From **The Panolian**

Commentary by Emily Darby Williams

"Mindfulness means to establish yourself in the present moment," writes Thich Nhat Hanh, the 85-year-old Buddhist monk and peace activist who visited in Panola County last week.
As I rushed to the Magnolia Grove Monastery in the Red Hill Community last Friday to cover the event for The Panolian, I had no idea what I was about to experience. My "present moments" had been full of the rush of my daily life.

Like many people, I was forgetting to breathe, to stop and smell the roses.
As I entered the monastery grounds I saw cars with tags from all over. People had traveled far distances to have this feeling of "peace" promoted in the lifestyles of the Vietnamese Buddhists--and non-Buddhists--who follow the teachings of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh.

I immediately met a couple from St. Louis who noticed I was somewhat lost.
Eunice, a Presbyterian preacher and her husband, a former Baptist preacher, explained the Buddhist ways and the history of Thich Nhat Hanh.

A native of Vietnam, Hanh was educated at Princeton, Cornell and Columbia Universities, and has been a peace activist since the early 1960s. He focused on relief work in Vietnam and was nominated in 1967 for the Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the 1964 recipient. The Vietnamese government denied permission for him to return to live in that country and he has lived in exile in France since the 1970s.

He has written more than 100 books and is known internationally for his teachings on mindfulness.
When I arrived Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh was speaking to the hundreds of people who traveled to hear him, so I sat from a distance and just enjoyed the scenery.

It was lunch time. I explained to Eunice, my new friend, I was apprehensive about eating because of recent gallbladder trouble.
She understood and explained the food was vegan and that at mealtimes "noble silence" is observed.
I waited in line to eat and saw and smelled the most wonderful aromas of the lunch that had been prepared by the monastics.

I took my vegan food to the nearest sitting place and read on the paper placed on my table:
"Food is to nourish, this food is a gift of the earth, the sky, numerous living beings, and much loving work.
"May we eat with mindfulness and gratitude so as to be worthy to receive it.

"May we recognize and transform our unwholesome mental formations, especially our greed, and learn to eat with moderation."
That may explain America's obesity problem, I thought to myself, as I mindfully ate slowly, enjoying each piece of food I ate.

I have had no gallbladder issues since.
On Saturday I came back. I walked to the tent where everyone peacefully sat and sang songs before Thich Nhat Hanh arrived to speak.

He was open to questions, beginning with small children first.
A small child asked him what foods Buddhist monks ate.

He answered the question perfectly so everyone could understand, but explained they ate a vegan diet because they don't believe in suffering or adding to suffering of animals.
A mother asked him, "How do I find peace with a son who has a drug addiction?"

He answered the mother, saying if there was any way she should be understanding and to not add suffering and also help the suffering in her own heart.
"If you suffer and make your loved ones suffer, there is nothing that can justify your desire."

The question that brought me to overwhelming tears was from a Vietnam War veteran.
The man, who said he suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, asked "how do we explain to you and other generations of the Vietnamese people that we really did care and we are sorry?"

The moving question had many in tears.
Again, Thich Nhat Hanh had an answer that comforted the Vietnam vet. He said, "We just have to make sure that never happens again."

"When another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply within himself, and his suffering is spilling over. He does not need punishment; he needs help. That's the message he is sending."
He told a story about a man who could not forgive himself after the casualties he experienced and was accountable for in the Vietnam War.

The Zen master told the man it was a fact he did those things, but he could make it better by giving back, or helping children who are starving. To be a better or "mindful person."
I definitely felt the "moment."

Afterward we ate our vegan lunch in "noble silence," and I felt the sun against my back.
I walked back to my truck behind Vietnamese children and collected a few pebbles before

leaving this beautiful place.

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Please click here to view pictures of the retreat.