NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# On retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh

John Dear | Aug. 28, 2007 On the Road to Peace

**"W**hen we have peace, then we have a chance to save the planet," Nhat Hanh told us last week. "But if we are not united in peace, if we do not practice mindful consumption, we cannot save our planet. We need enlightenment, not just individually but collectively, to save the planet. We need to awaken ourselves. We need to practice mindfulness if we want to have a future, if we want to save ourselves and the planet."

I was in Colorado to prepare for my upcoming trial on Sept. 6 and probable imprisonment. First I spent a few days at the Trappist monastery at Snowmass, then I drove east over to Estes Park in the heart of the Rocky Mountains to attend a retreat with the Buddhist leader Thich Nhat Hanh. A thousand people gathered for six days of silence, mindfulness, walking meditations and dharma talks by the legendary peacemaker.

What a blessing to be with "Thay," as he's called (a word meaning "teacher"). I've been attending his lectures since the late 1980s, but in the late 1990s, while serving as director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, I came to know him personally and we became friends. Knowing Thay has been one of the great blessings of my life.

Once in 1998, I drove from New York to Vermont to visit him, but on arrival, learned that he was resting, have just completed a six-day near Boston. I was tired too, so I walked down the green lawn of the country house where he was staying, lay down under a tree, and promptly fell asleep. When I woke up a few hours later, there he was, sitting right next to me, in the full lotus position, smiling. We had a beautiful conversation about peace and nonviolence.

On another visit, I remember sitting on the floor with Thay and eight monks, in a circle, eating a delicious vegetarian pizza. We ate mindfully, peacefully in silence. Then after 45 minutes, he introduced me to the monks, and we spoke about our work for peace, our mutual friends, our books, and the importance of nonviolence.

After a while, he said to the group, "I feel sorry for Fr. John. He works so hard for peace. Could one of you please sing a song for him?" With that, one of the monks stood up and broke into an impromptu chant that went something like: "Poor Fr. John. He worked so hard for peace, and then one day, he died. Poor Fr. John. He worked so hard for peace, and now he's dead." This went on for 10 minutes. Afterward, Thay and the others nodded their heads in solemn agreement. A classic Buddhist teaching from my Zen master: "Wake up! Life is precious! Everyone dies! Live now in the present moment!"

Thay is the epitome of gentleness. I am continually amazed at his peaceableness, how he practices so diligently what he preaches so famously. I wish I could be more like him, because in his peace, I find Christ and learn more about Christ. I also wish that more Catholics, priests, nuns, Jesuits and activists could practice peace as seriously as he does.

Fr. John Dear is featured in a new 90 min. documentary film, "The Narrow Path: John Dear and the Way of Nonviolence," with music by Jackson Browne and Joan Baez. It's the latest San Damiano Film, and here's the trailer:

To order or for more information:href="http:\\\\www.sandamianofoundation.org">www.sandamianofoundation.org orThe Narrow Path [1].

In 1942, when he was 16, Nhat Hanh entered a Buddhist monastery in rural Vietnam. Later he founded the School of Youth for Social Service, whose students rebuilt villages that were destroyed by bombs and resettled tens of thousands of people fleeing the war zones. He also founded Van Hanh Buddhist University, La Boi Press, and his own religious order of monks, the Order of Interbeing, which today has some 600 professed monastic men and women. During the war, many of his friends were killed. He himself barely survived three separate bombings.

In 1966, the Fellowship of Reconciliation invited Thay on a three month speaking tour of the United States. He was introduced to Thomas Merton, Daniel Berrigan and Dr. King, who nominated Thay for the Nobel Peace Prize. Afterwards, Vietnam refused to let him return, so he settled in France where he founded Plum Village, a monastic community that attracts nearly a thousand people a week (See: www.plumvillage.org). He served as chairman of the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation at the Paris Peace Talks, and organized projects to rescue the boat people. He has authored more than 75 books, including *Being Peace*, *Peace Is Every Step*, *No Fear, No Death*, and *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. He has published five books a year for the last six years.

"Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy and serenity," Thay writes. "We need only to be awake, alive in the present moment." He teaches the practice of mindfulness, being aware of your breathing and being centered in the present moment, throughout our day -- when getting up, sitting down, walking, eating, driving, talking, doing the laundry and washing the dishes. His teaching makes the connection between the world's wars, poverty and destruction, and the way we live our day to day lives, moment to moment.

"Practicing nonviolence," he once said, "is first of all to become nonviolence ? The essence of nonviolence is love. Out of love and the willingness to act selflessly, strategies, tactics and techniques for a nonviolent struggle arise naturally. Nonviolence is not a dogma; it is a process. Other struggles may be fueled by greed, fear or ignorance, but a nonviolent one cannot use such blind sources of energy, for they will destroy those involved and also the struggle itself. Nonviolent action, born of the awareness of suffering and nurtured by love, is the most effective way to confront adversity."

I was deeply moved by his dharma talks last week on the Buddha, mindfulness, breathing, sitting, walking, looking deeply and living fully in the present moment. Afterwards, I gave him the little wooden cross that I wore for years during my own dharma talks around the country.

"You practice mindfulness, on the one hand, to be calm and peaceful," he told us one morning. "On the other hand, as you practice mindfulness and live a life of peace, you inspire hope for a future of peace."

It was amazing to sit still with a thousand people for hours, with Thay on the small platform, in perfect silence. But the best part was the walking meditation. Each morning at 5:30 a.m., Thay and the monks led a thousand of us in a silent 20-minute peace walk to an open field of grass surrounded by the towering Rocky Mountains, where we sat still for 30 minutes in silence to watch the sun rise. Then we walked back to the main hall for our guided meditation.

"When we walk mindfully, we enjoy every step we take," he told us. "Every step brings freshness, relaxation, calm, and happiness. Each step is nourishing and healing. We begin to walk like the Buddha." Thay is teaching me how to walk the road to peace, how to follow Jesus more peacefully, how to live in the Holy Spirit of peace.

On Thursday morning, as we walked slowly around the corner of one of the buildings at the park conference center, we came upon two enormous elks, standing solemnly, just 20 yards from us. One of them, a bull elk, had spectacular antlers, perhaps four or five feet tall. A thousand of us, led by Thay, walked right by them. We walked slowly, mindfully, peacefully, one step at a time, in perfect peace. The giant elks stood there, taking it all in, looking at us, also practicing perfect mindfulness and peace. In the distance, as a layer of white clouds hung just below the mountaintops, the sun rose. It was a magical moment, an experience of peace, thanks to Thay and the God of peace, which I'll return to in days to come.

John Dear is featured in a new DVD, "The Narrow Path," available from **www.sandamianofoundation.org [2]**, and his new book, *Transfiguration*, (Doubleday) is at your local bookseller. For information, see: **www.johndear.org [3]**.

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**Source URL (retrieved on *03/11/2014 - 16:42*):** http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/retreat-thich-nhat-hanh

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