This would be a notably auspicious year for you to bestow your Prize on the Venerable Nhat Hanh. Here is an apostle of peace and non-violence, cruelly separated from his own people while they are oppressed by a vicious war which has grown to threaten the sanity and security of the entire world.

Because no honor is more respected than the Nobel Peace Prize, conferring the Prize on Nhat Hanh would itself be a most generous act of peace. It would remind all nations that men of good will stand ready to lead warring elements out

of an abyss of hatred and destruction. It would re-awaken men to the teaching of beauty and love found in peace. It would help to revive hopes for a new order of justice and harmony.

I know Thich Nhat Hanh, and am privileged to call him my friend. Let me share with you some things I know about him. You will find in this single human being an awesome range of abilities and interests.

He is a holy man, for he is humble and devout. He is a scholar of immense intellectual capacity. The author of ten published volumes, he is also a poet of superb clarity and human compassion. His academic discipline is the Philosophy of Religion, of which he is Professor at Van Hanh, the Buddhist University he helped found in Saigon. He directs the Institute for Social Studies at this University. This amazing man also is editor of *Thien My*, an influential Buddhist weekly publication. And he is Director of Youth for Social Service, a Vietnamese institution which trains young people for the peaceable rehabilitation of their country.

Thich Nhat Hanh today is virtually homeless and stateless. If he were to return to Vietnam, which he passionately wishes to do, his life would be in great peril. He is the victim of a particularly brutal exile because he proposes to carry his advocacy of peace to his own people. What a tragic commentary this is on the existing situation in Vietnam and those who perpetuate it.

The history of Vietnam is filled with chapters of exploitation by outside powers and corrupted men of wealth, until even now the Vietnamese are harshly ruled, ill-fed, poorly housed, and burdened by all the hardships and terrors of modern warfare.

Thich Nhat Hanh offers a way out of this nightmare, a solution acceptable to rational leaders. He has traveled the world, counseling statesmen, religious leaders, scholars and writers, and enlisting their support. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity.

I respectfully recommend to you that you invest his cause with the acknowledged grandeur of the Nobel Peace Prize of 1967. Thich Nhat Hanh would bear this honor with grace and humility.

Sincerely,

Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://plumvillage.org/letter-from-dr-martin-luther-king-jr-nominating-thich-nhat-hanh-for-the-nobel-peace-prize-in-1967/>

The Nobel Peace Prize was not awarded in 1967. According to the Nobel Peace Center website:

Since the inception of the prize in 1901, there have been a number of years when the Nobel Peace Prize was not awarded. Altogether, it happened 19 times, the last time in 1972.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee can decide to postpone the Nobel Peace Prize. However, if they do not award it within the following year, the prize amount will be returned to the Nobel Institute's fund. This may be the case if none of the nominations qualify for the prize or if the members of the Committee cannot reach a decision.<sup>2</sup>

Hindsight is always 20/20 they say. I am sure there are some among the Nobel Institute who think Hanh should have been awarded the Peace Prize in 1967, but I could find no notes about how or why that decision was made. For what it is worth, Mahatma Gandhi also never received the award. Perhaps there are times when peace activists exiled by violent, brutal, oppressive regimes are too politically untouchable to be embraced publicly. But that is my own speculation, to be sure. (Barack Obama was awarded the Peace Prize for nothing more significant than NOT being George W. Bush, after all.)

Thich Nhat Hanh taught much of the world what the practice of mindfulness is, and offered accessible ways for people to engage in it. We didn't have to travel to Asia or climb to a mountaintop to find a slice of peace in our frazzled worlds. We could journey within, seek the calm that exists there. We could let go of all that is unnecessary, if only in our minds, and seek simplicity in our hearts. We could focus on being present, attuned to each moment, conscious of our breath, aware of our heartbeat, in touch with our bodies. We can think about our actions and consider their impact. Are they necessary? Are they life-giving? Are they affirming? Do they encourage peace?

Mindfulness practice keeps us in the moment, but it also has a legacy. What we do today affects the world and what we will encounter tomorrow. A consecutive string of days, stretched long enough, becomes a legacy of a career, a relationship, a lifetime. Thich Nhat Hanh chose peace each day, each moment, even, and it has left us a lifetime legacy of peace in action. The footprints left by this humble monk are clear and unwavering. There are no places where he strayed from his path.

When you look back on your life, what do you think your impact on the world might be? What might your footprints look like? I know teachers who look back on a lifetime of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://peaceprizelaureates.nobelpeacecenter.org/en/laureate/1967-ingen-pris>

educating and encouraging children. Artists who leave a legacy of their work behind in galleries and on walls. When I think about my own impact on the world, I fear my own footsteps might look like those left by a dog chasing multiple seagulls at the beach. I've been a reporter, a bus driver, I have worked in construction, and organized volunteers and preached some words. Perhaps my footprints may indicate a life of exploration, I do not know how it all will be described when I am gone.

I find that taking stock at the end of each day is a good practice and can focus my attention more sharply on the next day. When I prepare for bed I think, "What did I do today?" But I do not try to merely recite a litany of errands run or chores accomplished. Instead, I consider whether I was present in the moment, or was my mind somewhere else? Were my daily activities meaningful to me or simply busywork for my brain and body?

We cannot all live lives likely to get us nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, but we can live lives of simple mindfulness and humility. We can strive, like Saint Francis of Assisi, to serve rather than to be served, to bring peace where there is violence, harmony where there is strife, justice where there is exploitation or abuse.

Each day matters. Each moment matters. If we are engaged in even the simple task of washing dishes, we can devote ourselves to the simple beauty of that humble act. Mindfulness draws us into the moment, and challenges us to embrace that moment for what it is, not unlike Thoreau at Walden, experiencing every bit of life, good or bad, but truly knowing it deeply.

What footprints will you leave on this world?

I offer you now these words from Thich Nhat Hanh.

"The moment I die  
I will try to come back to you  
as quickly as possible.  
I promise it will not take long.  
Isn't it true  
I am already with you  
as I die each moment?  
I come back to you  
in every moment.  
Just look,  
feel my presence.

If you want to cry,  
please cry,  
And Know  
that I will cry with you.  
The tears you shed  
will heal us both.  
Your tears and mine.  
The earth I tread this morning  
transcends history.  
Spring and Winter are both present in the moment.  
The young leaf and the old leaf are really one.  
My feet touch deathlessness,  
And my feet are yours.  
Walk with me now.  
Let us enter the dimension of oneness  
and see the cherry tree blossom in Winter.  
Why should we talk about death?  
I don't need to die  
to be back with you."  
~Thich Nhat Hanh

Amen