

THICH NHAT HANH

13 February 2010, Lunar New Year's Eve

Celebrating 1,000 Years of Hanoi

In the year 1010, one thousand years ago, the first king of the Ly dynasty founded Thang Long, the city now known as Hanoi. The Ly dynasty has been described as “the most compassionate, peaceful and harmonious in the history of Vietnam” by the eminent historian Hoang Xuan Han. This, he wrote, was “thanks to the influence of Buddhism.”

The first king of the Ly dynasty was Ly Thai To. From a very young age he had been trained as a Buddhist monastic aspirant at Luc To temple by Zen Master Van Hanh. When he ascended to the throne he organized political and cultural life in the spirit of openness, fearlessness and non-dualism as taught by Zen Master Van Hanh. The practice of Buddhism gave the nation a solid foundation of peace and happiness which lasted for centuries. Ly Nhah Tong, the fourth king in the Ly Dynasty, spoke of Master Van Hanh with great respect. “Master Van Hanh's actions embraced the whole of the past, present and future,” he said. “His words presaged events with extraordinary accuracy. In his hometown Co Phap, he needed only to plant his staff in the ground and sit in stillness, and the city of Thang Long could enjoy stability and peace for ever.”

*Ten thousand actions embrace past, present and future,
Words of foretelling are effective,
With a monk's staff firmly planted in Co Phap
Stability reigns in the kingdom*

If we look again at the actions of the Ly Kings in the early years of Thang Long city, we will see how to celebrate 1,000 years of Hanoi in such a way that our actions continue the legacy of our ancestors.

In the year 1010, the year of Thang Long's founding, king Ly Thai To gave the order for the people to be freed from the obligation to pay taxes for three years. Those who were poor, weak, sick, orphaned or widowed, and had accumulated debts of unpaid taxes over many years were pardoned. That Summer the king ordered Flourishing Sky Temple to be built in the inner city for his court to recite the precepts and practice meditation, and the Adornment With Victory Temple to be built on the outskirts of the city for the people to do the same.

In 1012 the king built Dragon Virtue Palace for the young prince Phap Ma to live close to the people and understand their situation. In 1016 he lifted taxes on land and property for three years, and the next year extended this to include farmland. In 1017 he announced an amnesty for all those who were exiled or living in hiding to be able to return home without fear of punishment; this applied even to those who feared reprisals because of their previous opposition to the government.

In 1014, at the request of Venerable Monk Tham Van Uyen, a Great Precept Transmission Ceremony was held in the newly-founded Thang Long city, and over 1,000 young men and women were ordained as monks and nuns. Two years later another Great Precept Transmission Ceremony was held with another 1,000 ordines, and yet a third Ceremony was held in 1019. In 1018, the King sent a delegation to China, led by the two lay men Nguyen Dao Thanh and Pham Hac, to ask for the Tripitaka – the Three Baskets of Sutras, comprising the Sutras, the Vinaya and the Sastras. When the delegation returned in 1020, the Most Venerable Patriarch Monk Phi Tri formally welcomed the Tripitaka at the king's invitation.

Prince Phat Ma ascended to the throne in 1028, taking the name Ly Thai Tong, the second king of the Ly Dynasty. He immediately declared another amnesty and ordered silk and money from the royal store to be distributed to the people. When the Lord Kai Quoc, Prince of Bo and ruler of Truong Yen Palace, betrayed him, the King himself went to quell the uprising. When Lord Khai Quoc surrendered, the King pardoned him and allowed him to retain his title and position.

The King built the Trung Hung Sutra Library in Limitless Light Temple in 1034 and ordered copies of the Tripitaka to be made and stored there. In 1036 he announced another amnesty for the people. In 1040 he inaugurated the Arahata Dharma Festival at the Dragon Lake within the Palace grounds, and decreed another amnesty for his subjects, pardoning all criminals and traitors, and repealing all taxes on the people that year. In 1049 he built Dien Huu temple which has now become the One Pillar Temple. In 1052 the king had a Great Temple Bell cast and hung at the Dragon Lake, for the people to come and sound, to call for a hearing with the king himself whenever they had been victims of miscarriages of justice or misunderstandings.

The third king, Ly Thanh Tong took the throne in 1054. He inspected Thien Khanh Court in person to see for himself how justice was dispensed by court officials. On one occasion he pointed at his daughter, princess Dong Thien, in his entourage, and told the judge, “I love my people just as parents love their children. The people break the law out of ignorance and lack of understanding, and I feel great compassion for them. From now on, whatever the offence committed, whether major or minor, tolerance and leniency should be exercised.” When there was a terrible drought in 1070 the King gave the order for rice, money and clothes from the royal storehouse to be distributed to the poor.

The fourth King, Ly Nhan Tong, took the throne in 1072. In 1076 he decreed an amnesty for the people, and in 1088 appointed Zen Master Kho Dau as the National Teacher, responsible for teaching meditation and advising the king on matters of state. In the Summer of 1095, when another great drought swept the country, he pardoned all those who had inherited debts or could not pay their taxes, and freed all prisoners. In 1103, the King's mother used money from the royal treasury to buy poor young women out of indentured service and herself arranged for them to be married.

In 1127, King Ly Than Tong ascended to the throne and, in February 1134, in order to pray for rain, took up the practices of meditation, eating only vegetarian food and living simply. He also pardoned all criminals in the country. In the same year he gave permission for another Great Ordination Ceremony of monks and nuns to be held. In 1136 he appointed Zen Master Khong Lo as National Teacher and repealed income tax for the people.

During the Ly Dynasty, the Zen Masters Van Hanh, Kho Dau, Khong Lo, Tong Bien and Vien Chieu were all appointed by the kings as National Teachers. The understanding of these Masters was vast, their wisdom transcendent and their love unlimited. These were teachers of all the people in the country.

NOTES: The Zen Master's name, “Van Hanh”, means “Ten Thousand Actions”; The Zen Master's name “Nhat Hanh” means “One Action”. Thich Nhat Hanh founded a “Van Hanh Buddhist University” in Saigon in the early 1960s.

12 PROPOSALS
on How to celebrate Hanoi's 1,000-year anniversary
from ZEN MASTER THICH NHAT HANH

The best way to celebrate 1,000 years of Hanoi is for the government and the whole nation to endeavour to take up and continue the work our forefathers began in founding the capital, namely:

1. **To establish a university with the name Van Hanh**, offering courses that have the capacity to transmit the spirit of openness, fearlessness and non-dualism, as taught by Master Van Hanh. Other campuses can be established simultaneously in other major cities of the country.
2. **To allocate time for the daily study of global ethics at all levels of education**, and invest money in training teachers to teach ethics, in the light both of traditional Vietnamese cultural values and global ethics. The classes should offer concrete practices that can be applied to address contemporary social evils such as domestic violence, divorce, suicide, drug abuse, prostitution, abuse of power and corruption. In this way the policy of model ethical towns and villages can be realized.
3. **To call for a summit of all religious traditions and charitable organizations in Vietnam to draft a non-sectarian Charter of Ethics** that can be a basis for the practice of ethics throughout the country. This text should have the capacity to bring about a healthy and compassionate society and save the planet. Each tradition should present and contribute their own ethical code (for example, Buddhism would present the Revised Five Mindfulness Trainings), and together discuss, exchange and learn from one another how these principles can be applied in family life, schools and workplaces. Recitations of the resulting non-sectarian text can be organized once a month in every temple, church, town hall or library. Government officials should also attend recitations alongside ordinary citizens.
4. **To establish councils of wise and ethical people** in villages, towns and cities. These councils should be composed of people renowned for their kindness and virtue, who can be ethical role models for the community. The councils could include Catholic priests, Protestant Ministers, and Buddhist Abbots and Abbesses, who would care for the ethical wellbeing of the community with their wisdom, loving kindness, encouragement and firmness.
5. **To offer an amnesty for all those in exile abroad, banished from their hometown within Vietnam or imprisoned**, whether for being members of unauthorized organizations or churches or because they have called for pluralism, multipartyism, freedom of religion or freedom of speech. A number of prisoners should be given early release on social work under the guidance and sponsorship of ordained members of all religions.
6. **To repeal taxes for anyone without a home, without a job or source of income.**
7. **To establish Sundays as a 'No Car Day'** in Hanoi and other big cities and towns: citizens should only use bicycles, rickshaws, horse carriages or walk, except in emergencies. Sundays should also be a No-Smoking Day and No-Alcohol Day – a day on which no cigarettes, wine or beer are sold.
8. **To support the establishment of vegetarian restaurants** in the capital and other major cities. Every restaurant must offer at least a few vegetarian dishes on the menu, and everyone should be encouraged to be vegetarian for at least 15 days a month (according to the UN's recommendations to cut back meat consumption by 50% to save the planet). Those who fully embrace a vegetarian diet can benefit from a 50% discount on their health insurance contributions.
9. **To subsidize solar power technology** for cooking rice, boiling water, lighting, preparing tea, washing clothes and so on.
10. **To end the production and use of plastic bags and packaging.**
11. **To call for a Great Buddhist Summit**, and invite Venerable monks and nuns from inside and outside the country to re-establish a People's Buddhist Church, totally free from political interference.
12. **To organize retreats in Vietnam for Vietnamese people and foreigners to learn and practice ways to transform violence and build brotherhood and sisterhood in the spirit of openness and non-dualism as taught by Zen Master Van Hanh.**

If the government, law-makers and law-enforcers of the country do not want to, or cannot, realize these proposals, then we, the People, will do it by ourselves, beginning with the Buddhists and with the support of other religions and charitable associations.