

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076–9005

<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/>

Volume 29, 2022

# Collapsing Space and Time: Thich Nhat Hanh's Ecological Humanism

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# Collapsing Space and Time: Thich Nhat Hanh's Ecological Humanism

Victor Thasiah<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Identifying with non-human organisms, such as flora and fauna, and non-living members of the natural world, such as winds and clouds, was central to Thich Nhat Hanh's (1926–2022) practice of Buddhism and conduct of resistance during the Vietnam War. This deep affinity with nature enabled him to “become himself” and sustain his public service and humanitarian work under duress. We examine Nhat Hanh's extended accounts of identifying with the natural world during the war, relevant material from his 1962–1966 memoirs and 1963 poem “Butterflies over the Golden Mustard Fields.” They set out what we call his ecological humanism, his paradoxical overcoming of self-alienation through a close rapport with relatively wild nature. With no critical biography yet available, this

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<sup>1</sup> California Lutheran University. Email: [vthasiah@callutheran.edu](mailto:vthasiah@callutheran.edu). This essay is dedicated to the memory of scholar-activist Rahuldeep Gill (1979-2021). The author would like to thank the *Journal's* anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

focused, ecocritical interpretation, the first of its kind on Nhat Hanh during this major period, contributes to a better sense of the making of this global Buddhist influencer, who at the time was nominated by Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Nature is immense, / I wander in great freedom, / To the lofty mountains where the clouds hide, / And to the deep waters of the great oceans. / . . . The mandarin career is perilous, why then should I venture in it? / What shall I do then because people are not constant? / One should take off one's clothes to cross deep waters and roll up one's / clothes to walk shallow waters. / One should offer one's service when called upon but should retire into / seclusion when wanted. . .

Tue Trung, "The Eccentric's Song"

## **Introduction**

White supremacy, according to legal scholar Frances Ansley, is

a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted

across a broad array of institutions and social settings.  
(1024)<sup>2</sup>

While many have long sought and now seek to resist, dismantle, and transition from this sociopolitical system, the broad-daylight lynching of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, certainly broadened the felt urgency.<sup>3</sup> There still are not enough accessible resources, however, for sustaining this unavoidably, inescapably self-involving work, and for supporting one's well-being, self-nurture, and flourishing in the meantime.<sup>4</sup> As bell hooks puts it:

Even though there is much awareness that daily white supremacist thinking and action are pervasive, there is little commentary about what folks can do to protect mind, body, and heart. . . One can be mindful of the impact of white supremacy while working consciously with mindful awareness to create a life where wholeness of self and identity stand as a powerful counter-hegemonic resistance to engulfment by racialized identity. Black folks, young and old, who are swept away by the idea of race and its concomitant anti-black racist agenda tend to end up seeing themselves as victims, living with depleting psychological states of fear and paranoia, states of mind that make coping in a predominantly white world difficult, if not downright impossible. (153)

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<sup>2</sup> For a historical treatment of white supremacy, see Fredrickson, who summarizes white supremacy as “the attitudes, ideologies, and policies associated with the rise of blatant forms of white or European dominance over ‘nonwhite’ populations. In other words, it involves making invidious distinctions of a socially crucial kind that are based primarily, if not exclusively, on physical characteristics and ancestry” (xi).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Beth Gardiner’s interview of Elizabeth Yeampierre, and Hopkins.

<sup>4</sup> Two well-respected, contemporary resources are Menakem and brown.

These are among the impacts, observes philosopher Charles Mills, that white domination has at the level of our subjectivity, our experience of ourselves. Mills explains, “Nonwhites socialized into the acceptance of this somatic norm [of whiteness] will then be alienated from their own bodies, in a sense estranged from their own physical being and being-in-the-world” (47). Thus, “resistance to oppressive corporeal whiteness has taken the form of a guerilla insurgency on the terrain of the flesh itself” (47). Sharing hooks’ interest in ways of being that both protect one’s “mind, body, and heart” and promote “wholeness of self and identity” under oppressive sociopolitical systems like white supremacy, we consider the life of Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (TNH), who enacted and recorded a comparable resistance and insurgency during the Vietnam War (1954–1975). While we will not have more to say about resisting, dismantling, and transitioning from white supremacy in particular, this critical study of his ways of being during the war, centering on what we refer to as the collapsing of both space and time, can serve as a resource for more than historical interest.<sup>5</sup>

Identifying with non-human organisms, such as flora and fauna, and non-living members of the natural world, such as winds and clouds, was central to TNH’s practice of Buddhism and conduct of resistance during the Vietnam War. This deep affinity with nature enabled him to “become himself” and sustain his public service and humanitarian work under duress. In what follows, we examine TNH’s extended accounts of identifying with the natural world during the war, relevant material from his 1962–1966 memoirs (Nhat Hanh *Fragrant*) and 1963 poem “Butterflies over the Golden Mustard Fields” (Nhat Hanh *Call* 76ff). They set out what we call his ecological humanism, his paradoxical overcoming of self-alienation (akin to what Mills explains above) through a close rapport with relatively wild nature. With no critical biography available yet, this focused,

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<sup>5</sup> See Belew and Gutiérrez.

ecocritical interpretation, the first of its kind on TNH during this major period, contributes to a better sense of the making of this global Buddhist influencer, who at the time was nominated by Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize.

In the government-banned 1967 book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*—which circulated underground and outlined his views on the history and nature of Vietnamese Buddhism, as well as his ideological criticism of Vietnam’s colonial history and political factions—TNH summarizes his perspective on Vietnamese Zen by stating that it combines the “freedom and aloofness of Taoism and the sense of responsibility of Confucianism” (*Lotus* 11). He illustrates this hybridity by reproducing Tran Dynasty Zen master Tue Trung’s (1230–1291) poem “The Eccentric’s Song” (*Thu History* 140–147) in full. The selected lines above, referring to both nature, where one retreats and wanders in freedom, and society, where one deals with the perils of politics, further introduces our critical study. This framing of Vietnamese Zen also reminds us of the relevance of early Chinese sources for understanding how relatively wild nature at once heals and helps TNH as he copes with and emerges from mass atrocity.<sup>6</sup>

King, a 1964 Nobel laureate, recommended the “virtually homeless and stateless” TNH for the same award in 1967. After noting the latter’s humility and devotion, his “immense intellectual capacity,” and the “superb clarity and human compassion” of his poetry in the nomination letter, King recounts what led to TNH’s “particularly brutal exile,” namely, his public service and humanitarian work. He writes,

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

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Slingerland.

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

King's remarks on TNH's prodigious domestic and international efforts toward peace during the mid-sixties should allay any preliminary concerns or criticisms of escapism and/or solipsism that the latter's preoccupation with the natural world and being himself could have involved during such daunting and desperate circumstances. They also reference both the exploitative nature of the sociopolitical systems he resisted and those who were exploited and victimized by them—the North and South Vietnamese peasants—with whom TNH identified in what we might call his Liberation Buddhism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> While we focus in this essay on TNH's identification with non-human organisms and non-living members of the natural world, it is important to note his simultaneous identification with Vietnamese peasants in his social work and sixties writings. For example, consider this passage from *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* on what I call TNH's Liberation Buddhism:

The majority of the peasants take little or no interest in the problems of communism or anti-communism. They are direct victims of the war, and consequently they welcome every effort in the direction of ending the war. Except for those who believe that they must support the [National Liberation] Front in order to expel the American "aggressors," everyone hates the war itself. The more the war is escalated, the more they are its victims, since both sides threaten their lives and property. Since early 1964 I have frequented the remote villages of Vietnam, along with teams of young social workers, and it is from these visits that I interpret the mind of the peasant. . . . The spirit of patriotism among the peasants is very high. They are not informed about world history or ideological struggles; what they see is a large force of white



### Fragrant Palm Leaves and Butterflies

During the mid-to-late 1950s, both Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam and Ngo Dinh Diem's Republic of Vietnam, supposedly representing their respective peasant majorities, reproduced comparable Vietnamese versions of earlier French colonial violence, domination, dehumanization, and control. The former attempted to consolidate and communize everything above the seventeenth parallel, while the latter attempted to consolidate and de-communize everything below it. These matching endeavors of course required monumental feats of social, political, and economic engineering. In *Vietnam: A New History*, Christopher Goscha details how Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem struggled "to impose authoritarian rule and create the legitimacy for these two different Vietnams that had emerged from a century of French colonial rule" (303). Both employed arbitrary arrests, torture, executions, censorship, concentration camps, and forced labor, causing "indescribable psychological pain" and mass suicide (292). In the early 1960s, while teaching at Princeton and Columbia in the United States, TNH reflected on being caught between these diametrically opposed, symmetrically appalling Vietnams in his literary memoirs published under the title *Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals 1962-1966* in Vietnamese in 1966, and translated into English in 1998.

Meanwhile, TNH's reform efforts toward what he considered a more humanistic Buddhism and humane Vietnam were rejected by his Buddhist superiors. We know the Vietnamese had been active for decades both reconceiving Vietnamese Buddhism along the lines of earlier Chinese Buddhist revivalism and redeveloping a Vietnamese Buddhist nationalism, "emphasizing the centrality of education, modern publishing,

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Westerners doing their best to kill their fellow countrymen, many of whom previously fought against the French. The peasants do not see the victims of the American military effort as dead Communists, but as dead patriots. (64ff.)

social work, and Buddhist lay groups” (DeVido 413), but we don’t have access to any documented evaluations of TNH’s activity (Goscha 317). It is clear from his journal entries that some of his ideas were censured and his idealism was accordingly abandoned. He recalls,

We were accused of sowing seeds of dissent when we challenged anything traditional. We were considered rabble-rousers who only want to tear things down. . . We sowed these seeds against steep odds, and while waiting for them to take root, we endured false accusations, hatred, deception, and intolerance. (*Fragrant* 51)

This disapproval was devastating; recollecting the experience a half-decade later, TNH writes, “I became so sick I almost died” (7).

Over his long career as an exiled global Buddhist influencer and peace activist, many would characterize TNH’s style as one of seemingly invincible equanimity and compassion, even if he could be pointed at times. Projecting backwards, it is difficult to imagine him as iconoclastic, confrontational, and obstreperous. Based on his memoirs, however, his way of dealing with such conflicts in the mid-to-late 1950s might not have been what we would later come to expect.<sup>8</sup> Take this passage for example:

I want to burn down the huts where my friends dwell. I want to incite chaos to help them break through the shells that confine them. I want to smash the chains that bind them and topple the gods that restrain them. . . . [A]n infinitely exquisite moment [is when a friend] emerges from the chaos caused by the annihilation of his last refuge. There he is, liberated from the hard shells of a thousand lifetimes, standing nobly in the brilliant light cast by his burning refuge. In that moment, he will lose everything,

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, King and Strain.

but in that same moment, he possesses everything. (*Fragrant* 88)

Of course, knowing whether, how, and if so, to what extent, TNH burnt down forms of established Vietnamese Buddhism and incited chaos, smashed chains, and toppled gods among his friends, would assist us in better contextualizing and comprehending what follows. As noted above, however, we await further, critical biographical work on him during this major period.<sup>9</sup>

Hurt, confused, frustrated, and despondent, TNH turns to a relatively wild natural setting to recuperate. He relocates for two years to a mountain forest hermitage he and close friends build in the Dai Lao Forest among Vietnam's Central Highlands Indigenous Montagnards. Conscious of precedents, he writes, "In ancient times, some Vietnamese chose to live in the highlands among wild beasts. They preferred the danger of being eaten alive to living under an oppressive regime" (49). The dark, beautiful, and mysterious forest and its clear running streams spread across the highest regional mountains, home to the tigers and gibbons that TNH often mentions in addition to his favorite flowers, plants, and trees. He recalls the special kinship he felt with the Indigenous Montagnards, who helped him construct the hermitage on the sixty-acre parcel he bought from them in August, 1957. Though he doesn't comment in his journals on contemporary Montagnard resistance to Diem's Viet immigration and centralization policies threatening political autonomy and cultural continuity, they too face pressures of domination and assimilation (Goscha 436).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The most useful, current biographical source in English on TNH during this period is Khong.

<sup>10</sup> See Salemink.

Phoung Boi Hermitage (PB), established at base of the highest mountain, which TNH and his friends call “Montagnard Hill,” included a dormitory, living room, kitchen, library, study, and meditation hall, and functioned as a laboratory for rehabilitating themselves and reimagining their practice (15). The name Phoung Boi, referring to “the kind of palm leaf (talipot palm) on which the teachings of the Buddha were written down in ancient times” (1), signaled their intentions of both honoring Vietnamese Buddhism’s past and renewing it for Vietnam’s war-torn present and post-war future. TNH’s plan, at least for himself and close friends, “to put down roots, to build a home in the forest and create a safe territory. . . sheltered from the harshness of worldly affairs,” clearly resonated with several like-minded others (19). While there were just a few people in residence at any given time, the hermitage constantly drew additional friends, writers, artists, and even families, who would stay for days, weeks, or months over the two-year span (Nhat Hanh *Raft* 126). Temporarily suspending their participation in dehumanizing social, political, economic, and religious orders of reality, they sought to recover their humanity together.

Though relatively remote, this experimental community was never really off the grid. The Diem regime regularly surveilled PB, suspecting it of clandestine, non-compliant activity. Their distrust of and hunches about TNH were warranted. He remarks, “It seemed that the authorities had been watching us for some time, perhaps to retaliate for the articles and books I’d written opposing their policies” (57). This adversarial—neither agnostic nor apolitical—attitude and activity remained consistent throughout the war. In a recorded conversation in 1974, he relates, “I have the impression that in order to be ourselves we should oppose *any* government in power, we should be a kind of permanent opposition” (Nhat Hanh *Raft* 94f). In addition to healing and recovering from “very, very deep” wounds, TNH and others used the space and time to look deeply and critically at Vietnamese authoritarian politics, cultivate

innovative Buddhist practices relevant to peasants, and plan for new social initiatives in rural areas (133).

Comparable to Mills' view above of oppressive sociopolitical systems estranging people from their respective bodies, TNH explains the forms of self-alienating coloniality he is resisting, and from which he needs healing and recovery:

We feel forced to comply with the dehumanizing demands of society, and we bow our heads and obey. We eat, speak, think, and act according to society's dictates. We are not free to be ourselves. . . We become cogs in the system, merchandise, not human beings. Our individuality is undermined, yet we comply because we lack the courage to refuse society's demands. . . We, too, have become so accustomed to our way of life with its conveniences and comforts that we allow ourselves to be colonized. (92)

Living without accustomed conveniences and comforts in a relatively wild mountain forest apparently helped TNH counter "being invaded, occupied, assaulted, and destroyed by the system" (*Raft* 129). This kind of resistance to him is both preliminary to and prefigurative of other forms of expected resistance, like the Buddhist street protests that precipitated the fall of Diem. While TNH and other monastics naturally leveraged their monastic training, PB residents collectively ensured that there would be no rule or discipline followed at their hermitage, and that any social conventions deemed stifling would be intentionally disregarded (126). Days were spent hiking, exploring, lounging, meditating, sipping tea, reciting poetry, playing music, and, especially pleasurable to the monks, running and shouting. By the end of the war, TNH's "engaged Buddhism," largely conceived in the context of what we might call PB anarchism, comprised breathing regimens and other practices for sustaining both present attention to one's body and the social and natural world on the one hand, and present

resistance to, dismantling of, and transitioning from systemic dehumanization and environmental degradation on the other (Nhat Hanh *Miracle*).<sup>11</sup>

So far, such intentions to recuperate in wild places beyond the reach and control of oppressive sociopolitical systems sound familiar. Well known for this view, for example, is author and activist Edward Abbey, who famously expressed, “New dynasties will arise, new tyrants will appear—no doubt. But we must and we can resist such recurrent aberrations by keeping true to the earth and remaining loyal to our basic animal nature” (368f). A related and recent installment is geographer Andreas Malm’s “progressive, cosmopolitan, Marxist view of wilderness as a space less subjugated by capital than others,” aligning politically with the “long history of exploited and persecuted people seeking freedom in and through the wild” (3). With “a desperate hope invested in uncontrolled nature,” people have turned to wild places for fugitive self-emancipation, and defiant, insurgent, vanguardist counter-power (25). “In times of barbarism,” Malm maintains, “wilderness becomes a repository of the civil, the humane, the unconfined: of anticipation” (27). He thus warns of the stakes of losing these wild places, especially vulnerable in a rapidly warming world.

TNH’s distinctive contribution to the long-standing, cross-cultural conversation on the value of such wild places for relief from and resolve against oppressive sociopolitical systems starts with the imagined

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<sup>11</sup> See Nhat Hanh, “History” pp. 29-36. On TNH’s environmental activism as a form of his engaged Buddhism, see his assistance in convening Europe’s first conference on the environment in 1970, meeting with the U.N. Secretary-General on the environment in 1971, and hosting of the “Dai Dong” Environmental Conference coinciding with the U.N. Summit on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972 (referenced in Khong *Learning* 159). <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/letters/the-menton-statement-a-message-to-our-3-5-billion-neighbours-on-planet-earth/>

dominance of nature, relativizing the dominance of colonial and other such forces faced at the time.<sup>12</sup> TNH explains:

At night, the sacred forest declares its absolute authority. . . . Sitting in the study at Phoung Boi, I heard the many eerie cries coming from the forest. By eight o'clock it was already night, and the forest's dominance was restored. The whole universe sank into a profound silence that, at the same time, vibrated with life. I could almost hear the majestic steps of the mountain god as he leaped between the towering trees. . . . Some nights I stood gazing at the forest for hours. Just fifty meters away, the omnipotent forest pulled at me, with an irresistible force. It was wild and invigorating. I imagined seeing the shadowy form of a Montagnard tribesman from thousands of years ago, and I could feel the ancient tribesman in myself awakening. I felt the urge to leave civilization behind, throw away my bookish knowledge, tear off my clothes, and enter the forest naked. To do what? I didn't know. But I would enter the forest's depths. Even if wild animals devoured me, I knew I would feel no pain, terror, or regret. I might even enjoy being devoured. I stood at the window for a long time, struggling with the call of the forest and the moon. (*Fragrant* 22f.)

Wild nature exercises authority, and its dominance enchants and enlivens; in contrast, colonial authority terrorizes, traumatizes, exploits, extracts, and deadens. Even if stalked, clutched, and preyed upon ravenously in the wild, TNH "would feel no pain, terror, or regret." He identifies with Indigenous highlanders, romantically, he grants, who defend political autonomy and resist cultural assimilation while he lives among them

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<sup>12</sup> See Guha, and Vannini and Vannini.

(Goscha 436).<sup>13</sup> More deeply, though, he identifies with relatively wild, other-than-human nature, which enables him to recover his own human nature as such. In these paradoxical experiences of both relatively uncontrolled and more controlled nature—the latter less continuous, more fragmented by human artifice—nature’s authority is communicative as “the call of the cosmos,” to which TNH develops a close rapport.

This call of the cosmos initiates healing and recovery from, in Mills’ language, alienation from one’s own body and estrangement from one’s being-in-the-world. “When I hear it now,” TNH observes, “I pause, and, with all my body, with every atom of my being, every vein, gland, and nerve, I listen with awe and passion” (*Fragrant* 30f.). He continues: “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” (30). This radical receptivity to and identification with non-human organisms and non-living members of the natural world, and a deep affinity with their perceived fittingness and spontaneity, is the key to, for lack of better terms, TNH’s ethics and nature poetry.

Later in his memoirs, TNH conveys the breakthrough experience of emptiness he had one night between bookstacks at Columbia University’s Butler Library related to both the recovery of his humanity on the one hand and his ethics on the other. In the famous passage he recounts:

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

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<sup>13</sup> See Thich Nhat Hanh on the Montagnards in “On Simplicity.”



lifted silently and effortlessly. . . At that moment, I had the deep feeling that I had returned. (*Fragrant* 84f.)

TNH experiences himself stripped of, unoccupied by, and released from systematically dehumanizing—religious, sociopolitical, and interpersonal—commitments and determinations. He has been decolonized to a significantly meaningful extent. While he seems to lose himself—as a discrete, material being among other material beings—he seems to find himself in the process. He depicts this “return” by figuring himself as a blithe insect. “Like the grasshopper,” he imagines, “I had no thoughts of the divine. . . . When a grasshopper sits on a blade of grass, he has no thought of separation, resistance, or blame . . . It knows nothing of philosophy or ideals. It is simply grateful for its ordinary life” (*Fragrant* 85). But does TNH just trade one form of dehumanization for another, where such identification with either non-human organisms or non-living members of the natural world leaves him with nothing either uniquely or distinctly human?

He supposes a particular kind of naturalism, acting fittingly according to one’s human nature, to be normative and humane. Such fittingness is spontaneous, even when it involves thorough deliberation, what TNH refers to as looking deeply. As we have seen, he develops a Liberation Buddhism impressively conversant with complicated, life-threatening domestic social, political, and economic engineering on the one hand, and comparably complicated, life-threatening geopolitical maneuvering on the other. A koan accounts for how such a critical fittingness and spontaneity flow from a comprehension, understanding, and appreciation of context, however complex.

For someone who has seen the nature of things, knowledge gives rise to action. For those who have truly seen, there is no philosophy of action needed. There is no knowledge, attainment, or object of attainment. Life is lived just as the

wind blows, clouds drift, and flowers bloom. . . If asked a philosophical question, you might answer with a poem, or ask, “Have you had your breakfast? Then please wash your bowl.” Or point to a mountain forest. (*Fragrant* 105)

Everything seems to hang on seeing what TNH imagines and conceives as the nature of things, the meaning he connects with chosen aspects of the cosmos, which his poem “Butterflies over the Golden Mustard Fields” further clarifies. Finally, perhaps referring to himself and his moral or ethical agnosticism (not nihilism), he concludes:

There are people who live like clouds, flowers, and wind, who don’t think about morals, yet many people point to their actions and words as religious and ethical models, and they praise them as saints. These saints simply smile. If they revealed that they do not know what is good and what is evil, people would think they were crazy. (*Fragrant* 105)

TNH may have lived simply in a mountain forest and not thought much about morals, what is good and what is evil, but he went there to “look deeply” at the convoluted sociopolitical systems that oppressed both him and the North and South Vietnamese peasants, and the stark and subtle drama of being of non-human organisms and non-living members of the natural world. In his commentary on his “Butterflies” poem, to which we now turn, TNH refers to the fitting, spontaneous, and humane action that follows from this thorough deliberation—perceived by others as religious and/or ethical action—as “non-action.”

As for the “Butterflies” poem background: in November, 1963, Vietnamese military and security officers, with American support, overthrew President Ngo Dinh Diem. While succeeding military governments were no more capable of handling political instability and guerilla insurgency, American intervention ramped up, as did savage warfare and car-

nage (Goscha 322). Just after Diem's demise, TNH's brother monks asked him to return to Vietnam—from teaching and research at Princeton and Columbia in the United States—to help them rebuild the country. Started in New York in 1963, and developed and completed in Vietnam shortly thereafter, TNH's "Butterflies over the Golden Mustard Fields" sets out his view of this public service and humanitarian work. As he puts it, the poem "is about rebuilding the country and about the kind of action known as 'non-action.' We don't have to do much if we know how to be. If we stop being joyful and stop singing, we are caught in a kind of prison. The stars in the sky never build prisons" (*Call* 79). Like the memoirs we have examined and interpreted, non-human organisms and non-living members of the natural world, in this case stars, inform us on how to, and how not to, be. Knowing how to see is again paired with knowing how to be.

In the poem, TNH recalls "butterflies fluttering above our garden." He senses his mother's and sister's presence: "The gentle afternoon breeze is your breathing." Like both a butterfly and child, he is "not dreaming of some distant future." He calls others into a close rapport with relatively wild nature in real time. "Let us sing with the flower and the morning birds. / Let us be fully present." Called home himself by his brother monks to rebuild Vietnam, TNH inquires, "What can I do to help?" The breeze becomes a wind, and its response is instructive: "Smile. Life is a miracle. / Be a flower. / Happiness is not built of bricks and stones." He concedes, "I understand. We don't want to cause each other pain." He thus advises a brother, ". . . be a flower standing along the wall. / Be a part of this wondrous being." Further referring to the work he has been called home to do, he writes, "I hear the excited buzzing of the diligent bees / preparing to rebuild the universe. / Dear ones, the work of rebuilding / may take thousands of lifetimes, / but it has also already been completed just that long ago."

TNH again suggests identifying with a flower in contrast to carceral metaphors: “Your hands are as beautiful as chrysanthemums. / Do not let them be transformed into gears, hooks, and ropes.” Moreover, “The chrysanthemum is smiling at you. Don’t dip your hands into cement and sand. The stars never build prisons for themselves.” In other words, don’t let yourself be co-opted, appropriated, and instrumentalized in the construction of sociopolitical systems that currently generate suffering for yourself and others. Happiness, according to TNH, will never be built and enjoyed in this way; it has already been built and can be enjoyed now, perceived in the wondrous being of human and other-than-human nature. He observes, perhaps differentiating suffering from discomfort, however difficult, “If you have suffered, it is only / because you have forgotten / you are a leaf, a flower.” Finally, he reiterates the normativity of naturalness. “Why speak of the need to love one another? / Just be yourself. / You don’t need to become anything else.” The poem ends with an ask based on a deep affinity with wild nature: “Please listen as if I were / a bubbling spring.”

TNH collapses both space and time in what we have examined and interpreted. He enters a forest’s depths, identifying with non-human organisms and non-living members of the natural world, and with North and South Vietnamese peasants in the anti-war/pro-peace initiatives he develops there, collapsing the space between himself, wild nature, and the peasants. Expecting desired and humane futures to be the extension of fitting, spontaneous, and humane action in the present, TNH collapses time. The future is the present, in the future. Tomorrow is today, tomorrow. Collapsing both space and time, he heals and recovers from, and resists and engages, oppressive Vietnamese and international sociopolitical systems—their respective colonial, carceral edifices poetically symbolized by huts, shells, chains, gods, refuges, cogs, merchandise, bricks, stones, gears, hooks, and ropes. Entering a forest’s depths, TNH imagines falling under another absolute omnipotence, dominance, and authority, displac-

ing politics by other means. Immersed in relatively wild nature, he identifies with wondrous non-human organisms and non-living members of the natural world in their fittingness, spontaneity, and flow, not subject to the surrounding perils of politics. Is such a collapsing of both space and time, is this sixties “flower power,” enough, however, to resist, dismantle, and transition from structures as formidable as the colonialities of North and South Vietnam and related, broader neo-colonial strategies, not to mention current structures like white supremacy?

### **Conclusion: Collapsing Both Space and Time**

Peace scholar Johan Galtung’s seminal theories on systemic violence such as colonial, racial-ethnic, and ecological violence continue to inform critical social analysis and radical political activism.<sup>14</sup> For Galtung, systemic violence—justified, legitimized, and rationalized by various aspects of culture (such as religion, ideology, language, art, and science)—refer to structures and processes that exploit and degrade both human and natural communities (Galtung 291). These aspects of culture can construct and reinforce what Galtung calls steep, self-other gradients—systems where some groups of people, however large or small, are valued more highly than other groups of people, or where humans as a species are valued more highly than other non-human species, however conscious or capable. As Galtung notes, “Any Self-Other gradient can be used to justify violence against those lower down on the scale of worthiness. . .” (302). Both French and Vietnamese colonialisms, the former supposedly civilizing society, the latter supposedly liberating it, come to mind.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Nixon.

<sup>15</sup> Galtung observes,

Galtung's "Gandhism," in particular, resonates with TNH's ecological humanism. Two related axioms capture the former: the unity-of-life and the unity-of-means-and-ends, with unity denoting a "closeness, against separation" (302). On the unity-of-life, Galtung explains, "In our mental universe all forms of life, particularly human life, should enjoy closeness and not be kept apart by steep Self-Other gradients that drive wedges in *social space*" (302). The unity-of-means-and-ends brings "other mental elements, such as acts, and facts brought about by acts, close together. They should not be kept separate by long causal chains that drive wedges in *social time*" (302). We might say that Galtung proposes the collapsing of space, where all of life is regarded as relatable and equitable in value, and the collapsing of time, where "[i]f the end is livelihood, then the means has to be life-enhancing" (302). TNH enacts and records a similar program, identifying with other-than-human nature (and North and South Vietnamese peasants), and viewing desired and humane futures as extensions of fitting, spontaneous, and humane action in the present. In his public service and humanitarian work during the Vietnam War, TNH's practice of Buddhism and conduct of resistance centers such collapsing of both space and time.

There continues to be a need for accessible resources for sustaining resistance, dismantling oppressive sociopolitical systems, and pursuing just transitions; for protecting one's mind, body, and heart and

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To initiate long social sequences leading to take-off or revolution, investing in industry or the industrial proletariat, is not good enough. The means must be good in themselves, not in terms of distant goals, way down the road—as witnessed by the millions sacrificed on the altars of industrialism in the name of "growth/capitalism" and "revolution/socialism"... Gandhi would be as skeptical of Marxist ideas of revolution and hard work, of sacrificing a generation or two for presumed bliss the day after tomorrow, as he would of liberal/conservative ideas of hard work and entrepreneurship, of sacrificing a social class or two for the bliss of upper classes even today. (302)

promoting wholeness of self and identity against self-alienation and dehumanization; and supporting well-being, self-nurture, and flourishing in the meantime. Identifying with non-human organisms, such as flora and fauna, and non-living members of the natural world, such as winds and clouds, TNH claims, can be profoundly humanizing—freeing, healing, grounding (in body), and enlivening—in the midst of such violent structures and processes. But does such an identification with the natural world function in the same way in conditions of climate disruption, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and mass extinction, and of corresponding human grief, anger, anxiety, and despair?<sup>16</sup> Do these matters at best problematize, and at worst compromise, the very basis of TNH’s ecological humanism? Perhaps, but nature is resilient, a concept with potential in responding effectively to this kind of question. And TNH’s collapse of space between ourselves and other-than-human nature, according to Galtung, is the very way to protect, restore, and steward such landscapes (and waterscapes), the very way of “enhancing all life, not just human life” (302).<sup>17</sup> With the Vietnam War as the occasion and King’s nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize as an endorsement, TNH’s contemporary memoirs and poetry are accessible resources for conceiving of, and possibly experiencing, a certain wholeness of being in even the most oppres-

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<sup>16</sup> See Latour.

<sup>17</sup> On how a steep self-other gradient leads to “violence against nature,” Galtung maintains,

The structural form of [violence against nature] would be more insidious, not intended to destroy nature but nevertheless doing so: the pollution and depletion associated with modern industry, leading to dying forests, ozone holes, global warming, and so on. What happens is transformation of nature through *industrial activity*, leaving non-degradable residues and depleting non-renewable resources, combined with a *world-encompassing commercialization* that makes the consequences non-visible to the perpetrators. (294)

See also Wilson and Crist, et. al.

sive, complicated, problematic, and compromised of today's sociopolitical and environmental circumstances.

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