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Thich Nhat Hanh and the Literature of Interbeing: Origins, Development, and Continuation

Grégoire Mauraisin
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Supervisor: Cian Duffy

Abstract

This thesis takes a look at the origin, development and continuation of Thich Nhat Hanh's literature (TNH). To do so, I first establish necessary Buddhist concepts and situate them in relation to Western ideas. I take special interest in the role of mindfulness and the Insight of Interbeing. I then explore the role of literature in traditional Buddhism, taking particular interest in the kōan. The following part looks at the development of TNH's literature and considers it in relation to history and Buddhist philosophy. This part explores notably his poetry and calligraphy. The final part of this thesis is an exploration of different literary devices used at Plum Village, the monastery founded by TNH, and how they relate to the practice of mindfulness and the Insight of Interbeing. The conclusion reflects on the meaning of this literature for contemporary time and suggests different applications of the Insight of Interbeing in the field of English Literature.

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Introduction

Thich Nhat Hanh, pronounced Tik Nyat Han and hereby rendered as TNH, was a Vietnamese monk who was born on the 11th of October 1926 and died on the 22nd of January 2022. He was one of the most important spiritual figures of the 20th and early 21st century and has played a pioneering role in bringing Buddhist practices from East Asia to Europe and the USA. He has been described as “the most important figure in Western Buddhism [...] in terms of direct influence through number of students taught and the degree to which terms and concepts he has coined or emphasized (‘engaged Buddhism,’ ‘interbeing,’ ‘mindfulness,’ etc.) impact the very language of contemporary Western Buddhism itself” (“Extended Biography”). For these reasons, he has been recognized as “one of the ten most influential, distinctive, or representative leaders in Buddhist history” (“Extended Biography”). He wrote over a hundred books, countless poems and drew over 10.000 original calligraphies, all deeply inspired by his Buddhist philosophy. As the vast majority of his work has been published in English, his legacy has found a home in the landscape of English Literature.

In 1966, after calling for peace internationally in relation to the Vietnam War, TNH was exiled from his native Vietnam and found refuge in France. In 1982, together with Sister Chan Khong, TNH founded the Plum Village monastery, where he subsequently lived for over 30 years. Sister Chan Khong still lives there. Plum Village is the root monastery of the Plum Village Tradition, the single most important branch of Buddhism that was born in the West. What started from a small rural farmstead is now the home of 200 monastic practitioners and receives over 10,000 visitors each year (“Extended Biography”). The Plum Village tradition has grown to be present throughout the world and now has monasteries in the USA, Thailand, Germany, Australia and Hong Kong. In all the monasteries, literature plays a crucial role and is used daily to support practitioners in their practice.

Both the literature of TNH and its continuation through Plum Village have deep roots in a 2,600 years old tradition, Buddhism. It is a specific branch of Buddhism that TNH comes from, a branch known as Zen. Zen is itself a branch of Mahayana Buddhism and is widely thought to have originated in China in the 6th Century, after the semi-legendary monk Bodhidharma took the Buddhist teachings from India to China (Pine x). Strictly speaking, Bodhidharma was a member of the Dhyana school, Dhyana being the Sanskrit word for

“meditation.” In China, Dhyana was rendered as “Ch’an” and subsequently travelled to neighboring countries, adapting with local cultures. It travelled to Vietnam to become Tien, to Korea to become Seon, and to Japan to become Zen. It has to be noted that while the story that Zen originates in China as Ch’an has been agreed upon by scholars for generations, TNH argued that new evidence suggests that Zen was present in Vietnam even before Bodhidharma arrived in China (“Plum Village Lineage”). Strictly speaking then, TNH is a Tien Master, however in the English-speaking world this has been rendered as Zen.

Zen was present in the English-speaking world before the arrival of TNH. The event that is most often noted as the first arrival of Zen in the contemporary English-speaking world is the visit of Soyen Shaku to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Following his visit, Shaku’s view of Buddhism gained great popularity in American intellectual circles. William James is notably noted as claiming that “[Buddhism] is the psychology everybody will be studying twenty-five years from now” (Fields 135). The second most important event in the spread of Buddhism in the intellectual landscape of the English-speaking world is the coming of Japanese Scholar D.T Suzuki, who was a student of Soyen Shaku. According to Lynn White: “It may well be that the publication of D.T Suzuki’s first *Essays in Zen Buddhism* in 1927 will seem in future generations as great an intellectual event as William of Moerbeke’s Latin Translation Aristotle in the thirteenth century” (Kapleau xi). Suzuki’s contribution has had a great impact on American culture, most notably on the Beat generation and writers like Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder, as seen in *The Dharma Bums*. Suzuki’s work was also met with appraisals from intellectual circles. For instance, Martin Heidegger is recorded as saying that “If I understand [D.T. Suzuki] correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings” (Kapleau xi).

Since then, the influence of Zen on English Literature has grown exponentially. Many English works have been inspired one way or another by Zen, with notably Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* or, more recently, Ruth Ozeki’s *The Book of Form and Emptiness*. Another important figure linked to Zen was Leonard Cohen who spent several years in a Zen Monastery (Gindin). Many famous spiritual figures such as Alan Watts, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, Tara Brach, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Joan Halifax and many more have been deeply influenced by Zen.

But what is Zen? Philosophically, Zen takes root in a practice of mind that aims at experiencing reality as it is, beyond all concepts. The most central technique used is

meditation. Though different schools have different techniques, the one championed by TNH is mindfulness. Simply put, mindfulness is the practice of bringing one's awareness to the present moment in a non-judgmental way. In that sense, the practitioner aims at remaining in "bare awareness" of what is present. Though mindfulness has now been secularized to the point of being barely recognizable, in Buddhism, it is the first part of what is known as the Threefold Training, the two other parts being concentration (Samadhi) and insight (Prajna). TNH explains that the Threefold Training is practiced to "shed light on all things, to produce the power of concentration and to bring forth deep insight and awakening" (*Zen Keys* 27). It can be understood as using mindfulness to bring the mind to a one-pointed state, which is concentration, and with this one-pointed mind, pierce through notions and see unconditioned reality, this is insight.

This notion of insight is central to Zen and much of the literature that comes out of it relates to it in one way or another. However, as the practice of mindfulness requires a letting go of all notions in order to remain in open awareness of the present moment, Zen Buddhists have developed a complicated relationship with language. In that sense, much of their literature is concerned with helping the practitioner letting go of ideas. This has been the case historically in traditional Buddhism, but this is also the case for TNH's work, and all the literary devices used at Plum Village. In that sense, this literature, whose notion of insight is central, brings a new perspective in English Literature, one that both completes and departs from it.

Despite TNH's important bibliography, little academic interest has been given to his work. Many psychologists and healthcare professionals have commented on the beneficial aspects of mindfulness practices, but almost no literary critics have taken a closer look at his work. A rare exception is Victor Thasiah, who wrote *Collapsing Space and Time*, an article in which he uses two of TNH's poems to understand what he calls "ecological humanism." There has, however, been no article published on the matter of TNH's calligraphies and no interest, from a literary perspective, has been given to texts used at the Plum Village monastery. This thesis aims at bringing light on an important contribution to English literature offered by TNH.

The aim of this thesis is to understand the literature of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and its continuation, the Plum Village Literature, in light of the notion of insight. In order to do so effectively, I first introduce in the background section some key Buddhist concepts that are necessary to understand in order to grasp the philosophy from which the literature comes out of. In my first analytical section, I retrace one of the roles of literature in traditional

Buddhism and use the kōan as an example. In my second part, I look at TNH's literature under two different and complementary angles. On the one hand from what he calls the Historical dimension which aims at understanding his poetry in relation to his life and, on the other hand, from the Ultimate dimension, which is the dimension that he argues to be revealed through the practice of mindfulness. In this section, I also pay attention to his calligraphy. The final section is concerned with the literature used in Plum Village as the continuation of TNH. This part discusses many different literary devices and situates them in the context of the practice of mindfulness.

Background

As this thesis is concerned with a type of literature that takes root in Buddhist thinking, it is necessary for the reader to be made familiar with some key Buddhist concepts. However, Buddhism being an incredibly complex philosophical system that spawned over 2,600 years, it is impossible to rightfully explain everything here. For this reason, I have chosen to shortly retrace the origin of Buddhism and outline key concepts that have been argued for by TNH and how they relate to contemporary continental philosophy. These concepts are necessary entry points to understand the subsequent literary discussion.

Overview of Buddhism

Historical facts concerning the life of the actual Buddha are scarce and difficult to interpret due to their age. However, the scientific consensus estimates that the Buddha lived from around 563 BCE and 480 BCE and died around 80 years later between 483 BCE and 400 BCE. Most of what is known about Buddhism is a mixture of myths, stories, and historical facts.

The traditional story tells that Siddharta Gothama was born as a member of one the highest castes in ancient India. During his entire youth, Siddharta was kept by his father in a palace where he could enjoy all imaginable pleasures in such a way that he would remain unaware of life's realities. However, at the age of 29, Siddharta wandered outside the palace and saw what is known as the four sights. He saw an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a holy man. As he asked his servant the meaning of all this, he was told that this is the human condition, all humans are subject to aging, sickness and death, and that the holy man was trying to find a way to be happy in the midst of all that. Following this discovery, Siddharta decided to leave behind his life of luxury and seek a way to put an end to the suffering inherent to the human condition. He then became a wandering ascetic and, for six years, would intentionally starve himself, inflict pain on his body and avoid sleeping. After a while, he saw that neither a life filled with pleasure nor one devoid of it helped in reaching his goal. For this reason, he resolved to leave the ascetics and developed his own practice. He decided to eat and practiced meditation in a way that had come to him spontaneously when he was a child. With the strength that the food gave him and the understanding he had developed

during his years as an ascetic, Siddhartha decided to sit under a tree and resolved to not stand up until he realized full awakening. The story tells that he sat under the Bodhi Tree, in Bodhgaya, for an entire night and in the morning, he finally found what he sought. Buddhists believe that he reached full enlightenment, thus becoming the Buddha, which means the Enlightened One.

Upon reaching enlightenment, he stayed in meditation for some time further contemplating what he had just realized. Eventually, he returned to the ascetics with whom he trained and started to teach them. This first teaching is recorded in the *Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma*. With this discourse, the teachings of Buddhism started. This Discourse is arguably the most fundamental of all Buddhist teachings. In it we find the core belief of all Buddhist schools.

The first thing the Buddha mentions is the cultivation of the Middle Path. According to him, “devotion to sensual desire and the pleasure resulting from sensual desire is pedestrian, worldly, ignoble, and unbeneficial.” Similarly, “devotion to harsh austerity [...] is painful, ignoble, and unbeneficial.” (Plum Village, *Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma*) Instead, he argues for what is known as the Middle Path. From following the Middle Path, the Buddha is believed to have derived four teachings, known in Buddhism as the Four Noble Truths. They are the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism on which all Buddhist schools agree on.

According to the Buddha the Four Noble Truth are:

1. The Noble Truth of Dukkha
2. The Noble Truth of the Cause of Dukkha
3. The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Dukkha
4. The Noble Truth of the Way towards the Cessation of Dukkha.

Dukkha is a Pali word which has no direct translation in English. The most common translation is “suffering,” but it can also be understood as “stress,” “anxiety,” “ill-being” or “unhappiness.” In the Buddhist view, the cause of Dukkha is to be found in the attachment to what is impermanent, one’s wish to be different from what one is, one’s wish for things to be different from the way they are. Ultimately, all that is conditioned and impermanent is seen by Buddhists as Dukkha. The Third Noble Truth claims that there is a way through which one

can end Dukkha and The Fourth Noble Truth is the way to do so. The Fourth Noble Truth is the Noble Eightfold Path, a list of eight directions that the Buddha gave to put an end to suffering.

The eight directions are: right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Explaining them individually is of little use for a thesis on literature, but those who wish to know more about them can find detailed explanations in *The Heart of The Buddha's Teachings* by Thich Nhat Hanh.

Situating the notion of Insight

The story of the Buddha tells the story of someone that gained insight into the nature of things. Insight, also known as Prajna in Buddhism, can be understood as the result of a phenomenological investigation using as primary methodology the practice of meditation. As such, it is suited to understand the Buddhist insight in light of phenomenology.

Nowadays, phenomenology stands for many things, but the figure that is often seen as the founder of phenomenology is Edmund Husserl. As Evan Thompson explains in *Mind In Life*, Husserl's project first started with the division of the human attitudes towards their experience of the world. On the one hand, there is what Husserl called the "natural attitude" which is the attitude of "being straightforwardly immersed in the world" (17). This attitude can be understood as that mental state that experiences the world simply as such, in an unquestioned manner. It is the attitude that most people live their life immersed in. On the other hand, there is the "phenomenological attitude" which "arises when we step back from the natural attitude, not to deny it, but in order to investigate the very experience it comprises" (18). In other words, the phenomenological attitude aims at investigating the subjective experience that witnessing the phenomena of the world entails. The phenomenologist is not investigating the world, but her experience of it.

One of the most important tools in the Husserlian arsenal of phenomenological inquiry is what is known as "phenomenological reduction." Simply put, this reduction aims at looking at a thing as an experienced phenomenon rather than as an object in the world. In other

words, it is not trying to answer what a thing is independently of the mind, but rather how the thing is experienced, how it relates to the subjective apprehension of reality and appears as a phenomenon on the stage of consciousness (19). The main method that Husserl argued for in conducting a phenomenological reduction is through the practice of epoché, also commonly called bracketing. This bracketing means for Husserl a “suspension [...] of both our natural ‘positing’ attitude and our theoretical beliefs and assertions (whether scientific or philosophical) about “objective reality” (19). In other words, it is moving from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude all the while suspending judgment regarding the nature of the object experienced. It can be summarized as looking at the mind looking at the object with no thoughts about the object. For Husserl, this faculty is a trainable mental skill that one can practice (19).

In the same way that Husserl saw epoché as a trainable skill, so do Buddhists see mindfulness as a skill. For this reason, they practice remaining in awareness of the unfolding, moment after moment, of each activity in daily life. Similarly, to Husserl’s epoché, the practice of mindfulness does not try to add any concept or idea to the experience of a phenomena. Instead, the practitioner aims at remaining in “bare awareness” of what is present. “In what is seen, there must just be the seen; in what is heard, there must just be the heard” tells the Buddha (Kapleau 11). TNH once explained that one day a philosopher asked the Buddha “what is the method that you use, what is it that you practice?” The Buddha answered “In Buddhism, we walk, we eat, we sit...” But the philosopher said that everybody walks, eats, and sits, there is nothing special about that. To which the Buddha replied: “In Buddhism, when we are walking, we know we are walking, when we are eating, we know we are eating, and when we are sitting, we know we are sitting.” The Buddha further explained that when one is not practicing, one is generally not aware of what they are doing. (Hanh, *Zen Keys* 25) This echoes well the different attitudes found in Husserl, on the one hand there is that practice of mindfulness which parallels the “phenomenological attitude” and on the other there is what TNH calls “forgetfulness” (26) which can be equated to Husserl’s “natural attitude.”

Mindfulness, however, is only the first step in Buddhist phenomenology. The other steps, which are part of what is known as the “Threefold Training” are concentration and insight (27). According to this Buddhist teaching, by remaining in mindfulness, the practitioner can enter deep states of concentration (samadhi), and from this realize insight (prajna).

The idea of insight is important and is one of the pivotal points on which Buddhism differs from Husserlian phenomenology. In the Buddhist view, insight cannot be obtained just by the intellect, that is to say through study, hypothesis, analysis and synthesis (28). Instead, the practitioner uses “her entire being as an instrument of realization.” This method does not reject the intellect but encompasses the whole body (28). In Buddhism, intellectualization is often viewed as standing in the way of insight. Ch’an Master Huang Po famously said that “those who seek truth by means of intellect and learning only get further and further away from it” (Blofeld 79). Instead, TNH argues that “insight is revealed through the letting go of notions rather than through the accumulation of intellectual knowledge” (“Fourteen Mindfulness”). For this reason, Buddhists often caution against the derive of intellectualism and emphasis the need to not be attached to any doctrines, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones (“Fourteen Mindfulness”). Zen has to be understood as a methodology of phenomenological inquiry whose primary tool is letting go in order to remain in open awareness of the present moment.

All Buddhist concepts are thus means to an end, they are made to help the mind let go of concepts. Ultimately, one also has to let go of Buddhism altogether, as TNH puts it, “the raft is not the shore.” Once all concepts and ideas have been dispensed with and the mind can reach profound levels of stillness, an understanding far beyond concepts can be grasped, this is insight.

A good way of having a better grasp of the Buddhist notion of insight is to understand it in light of mystical experiences. In his seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, William James explains that such experiences are to be directly experienced for one’s self and cannot adequately be rendered into words; they cannot be transmitted to others (370). Moreover, such experiences have a noetic quality, that is to say they impart knowledge to who has them. Commenting on mystical experiences, William James once described them as “states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect” (370). Such mind state does not come following the elaboration of complex knowledge system, but comes through various practices, including meditation and mindfulness. These insights have also been shown to have profound personal significance for those who have them, and recent studies do suggest that mindfulness is a reliable method to experience such insight (Yaden et al.).

Nirvana

One of the most famous insights in Buddhism is the insight of Nirvana, and it is also a key one to understand the work of TNH and the Plum Village Community. Nirvana is a Sanskrit word that literally translates as “blowing out” like a candle. According to TNH, “Nirvana is the cessation/ extinction of suffering” (Hanh, “What is Nirvana” 00:06). However, in Buddhism, it is believed that one’s suffering comes from wrong perceptions about the nature of one’s self and the nature of reality. For that reason, the way this cessation of suffering is achieved is by removing all wrong perceptions. According to TNH, it is through the practice of mindfulness that one can remove wrong perceptions. (00:31) He explains that an individual has wrong perceptions about one’s self and on other, and these wrong perceptions are the roots of fear, violence and hatred. That is why, he explains, that removing such wrong perception is the only way to peace (01:00). As such, when there is an extinction of wrong perception, there is peace and there is a removal of suffering. This is Nirvana. However, TNH continues and explains that through the practice of meditation, one can come to realize that even ideas like being and non-being are wrong perceptions and that they lead to suffering (01:30). The easiest way to see that is that people suffer because they believe that they can go from being to non-being, from birth to death. But, according to TNH, reality is not like that nothing can come into being and then go into non-being. He takes the example of a cloud and explains that a cloud can transform into rain or snow, but it is impossible for the cloud to become nothing. It cannot go from being to non-being. This is the same for humans. That is why TNH believe that, if we think of death as coming from being to non-being, “the notion of death cannot be applied to reality” (03:09). There is only transformation and continuation. That is why TNH argues that all ideas of being and non-being, birth and death, should be removed by the practice of looking deeply (04:00).

TNH further explains that Nirvana is not something that one can get in the future, because even the notion of future is rooted in what Buddhists call wrong view, a fundamental misunderstanding of the Buddhist teachings. Nirvana is then the capacity to remove all wrong perceptions (04:28). In that sense TNH explains that nirvana is freedom, freedom from wrong views, but “in Buddhism, all views are wrong views” (04:42). TNH explains that when one gets deeply in touch with reality, one no longer has views, one has wisdom. There is just a direct encounter with reality, it contains no thoughts and no ideas.

According to TNH the moment one can get in touch is always in the present moment. During an interview, Sister Anabel explained that “Nirvana is right here and now, you can realize it for yourself” (“Enjoying the Ultimate”). Nirvana is not considered to be in the future or in the past, it is thought to be always available here and now. That is why the present moment plays a crucial role in the literature of TNH and Plum Village, because in light of the understanding of Nirvana, the present moment becomes the moment of no Birth no Death, what the Plum Village tradition calls the ultimate dimension and as TNH explains “Just as the birds enjoy the sky, and the deer enjoy the meadow, so do the wise enjoy dwelling in nirvana” (“Enjoying the Ultimate”).

Much of the literature I will discuss aims at removing wrong views in order for the practitioner to encounter reality beyond views. As TNH explains, some of the notions that carries a lot of suffering are the ideas of being and non-being. He believed that, for a long time, “Western philosophy has been preoccupied with questions of being and nonbeing, but Buddhism goes beyond these dualistic notions.” That is why he says “To be or not to be, that is no longer the question. The question is one of Interbeing” (Hanh, *The Other Shore* 28).

The Insight of Interbeing

Arguably the single most important insight in the Plum Village tradition is the insight of Interbeing. Though the term Interbeing was coined by TNH in the 1980s while he was leading a retreat at Tassajara Zen Center in California, (*The Other Shore* 27) it is used to facilitate the understanding of important traditional Buddhist concepts, namely Emptiness, No-Self and Interdependent Co-Arising. The best way to understand these concepts, and subsequently the insight of Interbeing is by looking at *The Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*. *The Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*, meaning the Sutra on the Heart of Perfect Understanding, is the essence of Buddhist teaching (9). The earliest historical evidence of its existence dates back to 661 CE, (Lee) but the body of literature from which it comes from, the Prajnaparamita literature, is thought to have been mostly composed between 100 BC and 600 AD (Conze). It is one of the most central Mahayana texts and is chanted or recited daily in monastic and lay communities throughout the world, including Plum Village. This sutra tells the story of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisatva of compassion, who after practicing looking deeply realized the Emptiness of all phenomena and with this realization, he overcame all ill-

being. It is in this Sutra that the famous Buddhist phrase “Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form” is found.

The first step towards understanding Interbeing is by understanding Emptiness. In the Heart Sutra, it is said that “all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness.” (*The Other Shore*) Simply put, that means that things do not have an essence, they are empty in nature. This can be understood as the idea that a thing, like a chair, is a conceptual entity that does not have an inherently existing essence. That is because Buddhists believe that reality is marked with Impermanence which means that things are not the same, even for two consecutive nanoseconds. This means that saying there is such a thing as a chair, would miss on the characteristic of existence and imposes a rigid and conceptual idea to an ever-changing flow of Emptiness that Buddhists believe reality is.

So, on the one hand Buddhists believe that there is the conceptual world with things thought of as having an inherent nature. This is the world that they believe to be made out by what they call vikalpa, which means discrimination, as in discrimination of subject/object, being/non-being... (Hanh, *Zen Keys* 136) But on the other hand, Emptiness teaches that reality is beyond all concepts and looking at a chair is never looking at reality, because a chair is a concept and reality is beyond all that. This reality that is beyond concept is known in Buddhism as Tathata, or suchness. It is the ultimate aspect of reality that cannot be expressed in language (136).

What is important to note is that TNH argues that Emptiness has been misunderstood as a doctrine of non-existence. That is to say, some believed that emptiness means “chairs do not exist.” A perfect example of this misunderstanding is found in Schopenhauer’s magnum Opus, *The World as Will and Representation's* closing word in which he explains that “the prajna-paramita of the Buddhists, the 'beyond all knowledge', [is] the point at which subject and object are no more” (Schopenhauer 526). But this view, that emptiness points towards the non-existence of things, is caught in wrong view. That is because it remains in a dualistic framework, one side existence and another side non-existence. But the insights of Buddhism transcend all dualistic ideas of being and non-being. For that reason, TNH coined the term Interbeing.

In TNH' view, a chair is empty, that is to say, it is empty of a separate self. But though it is empty of a separate self, it is full of everything else, that is because the entire cosmos has to exist for the chair to be. In that sense, he makes a move away from two extremes, one saying, "Chairs exist" and the other saying "Chairs don't exist" by saying "Chairs inter-exist." He wrote: "Emptiness points to the absence of an essence in things, but points towards the interconnectedness of all things. Nothing can be on itself alone, everything exists because everything else exists. To be empty of a self means to inter-be with everything else" (Hanh, *The Other Shore* 33).

To illustrate his point of Interbeing, he often used the example of a flower. He argues that by looking deeply into a flower, one can see that it is made of only non-flower elements, like the sun, the Earth, the rain. And the same goes for the Earth, which is made of non-Earth element, and this is true for everything else. As such there is nothing that is, and nothing that isn't, but everything inter-is. It could be said then that the insight of Interbeing is comparable to being able "To see a World in a Grain of Sand" (Blake).

The insight of Interbeing is a new way to phrase something that has been seen by countless people before. It is not a new discovery by TNH, just a framework to shine light on a fundamental aspect of existence. Contemporary studies showed that mystical experiences can lead to such insight. David Yaden explains that such experiences, which he calls Self-Transcendental experiences, are characterized by "the dissolution of the bodily sense of self accompanied by reduced self- boundaries and self-salience" and "the sense of connectedness, even to the point of oneness, with something beyond the self, usually with other people and aspects of one's environment or surrounding context" (145).

As mystical experiences are not a new phenomenon, there has been many works of literature that already touches on the insight of Interbeing. However, Buddhism provides a framework tailored to understand such experiences and has a history of using literature specifically to communicate it. Now that this type of literature has arrived in the English-speaking world, it is important to understand it.

The Two Truths Doctrine

The last important Buddhist idea that is necessary to understand is the Two Truths Doctrine, an important teaching that takes root in the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism. The Two Truths doctrine asserts the existence of two kinds of truths, the relative truth and the ultimate truth. Simply put, the two truths doctrine states that there are two ways of viewing the world: as things appear to be, and as things are (“What is the doctrine of Two Truths”). Buddhists view the relative truth as the conventional exposition of how things appear to be. It is the mundane explanation that people agree with. In a way the relative truth is of the realm of science and language. It is true, on a relative level, to say that I am a separate self-entity, the world is made of many things, like chairs, flowers... If I were to tell someone that I was never born and that I will never die, they will rightfully point out that this is impossible. But Buddhists also believe in another kind of truth, which, in their eyes, does not contradict the relative truth, it is the ultimate truth. The ultimate truth, however, is thought to be inexpressible and lying outside conventional language and experience (“Two Truths”). It is as a bridge to both truths that TNH articulates the notion of Interbeing. What is important here to note is that Buddhists do not view one truth as being above another one. They both inter-are together. Nagarjuna, an important Buddhist philosopher of the 2nd century CE, and the founder of the Madhyamaka school explained that both truths are true, “there is value in both because the conditional depends on the absolute and vice versa” (“Two Truths”). Madhyamaka wrote “Without a foundation in the conventional truth, the significance of the ultimate cannot be taught. Without understanding the significance of the ultimate, Liberation is not achieved” (“Two Truths”). That is why, in the word of TNH, the two truths inter-are.

Put another way, one could consider that an approach to the relative truth is the scientific/rationalist approach. The approach to what Buddhists call the ultimate truth, however is through contemplation. It is arrived only when all notions, including Buddhist ones, have been dispensed with and what remains is a mind state that can be understood through the framework of mystical experiences. Saying that the two truths inter-are is thus a way not to deny the veracity and the importance of traditional epistemology, but to remind that such epistemology is insufficient, incomplete and not superior to other epistemologies. This is the same way for contemplative practices, they are insufficient, incomplete and not superior to other epistemologies. But together they can cover both the inexpressible aspect of existence and what we can know in a traditional way.

Part 1. Origins: Zen Literature

TNH's work draws from a long literary tradition that takes root in the time of the Buddha. No scholars have yet taken interest in the origins the roots of TNH's work specifically, but a consequent body of work has been written on traditional Buddhist literary devices, the most important of which being the kōan. This part discusses the way literature was used by Zen Buddhist in history in order to understand the roots of TNH's work.

The Flower Sermon, a legend that tells the origin of Zen, is the perfect place to start the discussion of Zen and literature. The story says that one day, the Buddha was sitting with many of his disciples at Vulture Peak Mountain. The disciples had gathered around to hear the Buddha's teachings, but the latter did not utter a word. Instead, he picked a flower and held it up in front of his audience. None of the students understood what that meant, except Mahakasyapa, who upon seeing the flower smiled. Following this understanding, Mahakasyapa is said to have suddenly experienced a full breakthrough, instantly reached enlightenment, and grasped the essence of the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha saw Mahakasyapa's enlightenment and confirmed it by saying "I possess the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the wondrous mind of nirvana, the subtle Dharma-gate born of the formlessness of true form, not established on words and letters, a special transmission outside the teaching. I bequeath it to Mahakasyapa" (Welter 139). To this day, Mahakasyapa is considered to be the first Indian Patriarch of Zen in the lineage of transmission (Kohn 262; Reps 100).

This story illustrates the first transmission of Zen, transmitted from mind to mind, outside of conceptual thinking. It is seeing into Tathata that Buddhists believe the Buddha discovered and then transmitted. Mahakasyapa was the first to experience the transmission and from then on, the teaching has been transmitted in what Zen Buddhists believe is an unbroken lineage, from master to student. Though the essence of the teaching lies outside of language, the role of literature in the transmission and in the tradition is paramount, only bested by an actual real-life encounter with a living master.

The best way to start and understand the nature of the object that has been transmitted is by understanding the concept of Tathata. Tathata or Suchness / Thusness also sometimes referred to as the Essence of Mind or mind-essence is a central concept in Zen and is used to

denote “the absolute, the true nature of all things. Thatata is generally explained as being immutable, immovable, and beyond all concepts and distinctions” (Kohn 221). The idea here is that humans see the world in this or that way, but beyond the way they see it, the world is the way it is; it is *thus*. It is this “thusness” that Tathata is pointing towards. Though it is fundamentally impossible to express the suchness of things through language, Buddhists believe that through right practice, one can experience it.

This is where literature becomes an important tool. One used to transmit the experience of suchness from one person to another. However, language is seen as problematic for it is thought to be the root of the conceptual world and Buddhist believe that “concepts are not true things that can be obtained, they are only the product of discrimination. The true nature of things, liberated from this discrimination, is called thusness (tathata)” (Hanh, *Zen Keys* 137). For that reason, Zen masters devised peculiar ways of talking that has for goal to allow the mind to let go of concepts. The most important instance of this type of literature is the Kōan.

Kōans

The literary device that I chose to discuss is the Kōan, both because it is arguably the most famous Zen device and because profoundly shaped specifically around the realization of insights. The word is the Japanese rendition of the Chinese word “gong-an” which literally translates as “public notice.” Simply put, kōans are short stories or anecdotes that depict “Ch’an masters interacting with monastics and sometime laypeople in highly unconventional ways, using disruptive and illogical language and seemingly bizarre or shocking actions” (Schlütter, 15). In addition to the anecdote, which is called “the Case,” kōans come to students with a commentary that is done either by their own master or by previous enlightened masters. Essentially, kōans are used as part of Zen training for the practitioner to “break out” of conceptual and dualistic modes of thinking and experience a “break through” and gain insight into the nature of things. It is estimated that there exist 1,700 kōans, but only around 500 of them are actively used. That is because many kōans are repetition of the same case but only in a different form (Kohn 117). Here is an example of a famous kōan to give the reader a clearer idea of what is being talked about:

One day, a monk who just entered the monastery asked Joshu, an important Ch'an Master, to teach him Zen. Joshu asked the monk if he had already eaten breakfast and the monk replied yes, he already had breakfast. Joshu said "Then go wash your bowl!" and at the moment the monk was enlightened. (Reps 101)

The earliest historical evidence for the origin of kōan practice is found in the *Anthology of The Patriarchal Hall*, a text compiled in 952, that was only rediscovered in the 1930s in the Koran monastery Haein-sa (Welter 144). In it, one learns about the oral ancestor of the kōan, the "encounter dialogue." The encounter dialogue was a form of teaching during which students would ask questions on anecdotes of the lives of ancient masters. The master would then offer a comment on the case. This practice of "commenting authoritatively on old cases [...] was not simply a means of elucidating the wisdom of ancient patriarchs for the sake of disciples or a larger audience. It was also a device for demonstrating the rank and spiritual authority of the master himself" (Schlütter 17). In other words, the origin of kōan practice finds root in an oral tradition that aimed at helping the student understanding the practice and as a mean to provide evidence for the master's own insights.

Another important historical document describing "encounter dialogues" is *The Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp*, which retraces the unbroken transmission of Zen from The Buddha all the way to Huineng. This text, dated between 1004 and 1007 CE, contains hagiographies of all the patriarchs. In these hagiographies, we find several events that would later be used as kōans. This text also illustrates the importance of the line of transmission in Zen. As Zen is understood as "a special teaching beyond words and letters," the authority of a master partially rests on his spritual ancestors (Reps 11).

By the beginning of the 12th century, a shift between "encounter dialogues" and systematize kōans had occurred. By this time, Ch'an Buddhists had started to compile cases in single volumes and included formal commentaries for each of them. Cases were no longer found randomly in the hagiographies of the masters, or shared orally, but were now systematized and commented upon. A notable example of a work from this time that is now accessible in the English language is *The Blue Cliff Record*, a collection that was originally compiled in 1125 in China. Another important kōan compilation is Dahui's *Shobogenzo* compiled between 1147 and 1150. From the 12th century onward, kōan compilations kept developing in

China until it was exported to Japan by Dogen in the 13th Century. There, kōan practice kept on evolving in its own distinct way.

Eventually, kōans became of particular interest in the English-speaking world following D.T. Suzuki's import of Zen. Alongside his writings, several people had translated kōans. The most notable example being Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki with their publication of *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. Nowadays kōans are quite well-known from people even outside of Zen and popular culture has somewhat appropriated some. A good example might be David Foster Wallace who used a kōan as the basis for his speech "This is Water," given at Kenyon College in 2005. In it, Foster Wallace tells the story of two young fish who, on their way upstream, cross path with a wise old fish. The old fish says, "Hey, how is the water?" and continues his way down. After a long while, one of the fish says to the other "What the hell is water?" (Foster Wallace; Reps 58). Foster uses the kōan to make a point similar to what Zen Buddhists have argued for. He says:

The capital T Truth is about life before death. It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over 'this is water. This is water.' (Foster Wallace 21:43)

Foster Wallace's argument seems to align with the Zen notion that intellectual knowledge can stand in the way of being aware of what is happening in the present moment. It echoes well the Buddhist idea that insight is gained through the letting go of notions rather than the accumulation of intellectual knowledge. It is, in fact, precisely to facilitate that letting go that kōans are used.

Of all the Zen schools, the one whose name is most often cited as an example of tradition focusing on kōan practice is the Japanese Rinzai school whose "monastic training is, to a considerable degree, organized around the meditative practice of contemplating phrases" (Foulk 26). For instance, in the Rinzai school, kōans are given such an important place that "disciples [...] are expected to spend a dozen or more years with a master to complete a full course of training in kōan commentary" (42). The way the kōan practice has developed in this tradition is through a curriculum. That is to say, students have to go through a vast amount of

kōans and prove their understanding in front of a master. Only then, the master “will recognize the [student] as a dharma heir and give him formal ‘proof of transmission’” (42). As such, in the Rinzai tradition, “the accepted proof of satori (Enlightenment in Japanese) is a set of literary and rhetorical skills that takes many years to acquire” (42). It is for this reason that practitioners of this school tend to have a peculiar use of language.

From a literary perspective, kōans tend to have a similar form, somewhat reminiscent of a joke. First, there is the set up and then there is the punchline. This punchline is called Wato, which is Japanese for “word-head.” A wato can be thought of as the key line of the kōan. A kōan can contain several watos, in the case of Joshu’s bowl, the wato is “Then go wash your bowl!” Whereas the short story on its own is often called the kōan, strictly speaking a kōan also contains the commentary of a Zen master on the story. The story is called the “case” and the commentary is simply known as the commentary. Formally speaking, it is the combination of the case and the commentary that constitutes a kōan (Schlütter 15). But in everyday language, people tend to refer to the case when they talk about a kōan. That is because, whereas the cases remain the same for all students, they will have different commentaries depending on their different masters.

Another key point that makes a kōan a unique literary device is what Griffith Foulk called “the unspoken convention of the genre without which Koans would have no power to function as they do sociologically and psychologically” (39). He points out that what “identifies or actions as ‘expressions of the mental state of enlightened people’ is never the semantic content of the words themselves, but only their attribution to a Ch’an Patriarch” (39). In other words, when one looks at the expression “Go wash your bowl!” nothing in it contains that idea of enlightenment, but the characteristic of the genre is to attribute these apparently mundane phrases to great enlightened masters of the tradition. As such, “it is only their literary frame that makes them ‘impenetrable to the intellect’ and suitable as objects for the practice of contemplating phrases” (39). In other words, their attribution to specific important figure makes the words worthy of investigation rather than to be immediately rejected as utter meaningless non-sense.

But how do kōans relate with insight? Kōans are argued to be tools to help the mind break out of conceptual thinking. Once the student has received a kōan, she is instructed to work with it and is eventually asked to show the master that she gained insight. As seen, a kōan contains

an inherent paradox which cannot be resolved rationally. For this reason, Kapleau explains that trying to resolve a kōan rationally is like “trying to smash one’s fist through an iron wall” (76). Instead, one has to keep her awareness on the kōan at all time and refrain from intellectualizing it. Zen master Dahuin gave the following instruction:

Whether you are walking or standing, sitting, or lying down, you must not for a moment cease [to hold this Wato in your mind]. When deluded thoughts arise, you must also not suppress them with your mind. Only just hold up this huatou (Wato). When you want to meditate and you feel dull and muddled, you must muster all your energies and hold up this word. Then suddenly you will be like the old blind woman who blows [so diligently] at the fire that her eyebrows and lashes are burned right off. (Schulster 33)

In other words, the instruction for a kōan is to obsessively direct the mind at the wato until every thought that arises is instantly directed towards it such that nothing remains outside of the wato. Practicing with a kōan this way is argued to allow the mind to gain a great amount of concentration that allows one to see through dualistic notions and ultimately leads to insight. For this reason, Victor Hori explains that “the object of insight that the kōan aims at arriving is non-duality” (Hori 288). In other words, the realization of a kōan can be argued to be the interbeingness of the mind and the kōan. Hori explains that “when the monk realizes that the koan is not merely an object of consciousness but is also he himself as the activity of seeking an answer to the koan, then subject and object are no longer separate and distinct.” When the student realizes the kōan, they see that that “the monk himself in his seeking *is* the koan.” (288)

The Buddha is a dry shit stick

Let us now discuss a specific kōan as to understand more in depth how such literary device fits in Buddhist philosophy. The kōan that I chose is a famous case that comes from the Mumonkoan:

A monk asked Unmon, ‘What is Buddha?’

Unmon replied ‘A dry shit stick!’ (Yamada et al. 101)

This specific kōan is famous both in and out of Buddhist tradition, one of its notable appearances in an English work is in the novel *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac where to the question “what is Buddha?” Christine answers “A dried piece of turd” (Kerouac 173). Interestingly, Kerouac’s take on the kōan displays a specific understanding that is not universally agreed by scholars. Indeed, in the original kōan, the dry shit stick might not refer to a piece of fecal matter that has dried in the shape of a stick, but it rather denotes rather a wooden stick that was used as toilet paper, which would then be known by monks as a shit stick. There is debate as to whether the dry shit stick is the turd itself or the tool that was used. TNH explains that “Scholars still aren't sure if the phrase "a stick of dry fecal matter" means the fecal matter dries and becomes very hard like a stick or that the monks there used sticks as toilet paper” (Hanh, *Zen Battles* 97).

At any rate, the point of this kōan, like it is often the case in Ch’an is to strike the mind of the practitioner to help it break out of the shackle of conceptual thinking. As such, calling the single most important figure of the religious worldview a dry shit stick, appears to be rather shocking. But in light of the Buddhist philosophy, it actually makes some sense. TNH explains that calling the Buddha as such is used as an image of opposite of what one would ever expect the Buddha to be. He says: “We tend to think of a true person as pure and noble, someone extraordinary, so the Zen master uses this image of a dry piece of fecal matter or dried excrement on a stick to neutralize our view. If we have a set view about what our true person is, then that view has no more value than a piece of dry fecal matter” (97).

In this kōan then, we find two characteristics. The first is the principle of non-attachments to views. Here, the idea that the Buddha is something that is normally considered extremely dirty is used to upset the mind of the practitioner and help her let go of their notions of purity and impurity. As the Heart Sutra mentions, in Emptiness there is “no defilement, no purity.” (Hanh, *The Other Shore*) This kōan speaks to that, deeply upsetting held belief by calling the Buddha the opposite of what a practitioner supposedly believes. For this reason, TNH calls the view that one may have about the Buddha as having no more value than a dry piece of fecal matter.

The second aspect that this kōan speaks to is the principle of non-duality. As discussed already, nothing is but everything inter-is, and this is also true for the Buddha and the dry shit stick. If one looks deeply, one sees that the existence of fecal matter entails also the existence

of life, the Sun, the Earth and the cosmos. As such the idea that the dry shit stick is an entity unrelated to the Buddha is only an idea in the mind. In the non-dual view, the dry shit stick, the Buddha, and one's own personal self, are all equally empty in nature. Thus, arriving at the view that the Buddha is not different than a dry shit stick is the view that nothing exists outside of everything else, this is the insight of Interbeing. In that sense, the practitioner of the kōan might experience a deep insight when he sees for himself that *he is* the dry shit stick, just as much as he is the Buddha.

Part 2. Development: Thich Nhat Hanh's Literature

I have discussed how understanding of the Insight of Interbeing was already present in traditional literary devices used in Zen. This was an important move as it allows for an understanding of the background from which TNH came from. Though kōans were not endogenous to the English-speaking World, that is not the case of TNH's work. As the vast majority of it was originally published in English or translated by himself from his native Vietnamese into English, it falls under the scope of English literature. The previous section of this thesis established the roots from which his literature draws upon. This part aims at understanding his poetry and calligraphy.

Thich Nhat Hanh's Poetry

Despite the large number of poems published and their popularity, little academic interest has been shown to TNH's poetry. This part seeks to understand the relationship between his poetry and the notions of insight.

Poetry has always been an important part of Buddhism. In *Poetry and Zen*, Sam Hamil explains that Buddhists believe that "poetry [...] is one of the many paths to enlightenment. It is no substitute for zazen (sitting meditation), but an aid to deepen one's practice day by day" (19). Poems can help with the practice in many ways. One way is that poems have been used to illustrate teachings or to articulate insights. Another way poetry can help with the practice, can be understood in light of John Brehm's view of poetry. He writes "a poem is always about the quality of awareness that produced it. Simply by presenting that quality of awareness, the poem implicitly recommends it to us. And when we make contact with these deeper mind states, our own awareness is enhanced" (Brehm 4). In that sense, a poem can be seen as an articulation of the experience of the world that such mind state entails.

Thich Nhat Hanh's poetry can be seen through two different lenses, the Historical Dimension and the Ultimate Dimension. This division is taken from his anthology *Call Me by My True Names*. Simply put, the Historical dimension looks at TNH's poetry in light of the historical

context in which it was written, whereas the Ultimate Dimension is poetry written in light of the practice of looking deeply. What is important to note is that The Ultimate Dimension and the Historical Dimension inter-are, there are not separate self-entities. TNH explains that “If you touch deeply the historical dimension, you find yourself in the ultimate dimension. If you touch the ultimate dimension, you have not left the historical dimension.” (Hanh, *Call me By My True Names* 1)

For that reason, I have chosen to first look at TNH’s understanding that comes out of his practice and then look at how these insights are applied in the historical dimension. All the poems discussed come from the anthology *Call Me by My True Names*.

The Ultimate Dimension

The Ultimate Dimension is to be understood in light of the practice of mindfulness, also sometime called by TNH as looking deeply. In essence, according to TNH, the Ultimate Dimension is the present moment. While experienced deeply through the practice of mindfulness, it is argued to bring forth profound realizations known as insight. In that sense, TNH’s poetry about the Ultimate Dimension reflect these realizations and helps the reader be in touch with such mind states. One of the most important insights that comes out of TNH’s tradition is the insight of Interbeing. For that reason, it is the one on which this part focuses. The first expression of Interbeing I look at is as to how it relates to a personal sense of self as illustrated in the poems “Please Call Me by My True Names” and “Interbeing.”

“Please Call Me by My True Names” was written in 1978, three years after the end of the war in Vietnam. At this time many Vietnamese people were living in refugee camps in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines as they had no home to return to. Many of these people had to flee Vietnam by boat and it is said countless “boat people fleeing Vietnam died in the ocean; only half arrived at the shores of Southeast Asia” (“Thay’s poetry”). Even after they arrived, they were still in a lot of suffering. TNH explained that at the time, Plum Village would receive hundreds of letters each week from families in distress. He recalls that “It was very painful to read them, but we had to be in contact” (“Thay’s poetry”). One day, a letter came to explain that a little girl on a small boat was raped by a

Thai pirate as she was fleeing for her life. She was twelve years old and after the event jumped into the ocean and drowned herself.

TNH deeply reflected on this event, and he explains that the first natural reaction when one learns something like that is to get angry at the pirate and take the side of the girl. It is only normal to side with the victim of such a horrible act and it might be impossible for many to get past this anger. But TNH reflected further and saw that taking the side of the girl is easy, and we can then just take a gun and shoot the pirate. TNH explained that during a meditation he saw that if he had been born in the same place as the pirate and raised in the same condition, he would be himself the pirate. (“Thay’s poetry”). Yet, the conditions that made the pirate were still there. If actions were not taken, then some of the babies that were born in those same places would become the same pirates. He explains that “we educators, social workers, politicians, and others do not do something about the situation” it will all happen again. In that sense, “if you shoot the pirate, you shoot all of us, because all of us are to some extent responsible for the state of affairs” (“Thay’s poetry”). After a long meditation, TNH wrote this poem. He explains:

In [the poem], there are three people: the twelve-year-old girl, the pirate, and me. Can we look at each other and recognize ourselves in each other? The title of the poem is ‘Please Call Me by My True Names,’ because I have so many names. When I hear one of these names, I have to say, ‘Yes.’ (“Thay’s poetry”)

This poem can be seen as articulation of the notion of the Interbeing applied to the Self. As discussed above, Buddhists consider the self to be empty and as such argue for the doctrine of No-Self (Anatman). It does not mean that the individual does not exist, but rather that it does not exist as a separate self-entity, in exactly the same way that a wave cannot exist separately from the ocean. In that sense, the notion of Interbeing is a way to transcend dualities of self and other, by seeing that both self and other are Empty in nature, that is have no essence or separate self-entities. It might appear evident that this is the case, but, through poetry, TNH manages to articulate how precious the insight of Interbeing is. One of the ways he does so is by writing poems in which the speaker identifies with their body in full light of Emptiness. That is done in awareness of the famous statement found in the Heart Sutra “Emptiness is Form, Form is Emptiness” that TNH retranslated as “This Body Itself is Emptiness and Emptiness itself is this Body.” (*The Other Shore*)

There are several instances where the understanding of the body as emptiness is made clear. For example, in the poem “Please Call Me by My True Names,” the speaker explains that “The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death of all that is alive.” (*True Names* 72) This echoes the interconnectedness of all elements. Emptiness refers to the emptiness of a self, but contains everything else. In that sense, it expresses that all that is alive is not separate from one’s self. This specific identification with what would traditionally be thought of as not oneself is also pushed in a difficult direction, in the sense that the speaker recognizes the atrocious events that are part of existence and identifies with it too. The speaker recognizes themselves both in “the twelve-year-old girl” and the “sea pirate;” in the “child in Uganda” and the “arms merchant” (72). Though there appears to be a sense of duality between the girl and the pirate, the child and the merchant, at the level of Emptiness, all aspects of existence, both the wondrous and atrocious ones are together. For this reason, the speaker explains that “my joy is like spring [...] my pain is like a river of tears.” It calls to the unity of things and the realization that they are of the nature of Emptiness and as such are not separate from the speaker. TNH explains that “we should practice until we can see that each person is in us, that we are not separate from others. [...] we are of the same reality. We *are* what we perceive.” (Hanh, *The Heart of The Buddha’s Teaching* 135). Then who is the speaker one may ask? The answer would be like the answer of a kōan, the speaker and the reader are not separate self-entities. They are both of the nature of Emptiness. Perhaps to understand fully one has to be able to answer the kōan “What was your original face before your parents were born?”

A similar instance of identification with non-self-elements in TNH’s work has been noted by Victor Thasiah in one of the rare academic works that discusses TNH’s poetry. In his article Thasiah argues for what he calls TNH’s “ecological humanism” which he sees as stemming from an “identification with non-human organisms and non-living members of the natural world, and a deep affinity with their perceived fittingness and spontaneity” (Thasiah 36). To make his point Thasiah uses an example from *Fragrant Palm Leaves* where TNH describes his experience sitting in a forest. TNH wrote:

I heard the call from the heart of the cosmos. I wanted to turn into an areca tree or become a branch bending in the wind. I wanted to be a bird testing the strength of its

wings against the wind. I wanted to run outside in the rain and scream, dance, whirl around, laugh, and cry. (Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* 30)

Whereas Thasiah identified a passage where TNH expresses a wish to become one with nature, in “Please Call Me by My True Names,” this wish is taken further into a full identification with all things. Such powerful identification was also revealed by Thasiah in a later passage of TNH’s work in which he expresses a profound experience:

I understood that I am empty of ideals, hopes, viewpoints, or allegiances. I have no promises to keep with others. In that moment, the sense of myself as an entity among other entities disappeared. I knew this insight did not arise from disappointment, despair, fear, desire, or ignorance. A veil lifted silently and effortlessly. . . . At that moment, I had the deep feeling that I had returned. (Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* 84)

It appears that a similar phenomenon is at play in the poem “Please Call Me by My True Names.” The sense of being an entity among other entities is lifted and what is revealed is an all-encompassing compassion, beyond fear, despair, desire, or ignorance. In this passage Thasiah sees a political activity taking place and he argues that “[TNH] has been decolonized to a significantly meaningful extent” (Thasiah 37). Whereas I do not disagree with Thasiah’s political reading, I also see here a clear report of the Insight of Interbeing, the same one that is taking place in “Please Call Me by My True Names.”

In the poem “Interbeing,” the notion of Interbeing is made even clearer, the speaker says, “The sun has entered me together with the cloud and the river” and explains that “there has not been a moment we do not interpenetrate” (*True Names* 150). Again, the identification with non-human elements is clear. But this poem takes it even further and sees that prior to manifesting in this body, the speaker was already in the sun and the river “Before I entered the river, I was already in it. There has not been a moment when we have not inter-been.” This speaks to an important idea that follows the notion of Interbeing, No Birth. The end of the poem contains what follows No Birth, namely No Death: “Therefore you know that as long as you continue to breathe, I continue to be in you” (150).

No Birth no Death is an important implication that the identification with the whole cosmos leads to. In “Please call me by my true names”, one reads “The rhythm of my heart is the

birth and death of all that is alive” (72). This notion of no Birth, no Death also finds root in the Heart Sutra where one can read “all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness, their true nature is the nature of no Birth no Death” (*The Other Shore*). The reason this theme appears in TNH’s work is because in light of Interbeing, it is argued that things do not come into being and then go into non-being. The famous example that TNH gives is that a cloud never dies. A cloud cannot go from being to non-being. It has to arise from conditions, and then transform into other conditions. The cloud becomes rain and then becomes the water that the tea leaves feed on, the tea is then drunk and becomes part of the drinker. To that effect, TNH wrote “smile to the cloud in your tea.” TNH explains that “a cloud can become the rain, the snow, or the ice but a cloud can never become nothing. The same is true with everything else, including us human beings. We can never become nothing. We just transform” (Hanh, *The Way Out is In* 9). When one has developed the ability of mind to dwell in the present moment, TNH believes, one can touch the world of no Birth no Death and see that all that is is right here right now.

A particularly poignant poem that TNH wrote in light of the idea of no Birth no Death is “That Distant Autumn Morning.” This is a poem TNH wrote seven years after the passing away of his mother. In *Call Me by My True Names*, TNH explains that three years before writing the poem he had a dream in which he saw his mother young, vivid, joyful and beautiful. He woke up from that dream and went out to the moonlit garden and said that he discovered his mother has never died. In the poem, this is expressed in the line “since then you have come back to me many times, and each time so alive” (*True Names* 122). The speaker of the poem is “now on that high hill” and in light of the insight of Interbeing, the reader can understand that the conditions that led the speaker to experience that hill include the existence of their mother. For that reason, they say “Do stay with me the whole day, Mother.” The speaker, by looking deeply at the conditions that were necessary for the present moment to arise, sees the presence of their mother and says “I know you are truly here.” This is the same insight that is written in the poem “Interbeing” where it says, “as long as you continue to breath, I continue to be in you” (150).

Another important idea that the Insight of Interbeing leads to, one that is present in many poems mentioned is the idea of compassion. Compassion is a key concept in TNH’s philosophy, and his understanding of the word comes from the Buddhist concept Karuna. Traditionally, compassion is understood as “suffering with” the other person. But in

Karuna, TNH explains, that one does not need to suffer, because if one suffers with, then one cannot help the other person. TNH uses the metaphor of a doctor to exemplify what karuna means. When a doctor meets a patient that is suffering, the doctor does not have to suffer with, but rather understand the roots of suffering. It is from this understanding that the doctor can apply their skills and transform the suffering. This is the same way with the practice of meditation. TNH sees that when other people suffer, with compassion one can see the roots of their suffering and transform it. Transformation means changing anger and hatred into love and joy. This understanding is exemplified in “Call me By My True Names” where the embracing of all things leads to the “opening of the door of compassion” (*True Names* 73).

The Historical Dimension

The idea of compassion is a key concept to understand TNH’s work in relation to the historical Dimension. TNH once wrote that “teaching is not done by talking alone. It is done by how you live your life. My life is my teaching, my life is my message” (Hanh, *At Home in The World* 6). For that reason, an important part needed to understand his poetry is to understand his life.

TNH was born on the 11th of October 1926 in Huè, French Indochina. When he was 16 years old, he entered monastic life in Từ Hiếu Temple, and became fully ordained at 23 years old in the Buddhist Academy of Bao Quoc, in Huè. It was then that his first poetry book, named *Tiếng Địch Chiều Thu*, which means *Reed Flute in the Autumn Twilight*, came out. This was in autumn 1949, in the midst of the First Indochina War. It was the war that opposed the French Colonial army against the Vietnamese fighters for independence. It lasted from 1946 to 1954, killing over 50,000 people. (Hanh, *Inside the Now* 17) TNH published this book when he was living at the Source of Awakening Temple in Saigon. There, he met a Vietnamese poet named Tru Vu, who after having read *Reed Flute*, dedicated a poem to TNH, saying: “For Thích Naht Hanh—As a bridge of sympathy between Spirituality and Poetry.” (18). TNH recalls wondering about the connection between spirituality and poetry after seeing this dedication. He wrote that a bridge might not be necessary, because poetry is already spirituality and spirituality already poetry (18). A few months later, TNH would publish his second book of poetry, “The Golden Light of Spring”, in which he wrote:

May the radiant light of the golden path—source of poetry—

Illuminate the depths of the darkest night. (*Inside the Now* 18)

This is a useful entry to understand TNH's poetry. What he refers as the source of poetry here is the light that comes from touching deeply the ultimate dimension, by being present with each step of life to really see how marvelous all of existence is. The light then instills this sense of wonder, the awe-inspiring experiences from which springs poetry. This poetry, like the path of awareness can bring this light into the depth of the darkest nights, which here refer to the atrocities of the war in Vietnam that TNH had witnessed.

In 1955, the second Indochina war, most commonly known as the Vietnam War, broke and TNH began to witness first-hand even more atrocities. This was the time of Agent Orange, napalm and carpet bombing. Many of his poems were directly influenced by the atrocities he witnessed. For example, between 1964 and 1965, TNH wrote the anti-war poem "Our Green Garden." In it he describes that "all around, the horizon burns with the color of death," (*True Names* 6) referring to the Americans mass burning of Vietnam with napalm. It has been reported that about 388,000 tons of Napalm U.S bombs were dropped in Vietnam between 1963 and 1973 (Neer 111). Other elements point towards the vast amount of suffering that was present during the war. Phrases like "the rattle of the gunfire," "dying flower," "the blazing, blackening place where I was born" (*True Names* 6) signal the omnipresence of death in Vietnam at the time. Yet, in face of these atrocious events, TNH writes "I am still alive/ but my body and soul writhe as if they too had been set on fire" (6). This part shows the deep hurt that TNH and the people of Vietnam were faced with. But despite the immense amount of suffering that he is expressing, TNH still manages to call the enemy "dear brother" and writes "Dearest brother, I know it is *you* who will shoot me tonight" (6). This illustrates TNH's radical refusal to see people as enemies and calls to the insight of Interbeing that sees that people are not separate from one another. This is even more emphasized when TNH writes that it his brother will be "piercing *our* mother's heart," seeing the interrelatedness of all people. He famously said that "man is not our enemy, our enemy is anger, greed and fanaticism" (19). And through the practice of mindfulness, he had been able to see that these seeds of anger, greed and fanaticism are also within him. But he refused to let them win, instead, he was willing to sacrifice his life for peace and writes "Here is my breast! Aim your gun at it, brother, shoot!" but he then asks, "Who will be left to celebrate a victory made of blood and fire?" (7) For they are of the same nature. It is just humanity killing itself.

During the war, TNH didn't only write poetry, for he believed that the practice of Buddhism must be engaged. The same year he published this poem, he also founded the School of Youth for Social Service. (SYSS) The school was a grassroots relief organization of 10,000 volunteers created to help populations affected by the war. The school grew with difficulties among the War-torn Vietnam, but by 1966, volunteers had built dormitory rooms, classrooms, auditorium and supporting facilities. Students of the school helped Vietnamese people on as many fronts as possible, including education, sheltering and medical care. The SYSS inspired many poems to TNH. One of the most important poems that he wrote in relation to the SYSS is the poem "Recommendation." This poem, composed in 1965, was written for the young people of the SYSS who risked their lives every day during the war. The poem recommends them to prepare to die without hatred. TNH explains that some of the young students had already been killed violently and that he needed to caution others against hating (*True Names* 19). The poem calls the youth to "promise" TNH that, in the midst of event where others "strike you down with a mountain of hatred and violence [and] they dismember and disembowel you" (18), they will remain in touch with the insight of Interbeing that allows the arising of compassion. This poem displays the same understanding as in "Our Green Garden" and illustrate a powerful refusal to see others as enemy. This is powerfully phrased in the line "man is not our enemy" (19). This, for him is necessary to understand for the view that a person can be an enemy is rooted in wrong view. TNH understands that the roots of anger, hatred, greed and fanaticism are not fought with more anger and hatred. For that reason, he argues that "the only thing worthy of you is compassion," for "hatred will never let you face the beast in man" (19). This poem is a powerful juxtaposition of the atrocities that are found in the historical dimension and TNH's philosophy of peace and compassion that arose from the insight of Interbeing. In the poem compassion is understood as that which transforms hatred and violence into a "love that has become eternal" (18).

Another poem that was written in the same circumstances as "Recommendation" is "Those That Have Not Exploded," which was written in 1966 after a group of unknown men attacked the SYSS with grenades and guns. This poem expresses the deep hurt and misunderstanding that TNH felt following the attack. It starts with:

I don't know,
I just do not know

Why they hurl grenades at these young people. (22)

The poem continues to question the atrocities committed to people that made a commitment to help villagers and teach children. He describes the grenades that busted and killed twelve young people (22). But instead of manifesting anger or hate, TNH writes “we accept death and sorrow” (22). That is because this acceptance is at the root of what transform anger and hatred into peace. TNH explains that “there are more grenades [...] in the heart of man.” That is why in TNH’s view the practice of mindfulness and letting go of notions is most primordial, because it is the way to

take those grenades out of our hearts
our motherland
humankind. (22)

All three poems, “Our Green Garden,” “Recommendation” and “Those That Have Not Exploded” show how deeply embedded into the historical context TNH’s writing was and how the insight of Interbeing relates to it. It shows that these deep insights have the ability to transform hate within oneself so to put compassion, joy and understanding in the world. In that sense, his life was truly his message. It is this revolutionary philosophy that led Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who would nominate him the Nobel Peace Prize, to write “[TNH’s] ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity” (King).

Thich Nhat Hanh's Calligraphy



Fig. 1: Thich Nhat Hanh, "Present moment wonderful moment," 2000.

Calligraphy plays an important role in the Plum Village tradition and is a sizeable part of TNH's literary heritage. To understand TNH's calligraphy, I will try to understand the historical origin of his calligraphic style and use criticism relevant to his style to gain deeper insight into his work.

Calligraphy, from the Greek words kalos (beautiful) and graphein (writing), can simply be understood as the art of writing beautifully. The practice of calligraphy has appeared throughout the world in countless different cultures. There are however several main branches of calligraphy that have been grouped together. The branch of calligraphy that Europeans would be most familiar with is known as Western calligraphy. It is the branch of calligraphy that uses primarily the Roman alphabet, though it can also include the Greek and Cyrillic one. As TNH does use the Roman alphabet for his calligraphy, and uses the English language, it can be argued that his work belongs in this branch. However, the tools that he

used are different from the traditional tools used by Westerners. Instead of the quills and pens that European scribes were used to, he used the traditional set of brush, ink, rice paper and ink stone, also known in China as the Four Treasure of the Study. It is these tools that gives East Asian calligraphy its unique aesthetic that is also present in TNH's work. In that sense, his calligraphy practice is well rooted in an ancient Asian tradition that is important to understand in order to have a deeper insight in his work.

East Asian Calligraphy is a broad term that encompasses different calligraphic styles whose primary alphabet are the East Asian Characters. It includes Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese calligraphy. However, the oldest form of East Asian calligraphy known today is the Chinese calligraphy, all other East Asian calligraphy then derive from the Chinese one. According to Stephen Little, Chinese Calligraphy can be traced back to the beginning of the Bronze Age, around 2000 BCE (373). The earliest known form of Chinese writing was found on oracle bones; rune like objects that were used for divination (373). The script present on the bones, simply called Oracle Bone Script is considered the direct ancestor of over a dozen East Asian Writing system that develop over three millennia.

With time, the Oracle Bone Script evolved in a variety of different scripts, most notables of which are the Seal Script, the Clerical Script, the Regular Script, the Semi-Cursive Script and the Cursive Script. All of which served as a basis for East Asian Calligraphy in General.

The Seal Script appeared around the time of the Qin Dynasty (221 BCE -206 BCE), when several forms of writing were unified into one script (374). The Seal script is considered to be the ancestor of the Clerical Script which is thought to have appeared during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE). The Clerical Script, as its name indicates, was developed by clerks who, according to Little, needed a script that was "simpler and more fluid in its form." (375) It was first with the Clerical Script that "the actual physical movements of the writer's hand [became] immediately manifest as the shifting speed and direction of the brush [were] evident in the strokes of ink." (375) It was during this period then that calligraphy, in East Asia, began to be perceived as art (375).

According to Lothar Ledderose, it was during the Six Dynasties (220 CE - 589 CE) that calligraphy was truly elevated to an art form that was practiced by the educated elite (246). It was then that calligraphic pieces were for the first time collected as works of art, that

theoretical treatises on calligraphy began to be written and that three new scripts received their final formulation (246). It was during this time that the Four Treasures of the Study would become formalized. All subsequent calligraphy in China were then made using these primary tools. The formalization of these tools led to the development of the three new scripts, the Cursive Script, the Semi-Cursive Script and the Regular Script. Since the officialization of these scripts, no other script has seen the day (246). These scripts were most notably brought to "the apex of classical perfection" (Little 375) by Wang Xizhi (303-361) and his son Wang Xianzhi (344-388), the most celebrated calligraphers in Chinese history. Together they became known as the Two Wangs, and their style, especially Wang Xizhi's, "served as the basis for a coherent stylistic tradition that dominated the history of Chinese calligraphy for more than a millennium" (Ledderose 246). The classical style led by the Two Wangs greatly shaped the practice of Calligraphy in Ancient China and greatly inspired neighboring cultures, including Vietnam and Japan.

As Calligraphy played such an important role in Ancient China, countless works or criticism have seen the day and many of them appear useful to gain a deeper understanding of TNH's work. Xiongboi Shi argued that Chinese critics divided the appreciation of a work of calligraphy in two ways. One interested in the semantic content of the calligraphy, and another interested with the stylistic features of the work. Shi quotes Yu-Kung Kao, professor of East Asian Studies at Princeton University, as saying that, for poets, "physical characters are never in themselves as important as their mental counterparts," whereas, in calligraphy, "the physical presence of the words, not their content, is the object of appreciation" (486). According to Shi, the Chinese critic in ancient China would be most interested in the physical presence of the words. That is because often time the same texts were written down, and the content started to matter less than the style with which it was written. For that reason, Shi explains that the Chinese would sometime regard the art of calligraphy as separate from the meaning of the word. For that reason, many of the criticism of calligraphy that has been devised in ancient China overlook the meaning of the text.

One of the features that Chinese calligraphers were most concerned with was the type of brush strokes present. Shi quotes Wen Zhenheng (1585-1645) as saying:

"When about to observe an antique scroll [...] one should first see whether the brush work is strong and real and whether it is in harmony with the [spirit of the artist]. In the second place

one should assess the natural talent of the artist and see whether his work shows the strength that is testified by a free handling of the brush" (487).

Shi thus argues that calligraphy appreciation, according to Wen, involves bringing into awareness the brushwork or formal qualities and their spiritual or inner qualities in calligraphic works (487). This twofold structure of the spiritual meaning as well as the brushwork was also stated in the Six Principles of Chinese painting, written by Xie He (500-535). Among the six principles, it is the first two that are particularly relevant to calligraphy. They are, as translated by Shi, "animation through spirit consonance" and "structural method of the brush" (487). Spirit consonance can be understood as the portrayal on paper of the artist mind state, and the structural method of the brush refers to the unique style of the artist, like the uniqueness of one's own handwriting. A calligraphy could thus be seen by Chinese critics as containing an outer form, its formal features, and an inner form, its spiritual dimension. However, of the two dimensions, Shi argues that it is "unanimous that the latter deserves more attention in judging calligraphy" (488). He quotes the eight-century critic Zhang Huaiguan as saying: "Those who know calligraphy profoundly observe only its spiritual brilliance and do not see forms of characters" (488). That is because the brushwork itself is informed by spirituality. For instance, Ledderose noted that a defining feature of Wang Xianzhi's work was the element of *Tzu-Jan*, which he translates as "spontaneity," one closely linked to the Taoist notion of "a free, unobstructed flow" (266). Ledderose found in the brushstroke of Wang Xianzhi, the very same spirituality that inspired him. The same case can be made to understand TNH's work, though the spirituality at its root, Zen, is still linked to Taoism.

One of the most practical ways that Shi offers to make a critic of a calligraphy draws from Richard Wollheim and see criticism as retrieval. Wollheim wrote:

"Criticism is retrieval. The task of criticism is the reconstruction of the creative process, where the creative process must in turn be thought of as something not stopping short of, but terminating on, the work of art itself. The creative process reconstructed, or retrieval complete the work is then open to understanding." (491)

One of the way this retrieval is done is by understanding the bodily movement that were present in the creation of the calligraphy. Shi shows that such a view was already present in China. He quotes the Qing Dynasty scholar-artist Da Chongguan (1623-1692) as saying:

"To understand the force [within a calligraphic work], one needs to observe the progression of the brushwork. What is meant by a work's full sinew? One need to discern the linking and the twining of the brushstrokes" (493).

Let us look at the calligraphy “Present moment wonderful moment” (Figure 1). The first thing to notice is the presence of various elements, there is the text, the circle, known as Enso, and a red stamp. The text is written, contrarily to Chinese Calligraphy, with Roman letters, this can be seen as a Vietnamese element as the Vietnamese people adopted the Roman alphabet following the French colonization of Vietnam in the 18th Century. Following this period, many Vietnamese calligraphies were done with the Chinese style using the Roman alphabet.

Looking at the calligraphy from Shi’s perspective of *criticism as retrieval* would mean to start by looking at the brushstrokes, but there is something in the brushstrokes that is deeply informed by TNH’s philosophy and yet invisible to the eye. It is the presence of tea in the ink. TNH used to mix tea in his ink tray as a token of Interbeing (“Calligraphy”). TNH would often use his tea to illustrate the interconnectedness of all things. This incorporation of tea is an important element to understand in order to have a fuller picture of the process of creation.

Looking at the brushstrokes, one can recognize a certain smoothness, no sharp angles as could be the case in a work of Western calligraphy. The first line appears to be made of four distinct strokes, the “P” appears to have been written from bottom to top, the “res” appears to be a single continues brushstroke which appear to flow from one letter to the other. The Plum Village community explains that this particular shape of “r” is a shape known as the running r and it evidence an inclusion of modern elements. This specific shape was borrowed from the French way of writing the letter (“Calligraphy”). The “ent” also appears to be a singular stroke, except for the T-bar being an independent stroke. The “e” appears to be somewhat darker than the ending of the “s” and the following letters, indicating a longer pause between the two parts. The T-bar appears to have been made without any pause to refill the brush with ink, as it can be seen that the bottom part of the “t” is lighter than the preceding letters, and

the T-bar even lighter as the ink ran out. Altogether the brushstrokes seem to indicate a profound gentleness and a slow, continuous, and even movement. The brushstrokes are not rushed, but it rather appears as if they were let to happen.

Looking closely at the brushstrokes allows to see the gentleness with which the work was produced. It is in this gentleness that one can argue to see the “spiritual brilliance” that Zhang Huaiguan talks about. Each stroke appears to be done with mindfulness. Talking about his work TNH explained that “in my calligraphy, there is ink, tea, breathing, mindfulness, and concentration. This is meditation. This is not work” (“Calligraphy”). In that sense, the brushstroke is an extension of the practice, and the retrieval allows to see the meditation taking place.

Another noteworthy feature is the presence of the Enso, a distinctively Japanese element, one well rooted in Zen thought. Here again a definite smoothness of brush can be felt starting from the bottom left side and continuing all the way around to finish on the right side. The markings in the ink seem to indicate a rotation of the brush as TNH circle around the paper. Talking about drawing the circle, Brother Phap Huu explained that TNH would breathe in for the first half, and breath out for the second half (Confino 12:10 - 12:20). TNH once commented on his philosophy behind drawing the circle, he wrote:

“The hand that draws the calligraphy does not act alone. It is connected to my whole body, my mind, and all the cells in my body. I like to invite all my cells to join me in making a circle. These cells don’t exist by themselves either. I invite all my ancestors to draw the circle with me, as well as all the people whose lives have touched mine. My whole community is in each calligraphy. Please don’t think that these calligraphies are drawn by one person alone. We as a community have drawn this circle together.” (Hanh, *The Way out Is In* 10)

Informed by the philosophy of Interbeing, the Enso in TNH’s eye is not simply a product of his own hand, but rather a continuation of the whole community that allowed the moment of creation to arise. This aligns with one of the traditional meanings of the Enso, which in the foreword of *Enso: Zen Circles of Enlightenment*, John Daido Looi explains it to be a symbol that “encompasses and conveys a continuing and ceaseless action through all time” (Seyo xii). But he also notes that there is no definite and fixed-upon meaning of what the Enso symbolizes. Another idea, this time argue by Audrey Yoshiko Seyo, is that the Enso

represents “the void, the fundamental state in which all distinctions are removed,” (Seyo 17) a state where all dualistic notions are abandoned. This interpretation of the Enso offers a notion that echoes the idea of Interbeing. Traditionally, the Enso was also seen as “a direct expression of thusness or this-moment-as-it-is” (xi) and Looi argues that in Zen it is considered to be one of the most profound subjects, one that exposes the most directly the mind state in which the circle was produced (xii). Looking at “Present moment wonderful moment,” one can notice, the precise uniformity of the circle and the gentle and free continuation of the brushstroke. There appears to be no pause, but rather a single, smooth brushstroke with a clear beginning and end. In that sense, the “spiritual brilliance” of the circle seem to align well with the gentleness reflected in the brushstrokes present in the text.

The final noteworthy element, one also proper to East Asian calligraphy, is the presence of a red seal. The seal, often known as *hanko* in Japanese, is used in lieu of a signature. The seal present on each of TNH’s calligraphy act as his signature. There are, however, no sources that discusses the meaning of the symbol present on TNH’s hanko. Neither did academics take interest in it, nor did TNH discuss its inclusion. What is interesting to notice, is that TNH’s hanko appear easily recognizable to the viewer unable to read East Asian scripts. TNH’s hanko is noticeable by its singular single line in the top left corner and the house-shaped sign underneath it. These features appear on all published calligraphy of TNH, making it an easy way to recognize his signature, even for those unable to read the script.

In summary, each of TNH’s calligraphy represent a combination of many elements coming from many different traditions. The medium used by TNH finds its origin in Ancient China and the inclusion of Roman letter first appear in Vietnam, but the consistent use of English word is singular to TNH. The way Ancient Chinese appreciated calligraphy was by paying particular attention to the brushstroke and see the philosophy behind it. Looking at a calligraphy of TNH, I have argued that the brushstroke embodies the philosophy of mindfulness and interbeing. One the one hand by being painted as part of a meditation, on the other as being made with tea and with the idea that it is a continuation of a community rather than the work of a single individual. The calligraphy also includes a traditional Japanese element, the enso and another East Asian feature, the hanko.

Altogether the elements compose the work which has at its heart a text. Whereas Ancient Chinese Calligrapher somewhat disregarded the text, here it is important to see how the

meaning of the calligraphy fits into TNH's philosophy. As discussed earlier, TNH sees the present moment as the Ultimate Dimension. For this reason, TNH taught that the practice of mindfulness is the practice of bringing back one's awareness to the present moment, to be in touch with the wonders of life ("calligraphy"). He wrote: "Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child—our own two eyes. All is a miracle" (Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* 12). In light of his belief that each moment is an engagement with the miracle of existence, one can understand why he wrote "present moment wonderful moment." In that sense, not only the brushstrokes speak of his philosophy, but also the text plainly states it.

Part 3. Continuation: Plum Village Literature

The life at Plum Village is specifically designed around the practice of mindfulness. Though there are a few different formal meditations each day, it should be considered that the whole day is a single meditation. All moments of life, from waking up to going to bed are done in awareness. As the mind has strong tendencies to wander away, this is a very difficult task. For this reason, literature plays an important role in the Plum Village tradition. Many different literary devices are used daily as a way to support one's practice. In that sense, virtually all the literature used at the monasteries are tools to help cultivate mindfulness. As such, they all ought to be understood in light of the practice. This part will look at the most important literary devices and texts that are used, how they are used and how they relate to the insight of Interbeing. This part aims mostly at being an introduction to the various texts used by the community, situating them in the context of literary academic discussion would be difficult as scholars have yet to formally approach these texts. The texts that I will look at are Contemplations, Discourses, The Mindfulness Trainings, The Five Earth Touchings, and Gathas.

The Contemplations

The first literary device that I wish to discuss are contemplations. They are short texts that can be recited at the start or at the end of one's day that helps one to stay in touch with the nature of impermanence and allows one to cherish the preciousness of their life and relationships ("Daily Contemplations").

One of the most widely used contemplation and is called "Contemplations Before Eating" also known as the Five Contemplations. These contemplations are paired with the practice of mindful eating. The practice of mindful eating has been explained in TNH's book *Savor*, written in collaboration with Harvard Professor Dr. Lilian Cheung. In it, they discuss seven practices of mindful eating. Understanding these practices will help gain a deeper understanding of the Five Contemplations.

The first practice is to honor the food. This means two things, to acknowledge where the food was grown and who prepared the meal, and to eat without distractions to help deepen the experience of eating (Cheung). To this effect, the first line of the contemplations is an acknowledgment of the origin of the food, “this food is a gift of the earth, the sky, numerous living beings.” In this line, the interbeingness of the food is also made clear. The line continues and recognizes the person who prepared the meal, by acknowledging the “much and hard loving work” (“New contemplations”).

The second line is similar to a vow, “may we eat in mindfulness and gratitude as to be worthy to receive this food.” This line to eat in mindfulness refers to several practices of mindful eating, namely eating in a way that engages all the senses, savoring small bites and chewing thoroughly, and eating slowly to avoid overeating. The aspect of overeating is emphasized in third line of the contemplation, where one reads “[may we] learn to eat with moderation” (“New contemplations”).

The contemplations are also made in light of important contemporary issues as they contain a wish to eat in a way that “stops contributing to climate change and heals and preserves our precious planet.” This line is referring to the practice of mindful eating to “eat a plant-based diet, for your health and for the planet” (Cheung). It is in line with this idea of mindful eating that all monasteries in the Plum Village tradition have been exclusively vegan since 2007, when TNH wrote the “Blue Cliff Letter” (“New contemplations”). The Five Contemplation is a good illustration of the role literature plays as a tool used in the practice of mindfulness and how it is done in full awareness of contemporary issues.

Discourses

Discourses are the Buddhist scriptures that are used at Plum village. The most important discourses in the tradition are often chanted and as such are found in *Chanting from The Heart*. This book offers a collection of verses, chants, practices, ceremonies, and discourses developed and used by the Plum Village community. In that way the practice of chanting is intimately linked to the Buddhist discourses. Though they are other texts, beside Buddhist discourses that are being chanted, this part looks at the practice of chanting and some of the key text of the tradition.

In *Chanting from The Heart*, TNH explains that “When [practitioners] chant, [they] chant from the heart. [They] are not performing either for a deity or for anyone else” (*Chanting from The Heart* 13). Instead, the practitioners use chanting as an instrument to “help coming back to the deepest place in [themselves], the place where [they] are alive and most awake.” (13) Chanting is not seen as simply singing while the mind is elsewhere, but it is instead imbued with profound significance and is understood as “the most immediate and direct way to reconnect [the practitioners] with those places” (13). For that reason, it is not especially the singing technique that is emphasized but the ability to generate great concentration in the chanting.

One type of texts that are chanted at Plum Village are the Buddhist discourses. They are translations of Buddhist teachings that have been made by TNH. *Chanting from The Heart* contains “twenty-two of the most fundamental teachings presented by the Buddha and his enlightened disciples” (14). These discourses are chanted for different reasons on different occasions, like for the passing of a loved one or an annual ceremony. It is understood that some of the most important teachings of the Buddha are rendered as chanting as a way to deepen one understanding of the text. Many of the discourses are then lessons that the Buddha taught and that the Plum Village community teaches. For instance, one of the discourses present in *Chanting from The Heart*, is *The Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing*. It is a traditional Buddhist text that is considered as one of the most important sutras in the Plum Village tradition and is taught at every Plum Village retreat. This sutra contains the teaching of the Buddha on how to practice mindfulness of the breath, it is at the core of the Plum Village practice. The English version of the text was first translated in 1988, but TNH continued to refine and revisit his translation throughout the years (“Discourse Breathing”). This sutra describes the sixteen steps in mindfulness of breathing. According to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, renowned Buddhist scholar in the Theravada tradition, “these steps are the most precise meditation instructions in the [Buddhist scriptures].” (Bhikkhu 73) These sixteen steps are the only instructions attributed directly to the Buddha found in the Vinaya, the code for Buddhist monastic. As such, this text is “considered indispensable guidance for [...] monks” (73). This sutra is the most concrete guide that Buddhism has to offer on the teaching of how to practice mindfulness of the breath.

All the other discourses are also Buddhist teachings and while they are useful to know, a deeper explanation of them would be somewhat out of place in such thesis. That is because it would mostly be an understanding of Buddhist philosophy rather than the role of literature at Plum Village.

The Five and Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings

Other important texts that are chanted are The Mindfulness Trainings (MTs). They are the core ethical guideline proposed by TNH. The Fourteen MTs were created in 1966, in the midst of the Vietnam War, as part of TNH's aspiration to renew Buddhism. In the book *Interbeing*, Sister Chan Khong explains that "the trainings contain the essence of the traditional monastic precepts as well as traditional lay and monastic Bodhisattva precepts" (Hanh, *Interbeing* 16). It was the transmission of the Fourteen MTs to six lay people that TNH began the Order of Interbeing. It started with six people, three men and three women, remembered as the Six Cedars. Sr. Chan Khong was one of them, alongside Nhat Chi Mai, who would immolate herself one year later to call for peace. Sr. Chan Khong explains that these trainings were supposed to be transmitted to other students as well, but as TNH was exiled from Vietnam for forty years, it was not until 2005 that the next transmission in Vietnam could take place (16). It took almost twenty years for new members to join the Order of Interbeing after the Six Cedars. It was in 1981, in France, that TNH would receive the next member of the Order of Interbeing, his niece Anh-Huong Nguyen ("Timeline of Community"). Since then, as of 2022, the Order of Interbeing is composed of over two thousand members ("Fourteen MTs"). The Order of Interbeing describes itself as "a community of monastics and lay people who have committed to living their lives in accord with the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, a distillation of the Bodhisattva (Enlightened Being) teachings of Mahayana Buddhism" ("What is the Order of Interbeing").

The Fourteen MTs, as they are today, are an updated version of the ones that were transmitted in 1966. The current formulation was made in 1988, soon after Sr. Chan Khong officially ordained on Vulture Peak in India, an important Buddhist place. Since then, however slight modifications have been added, in order to make the MTs always relevant with contemporary times.

The Plum Village community explains that “The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings are the very essence of the Order of Interbeing. [...] They allow us to touch the nature of interbeing in everything that is, and to see that our happiness is not separate from the happiness of others. Interbeing is not a theory; it is a reality that can be directly experienced by each of us at any moment in our daily lives. The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings help us cultivate concentration and insight which free us from fear and the illusion of a separate self” (“Fourteen MTs”). In that sense, the Fourteen MTs are the most practical expression of the insight of Interbeing.

Whereas anyone can practice the Fourteen MTs independently, to be worthy of receiving the training and being included in the Order of Interbeing (OI) takes many years. Sr. Chan Khong explains that one can become an aspirant to receive the Fourteen MTs only once one has practiced “the Five Trainings for at least two years in order to prove that [they] are really active, that [they] really love the practice, and implement it in a concrete and valuable way” (Hanh, *Interbeing* 22). The Five Trainings are the compressed version of the Fourteen. They cover the same area of life but with less depth. In that regard, they are most suitable for newcomers to the practice. At any rate, it is important to understand that the trainings are not precepts, nor commandments. They are called trainings because “they help us to see that we are training to go in a certain direction,” the direction of “great understanding and love” (22). Neither are they imposed by an outside authority, nor did they fall from the sky. They are the fruit of the practice of mindfulness, concentration, and insight.

The Fourteen MTs can be divided in three categories, the first seven MTs deal with actions of the mind. For instance, the first MT states that “Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones” (“Fourteen MTs”). The actions of the mind are put first, because in Buddhism it is thought that the mind is the foundation on which all of life follows (*Interbeing* 45). The next two MTs are concerned with speech, this is based on the Buddhist teaching of Right Speech, one of the components of the Noble Eightfold Path. The last five are concerned with bodily actions and involve mindfulness of consumption and sexual conduct. It is important to understand, however, that these trainings also inter-are, each training contains the others.

By taking a closer look at the Five MTs, one can see that they all share a similar structure, each of the training starts with the phrase “Aware of the suffering caused by” and continues with “I am committed to...” (“The Five Mindfulness Trainings”). This phrasing informs of the deliberate choice of acting in accordance with the MTs and reflects the kind of understanding that arises from the practice. The trainings do not appear to contain rhyme schemes or particular literary devices that would facilitate memorization. They appear to be a condensed expression of TNH’s philosophy.

The Five Earth Touchings

The Five Earth Touchings is a text used in during the ceremony of the same name. This text is not chanted but recited. The Plum Village community explains that “Practicing the Five Earth Touchings gives us an opportunity to contemplate what has been transmitted to us by our blood ancestors and spiritual ancestors. We can practice to celebrate the positive and transform what needs to be transformed” (“Fourteen MTs”). In that sense, the text serves as a reminder of the insight of Interbeing and as a way for one to manifest gratitude to what has been transmitted by the ancestors, whether they be biological or spiritual.

The text is divided into five different parts. The first part is concerned with offering gratitude to the blood ancestors. In it, one can read “I see my mother and father, whose blood, flesh and vitality are circulating in my own veins and nourishing every cell in me” (“Five Earth Touchings”). The first line shows how deeply imbedded in the insight of Interbeing the Five Earth Touchings are. They show the understanding that was previously discussed and state that “I know I am only the continuation of this ancestral lineage” (“Five Earth Touchings”). The second part addresses the spiritual ancestors. They are the teachers and their teachers that allowed us to be who we are today. This part serves to generate gratitude in one’s own mind towards “all teachers over many generations and traditions, going back to the ones who began my spiritual family thousands of years ago.” Many practitioners might consider the Buddha as their spiritual ancestor, but this is not what this part calls to. It does not exclude the Buddha but also include all figures that one feels connected to. This part is not a way to worship the Buddha or some religious figures. It is recited to understand that our own ideas are also a continuation that has been transmitted by our ancestors. This practice helps one see beyond the contemporary alienating individualist ideas and reconnect one with many generations of teachers, seeing that “I am their continuation” (“Five Earth Touchings”). The

third part serves to express gratitude to the lands. The text present on Plum Village's website addresses specifically North American lands and recognizes the presence of Native American ancestors "who have lived on this land for such a long time" ("Five Earth Touchings"). Depending on where one is, expressing gratitude to the lands would be expressed differently. It is for this reason that the community invites practitioners to write their own Five Earth Touchings. The Fourth part serves to generate gratitude and positive feelings towards our loved ones. It expresses a recognition of the suffering of one's blood ancestors and the interconnectedness of an individual and their family. By practicing mindfulness, one can develop compassion in order to "no longer feel resentments towards any [family members]." And with this comes the wish for them to be "healthy or joyful" because in light of Interbeing, it is argued that "I am not separate from them. I am one with those I love" ("Five Earth Touchings").

The last part extends this compassion to all those who made us suffer. This is a difficult but powerful practice, especially understood in light of TNH's past in the Vietnam war. It is a wish to send "love and understanding to everyone who has made me suffer, to those who have destroyed much of my life and the lives of those I love" ("Five Earth Touchings"). It understands that the reason those people made other suffered is because they suffered themselves. This is seen in the line "I know now that these people have themselves undergone a lot of suffering and that their hearts are overloaded with pain, anger and hatred." ("Five Earth Touchings") In other words, the text invites to the practice of mindfulness as it helps transform the suffering that was passed down onto the practitioners. Instead of generating more hate towards those who hurt them, as a practitioner one "sees the suffering [of the people who hurt them] and do not want to hold [these] feelings of hatred or anger in oneself towards them. I do not want them to suffer." ("Five Earth Touchings") This is a powerful exposition of the transformative power of compassion. Though people have wronged others and created much suffering in them, the practitioners want this suffering to be transformed within themselves. As such the hate, hurt and suffering that they received from other is vowed to not be put back into the world in the same form, but instead being transformed into love and understanding.

Gathas

Gathas are important literary devices used in Plum Village. There are two distinct types of Gathas, the ones for everyday use, as compiled in *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*, and the transmission Gathas as used during Lamp Transmission Ceremonies. Gatha is a Sanskrit word that means “song” or “verse”. It is derived from the word “gai” which means to sing, speak or recite. Gathas can essentially be understood as a mindfulness verses.

Gathas for everyday use

Let us start with the discussion of Gathas for everyday use. There are used as a way to bring awareness into the action that is being done. Gathas can be thought of as small poems designed to help deepen one’s meditation practice. Different gathas are used throughout daily activities to gather the mind and replace mindless thought with thoughts of awareness. For example, instead of riding one’s bike and think about trivial things, a gatha can be used to focus on the action of riding the bike. Same goes with the action of doing the dishes, opening a book or even looking at the stars. An example of Gatha is:

Waking up this morning, I smile.
Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.
I vow to live fully in each moment
And to look at all beings with eyes of compassion.
(Hanh, *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment 3*)

TNH and his community published their own collection of Gathas called *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment* in 1990, but the same Gathas can be found throughout many of TNH’s books, including *Chanting from The Heart* and *Zen Keys*. All of the gathas are original to TNH and his community, but they still draw inspiration from their traditional Chinese and Vietnamese counterparts. In the introduction of *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*, TNH explains that he received a copy of *Gathas for Everyday Use*, written by the Chinese meditation master Du Ti, when he entered the Tu Hiêu Monastery as a novice monk in 1942. Those gathas were made for traditional monks and nuns and he was instructed to learn by heart all fifty of them. Many years later, TNH and his community would continue using gathas at Plum village, while waking up, opening the window, entering the mediation hall...

TNH even says that practitioners there are silently reciting gathas all day long. (*Present Moment* vii) In fact, many Gathas are written throughout Plum Village, in the bathroom, kitchen, meditation hall... For instance, on the big bell in Upper Hamlet, one can read in French “Body and mind in perfect harmony, I send my heart along with the sound of this bell. May all those who hear me wake up from forgetfulness and transcend all anxiety and sorrow. Listen, Listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home” (my translation). In *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*, these are two different Gathas, one to invite the bell and another one to listen to it (10-20).

All Gathas are deeply intertwined with the practice. The way to use a gatha is by reciting on the in-breath the first part, and reciting on the outbreath, the next part. Then in-breath the following part and so on... For example, to begin the practice of mindful walking, one can use the designed Gatha and think “The mind can go in a thousand direction” on the inbreath and “But on this beautiful path, I walk in peace” on the out breath (57).

There are many different Gathas that are used for virtually all of the daily activities. Many of them are profoundly inspired by the insight of Interbeing. For instance, the Gatha that one might recite while using the toilets is “Defiled or immaculate, increasing or decreasing- these concepts exist only in our minds. The reality of Interbeing is unsurpassed” (9). The Gatha for serving food reads “In this food, I see clearly the presence of the entire universe supporting my existence” (48). In that sense, Gathas for everyday use are a great example of how literature both helps transmit insight and is generated by it. Though TNH and his community transmitted many Gathas, practitioners are always invited to come up with new ones and to imbue them with their own personal significance.

Transmission Gatha

The other type of Gathas that are used at Plum village are Transmission Gathas. They are notably used during the Lamp Transmission ceremony. The Lamp Transmission is an important Buddhist ceremony that takes root in the time of the Buddha where he would transmit the Dharma Seal to a disciple thus making him a direct successor. Historically, the lamp symbolized the understanding of the Dharma and the recipient of the lamp could become a recognized master. Back then, very few people actually received the lamp, only the most attained monastics could receive it. However, at Plum Village things are done

differently. TNH believed that because there is so much suffering in the world, “one buddha is not enough.” For that reason, he gave the lamp to many monastics and lay practitioners, officializing them as teachers in the Plum Village tradition and including them in an unbroken lineage of teachers and disciples.

At Plum Village, during the ceremony, the person receiving the lamp proposes an insight Gatha that is read out loud in front of the community and the teacher from whom the lamp will be transmitted. If the Gatha is accepted, the teacher offers a Lamp Transmission Gatha and with it the Lamp.

This practice of transmitting Gatha takes root in an important Buddhist text known as *The Sutra Spoken by The Sixth Patriarch on the High Seat of the Treasure of the Law*, shortened as the Platform Sutra. The Platform Sutra tells the story of how Huineng (638-713), an important Ch'an Master, became the 6th patriarch. In short, the 5th patriarch asked his community for a verse to prove that one had reached enlightenment. The most reputed monk of the monastery, Shin Chau, tried his chance and wrote on a wall of the monastery:

Our body is the Bodhi-tree
and our Mind a mirror bright.
Carefully we wipe them hour by hour
and let no dust alight. (Cleary 15)

Seeing this, the patriarch told Shin Chau that his stanza showed that he had reached “the Door of Enlightenment” but had not yet entered it (16). Meanwhile, Huineng, who was not even a monk, heard about the poem contest and when he saw Shin Chau's verse, knew that wasn't it. He then decided to write his own poem on the wall. It stated:

There is no Bodhi-tree,
nor stand of a mirror bright.
Since all is void,
where can the dust alight? (20)

When the patriarch saw Huineng's poem, he erased it from the wall, but understood that Huineng had seen into what they call the Essence of Mind, which is Tathata. From that

moment, the 5th patriarch transmitted the sign of the patriarchate to Huineng, making him the new patriarch.

TNH once commented on this famous Zen story. According to him, both poems are caught in notion of being and non-being. (Hanh, *The Other Shore* 19) The first poem shows attachments to being, by asserting that there is a “body” and there is a “bodhi-tree,” whereas the second poem shows attachments to non-being by stating that there is “no Bodhi-tree” and that “all is void.” Hence both poems, according to TNH, appear to deal with existence or non-existence of phenomena. However, one can argue that it is in the erasure of the second poem that the teaching is. It is in the silence beyond concepts that patriarch signifies with the erasure that notions of being and non-being are transcended.

Since then, the transmission of the lamp has included a short verse to prove that insight has been gained. TNH himself received the lamp on the first of May 1966, soon before leaving for the US to call for peace and finding himself exiled from home for 40 years (Phap Dung 2). TNH received the lamp from Zen Master Chan Ta (2). Brother Phap Dung wrote a letter to explain the lineage from which the lamp was transmitted and provided the translation of transmission Gathas representing five generations. The oldest Gatha present was transmitted in 1712 from Zen Master Tu Dung to Zen Master Lieu Quan. When Tu Dung asked Lieu Quan “The patriarch transmits to the patriarch. The Buddha transmits to the Buddha. What do they transmit to each other?” Lieu Quan answered “On rocks the bamboo shoots grow longer than ten meters. The weight of a turtle hair broom is three kilos,” to which Tu Dung replied “Row a boat on the high mountain. Ride a horse at the bottom of the ocean,” and Lieu Quan concluded: “Playing on a sitar without strings for hours, breaking a clay ox's horns makes him cry the whole night.” (10-11) These Gathas are reminiscent of kōans in the sense that they appear to make no sense.

Brother Phap Dung also gives a translation of the Gatha that TNH received but does not mention the Gatha that TNH himself offered. It remains that the ability to provide evidence of the lineage and the transmission is important and grounds the tradition in a 2.600 years old line of ancestors. Today, people who receive a Gatha do not receive it only from the teacher that present the transmission Gatha, but by the entire lineage of spiritual ancestor that are considered to inter-be with the transmitting master. As such when one receives the lamp, one

becomes part of this ancestral lineage and receives the responsibility to carry and transmit the light of the Dharma.

Let us have a look at some contemporary transmission Gathas. On the 11th and 12th of June 2022, I was personally present at Plum Village in the context of a summer retreat celebrating the 40 years of Plum Village. During my stay there, I had the opportunity to assist to several lamp transmission ceremonies. At one of the ceremonies, Shelley Anderson offered this insight Gatha:

I worry, will I die alone? Afraid? In pain?
The clematis in the back garden reminds me to enjoy
the here and now.
The pink clematis just smiles at the sun and enjoys the warmth of the present. (“40 years”)

The Gatha starts with lines of worries about the future, doubts and fears. But to these worries, the next line brings the practice back, of seeing the wonders of life, in “the here and now” and with that the worries dissipate, and one can dwell happily enjoying “the warmth of the present.” This insight Gatha was accepted by the community and Sister Chan Khong offered this Lamp Transmission Gatha:

The great work of no-birth and no-death
Can be realized at any moment
The true harmony of heart and mind,
Takes us to the shore of peace (“40 years”)

The work of No-Birth no-death is the insight found in the Heart Sutra, also known as the Sutra That Takes Us To The Other Shore. In line with Plum Village’s philosophy, this other shore is always accessible in the here and now; and resting in awareness with it brings “the true harmony of heart and mind.” It can be noted that the cryptic nature of the gatha that was present in TNH’s ancestor has been somewhat left out. Instead, true to TNH’s legacy, the Gatha contain elements of nature and emphasis on the present moment and the peace that can be found there.

Conclusion

As almost no academic interest had been given to the literary works of TNH's this thesis aimed at contextualizing TNH's work in relation to its historical and philosophical background. Central to many of TNH's work is his concept of Interbeing, which is a reiteration of traditional Buddhist ideas. This thesis first discussed the role of literature in traditional Buddhism as a tool to help the mind let go of notions in order to gain insights. This discussion was made with an emphasis on the kōan. I then discussed TNH's literature, focusing on his poetry and calligraphy. I looked at his poetry in two ways. On the one hand, from their historical perspective and on the other, in light of his philosophy and experience of the insight of Interbeing. The part on his calligraphy discussed the origin of TNH's style and used traditional criticism to understand the spiritual aspect of his work. The final part of this thesis gave a broad overview of several key texts used at Plum Village, it focused on their function, how they are used and the context from which they arose.

As this thesis is one of the first in English literature to address the work of TNH, I focused on explaining the historical and philosophical context of his work. However, once this necessary basis is understood, further analyses can be made in light of other elements. Possible discussion could include comparative analysis of TNH's poetry with other English-speaking poets, influences that TNH's has had on subsequent authors, or English influences found in TNH's work. Another interesting approach could be using the concepts here discussed to analyze other works of literature. One could look at other poems inspired by mystical experiences and look at them through the insight of Interbeing.

Another door that the understanding of TNH's work open is to the work of Sister Chan Khong, herself being an important figure in the community and one of the very first of TNH's follower. Many of the concepts used and discussed in TNH's work could be relevant to understand Sister Chan Kong's work.

Even if TNH recently passed away, the community that he created continues to publish regularly works in English. Contextualizing TNH's work also offers a good entry point to those works. For instance, one could take interest at the work offered by the monastic

community, such as *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* edited by Sister True Dedication. The community also opened their own publication house called Parallax press. Many of the works coming out of it are directly linked to the practice of mindfulness. Even outside of the monastic community, many lay people have been

What I find most important to understand, however, is that Zen literature is not written so that its concepts can be applied to other works in view of accumulating of intellectual knowledge. That would be missing the point. The real point that Zen texts emphasis is that the practice of meditation must come first. Then, with the practice, endeavoring to use the concepts and ideas of Zen for academic purposes might be a worthy endeavor, but it is not a substitute for the practice. The first thing, is then to arrive in the present moment and to remember: “I have arrived, I am home.”

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