

Resurrection as a Practice: Insights from a Buddhist Teacher



Easter Homily by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

April 9, 2023

"If the Buddha had been born into the society in which Jesus was born, I think he, too, would have been crucified."¹ Words spoken by the beloved Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, or Thay. May he rest in peace. I love Thay, as I know many of you do. His noble presence, which combined wisdom, mindfulness, and a fierce commitment to justice and activism, has informed and inspired millions of people.

He is perhaps less well known for his commitment to and respect for interfaith, yet it was an integral part of his world view. Specifically, he wrote and spoke about the parallels between Buddhism and Christianity. *Living Buddha, Living Christ*; *The Energy of Prayer*; and *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* are a few of his books that touch on his commitment to interreligious understanding and respect.

Sister Annabel Laity, the first Westerner to be ordained as a monastic disciple in Thich Nhat Hanh's Vietnamese Zen lineage, walks a religious path that is connected to both Christianity and Buddhism. Her newest book, *Mindfulness: Walking with Jesus and Buddha*, tells her tale and highlights teachings shared between the two religions.

On April 20, 2014, Thich Nhat Hanh delivered a talk entitled "Resurrection and the Stranger" at Plum Village, his monastic community and international practice center in France. In it, he talks about the importance of the resurrection story and its connection to the true meaning of Jesus' life, death, and teachings.

Thay opened his talk with these words: *Today is a very special day—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.* He went on to say to his community,

People live as if they are dead. But if they know how to breathe mindfully and walk mindfully, they are resurrected.

Resurrection is a practice.

If Jesus Christ could do it, then we human

beings like him can also do it.

Jesus is the son of God and also the son of men and a child of the Earth.

We are also the sons and daughters of men and children of God.

We can always come back to life by practicing awakening, mindfulness.

If we look around us, we see that many people are circulating around but are not truly alive because they do not have that awareness.²

Continuing, Thay spoke of Jesus' understanding of happiness, joy, and of the ability to transform suffering. He taught that we practice resurrection when we become mindful and present to what is; when we stop running, avoiding, or numbing ourselves to the moment. Being mindful and aware we come into contact with reality and ourselves. Sometimes we come into contact with peace, and other times, we come into contact with suffering, our own and others.

The real skill is to know how to transform suffering by befriending it, seeking to learn from it, and becoming one without allowing it to overtake us. From that place of mindful connection and awareness and acceptance, we gain insight into the next right action and compassion. We remember that we are not alone. We realize it may not even be our own suffering we are touching, it may be our ancestors', or our neighbors'. It may be the collective suffering of the world or the Earth.

We accept what is in this moment, and breathe again, into the next moment. At some time, we recognize that we are mindful of something else. We are mindful of the beauty around us, the things and people we are grateful for, the preciousness of life as seen in the bunny, the blade of grass, and our grandchild's eyes. We become one with our happiness, but we do not cling to it.

1 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Penguin House, 1995, 2007), 55.

2 <https://plumvillage.org/articles/resurrection-as-a-practice/>

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We breathe. We connect. We realize what is.
Happiness. Sadness. Fear. Anger. Suffering.
Compassion. Acceptance.
Happiness. Sadness. Fear. Anger. Suffering.
Compassion. Happiness.
We practice resurrection.

Thich Nhat Hanh says:

*Learning how to breathe mindfully, walk mindfully, eat mindfully, drive mindfully; we become awakened people, alive people, and we have the chance to live deeply every moment that is given us in our daily life. We do not live as dead people anymore.*³

In Thay's 2014 Easter talk, he references the story of the three men walking to Emmaus on a Sunday three days after the death of Jesus. Earlier that day the women had to go to Jesus' tomb to find the stone rolled away. They knew that he had risen and was not dead.

As the three men walked together, two of them were bemoaning the state of the world, reflecting on how the empire had killed the good rabbi and teacher, Jesus. The third man, Cleopas, said in response, "Are you a stranger to Jerusalem? Everyone knows what happened in the last two days. Jesus was crucified. He died and this morning he came back to life again."⁴

The men went on walking together, Cleopas frustrated and the two confused, if not judgmental of their fellow traveler. Later they stopped at an inn to rest, and there the two doubters were served communion by the third, Cleopas, who, they realize, because of the kindness and presence with which he serves them, is Jesus. "You walk with Jesus many miles, but you do not recognize him until you see him break the bread and give it to you, because his way of doing that is very special, very mindful himself."⁵

We all have the opportunity to understand resurrection as a practice. We are invited to

see the holy goodness within and among our neighbors, our family, our friends, and each other. We can delight in the goodness and generosity and beauty that surrounds and allow that memory to hold us when we encounter suffering. We can remember that resurrection is a way of being that will come, in its time, as we keep on showing up with mindfulness, presence, and equanimity.

Reflecting further on his speculation that Buddha too would have been crucified had he been born into the society Jesus was, Thich Nhat Hahn says, "It is not words or concepts that are important. What is important is our insight into the nature of reality and our way of responding to reality."⁶

May we respond to reality with mindfulness, compassion, and equanimity.

May we treasure the beauty we find, accept the suffering, and in so doing allow the resurrection of joy to return.

And so may we practice resurrection, as bearers of hope and compassion, this Easter day and every day.

Amen and blessed be.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Penguin House, 1995, 2007), 55.