

Peter Furlong (PF): Good evening, this is Peter Furlong for BBC Radio, and today I have the distinct pleasure of talking with one of the newest members on the United Nations group UNITY, Thich Nat Han. It's a pleasure.

Thich Nat Han (TNH): It is my pleasure to have this opportunity. Thank you.

PF: Let me start with a question I'm sure you get quite often. How does a Tibetan Monk end up with a Vietnamese name?

TNH: (laughing) It is a gift from my mother's father. Many years ago my grandfather Thich Nat Han left Vietnam and emigrated to Tibet. It was there he began to study the arts of Tibetan Magic which had been long lost to much of the world. He also discovered my mother's mother there as well. (laughing) So here I am, with his name and his memory. Of course, I still have my Tibetan names as well. My day name is Pem-ba, as I was born on the day of the week you call Saturday, and my virtue name is Lhak-pa Gyal-tshen, which means courageous speech in your language.

PF: Can you tell us some more details about your grandfather? Why did he leave Vietnam? Why travel to Tibet and take up Tibetan Magic?

TNH: Like many Westerners, you seek many details and facts, which you call knowledge. Yet knowledge does not always lead to understanding. There are many things I do not know. Only the things I understand. My grandfather Thich Nat Han left Vietnam when he was 32. I do not know the circumstances of his leaving, only that it was important he do so, and that he was unable to return to his native land ever. He left behind parents, brothers and sisters, but no wife and no children. He traveled to the Tibetan province Ü, which is north of Bhutan and India. There he settled by the river Kyi-chu, living on a small farm between the city of Lhasa and the Drolma Lhakhang Monastery. The climate there is mild and the land fertile. It was here that he raised some foods for himself and for trade, studied the practices of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan Magic. Several years later he met Pasang Lha-mo, which translates into female goddess or beautiful goddess. She became his wife and my grandmother.

PF: So your mother gave you the name Thich Nat Han?

TNH: My mother's father was murdered when I was three years old. In fact it happened upon my birthday, although my family did not find out about it until many days later. My mother took this as an omen that I was to follow the way of her father and bring light to the places he was not able to reach. There was a name

changing ceremony conducted by a Lama from the Una Monastery    Una Monastery was one of three monasteries near Drigung Qu why my family lived.

PF: Your grandfather was murdered?

TNH: Yes.

PF: By who? And why?

TNH: These things are still not clear. Only that he was traveling to Samye Monastery at the time, and carrying something of great value.

PF: But aren't you curious? Do you have any desire to avenge his death?

TNH: Curiosity is cyclical. Curiosity can only be calmed by understanding, and understanding only leads to more questions. To rush forward in the pursuit of empty knowledge is rash. I wait with patience. All I learn, all I experience, will lead me to where I need to be and when I need to be there. The gods, goddess and the Buddha see to it that all pieces are in place when they must be. My part is but to prepare myself for whatever task I may have. Regarding desire for revenge. I have no such desire. This has happened. I accept it. This is my path.

PF: What can you tell the listeners about yourself, starting with your childhood.

TNH: I was a typical child. Very problematic for my parents. (laughter) Perhaps this is why I was destined to follow the path of my mother's father. Just as he was known for having great curiosity, desire for learning and understanding, so too did I as a child show a great need to investigate and seek understanding. After my grandfather's death I became more curious about who he was, having only some vague memories of him, and began to read through some of his books and writings which were in the possession of my mother. There was much there about Buddhism, but also about the art of Tibetan Magic. Being a curious child, I began to try calling upon the powers in these books and much to the amazement of my family, it came easily to me.

PF: Were you able to use your powers to extend your bedtime or distract your mother when you were naughty?

TNH: (laughter) Alas no. The magic did not provide any useful things for a five year old child. As time went by I found that I could sense if something was about to go wrong, especially in quiet moments or when meditating. I could sometimes

summon a spiritual attack which at this point in my life was more visually impressive than useful. I also found I could heal small wounds.

PF: Healing wounds? How small?

TNH: Simple cuts or scrapes. Still all of these things took great concentration, silence and tranquility of the mind. I also felt very silly performing the chants that went along with the gestures. You know how the mind of a child can be. I was very self-conscious. Later in life as I came to understand the power of chanting and once I incorporated this as part of the magic my ability to control the spells became much more powerful.

PF: Can you tell us something about Tibetan Magic?

TNH: Tibetan Magic relies upon channeling the power of various Tibetan Gods, Goddess, Spirits and the Buddha himself. Formally known as Vajrayana or Tantrayana, it is known commonly as Tantric Buddhism. The origins and practices of tantrism originated in India and are associated with Shaivism, the cult of Shiva, the god of Yogins. In this way alone Tantric Buddhism differs greatly with the ways of Buddhism practiced in most of the world, those being the two schools of Theravada and Mahayana, commonly called the lesser vehicle and the greater vehicle.

Tantrism is profoundly complex, but to try condensing it for you, Tantrism is an alternative route to enlightenment, requiring intense concentration and induction through special rites of initiation, but offering the hope of achieving enlightenment in accelerated time, perhaps even in a single lifetime. The way of Mahayana, the way of the Bodhisattva requires many lifetimes to achieve, whereas Vajrayana, the tantric way, is a faster, although more risky route. It uses mantric formulas, incantation, ritual, and magic to achieve power over supramundane beings and, ultimately, to transcend the self and become one with the deity.

These rituals, incantations and mantric formulas are the keys to Tibetan Magic. However, meditation, above all, is considered the key to reaching transcendent understanding and spiritual transformation, and the great vehicle for meditation is the mandala. Without this understanding and transformation achieving both control and intensity in the practice of magic can not be achieved and it serves only as what you would call pallor tricks.

With the proper control, training and understand Tibetan Magic can be used for the purpose of influencing the karma of individuals and groups, healing, defensive purposes, the reading of minds, exorcism . . .

PF: Exorcism?

TNH: Yes.

PF: Can you elaborate?

TNH: The casting out of a demon from the body and mind of one who is possessed, followed by is banishment or destruction.

PF: Well yes, but I mean, have you ever exorcised a demon?

TNH: No. The all the demons I have met have been in excellent condition and did not require any exercising in order to improve their physical health.

PF: (laughing) Okay, I walked into that one. Seriously.

TNH: I have participated in one exorcism. It is not something to be attempted individually. While casting the demon from the body is not so difficult for the experienced monk, banishing it or destroying it may be well beyond the ability of a single man, even beyond the ability of ten monks. Exorcisms are always performed by groups of monks in the walls of a monastery.

PF: Amazing. Can you tell us about the monastery where you studied? What you did there? What it's like?

TNH: The Samye Monastery is located near the Brahmaputra River, on its north side, about 80 kilometers from my place of birth, Drigung Qu. The Samye Monastery is the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet. King Trisong Detsen, who acceded to the throne at the age of 13, formally established Buddhist monasticism in Tibet yet there was great hostility to this action, both from demons and spirits opposed to Buddhism and from the Bonpo aristocratic families which until this time had held much political and spiritual power. Trisong Detsen sent Padmasambhava of Oddiyana to subdue the hostile elemental powers of Tibet, both human and spiritual. To make them either amenable or subservient to Buddhism. Padmasambhava traveled the ranges of Tibet, transforming negative forces into Buddhist protectors, teaching the tantras and rituals to all willing to listen. It was on the summit of Mt. Hepori that Padmasambhava crushed the last of the demons and consecrated the ground as the building place of the first Tibetan Buddhist Monastery.

The monastery is constructed as a mandalic representation of the universe. The

overall design was based upon the Odantapuri Temple of Bihar in India. The central temple represent Mt. Meru and the templs around it in two concentric circle represent the oceans, the continents and the subcontinents of Buddhis cosmology. At the center of the monastery ground is the Utse. The Utse is the most elaborate of all the building in the monastery. In the very center of the Utse is a pole which represents the core of the universe. Directly north is a Moon Temple, directly south a Sun Temple. Around the Utse are four stupas: red, black, green and white. Samye Monastery has 108 buildings, and 1008 chortens on the circular wall around the monestary.

It is because Padmasambhava subdued the last of the reluctant spirits at this site that Samye has become the home of the most powerful Tibetan Magicians. At this place the spiritual forces drawn upon in Tibetan Magic are most powerful.

PF: How did you get the opportunity to study at Samye and what was it like?

TNH: My parents sent me to Samye at a later age, eight. While my mother desired me to follow the ways of her father, my father was not so certain. He hoped I would abandon my curiosity for magic. When he finally accepted this was not to be, he saw the wisdom in sending me to Samye where I could be taught the correct path to use and focus my powers. I spent 18 years training, studying and working.

PF: What work did you do?

TNH: Translations of text. I have always enjoyed reading and the written word. I view it as an art form which everyone can partake in.

PF: What languages can you read and write?

TNH: In addition to English and Tibetan I know Cantonese, Mandarin, Burmese and Sanskrit.

PF: So you translated books and manuscripts?

TNH: Correct.

PF: By hand copying?

TNH: Correct.

PF: Didn't this become monotonous?

TNH: Not at all. In fact it's very restful. It's a form of meditation in fact. One misconception in the Western world is that meditation is about blocking out the external world. This is not true at all. Meditation is about acknowledging the outside world and letting it go. Each word is acknowledged then let go. Each sentence acknowledged, then let go. Each paragraph, page, chapter, book and so forth. Yet at the same time, each piece of the manuscript that has been let go must also be held within, retained, so that each subsequent piece is translated correctly, with regard for what has come before it. It is a letting go and a holding on. It is both, it is neither. It is meditation.

PF: What about your studies? What does one study to become a Tibetan Monk and Magician?

TNH: I spent 18 years in the Monastery. The first six years were Prajñā pāramitā, Perfection of Wisdom. One studies the manuscript "The Jewel of Realization", written in the 4th century. This text concerns the nature of nirvana, deep levels of meditation and the wish for enlightenment.

The next four years are Madhyamika, The Middle Way. This is analysis of the quality of emptiness and the ephemeral properties of such emotions as joy, illness and jealousy.

Then two years of Abhidharma, or Higher Knowledge. The text which is central to Abhidharma is "The Treasury of Knowledge" written by Master Vasubandhu in 350CE. This text investigates the role and creation of karma, the nature of bardo, which is the intermediate state between death and rebirth, the constituents of time and space and the destruction of the world.

PF: Now all of this study, is this typical for a Tibetan Monk?

TNH: Yes, this sequence of study and these texts are what all monks must undertake. The entire process takes 32 years. My process continues even now.

Then two more years are spent in Vinaya, or Vowed Morality. This is the consideration of the nature of monastic vows, both in terms of their benefits and the attendant loss of freedom.

Finally there are two steps left, which can take place concurrently. These are the two steps of learning which I am still experiencing. Pramāṇa, or Buddhist Logic and Lam Rim, The Steps to Buddhahood. Pramāṇa examines logical reasoning and the

validity of many arguments at the root of Buddhist faith. If you will it is a testing of the faith by the intellect. "The Steps to Buddhahood" is a 15th century text written by the founder of the Gelug sect which prepares the student for the ritualistic meditation required along the path to enlightenment. I have a copy of this text with me and read from it each day before mediation.

PF: How often do you meditate?

TNH: Three times a day, for approximately 1 hour, 15 minutes.

PF: Did your study at Samye include physical training?

TNH: Indeed. I am accomplished at yoga and acrobatics. I engage in one hour training each day in each of these arts.

PF: What about your encounter.

TNH: My encounter?

PF: With the Chinese supergroup?

TNH: Much has been made of this. More than exist.

PF: When the Dali Lama chose you to join UNITY, there was a public threat issued by the Chinese supergroup known in the west as Metal Storm. They did mention you by name.

TNH: The story is very simple. I was deep in one of the underground sections of the monastery one day. When I emerged I walked into a battle between my fellow monks and Metal Storm. The battle was waning, with Metal Storm getting the best of the situation. I raised my powers against them and was able to force them into retreat. I only accomplished this due to their exhaustion after battle and my fully charged state. Had I encountered Metal Storm at the height of their power and alone, I would not have stood a chance. I was younger and bolder, or stupider as you might say, at the time.

PF: None the less, an impressive showing.

TNH: If you insist. Most likely it is what you would call "the right place at the right time".

PF: If you insist. (laughter) Can you explain to the listeners how Tibetan magic works?

TNH: No.

PF: No?

TNH: No. I can not.

PF: Can not, or will not?

TNH: Can not.

PF: But if you don't understand it, how can you use it?

TNH: I understand. But I do not have the knowledge of how it works.

PF: Aren't they one in the same?

TNH: Can you explain to me how a computer works?

PF: Well . . . I can explain how . . . Yes and no.

TNH: You can explain how to use a computer to accomplish something, correct?

PF: Yes.

TNH: But can you explain how every atom of the computer is behaving at any given moment?

PF: Of course not.

TNH: There is the difference between understanding and knowledge.

PF: Okay, I'm going to take your word for it. How about this, can you give us a demonstration? Fire something harmless across the studio?

TNH: (laughter) Fire something harmless. Yes, I can give you some pyrotechnics. Could I have quiet for a moment.

(After a brief pause, chanting is heard, then a rustling like wind in trees then a small

'pop'.)

TNH: Was that sufficient?

PF: Amazing. Let me see if I can describe for the listeners what I just witnessed. Thich Nat Han stood up, took a moment to compose himself then began a series of gestures with his hands and arms which chanting in . . .

TNH: A mixture of Sanskrit and Tibetan.

PF: . . . then ghost, spirits, something I can't define seemed to materialize around his body, glowing red they swirled around him, then, directed by his outstretched hand they formed into a globe over his left palm. The globe then flew across the room and left a slight black mark on our wall.

TNH: I will clean that up before I leave.

PF: You don't have to do that.

TNH: I insist.

PF: And I can see that we are almost out of time, so I have to cut the interview here. Thich Nat Han, thank you for your time.

TNH: Thank you for allowing me to speak to your audience. It has been an honor.

PF: All the best to you in your endeavors with UNITY.

TNH: Thank you Peter.

PF: This is Peter Furlong for BBC Radio saying good day until tomorrow.

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