

*Going Home*, by Thich Nhat Hanh

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [January 19, 2000](#) issue

Since the Vietnam War era, Thich Nhat Hanh has been known to North Americans as an activist for peace and justice and an interpreter of Vietnamese Buddhism and culture. Martin Luther King Jr. and Thomas Merton were his friends. Exiled from Vietnam after he headed the Buddhist delegation at the Paris peace talks, Nhat Hanh now lives in Plum Village, a monastic complex he founded in the south of France. From there he travels around the world, leading retreats on mindfulness. After the Dalai Lama, he is probably the world's best-known spokesperson for Buddhism.

This book presents various talks Nhat Hanh gave at Plum Village from 1995 to 1997 during the feast of Christmas. The talks were part of Nhat Hanh's continuing engagement with Christian themes and symbols. His teaching of the practice of mindfulness—a practice many Christians have embraced—as a way to overcome suffering recapitulates the fuller discussions offered in his numerous earlier works.

New in this book is an ongoing conversation with the figure of Jesus himself and with selected Christian perspectives. Nhat Hanh applauds Paul Tillich's approach to God as the ground of being, which he interprets as equivalent to the Buddhist understanding of Nirvana as the ultimate reality. Nirvana bears the same relationship to the phenomenal world as water bears to waves. But though the ultimate and the phenomenal world are one, no human concept can capture the full reality of the ultimate, of God. So Nhat Hanh insists on the necessity of transcending concepts and notions through the practice of mindfulness, the careful attention to the present moment.

As Nhat Hanh embraces Jesus as a brother on the journey, he draws a distinctively Buddhist portrait of him. Nhat Hanh tells us that he is not interested in the incarnation, but only in Jesus's teachings. Nhat Hanh is confident that Jesus engaged in walking and sitting meditation during his time of temptation in the wilderness. He equates the Holy Spirit with the practice of mindfulness and calls for the Holy Spirit to be presented in concrete ways—for example, as the Five Mindfulness Techniques (based on the traditional Five Precepts) of Buddhism.

Jesus's oneness with the Father is expressed in his realization that as a wave, a phenomenal manifestation, he is not other than the water, the ultimate. His crucifixion cry that he has been abandoned by God, recorded in Mark and Matthew, seems incomprehensible to Nhat Hanh, since it is impossible that the wave could be separated from or abandoned by the water.

The tone of the talks is warm and engaging. But Nhat Hanh never encounters Jesus as someone outside of his own Buddhist perspectives. Harmony comes at the price of distinction. Jesus and the Buddha may well be brothers, but they are not identical twins.