

Calendar

All Good Gifts

Alms Round Procession

Thich Nhat Hanh is spending the three months of winter in Escondido. But don't expect to see him at the mall. Why? Where does he shop? Unlike a Zen koan, the question *can* be answered simply: he doesn't shop.

The 77-year-old Vietnamese Zen Buddhist master, well-known in the West through his books and talks promoting peace, lives in a gift-oriented society. Like all Buddhist monks and nuns, he is forbidden to handle money or even to barter.

One way he gets what he needs is through a Buddhist tradition called an alms round, and on Saturday there will be one in San Dieguito County Park.

LOCAL EVENTS

Since Buddha's time (563?-483? B.C.) monks and nuns have traveled from their monasteries to nearby villages to receive (which is not to say *ask for*) food. There has been only one other official alms round in the United States, and that was in San Jose, according to Brother Phap Hai, who lives at Escondido's three-year-old Deer Park Monastery.

Thây (t'uh-ee) — or "teacher," as the faithful refer to Thich Nhat Hanh — has been here before, for less-extended stays. And this time, says one of the faithful, a 54-year-old woman named Lan Nguyenhuu, he has brought "every monk and nun from everywhere with him." There are a total of about 200

monastics in the Unified Buddhist Church, which Thich Nhat Hanh founded in 1969 during the Vietnam War.

Some flew here from the headquarters in southwestern France, others from the church's East Coast monastery in Vermont. They joined the 30, including Brother Phap Hai, in Escondido. A planeload of them in their robes, with both male and female heads shaved, would be a sight to behold, Nguyenhuu agrees.

Nguyenhuu, speaking by phone from her home in University City, is a 15-year member of the church and a semilapsed Catholic. (She attends Mass on occasion: "It's a hard habit to break.") A refugee who moved to San Diego in 1977, she says many church members have Vietnamese roots.

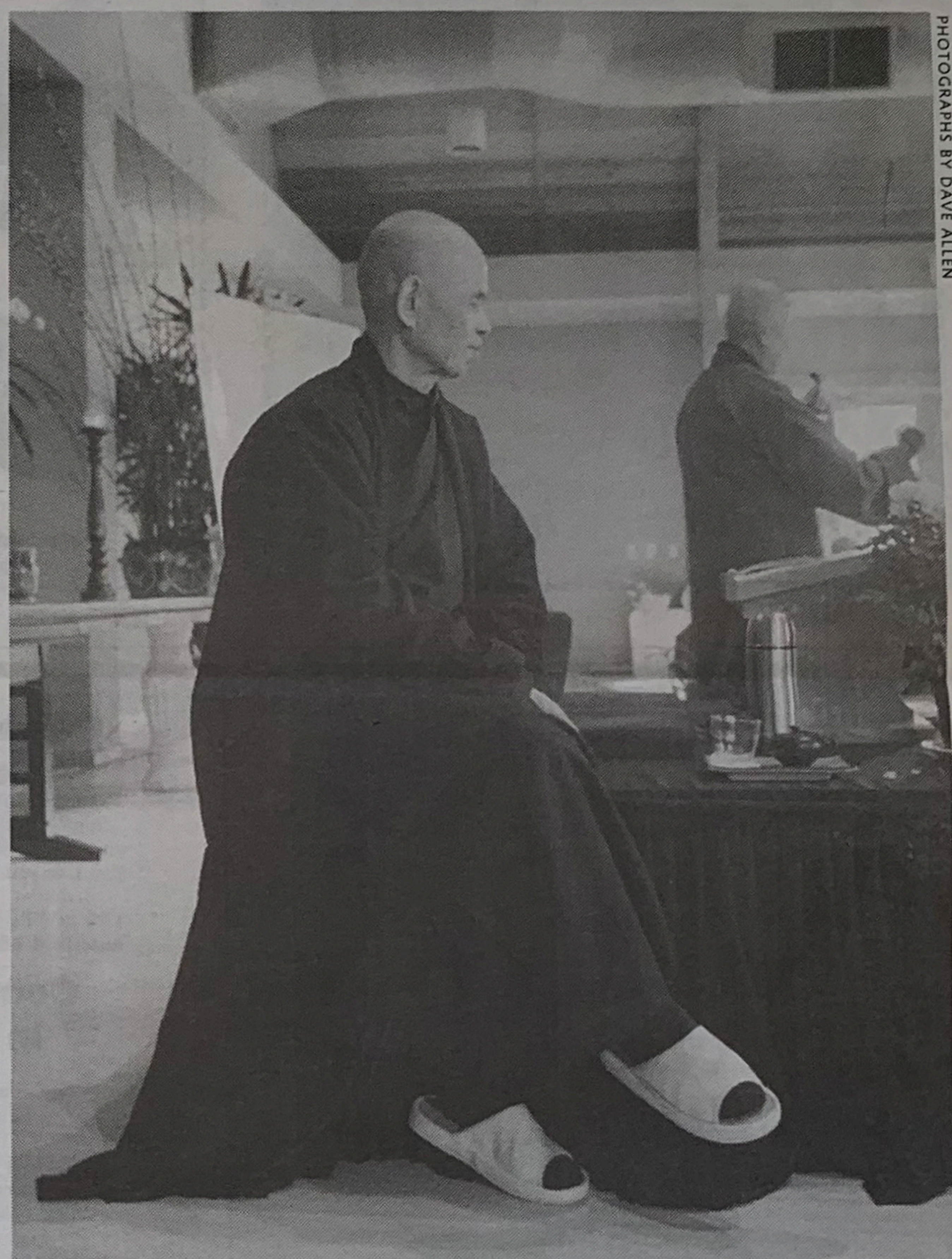
She is interrupted four times in 20 minutes by the pulse of her call-waiting system. She is sought by other journalists and by church members who have volunteered to make steamed buns for the alms round. The steamed buns will be filled with vegetables and tofu and wrapped in banana leaves. "Oh, my goodness! We have to make a few thousand pieces," says Nguyenhuu.

The public is encouraged to bring its own (vegetarian) lunch and (nonalcoholic) beverages. All told, more than a thousand people are expected to be there.

Following the alms round, Thich Nhat Hanh will speak in English and in Vietnamese for about 90 minutes. Lunch and (simultaneous) meditation

will follow. It's not exactly multitasking. "We don't talk when we eat," Nguyenhuu explains. That's going to be a lot of silent people. "Oh, you'd be surprised. It will be very, very quiet. Twice we organized a public talk held in Golden Hall for 3000 people, and everybody was *so-o-o-o* quiet."

The primary symbol of the Buddhist gift economy is the alms bowl. The monks and nuns, in formal dress — robes of yellow, brown, and gold — will carry them on Saturday. For things like airfare, they have to fundraise. Months ago, the church's website put the word out this way: "In order to realize this special event, we need your financial support." Their wish list included not only the airfare ("\$600 x 145 monastics from France = \$87,000" and "\$300 x 24 monastics from Vermont =



Thich Nhat Hanh

\$7200") but also \$1 million for the completion of a main meditation hall in Escondido.

Brother Phap Hai, whose name (given to him by "Thây") means "dharma ocean," is speaking by cell phone. (Nguyenhuu asked him to get one so organizers could more easily reach him during the planning of this event.) Of the new 6000-square-foot hall that can "easily" fit 600 people, he says, "One of the nice things about it is that we decided to honor the land here. We didn't move the rocks. Protruding through the floor, we have the wonderful rocks that are here."

The church purchased the land, once used by the California Conservation Corps, for \$4 million. (The seller was San Diego County.) That's one heck of an alms bowlful. Does the church spend a lot of time on its fundraising efforts? Other nonprofit organizations certainly do. "Funnily

enough, we don't," says Brother Phap Hai. "It happens quite naturally. We just let people know what we need, and over time these things are taken care of. As monastics, we don't pay a lot of attention to these kinds of things. It happens. That's the Buddhist way. People in the community find out what the monastics need, and we in turn offer teachings and ourselves, and the community makes a commitment to support us in a very simple and concrete way."

— Jeanne Schinto

"In the Footsteps of the Buddha"
An Alms Round Procession
Saturday, January 31, 10:00 a.m.
San Dieguito County Park
Highland Drive
Solana Beach
Free (parking, \$2)
858-646-9695 or www.esangha.org



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