

## I Am Not Different From You: A portrait of Sister Chan Khong

Eveline Beumkes

Her original name is Phuong; her Dharma name is Chan Khong, meaning "True Emptiness." Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister Chan Khong started Plum Village together in 1982. That Plum Village has become what it is today and that people all over the world have been inspired by Thay's teachings is to a great extent a result of Sister Phuong's enduring support and untiring initiative. Feeling grateful for having come in contact with Thay's teachings is feeling grateful to Sister Chan Khong in the very same breath.

I first met Thay and Sister Phuong in 1984 during a meditation weekend in Amsterdam. In the evening there was a special program with Vietnamese music. At one point the music stopped abruptly and Sister Phuong began to sing. I was deeply touched by her voice. Never had I heard someone sing like that. She sang my heart open and I cried and cried, not understanding what was happening to me.

During the first summer I spent in Plum Village, Sister Phuong wasn't yet a nun; she was simply called "Phuong." She had lovely long black hair that, in her way, she would casually put up in a bun by sticking a pen through it. She warmly welcomed the few Westerners that visited Plum Village in those days and she did what she could to make us feel at home. At that time she was the only person able to translate from Vietnamese into English or French. When Thay gave a Dharma talk or when there was an event in Vietnamese, she would sit next to us and translate for hours on end without ever appearing to get tired. Sister Phuong's way of translating was so expressive that even after having translated for hours, her voice sounded as colorful as it did when she began.

Three years later when I moved to Plum Village I was often the only one during the winter season that needed translation during Thay's talks and at the dining table at the end of the meals. There were about ten of us by then, and after dinner, as we were enjoying countless cups of tea, there was usually a lot of conversation, all in Vietnamese. During those moments I felt so left out, but when Sister Phuong was around she would always come sit next to me and, while participating wholeheartedly in the conversation, she would translate for me at the same time. I

savored those moments in her presence. A couple of years ago I noticed she had taken on a new habit; while translating she would keep her hands in a certain position, a mudra. When I asked her about it, she explained she did it in order to remind herself to stay mindful while she was talking.

She also strengthened my confidence that there is always a solution to any problem. One winter I had promised to make a flower arrangement for a tea meditation in the Lower Hamlet. I looked all over and could not find a single flower. When everyone was seated in the zendo and Sister Phuong was about to enter, I ran to her with an empty bowl in my hands telling her, quite

unhappily, that I had not succeeded in making the flower arrangement. Even before I had finished speaking she picked up some tufts of grass that were growing along the path, added a few handfuls of pebbles from the path we were standing on, picked up a stick lying nearby, planted it in the middle and . . . voila! Her creation was complete and the tea meditation could begin. While we entered she gave me a mischievous wink and whispered, "pure nature."



Practitioners singing with Sr. Phuong sitting behind in 1986

As the years passed, more and more people came to Plum Village and new sleeping quarters needed to be created. One of the places chosen for a future dormitory was the attic of the house where my room was. Cleaning it was a gigantic job, with spider webs from floor to ceiling and the dust of ages everywhere. After cleaning for just a few minutes I looked like a mineworker, and many hours of scrubbing and sweeping later I seemed to have made no progress at all. One afternoon, after a few days of lonesome work in that cheerless place, Sister Phuong suddenly appeared, joining me in my work with great swiftness. Her help and enthusiasm were most welcome, but at the same time I felt embarrassed that she was there mopping the floor with me while she had countless other things to do, things that could only be done by her. No matter what I said, she was not at all receptive to my urging that she spend her time in a different way; she continued until the job was done. She never felt that any job was beneath her.

### Tireless Energy for Others

I was often amazed by her inexhaustible energy. If something needed to be finished, she simply continued until it was done, if necessary beyond midnight, without eating and often all by herself. When packages of medicine needed to be sent to Vietnam, she sat for hours on the stone floor, addressing labels

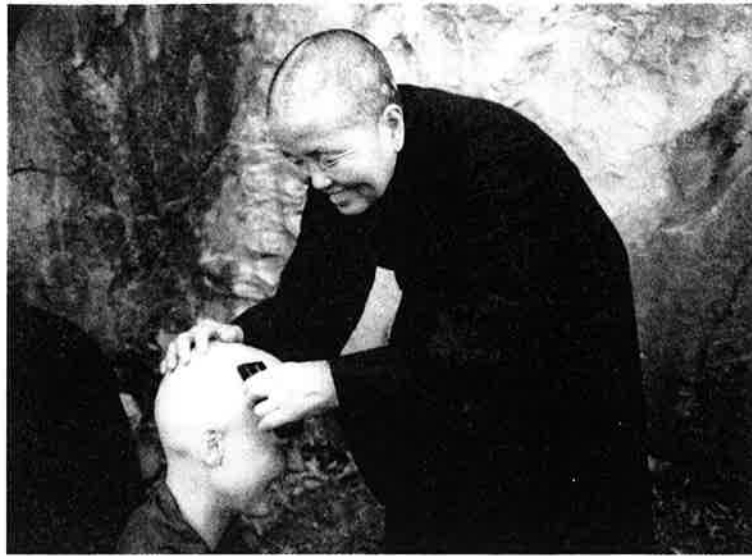
and writing uplifting words to each family. Others came and joined her in her work, but when they left she continued. And never have I detected even a glimpse of self-pity in her. Despite all that she has to do, I have never once heard her complain that she is too busy. I have also never heard her complain of feeling cold, while in the wintertime in the draughty rooms of Plum Village there is certainly reason enough to do so. In early autumn when I was already wearing two pair of socks, I saw her walking without any. Her name “Chan Khong” also means “barefeet” in Vietnamese. She never gave the slightest attention to her own discomfort.

When she talked about the situation in Vietnam she was always wholeheartedly involved. During a tea meditation many years ago I remember her telling us that she had just received a message from Vietnam that a number of artists had been imprisoned. She cried openly as she spoke and I felt so touched. As I suffer from my own pain, I saw her suffer from the pain of others. Far more often though, I saw her laughing, because she is very open to the comical aspects of a situation. Once a small group of very important Vietnamese monks from America paid a short visit to Plum Village. On the morning of their departure we were all, about twelve people, called to the zendo. We sat in a circle while Thay spoke for a while in Vietnamese. We had just adopted a new routine in Plum Village; when someone was leaving, in order to say goodbye to him or her on behalf of the whole Sangha, one of the permanent residents would practice “hugging meditation” with the parting friend during a communal meeting.

Hugging meditation is done in the following way: you first bow to each other, aware of your breath and forming a lotus bud with your hands to offer to the other person. Then you embrace the other person, holding him or her during three in and out-breaths, fully aware of the fact that (1) you yourself are still alive, that (2) the friend in your arms is still alive and (3) how lucky you are that he/she is still there and you are holding him/her.

Well, that morning Thay asked one of the nuns to come to the middle to say goodbye to one of the highly important monks (maybe abbots). In the meantime, he explained to the monk how hugging meditation was done. It was obvious to us that the monk in question was clearly not accustomed to this form of medita-

tion. And certainly not with a nun! Only those who know the tradition well can gather how revolutionary Thay was at that moment. When both were standing in front of each other and, after exchanging a short, uneasy glance, started bowing very deeply, the inevitable happened: their heads collided. It took all of us great pains to refrain from laughing out loud and, like us, Sister Chan Khong sat for a long time with a twisted face that she just couldn't manage to get back into the right expression, however hard she tried.



Sister Chan Khong shaving Sister Ha Nghiem's head in India, 1997

Though countless practical things continuously demanded her attention, Sister Chan Khong also kept an eye on us, on how we were doing. And if she suspected that something was wrong with one of us she asked straight away about it. Whatever it was she wanted to discuss, she always came immediately to the heart of the matter. When I wanted to tell her something, she usually got the point long before I had finished. Her way of listening was very attentive and without judging. When I spoke with her I always felt a lot of space. Yet I also know

from experience that her way of communicating has its own rules, and at times that has been quite difficult for me. The hardest to digest was her sudden way of stopping a conversation – completely unexpected, in the middle of a story, in the middle of a sentence. Since I learned that that moment could arrive at any time, I brought up what I wanted to talk about right away, or else she'd be gone long before I'd touched the topic I'd wanted to discuss. And that would be really bad luck because she was so busy, you'd never know when your next chance would be.

She could abruptly cut off a conversation on the telephone as well, just like that. It has happened to me more than once, that while in the middle of a sentence, I would suddenly hear “beep, beep, beep” in my ear, the connection having been broken. At first I felt really hurt, but as time passed I learned to see that as her “suchness,” and to simply accept it as just one of her many sides.

As far as I could see, the contact between Thay and Sister Phuong was always very harmonious and without tension. Once however, at the end of dinner, Thay spoke to her in an unusually stern voice, “Finish your meal!” Because it was so different from how Thay normally spoke to her or to any of us, I never forgot it. There were a few grains of rice (maybe eight or twelve) left on her plate and Thay further said something like, “Many

people are hungry at this moment.” To my surprise, Sister Phuong, with a look of remorse, proceeded to eat the remaining grains of rice on her plate, without any protest to having been addressed the way she was.

### Becoming a Nun

The first year I lived in Plum Village, Thay was the only monastic. But after their trip to India in 1988, Sister Phuong, Sister Annabel and Sister Chan Vi returned with shaved heads – they had become nuns. This unexpected change was a great shock to me. Thay must have noticed, because soon after their return when I happened to be alone in a room with him and Sister Phuong, he invited me to touch Sister Phuong’s head and to feel for myself how it felt without hair. While very carefully touching her head she laughed at me in a playful way and then took me warmly into her arms and said, “I am not at all different from you, even if I am wearing other clothes and have a shaved head. There is no difference at all between us.”

I felt that something had changed in Sister Phuong; I felt that the practice had really become number one in her life and that she had made a vow to try with all her heart to live as mindfully as possible. I noticed, for example, that in the middle of a conversation that was getting too noisy, she would become quieter, or while doing something very quickly she would suddenly slow down. Because I so clearly felt the change that took place in her, it was quite natural for me to start calling her “Sister Phuong” instead of just “Phuong.” Speaking about her new position as a nun, she once told me that she wanted to be careful that she didn’t become proud. She explained to me that in the Vietnamese community this could easily happen because as a monastic, Vietnamese people have the tendency to look up to you very much.

I have always known Sister Phuong as a jack-of-all-trades. According to her, she has much less energy than ten years ago, but when I see how much she takes on, seemingly without any effort, I am truly amazed. During a retreat some years ago in a Tibetan monastery in France, Thay fell ill. From that moment on, Sister Phuong took care of every aspect of the program, including the Dharma talk. On top of that she cooked twice a day for Thay and the three Plum Village residents who had come to take care of the children’s program. In her remaining time, she was available for retreatants who wanted to discuss their problems with her. And when the children’s program didn’t run so smoothly, she took care of that as well. She was the last one to go to bed and the first one to get up, and she continued to be in good spirits.

I have often wondered where her endless supply of energy comes from. I partly attribute it to the fact that she truly lives in the present; from moment to moment she deals with what is coming up, and she doesn’t lose energy in worrying about what may come next, which to me is a reflection of a deeply rooted faith.

Even more important though, I think, is her compassion. When she became a nun she received from Thay the name Chan Khong, “True Emptiness.” “My happiness is your happiness” and “your pain is my pain” is something that she truly lives. Seeing the self in the non-self is not a theory for her but the very ground of her being. ❀

*Eveline Beumkes, True Harmony/Peace, lived in Plum Village for three years from 1988 to 1991. She has helped to organize the practice in Amsterdam, Holland and translates Thay’s books into Dutch.*



### You Set Out This Morning

You set out this morning  
to give the silver space a future.  
The phoenix spreads her wings  
and takes to the immense sky.  
The water clings to the feet of the bridge,  
while the sunrise calls for young birds.  
The very place that served as a refuge for you years ago  
is now witness to your departure  
for the rivers and oceans of your homeland.

Thich Nhat Hanh  
Paris, 1966

Found in *Call Me By My True Names* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1999)