

Tricycle Talks

“Becoming Thay”

Episode #112 with Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê

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Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: What I would love to highlight is that this Zen master that the world came to know has a really interesting and complex past. And if we can look at that and really appreciate the ways in which he was so very human and really trying to figure out the answers to the biggest questions of our time, then we can appreciate his teachings even more because we understand where they came from. He lived through one of the most difficult eras in history. And he distilled Buddhist teachings in a way that is so simple, so clear, and can reach so many different people. So I would just really want to encourage people to look at where he came from, look at this history, not even just Vietnamese history, but this entire global history of colonialism, and to understand that is to appreciate his teachings even more.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê. Adrienne is a Columbia University PhD candidate in international history. Her research examines the southern Vietnamese Buddhist movement in the context of the Cold War and decolonization. In an interview in the August issue of *Tricycle* called “Becoming Thay,” she discusses Thich Nhat Hanh’s background and the religious and political landscapes that shaped him. In my conversation with Adrienne, we talk about the role that Buddhism played in building and promoting Vietnamese cultural identity in the face of colonial rule, the origins of Engaged Buddhism, how exile shaped Thich Nhat Hanh’s approach to teaching, and why he chose to return to Vietnam at the end of his life. So here’s my conversation with Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê, a PhD candidate at Columbia University. Hi Adrienne, it's great to be here with you today.



Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Hi, James. I'm happy to be here.

James Shaheen: So Adrienne, you were interviewed in the August issue of *Tricycle* about your research examining Thich Nhat Hanh's background and the religious and political landscapes that shaped him. Although Thich Nhat Hanh was such an influential figure in contemporary Buddhism, his background is often overlooked. So to start, could you tell us a bit about how you came to study Thich Nhat Hanh and this particular aspect of his life and teachings?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Yeah, absolutely. So my interest in Thich Nhat Hanh actually comes from a very personal place. I am the daughter of Vietnamese refugees. My parents both came to the United States after the end of the war in Vietnam in the '70s. And so I was raised in a Vietnamese Buddhist tradition, and I grew up going to the monasteries that Thich Nhat Hanh established in the US and in France. So my family considers him our teacher, and I grew up with his community, with his monastic and lay community that he established in the West after he left Vietnam.

My interest in the history came later. I studied history in college. I just loved exploring the past and how it informs our present day, and as someone who grew up as a Vietnamese Buddhist, I wanted to understand more the roots of my own spiritual tradition. So I started looking into it, and I was amazed to find that Thich Nhat Hanh was such a major figure in Vietnamese Buddhism in Vietnam before he left the country. So most people know him as this monk who brought mindfulness to the West and also Engaged Buddhism to the West. But his rich history is something that not many people appreciate. And so my work is really helping to bring that to light. And I studied not only Thich Nhat Hanh, but I studied the Vietnamese Buddhist movement in the 20th century. So I studied this world that he came from, and of course, he's a major figure of the time, but yeah, a lot of it is about the context that created him. So it's about how this global Zen master came to be who he is, or who he was.



James Shaheen: Many view Thich Nhat Hanh as the founder of Engaged Buddhism, but you suggest that while he was the first to coin the term, he was actually drawing on a much older tradition with Asian Buddhist thought. Can you say more about the origins of Engaged Buddhism and earlier reform movements within the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Absolutely. So, I think that the term Engaged Buddhism, specifically in English, Thich Nhat Hanh came up with that in the 1960s and started to popularize that in the 1960s. But the spirit of that term came in the generation before him. So he was born in 1926, and this was right around the time when the Buddhist revival was starting to take hold in Vietnam. So the Buddhist revival was a regional phenomenon that happened across Asia in the early 20th century, and it really coincided with anticolonial nationalist movements. So the connection between the revival of Buddhism as a religion and nationalism is that when people were colonized by European powers, they started to articulate what independence would look like in this new world that was forming with nation states, and they were searching for some kind of identity that united them before colonial powers came. Buddhism is a religion that has been around for thousands of years, and so a lot of intellectuals at the time latched onto Buddhism as the core of an Asian national identity that existed long before European powers came. And so it was held up as proof that there was a deep culture, there was a deep intellectualism, there was a base of values that really bonded people in Vietnam for many thousands of years. And so that became the basis of a national identity, and saying that we have been a united people for long before the French came.

Thich Nhat Hanh was born around the time that movement was just forming, and so he grew up very much steeped in these ideas. By the time he started his monastic novice training in the early 1940s, this movement had already transformed Buddhism in Vietnam. The temple that he was educated at, for example, was founded as part of this movement.



James Shaheen: You say that many Asian Buddhist intellectuals were trying to promote worldly Buddhism or Buddhism that could speak to and influence modern society. Could you tell us a little bit about this vision of a worldly Buddhism? What is it responding to?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: The Buddhist revival was this wave of new ideas of what Buddhism should look like. So you have a religion that's so many thousands of years old—of course it has to evolve and change with the times. So in the 20th century, as these nationalist independence movements are coming up, the idea is how can Buddhism support that: What does Buddhism look like in a time where we're fighting for national independence? So Buddhism has to speak to this idea of national independence, and it can do that only if it engages with the political realities of the time. The way that it was explained in layman's terms is If you just have monks and intellectuals who study sutras and meditate in far-off mountains, you're not going to be able to influence society in the way that you would want this very deep intellectual, cultural, history to shape your nation. So you need monks and intellectuals who are willing to engage with the world, a worldly Buddhism.

This concept originated with a Chinese Buddhist revival movement, and it spread through texts to other parts of Asia, including Vietnam, and Vietnamese Buddhists really latched onto this because it aligned with what they had already been talking about of bringing Buddhism into the modern world, into the cities, and engaging with the social and political realities of the time.

James Shaheen: OK, I also want to clarify, when we hear about nationalism today, it can often sound authoritarian or even jingoistic. But this was a very different kind of nationalism. Can you say more about this distinction?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Absolutely. A lot of people who I talk to about my research have a strong reaction to this idea that Buddhism was nationalist, because nowadays we think of nationalism as kind of being like a toxic patriotism, something really extreme and intolerant and things like that. But in the anticolonial context of the early 20th century, the mid-20th century,



this was really about self-determination. It was about the idea that Vietnamese people or people of whatever colonized place should be empowered to determine their own fate, their own future, to govern themselves and to not be subservient to a European power. So you would have been really hard pressed to find a Vietnamese person who wasn't a nationalist, who didn't want to have the power to determine their own lives. So it was a very different context. And I think as a historian, I think about it in a different way, but definitely talking to people today, it's important to note that this nationalism was different from what we think of nationalism as today.

James Shaheen: So you've mentioned that Thich Nhat Hanh grew up under French colonial rule and then went on to ordain as a novice during Japan's occupation of Vietnam. So how did colonialism and occupation influence Thay's engagement with Vietnamese Buddhism?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Yeah, that's a tough question. I mean, it was kind of the water that he swam in. It was the world he grew up in. So the French were very much entrenched in Vietnam by the time he was born. They started colonizing Vietnam around 1850. He was born in 1923, so he grew up in a French education system. His father was an official under the French administration. So this was just kind of the world he knew. But at the same time, by the time he started going to school, especially as a monastic novice in the early '40s, he was definitely exposed to these nationalist ideas, these revolutionary ideas of independence. And so he also embraced that dream. He wanted his people to be independent. He didn't want to see Vietnamese people suffering under colonialism, and so he really explored those ideas intellectually as a novice.

James Shaheen: I wonder to what extent his French education and his exposure to, say, Christianity also found its way into his teachings, or did it?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: I think his exposure to Christianity came a little bit later. Not that he wasn't aware of it at all. Of course, there were missionaries, and there were Christians in Vietnam, when he was growing up. But his early education was very much Buddhist, and it was



only later when he started expanding his education beyond what was given to him as a novice that he became interested in learning about other religions, and you really see this starting in the late '50s when he becomes very interested in what he sees as universal values that exist across religions. And so that aspect of Thay is a little bit more alive in the later years and more familiar to people today.

James Shaheen: You know, you just said that Buddhism became very much entwined with the nationalism of the sort you've described. So what role did Buddhism play in building and promoting Vietnamese cultural identity in the face of colonial rule?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: I mean, there were Buddhist temples, local Buddhist temples in villages dating back since Buddhism first entered Vietnam from India and China. It was a really influential part of people's cultural lives in the day to day. They may not have understood the texts, but it was very much like a center of life. And in the 20th century, what began to change is that Buddhism became more organized in Vietnam. You had Buddhist associations forming, you had more formalized education programs for monastics, you had efforts to educate the public about what the Buddha's teachings actually were, and so the idea was that if people really understood not just at a cultural level but at an intellectual level, what Buddhism was, then it would help to inform what people think the nation should be. So the idea was that it would be the basis of values for the nation.

James Shaheen: Right, so it's interesting you mention these mainstream revival movements, but at the same time, you say there were new sects built around Vietnamese national identity, including sects led by people claiming to be Buddhist prophets or reincarnations of a Buddha. So how did these sects come about, and how were they separate from the mainstream revivalist movements?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: So I think the clearest way to understand the distinction is that the Buddhist revival was very much in the cities. It was a very urban focused movement led by



people who were very literate, like scholars, studying texts, translating texts, that kind of thing. These other, smaller movements that were led by people who claim to be prophets to be leading Vietnam into the modern world, they were much more rural, and their religions are also a mix of things, a mix of Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship, and they also borrowed from native beliefs, local beliefs. So those movements were also nationalist in that they had a vision as well for independence and of this Vietnamese kind of cultural basis for a nation, but they were different from the mainstream revival movement in that they also had militias. They were organized in a very different way. They controlled areas of the rural landscape and dealt with the French in more of a direct power struggle in terms of controlling areas of South Vietnam.

James Shaheen: Yeah, were the mainstream movements less interested in what were considered to be the native elements of the tradition? Were they more interested in having, this is perhaps the wrong word, a pure Buddhism or a Buddhism free of the cultural roots in which it grew up in Vietnam?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Yeah. So there was an idea within the Buddhist revival movement, the urban centered one, that there was a kind of pure Buddhism. The idea was that you have the original Buddha in India who created the teachings, and then as Buddhism spread from India, east through China into Vietnam, it evolved. In order to spread, it had to adapt and pick up local beliefs. And so it became less pure. And so a central push of the revival movement was to go back to the original teachings, to go back to the texts and really extract the meaning from there, and to teach that to the people so that they would be less superstitious. This is another idea of what is modern Buddhism. It's anti-superstitious. It's really based on rationality and is aligned with scientific thought. The idea was that the core teachings of Buddhism are rational. They are aligned with scientific thought, and we need to bring that out in order for Buddhism to be relevant in the 20th century.

James Shaheen: It's interesting. This notion of a pure Buddhism and original Buddhism still exists today in the West and continues to be a bone of contention among differing Buddhist



groups. But some listeners may be surprised to learn that Thich Nhat Hanh actually considered joining communist-led forces, and you said that ultimately he joined the Buddhist revival rather than an organization like the Viet Minh because it offered a path of nonviolent revolution. Can you tell us more about his decision there?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Yes, as I mentioned before, he grew up in this time when the anticolonial movement was gaining strength, especially by the early 1940s. The Viet Minh was a coalition of many different nationalist groups. Its core leadership was communist, but it was much broader than the Communist Party. So Thich Nhat Hanh, as a novice monk, was exposed to the propaganda of the Viet Minh, of this call to join the revolution for independence, and many other Buddhists did join that movement, and monks were sent to the countryside to help teach literacy to people and support the movement in that way.

But sometime in the early 2000s, in a dharma talk, Thich Nhat Hanh said that ultimately he decided not to join the communist movement because he saw that joining that movement meant doing what he was ordered, and that movement was violent, and it would require Vietnamese people to kill their own people in order get their political goals, and he fundamentally disagreed with that. He wanted a revolution that was nonviolent. He wanted a revolution that was based on spiritual values that would lead Vietnam to an independent future without having to go to war to create it.

James Shaheen: Well, he did go on to become a leader within Buddhist nationalism, again, as you've described nationalism. So could you say more about his role in the Buddhist national movement? What role did he take on?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: I would say he really started to come to the forefront in the mid to late 1950s. So in 1956, the very first Vietnamese Buddhist magazine was founded. It was a national magazine of the first national Vietnamese Buddhist association, and he was invited to be editor-in-chief of that magazine. So that was his first big platform. And that's where we can



really see him become a leading voice in this idea of national Buddhism. So what I have found is that he, more than anyone else at the time, was really advocating for a truly centralized Vietnamese Buddhist organization, meaning a nationally centralized organization, because regional associations had existed since the 1920s. But he was saying, in order for our religion to really influence the future of our country, we need to have a unified front. We need to have an organization that really can represent all Vietnamese Buddhists. That's the only way that we'll be strong enough to make a difference. So that, I think, was his biggest contribution to the Buddhist nationalist movement.

James Shaheen: I find this next part remarkable. You mentioned that in his writing at the time, he wrote under twenty-eight different pen names, using different voices to reach different audiences through poetry, philosophy, literature, cultural commentary, and more. Many people today may be familiar with one of these voices. So can you say more about his ability to speak to a variety of different audiences? It reminds me a little, not to overdo the comparison, of the Buddha speaking to different people in different groups in different ways.

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Yes. So it's interesting, as the editor-in-chief of this national Buddhist magazine, it was his job to fill the magazine every month.

James Shaheen: I shudder to think.

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Exactly, and I don't know, maybe he didn't have that many contributors to pull from, but he really filled those pages with his own writings, oftentimes with all these different pen names. I think that this was the first time he had a big published platform, and so he was experimenting. He had so many different interests, and he wanted to explore so many different ideas, and he wanted to write poetry, and he was experimenting with all these different voices. It also was not uncommon to have pen names. At that time in Vietnam, most writers did have pen names, and they didn't publish under their own name. So he wasn't an anomaly in this way, but having twenty-something different pen names was a little bit weird. it



was different. But yeah, I see that as kind of his early days of exploring different voices to reach different audiences who were interested in different topics. Und under his own name, under Thich Nhat Hanh, he only wrote poetry for many years. So he became known first and foremost as a poet in Vietnam before anything else.

James Shaheen: Right, so by the time he came here, he was already prepared to speak in, say, a language attuned to a particular audience.

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Yes, he was definitely aware that there were many different audiences. I mean, in South Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s, when he was just putting down his roots there, it was already a very cosmopolitan place, right? You had had the French influence for many decades, then you had the Americans come in. There was this idea of liberal arts education entering Buddhism. He was very interested in reading what intellectuals in other places were saying around the world. And he wanted to learn English in order to interact with this world. He was inspired to become fluent in English after his first trip abroad, which was to Japan as part of a Buddhist delegation to Japan. So he wanted to speak to the outside world. And he was very much interested in connecting with people and ideas in other places.

James Shaheen: Right, you know, his books are everywhere, and yet most of the books of his I see are a particular voice, his teaching voice to reach Westerners of all backgrounds. And at the same time, he was a formidable intellectual, and this is not necessarily known. Were there particular voices of his that surprised you? You may have grown up with broader knowledge of who he is, but I think about it and a lot of people don't know about this deeply intellectual and literate Thich Nhat Hanh, or Thich Nhat Hanh the artist.

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Yeah, absolutely. He was a man of many voices. I have definitely been surprised. In my research, I've read so much of what he wrote. Almost everything that he published that I could get my hands on I've read. And this is starting in the 1950s onward. What has surprised me is it's really clear that early on, he was really wrestling with a lot of ideas, and a



lot of his early writing is so much more rebellious than his later writing. He really matured by the time he became known to the rest of the world. He was much more of a Zen master, but early on, he was a young monk. He was being exposed to all these ideas of modernity, of nationalism, of independence, and he was struggling with those ideas, and he had a lot of emotion that was kind of unfiltered in his early writings. So that really struck me.

James Shaheen: You know, it's funny, the few times I met him and interviewed him, I was met with the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, a bit tougher and more exacting and an insistence upon precision and looking at oneself and even detecting, perhaps, hypocrisy in one's own questions. So it was a very interesting moment, for me anyway. It was not the “open like a flower” Thich Nhat Hanh. It was more, “I'm going to put you through your paces.” So I found that very interesting.

In the late 1950s and '60s, Thich Nhat Hanh traveled outside of Vietnam for the first time, first to Japan and then to the US. So how did this time outside of his home country impact his worldview and approach to leadership?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Yeah. Being exposed to people and other parts of the world that were different from him I think really transformed him. The thing was, he was so open-minded. He was really absorbing everything. And, as I said, going to Japan, leaving Vietnam for the first time and going to Japan inspired him to master the English language as a way to communicate with the rest of the world. He also went to the United States to study at Princeton at Columbia. And it was there that he really started diving into comparative religious studies and trying to understand other religious traditions and their values and basis of their beliefs. And what's remarkable is that he found so many similarities, and he really saw religious leaders of other faiths as friends on the path. He believed that all these religions were trying to do the same thing, which is to create a more peaceful world, to reduce suffering, and to guide society in terms of morals. So in the 1960s, this is when he started to become known to the rest of the world, he really tried to connect with religious leaders in the United States and in Europe, particularly around the Vietnam War to



try to influence them to come out and say, “This war is immoral on a human level. We cannot let this continue.” And so he reached out to these religious leaders to say, “We need to work together because we want the same things for all of our people.”

James Shaheen: Right. I have to ask, I mean, you're at Columbia. He was at Columbia. You mentioned in the interview that he made use of Butler Library. How does it feel walking into Butler library and studying where he did?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: It's very special. We know the exact apartment building that he lived in when he was studying at Columbia, and I've walked by it a few times. It's special to feel such a personal connection to the history because he came to Columbia in the early '60s as a visiting scholar. There was an alternate reality where he would have stayed and become a professor and started Vietnam Studies at Columbia, which is the program I'm in now. I'm the first Vietnam Studies PhD at Columbia. The idea for this program had started way back then with him, and it finally came to fruition now. So I just feel like there's a karmic reason I'm at Columbia doing this history, writing about him, sitting in the same library that he experienced a moment of enlightenment in.

James Shaheen: In the interview, you let us know that he studied comparative religion, which allowed him to connect with prominent religious leaders like Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King Jr. and even the Pope. How did he view interfaith dialogue and activism, and what did he learn from working with these diverse religious and political leaders?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: So one of the first kind of pieces of writing of his that got me interested in studying this history was his letter to Martin Luther King Jr., and this was before they had even met in person, but he knew about MLK and the civil rights movement and very much saw a parallel between the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement in the United States. So he wrote this appeal to Martin Luther King saying, I'm paraphrasing, but basically, “You and I want the same thing. The struggle for peace in Vietnam is the same as the struggle for



civil rights in the United States. And as men who believe in this value of human life, we have to speak up. We can't let our societies go astray.” And so he really encouraged MLK to come out against the Vietnam War. And you really see the direct influence. Because I think it's known that MLK was kind of on the fence about coming out publicly against the war for a while before he actually did, and it was his communication and his meeting Thich Nhat Hanh in person that really pushed him to come out and say, “This war is immoral, and this struggle for civil rights and racial equality in the United States is very much tied to the war in Vietnam, because the United States is funneling all of its resources towards this war for what when we have poverty at home and inequality at home.” So if you read the sermon that MLK delivered at Riverside Church the year before he was assassinated, he basically directly quotes Thich Nhat Hanh, and so the connection is very obvious. So I think that Thay really knew how to connect with other religious leaders on a level that was universal, and he used that to try to kind of shake them awake, to get them to speak out against the war.

James Shaheen: You know, that got him exiled from Vietnam. So how did exile influence his approach to teaching and peace work?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: I think the fact that he was exiled from Vietnam was a huge change in his life in that it was a big heartbreak. If you look at his early writings, who he was before he left Vietnam, he was 100 percent invested in that country, in his homeland. And the fact that he was not allowed to return because he had traveled abroad and advocated to end the war that was killing so many of his countrymen, I mean, it fundamentally altered the direction of his life. And it's also the reason why so many people know him today around the world, right? So he turned his exile into an opportunity to bring Buddhism to the world in a new way. He was always kind of this visionary pushing the boundaries of Buddhism in Vietnam. He had conflicts with a lot of the Buddhist hierarchy in Vietnam because he was seen as a little bit too radical, pushing for reforms too quickly. So maybe, upon exile, he was kind of freed to explore and create Buddhism in his own vision. And I think that's what he did in creating Plum Village, in introducing



mindfulness and Engaged Buddhism in the ways that he did. That was him innovating. That was him deciding what kind of Buddhism this world needs.

James Shaheen: *Could you tell us more about the blowback he faced both during and after the war?*

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Absolutely. So during the war, of course, he was exiled by the South Vietnamese government, where he was a citizen, because it was illegal to be against the war, and he was hurting national security by speaking out against the war on the international stage, and so they invalidated his passport. It was deemed unsafe by his colleagues in Vietnam for him to return after he had made so many public statements. And so for his own safety, he didn't go back. And then later on, he learned that his passport was invalidated. But basically any person who spoke out against the war in South Vietnam at that time was in danger of being imprisoned and being silenced by the government. And so there was absolutely blowback during the war.

And then after the war, still, the politics of the Vietnam War are still very much alive today, because you have this entire diaspora of Vietnamese people who left Vietnam after the communist regime government took the South. And so those politics followed Thich Nhat Hanh, even beyond Vietnam. Even though so many Vietnamese people see him as a teacher and he's helped so many people find home who had to leave Vietnam as refugees and his teachings have helped them find home in other places in the world, there's still a group of people who see him as a traitor, as a national traitor. And so those politics kind of followed him his entire life until the end of his life when he did return to Vietnam and he was allowed to return.

James Shaheen: Right. So you know, what is really moving is that in the end, while he's known for being the founder of the Order of Inner Being, there was another lineage that he was loyal to, and he chose to return to Vietnam at the end of his life. So how do you understand this decision, and what might he have been communicating about his original lineage?



Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: So the decision to return to Vietnam late in his life, by then he wasn't speaking because he had a stroke, so he never fully articulated himself his reasons for returning, but he did communicate to his community that he wanted to return there. Personally, I think that he returned because he felt like that was a part of his life that he wasn't able to complete yet. You know, he's a Zen master who created an entire new tradition outside of Vietnam, but he came from somewhere. He had deep roots in Vietnamese Buddhism. He was actually chosen to be the next patriarch of his lineage in the temple where he ordained in central Vietnam. So even though he didn't get to live his life in that temple and educate the next generation at that temple, he still felt a very strong tie there. And he felt that in order to complete that circle of his life, he needed to return.

And I think that a lot of his teachings are about how to be home where you are. A lot of people ask, Was it that important for him to go home? Plum Village was his home, but I don't think he went back to Vietnam because he felt like that was his true home. I think he went back because that was a responsibility he had to his lineage. And I think it was also a message for all of his students now around the world to explore the roots of where this tradition came from. So even though Plum Village took root in the West, it really does have roots in Vietnam. And so his return to Vietnam I think can be seen as a wake-up call for all of us who have been exposed to his teachings and who have been influenced in some way to say, look, these teachings didn't just come out of thin air. They weren't just invented with no historical background. They came from a place with a really long, rich history of Buddhism. And we should look at that, and we should ask what that means. And we should honor that, as well, even as Buddhism adapts to the rest of the world.

James Shaheen: You know, you hinted before at the controversy that swirled around him, particularly as it became evident when he returned. In the West, he's universally loved. I wonder if you could speak a little bit about how his legacy is viewed in Vietnam.



Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Yeah, it's very complicated, just because it's so wrapped up in the politics of the war still. Thich Nhat Hanh is a very controversial figure because of his politics during the war, being against the war, not supporting either side, and even upon his return, there is some difficulty. His community is not very able to teach freely across the country. They're watched very closely by the government. I think there's this fear that he's someone who's so influential that the government is very wary of that. They don't fully trust it.

That said, part of the reason he did return to Vietnam was because he came to an agreement with the Vietnamese government that they would allow his books to be published in Vietnam and that he would be allowed to do some teaching tours when he came to Vietnam. So I think a big part of him just never forgot about this desire to build Buddhism in Vietnam in the modern day. When he did go back, a lot of people received him very warmly. Anecdotally, as someone who has spent a year and a half recently in Vietnam studying this history, there are so many young Buddhists there who are so inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings. They read his books and they're like, “This is unlike anything I've ever been exposed to. Buddhism's actually for me. It actually speaks to the younger generation.” And so I think even though the politics are really complicated, when you look at the generation that didn't live through the war, his teachings are really sinking in.

James Shaheen: You know, I think one thing about his teachings that always impressed me is that he can be very uncompromising in a very good way. I remember shortly after 9/11, I asked him about 9/11, and he wasn't without sympathy or without empathy. Certainly he understood what people were going through. At the same time, he pressed me to think about our own actions in the world and the extension of American power abroad and what that meant. So I can see why the government might have considered him a threat. He certainly didn't back down from any challenge.

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Yeah.



James Shaheen: OK, one last question. You've studied Thich Nhat Hanh extensively, both as a scholar and as a teacher in the Order of Inner Being. Is there anything about his life that you wish more people knew? Or any misconceptions that you wish you could correct?

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: What I would love to highlight for people is that this Zen master that the world came to know has a really interesting and complex past. And if we can look at that and really appreciate the ways in which he was so very human and really trying to figure out the answers to the biggest questions of our time, then we can appreciate his teachings even more because we understand where they came from.

He really suffered in ways that most of us can never imagine, growing up in a country at war, seeing his friends, his colleagues, his teachers being killed in these conflicts. So his teachings, at first glance, they're very soft, very simple. But in order to arrive where he did as a Zen teacher, as a Zen master, he went through so much turmoil. And I think that is where the beauty of his teachings comes in. He lived through one of the most difficult eras in history. And he distilled Buddhist teachings in a way that is so simple, so clear, and can reach so many different people. So I would just really want to encourage people to look at where he came from, look at this history, not even just Vietnamese history, but this entire global history of colonialism, and to understand that is to appreciate his teachings even more.

James Shaheen: Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê, thanks so much. It's been a pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to read “Becoming Thay” in the August issue of *Tricycle*. Thanks again, Adrienne.

Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê: Thank you so much, James.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Adrienne Minh-Châu Lê. To read an interview with Adrienne, visit tricycle.org/magazine. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are

Tricycle Talks

“Becoming Thay”

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Tricycle: The Buddhist Review. Thanks for listening!