

# Vietnam: Healing from the War

Edited by Joe Roche and Lisa Roche

Flow of traffic  
Flow of life  
Rhythm of life  
Rhythm of work  
Rhythm of love  
Madness to change this  
lifelong rhythm

*Rhythm of spirit  
with the earth  
with the sky  
with each other  
War destroyed it  
and yet...*

community is still there  
rhythm and pulse  
continues strong  
the ancient rhythm  
of working together

*to move earth  
to move salt  
to move water  
to move life  
to move in love  
to move spirit.*

Madness to change this  
ancient movement  
will the ancient rhythm  
of body and soul survive?...

Excerpted from "Vietnam,"  
—*Connie Frisbee Houde*



Photo: Connie Frisbee Houde



**The Vietnamese have a belief that when someone dies horribly, the spirit clings to the site of death. How many spirits cling to the Vietnamese battlefields?**

**T**he transition from Cambodia to Vietnam was tangible: From a country still devastated by a killing war, we entered one that had grown since its brutal destructive war with the U.S. twenty years ago into an industrious nation seeking to

enter the world economy while still maintaining its traditions. We pilgrims felt the energy change. It is seen in the people, in the work projects, in the cultivation of the land. As one monk told us, it will take more than a generation for Cambodia to recover. Vietnam already has.

Crossing the border between Cambodia and Vietnam on June 1st, we witnessed an historic moment for peace and reconciliation between these two nations. Maha Ghosananda, the senior Buddhist monk of Cambodia, met Thich Minh Chau, a senior monk of Vietnam. They each gave a talk and, during our Pilgrimage here, met several times—what could be the first span of a bridge of fellowship between the two countries.

Peace worker David Dellinger helped us to get into Vietnam through his friendship with Vice President Madame Binh, who also met with us. Dellinger is one of the great nonviolent peace activists of this century. His life has been threatened, and he has been jailed for an unwavering dedication to peace. He has given his life for peace and it shines out of him.

That the people have rebuilt their lives after the war is incredible. We walked among the bomb craters and vast defoliation, the giant pits left by the B52 bombers, twenty feet deep and thirty feet across; we crawled down in the tunnels where whole villages were sheltered to survive the continuous onslaught; we saw vast plains where luxuriant rain forests had once flourished. We traveled by train from South to North paralleling the Central Highlands and the Mountains beyond them on the west side, with the South China Sea on the east. All along the route, we saw rice farmers planting, harvesting, winnowing, with great water buffalo providing the heavy muscle to pull the metal-sheathed wooden plows.

The Japanese pilgrims and the Nipponzan Myohoji monks were particularly concerned about the brutality the Japanese Imperial Army inflicted on the Vietnamese during World War II. Three million citizens died from starvation alone. The Japanese expressed statements of great sorrow for what their country had done and prayed for those who had died. In a small field by a village where twelve hundred people had starved, the drums and the chants sought to bring reconciliation. The Vietnamese seemed to understand their gesture for peace.

We did not encounter anger during any of the interactions with the Vietnamese people. They spoke directly about what they experienced during the war with the United States. Many had missing limbs, disfigurements. These are the people who lost over two million of their citizens to U.S. firepower. I look into the eyes of some of those who speak of peace and forgiveness. Many are veterans of the war. There is, sometimes, sadness which comes from loss. There is also acceptance and kindness but no

anger. Perhaps only those who have suffered mightily can forgive mightily.

—Dan Turner

**O**ur Pilgrimage in Vietnam is unfortunately in hotels and buses most of the time now, comfortable to be sure, but lacking the impact of a walking pilgrimage. But we are grateful simply to have gained permission to be in Vietnam on any terms. We were informed that part of our difficulty in gaining permission was the clearly interfaith orientation of our Pilgrimage, but on the other hand, now that we are here, we are seeing the Buddhist heritage and Buddhist personalities being proudly introduced to us. We are not hindered from drumming and praying publicly at cemeteries and memorials.

—Greg Mott

**O**ur fourth night we spent on the Reunification Express, the railroad that operates between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. After twenty-five hours, we arrived at Dong Ha, the capital of Quang Tri Province. An official delegation met us at the station.

The next day, the Chairman of the Province took us to the Truong Son National Cemetery. After a brief official ceremony conducted by the Vietnamese at the cemetery, we were permitted to conduct our ritual to liberate the battlefields. It was very significant that the government officially sponsored our Pilgrimage and also participated in the ceremony. The ceremony began with us walking three times around the main cemetery monument, while chanting to the beat of drums. Our intention was for the spirits remaining on all of the battlefields to listen to our prayers. We called not only upon the “Vietnamese revolutionary mar-



Photo: Connie Frisbee Houde

tyrs” (the phrase used by the Vietnamese) who had died, but also upon the dead who had supported the Southern Government, upon the United States soldiers killed in battle, upon the Korean soldiers who had died. We called upon the civilians, the women and children who had died, and there were many to listen. After the chanting, we recited the Vietnamese Prayer to the Dead. Participants were given paper peace cranes to throw into the air during the second reading of the prayer after the words, “Let the hurt take wing...”

—Ramon Lopez Reyes, Vietnam Veteran

**T**he pilgrimage was given great political significance in Vietnam and we found ourselves being called “The Delegation” as we were taken on a twelve-day tour of historic spots from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi. We walked ceremonially during visits to military cemeteries

**In a small field by a village where 1200 people had starved, the drums and the chants sought to bring reconciliation.**



**Boy selling GI artifacts in Khe Shan**

the journey very powerful and were appalled at the destruction caused by the “American War” (the “Vietnam War” in the U.S.), particularly in the Cu Chi area west of Saigon and in Quang Tri province where tens of thousands of kilometers of deep jungle had been defoliated by Agent Orange. That defoliation destroyed a whole jungle ecosystem that still supported wild elephants and tigers in the late 1960s.

Yet, despite its scars, the country was as beautiful as I remembered it, and the people are wonderful and courageous. Needless to say the journey’s emotional impact was very strong. It is painful seeing the dark side of one’s country, the land one loves, but the United States has a large shadow. It was also painful looking at my part in supporting our national dark side, but indeed the truth will set us free. In the end, acknowledging some hard truths gave me the healing I had come for.

—*Frank Houde*, Vietnam Veteran

and historic monuments such as the bridge across the Ben Hai river, once the DMZ. We found

## Prayer to Liberate the Battlefields:

*Mother Earth, mother of us all,  
Listen to our prayers.  
You, whose womb gives birth to us,  
Whose Breasts nourish us,  
Whose heart loves us,  
Whose voice calms us when in anguish,  
Whose songs delight us when in joy,  
Listen to our prayers.*

*Mother Earth, I join with others to ask  
That the battlefields of Vietnam  
Be liberated from any anger and hate  
That has remained because of great  
Suffering and despair...*

*Mother Earth, many have been the tears,  
From here and abroad,  
For those who fell on these battlefields  
Our prayers join with these tears...*

*Let the hurt of those who died,  
And of those who survived the battlefields  
Take wing as your children  
Enter this new day.*

—*Ramon Lopez Reyes*