

*A Poem and a Peppermint Plant* from *The Sun My Heart* by Thich Nhat Hanh

I don't know what job you do every day, but I do know that some tasks lend themselves to awareness more easily than others. Writing, for example, is difficult to do mindfully. I have now reached the point when I know that a sentence is finished. But while writing the sentence, even now, I sometimes forget. That is why I have been doing more manual work and less writing these past few years. Someone said to me, "Planting tomatoes and lettuce may be the gateway to everything, but not everyone can write books and stories and poems as well as you do. Please don't waste your time with manual work!" I have not wasted any of my time. Planting a seed, washing a dish, cutting the grass are as eternal, as beautiful, as writing a poem! I do not understand how a poem can be better than a peppermint plant. Planting seeds gives me as much pleasure as writing a poem. For me, a head of lettuce or a peppermint plant has as much everlasting effect in time and space as a poem.

When I helped found the University of Advanced Buddhist Studies in 1964, I made a grave error. The students, who included young monks and nuns, studied only books, scriptures, and ideas. At the end they had gathered nothing more than a handful of knowledge and their diplomas. In the past, when novices were accepted into a monastery, they would be taken immediately into the garden to learn weeding, watering, and planting in full awareness. The first book they read was the collection of gathas by Master Doc The, the book which included the poems for buttoning your jacket, washing your hands, crossing a stream, carrying water, finding your slippers in the morning, practical things, so they could practice awareness all day long. Only later would they begin to study sutras and participate in group discussions and private interviews with the master, and even then the scholarly studies would always go hand in hand with the practical ones. If I were to help found another university, I would model it on the old monasteries. It would be a community where all the students would eat, sleep, work, and live everyday life in the sunlight of awareness, perhaps like the Ark Community in France or the Shanti Niketan or Phuong Boi communities. I am sure that in all the world's religions, meditation and study centers resemble one another. These are good models for universities as well.