

HEALING PRESENCE

Interview with Sister Dang Nghiem

by Nadia Colburn

“My name is sister Dang Nghiem. ‘Dang Nghiem’ is Vietnamese for ‘Adornment with Nondiscrimination.’ My teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh (called Thay by his students), gave me that name when I ordained as a Buddhist nun in May 2000... I discover my name as I practice it. For me, nondiscrimination means to let go of the separation inside me, the idea that I am this and I am not that. It also means to let go of the discrimination that you are different from me and you will not understand me because of our different life experiences. This kind of discrimination brought me a lot of suffering and kept me feeling alienated and misunderstood. When I practice nondiscrimination, I gradually let go of that separation inside me and around me.”

– from *Healing: A Woman’s Journey from Doctor to Nun* by Sister Dang Nghiem ©2010 Parallax Press. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

Sister D, as she is known, is tall and stately. She is a powerful Dharma teacher, and her presence is almost magnetic. When she moves, she seems to glide through the room, and when she sits in meditation, her entire body is still. Her face looks undisturbed, and her frequent smile is wide and inviting. But she was not always this way.

Sister D was born in 1968 in Central Vietnam at the height of the Tet Offensive. Her mother was Vietnamese, and her father was believed to be an American serviceman. Just after she was born, her family’s home was destroyed. She and her mother had to be carried to find shelter in a different village. Amid the difficulties of war and poverty, Sister D, or Huynh Thi Ngoc Huong, as she was known then, and her family struggled. Sister D became the victim of early childhood sexual abuse. She was raised mainly by her grandmother, and her mother disappeared when she was 12 years old. After the loss, Sister D and her younger brother continued to live with their grandmother. Five years later, they were sent to America under the Amerasian Immigration Act so that they could have a better education. Thus, at the ages of 17 and 13 years old, the two siblings arrived in Arizona, speaking no English and feeling fearful and disoriented in their completely new surroundings. Despite obstacles, including shuffling through three different foster care homes before she was on her own at the age of 19, Sister D excelled at school in Arizona. She studied Creative Writing and Psychology in college and, determined to devote her life to helping heal others, went on to attend University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine.



Sister Dang Nghiem

Sister D’s success continued through medical school, academically and personally. In addition to excelling in her clinical training, she met and fell in love with a deeply caring man, John, who became her partner. Sister D started her residency in Martinez, California in 1999. Her path seemed, from the outside, to be set. But inside, she struggled.

Sister D held her struggle privately as she pursued her medical career until the sudden and tragic death of her partner, John, in a swimming accident the day before Sister D’s thirty-first birthday. Feeling lost in her grief, she left her residency and went to Plum Village in Southern France, where Thay lives. There, she was ordained as a nun in May 2000. Ten years later, she wrote the book *Healing*, published by Parallax Press, about her life and experiences.

The book, Sister D says, “is the story of my grandmother, my mother, myself... I don’t see it as mine. It is the story of many men and women who went through that era, and it is also the story of human kind—of sexual abuse, physical abuse, loss of a partner, death, and of seeking peace and meaning in life. These are issues all of us face.”

I talked with Sister D about her experiences as a healer at Blue Cliff Monastery in July of 2014.

“... as I was despairing about this young man, I realized that as an educated person, with many good conditions, I also did not know how to take care of myself. I did not eat well; I was tired much of the time. When depression or despair arose in me, I drowned in it.”

NC: Sister D, in your memoir Healing, you talk about your aspiration to heal others as a doctor and about your training to be an internal family practice doctor with very challenged populations. You also talk, in your memoir, about your realization that you needed to heal yourself in order really to be able to help others.

Sometimes we get caught in a duality between helping and healing others and helping and healing ourselves; I don't think there needs to be that duality—can you help us unravel it?

Sister D: Most of us go into medicine with deep aspirations to serve others. But I learned very quickly in medical school that we quickly become stressed and very competitive. We begin to forget our deep aspirations.

In my first year of medical school, I recognized that. Five of us started to go to a prison program—the San Francisco Youth Guidance Center (SFYGC)—once a week. We taught the young men anatomy and physiology; we gave them counseling; and we also offered them genuine love, which they lacked. In turn, the youth helped us remember why we had gone into medicine and helped us take care of our hearts. Every week for six years, I went to that prison program. That experience saved those of us who continued.

In the hospital, however, I started to wonder about the efficacy of the work we were doing. When I was doing my residency, there was a young man, for example, who came in with an abscess on his upper arm. His arm had become infected from intravenous drug use, and the infection spread to his bone, which made him very sick. He stayed in the hospital for two and a half months recovering; we didn't know at first if he was going to make it. But we gave him lots of care and attention

Three months later, he came back with another abscess on his groin area. At that moment, I felt anger and despair.

But as I was despairing about this young man, I realized that—as an educated person, with many good conditions—I also did not know how to take care of myself. I did not eat well. I was tired much of the time. When depression or despair arose in me, I drowned in it.

I realized I was just putting a Band-Aid on my patients. I did not know how to address their problems at their roots just as I did not know how to address my problems at their roots.

A spiritual practice helps you address the problems on a deeper level, and this way you can have the tools to heal both yourself and others. But I did not know that then.

The Buddha teaches the four noble truths: the existence of suffering, the causes of suffering, and also the ways of practice to transform the suffering into happiness.

When my partner died, I really woke up. That helped me to choose a spiritual life—to choose peace. That was almost fifteen years ago. Now, if I were to die in the middle of the day like my partner, I would be able to say I have lived my life, and I don't have any regrets.

Although I am no longer a doctor, I consider myself a healer.

NC: People talk a lot these days about the mind-body connection in healing. Can you tell us about how you view this connection?

Sister D: We know about psychosomatic illnesses; they are mental illnesses manifesting in the body. An extreme example is that of Cambodian women who observed such atrocity—seeing their husbands and children being killed right in front of them—and went blind. In medical school, we learn 90-95 percent of illnesses are related to life style, and a major part of that is mental stress. In our modern society, we have a lot of stress and pressure—we hold this in our bodies, and it manifests in physical and mental illness. Unfortunately, in our medical training, we are taught how to treat problems once they have arisen, but not how to take care of ourselves so that problems are prevented.

In a spiritual practice, we learn these skills.

I spent seven years in medicine. I also had a B.A. degree in creative writing and a B.S. degree in psychology in college. Overall, I was in school twenty-four years. And, despite all of that knowledge, I didn't know how to take care of my body and mind. I did not have a deep understanding of myself. But a spiritual practice has helped me to gain a much deeper level of understanding of how my body and mind work together. This is important information that we all need to know about ourselves, but it is not often taught.

When we have a spiritual practice we become aware of our body; we befriend our body; we release the stress and tension in our daily life.

In my own life, I was sexually abused as a child—I was

aware of that, but I was oblivious about how it played out in my life. It affected my relationship with men and also with my body. In my case, I held tension in my bladder; it got so that I had to urinate so often it became quite inconvenient and painful, but I never thought about the roots of that problem. The body bears the burden of our mental pain, but we don't make the connection. Year after year, the problem becomes greater.

If we don't address these problems, they will affect our work, our service. It's very important for anyone—a doctor or a lawyer or a social worker—to be fully present, relaxed, and calm in his/her body, anchored in the breathing and in the body so that he/she can practice loving speech and deep listening. The more present we are with ourselves, the more present we can be for others, and the more we can be of service.

Our tendency is to have the answer, the solution. But in my monastic life, I learn just to be there, to be spacious, to relax my body and just receive everything that is said in that moment. Whatever thought arises, I let it go. And when the person stops speaking, I can respond. Amazingly enough, this really works. The feedback and guidance that I offer comes from a place of deep clarity and understanding, and it is much better suited to the person. People feel heard and seen, and this is healing in itself.

Deep listening and loving speech are profound medicine. Being truly present is profound medicine.

NC: I think many people feel a great deal of urgency, which may be related to that feeling of needing to have or having the answer. This is especially true, it seems, for those who work in emergency situations with people who are very sick or in crisis in one form or another. We can feel we don't have time for loving speech and deep listening. Time is running out. Someone is in pain. The icecaps are melting. There are wars. How can we take time to be mindful of ourselves and take care of ourselves when people are dying or in great need around us?

Sister D: I think people's sense of urgency is often habit energy. Even when we don't have anything to do, we still are anxious and still are in a hurry.

It helps to slow down in everything we do in the beginning so that we can be aware of ourselves, of the move-

ments of our body and of our feelings and perceptions. This is a daily practice of mindfulness in every area of our lives, so that it is naturally applied in times of crisis.

There is a misconception that meditation will take time from other things we are doing, but in fact, meditation actually helps us to see the situation we are in more clearly and to do the things we are doing in a much more effective way.

I'll give you an example of how being mindful can really make a difference. I remember one occasion when I was a medical student rotating in an emergency room. A young girl who had been recently raped was brought in by the police. I walked by and saw that she was left all alone sitting in a waiting room. She looked so cold and desolate and scared. But I was only a medical student, and I also had other patients to attend to. I did not dare to do anything for her.

The girl's rape was traumatic. But being left alone in the room all by herself for an hour or two hours was equally traumatic and damaging.

When we are not focused and mindful, we can cause more damage than good to the people we serve. If our mind is on our breath and in the here and now and we see that there is a young girl in distress, we can send a nurse, give her a blanket, give her a cup of water, or talk with her. Even in just two minutes, if we sit close and take her hand and look in her eyes and show her that we care, she can feel comforted and experience some healing already. You do not need to spend a long time. It is the quality of our presence that makes people feel cared for and that is healing in and of itself. That is why we practice mindfulness, so our presence can be real and felt in any moment.

NC: You have developed so much wisdom—how do you share that knowledge? What is your outreach as a nun?

Sister D: My outreach as a nun is to be mindful. The definition of mindfulness from the Chinese characters is "the mind that is in the now," the "Now Mind." This also means to be aware of what is going on inside oneself, which includes the body, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, and to be aware of what is going on around us.

When we teach mindfulness we are not transplanting something new or something exotic; we are igniting a capacity that is already there in each of us. We can talk all

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about it, but it’s still just knowledge. In fact, mindfulness has become a buzz word in many circles. People may read books or attend a few retreats and begin to teach mindfulness while they do not practice it themselves in their daily lives. This is simply a superficial transmission of ideas and concepts about mindfulness. The teachings don’t become real until you actually digest them yourself. When you digest them, they become your own flesh and bones.

Being mindful you uncover the roots of your habits; you have insight. Because your mind is calm and spacious, you start to have “sight,” you see “in” to the cause of why you are the way you are—it’s a breakthrough and it’s liberating.

When we are aware of what is going on inside of us and around us, then we have the qualities we need to work in the helping professions.

NC: Sometimes those breakthroughs when we see ourselves more clearly can be uncomfortable. How do you get through the discomfort of clear seeing?

Sister D: When we behave blindly out of habits and instincts, we suffer. We have a habit of putting a Band-Aid on

our discomfort and dis-ease; we use entertainment, we distract ourselves with our career, our ambition, our consumption. But when we don’t look at it, the pain is still there.

So yes, it can be painful—frightening—to see ourselves and to see life as it is. But that’s why we practice and have a community of practitioners to guide us and support us. In the practice, we touch joy as well as suffering to balance the two. And we have insights and breakthroughs.

When you realize why you do certain things, then you can have direct experience with transformation and healing. When you can see you are able to change your reactions—the way you think, the way you speak, the way you react—you are empowered, and you want to continue.

NC: You radiate peace, and people often comment on the peace you have come to embody with your presence. Where does that come from?

Sister D: Peace is the fruit of the practice. We all have the seeds of peace and joy, but it’s definitely with the practice and with the support of our Teacher and community that I’ve been able to cultivate it further—to be at peace with

CARLYN MARCUS EKSTROM



Green Layers, 24 x 36”, Acrylic on Panel

“As health care workers, as teachers, as peace activists, as social workers, as friends and as family members, we need to have a daily spiritual practice to take care of our bodies, of our love, and of our deep aspirations...”

myself; to be at peace with the past, with what was; to be at peace with whatever the future may hold; and to be at peace with the present moment, what is going on in this very moment, my perceptions, my feelings, and my thoughts. For the past couple of years, I have had Lyme disease. Often it is discomforting or painful, but because of the practice, I can be at peace with the pain in my body, with the physical illness. I can be at peace with what is.

Some people say, “Sister D, you must be very happy because you smile all the time.” I say, yes, I smile because I am happy sometimes, but most of the time, I just smile to my crooked thoughts.

I used to take my thoughts so seriously—they would just sweep me away, but I have learned to smile and to breathe. And the energy of anxiety and sorrow just relaxes itself and becomes more diluted, more spacious, more manageable. That’s peace right there. Peace does not mean you don’t have any problems. It means you can be quietly with what is. You can embrace what is as it is.

NC: Thank you, Sister D, for your time and wisdom. A final question: What is your advice for lay people in order to help others and also help ourselves?

Sister D: If you have enough compassion for yourself and recognize how quickly the years pass, you can ask yourself honestly: “Do I want to continue to do the same things year after year? Or do I want to have a spiritual practice in my life so that I can truly cherish each day, and so that if I were to come down with an illness or die suddenly in the midst of the day, I could handle it and accept it with no regret?”

The truth is that we all have plenty of time—how many hours do we spend checking email, text messaging, reading the web? We waste a lot of time—how many of us day-dream about the past or dread the future?

Mindfulness practice is pragmatic—while sitting on the bus or driving a car, just come back to your in-breaths and out-breaths and relax your body. Simply smile and send love to each part of your body. Simply enjoy the scenery and rest your mind. When you come home, be truly present in body and mind for your loved ones. Wherever you are, be fully there to live your life in that moment.

As health care workers, as teachers, as peace activists, as social workers, as friends, and as family members, we

need to have a daily spiritual practice to take care of our bodies, of our love, and of our deep aspirations so that we have the best physical and mental health possible in order to move forward for ourselves and to help others to do the same. §

(LOVE SONNET TO LIGHT)

by Laynie Browne

It gives me ornate pleasure
to write to you a tiny kindness
To look up at white skies and see
a bird which is never bird but visitation

of January light, blank sky between bare
branches is your pale winter hand
made celestial, or the warmth of your
eyes or mouth entering mine

Book divined features blind
beyond page are imagined
And if you have a body
it is not mine

Still I am sending you this January light
which moves as quickly as any confession
of love