



Ven. Dr. Thich Thien-An

September 1926 - November 1980



Ven. Dr. Thich Thien-An came to Southern California in the summer of 1966 as an exchange professor at UCLA. Soon his students discovered he was not only a renowned scholar, but a Zen Buddhist monk as well. His students convinced Dr. Thien-An to teach the practice of meditation and start a study group about the other steps on the Buddhist path, in addition to the academic viewpoint.

Several years later, his enthusiastic followers encouraged Ven. Thien-An to apply for permanent residence and start a meditation center that included place for practitioners to live. Twenty-six years later, The International Buddhist Meditation Center (IBMC) continues to thrive.

The IBMC today consists of six houses on a residential street several miles west of downtown Los Angeles. Suto, as his students called him, believed in the importance of being accessible to those who face the dukkha of city living. Two of the houses in the compound are named for Vietnamese monks who self-immolated to bring the attention of the world to the horrors of the situation in Vietnam, an act which ultimately led to the downfall of the hated Diem regime. One of those monks, Ven. Tieu-Dieu, was Suto's father.

Suto was born in Hue and grew up in a Buddhist family. Even as a young boy, he would imitate the chanting and ceremony of the monks who came to their house to give blessings and receive dana. He entered the monastery at the age of 14 and continued his education, finally receiving a Doctor of Literature degree at the prestigious Waseda University in Japan. He then returned to Vietnam to found a university there.

Ven. Thien-An's vision of his work in the U.S. was to bring Buddhism into another culture, as always adapting to the national values and understandings. He understood the American mind and culture and had a sense of how the practice needed to differ for Americans to develop. He mentioned often how the West would eventually bring Buddhism back to the East.

When Saigon fell in 1975, Ven. Thien-An saw his responsibility and helped the boat people and other refugees from his homeland. The center became a residence for as many of the displaced as possible. Networking was done to ensure help for the others. The American monks joined with Vietnamese monks to do this Bodhisattva work.

The fleeing Vietnamese, having left all their material belongings as well as family and friends behind, were so relieved to find Buddhists when they got off the ships that many of them cried. Suto opened the first Vietnamese Buddhist temple in the United States. Eventually, he became the First Patriarch of Vietnamese Buddhism in America.

Suto's vision of Buddhism in America included a softening of the lines between different Buddhist traditions, and the Center has always included teachers from Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, as well as monks and students from many different countries. He encouraged interfaith as well as interBuddhist



activities, and provided opportunities for students who wished to become dharma teachers and continue to live the householder's life, rather than becoming monastics. Many American monks and nuns were also ordained, and a number of his disciples still continue his work, both at the IBMC and other centers.

Dr. Thien-An died at the age of 54 of cancer which had spread rapidly throughout his body, from his liver to his brain. In his last months, one could often find him sitting peacefully on the steps of the bell tower. It was a gift to be able to sit quietly next to him and feel the energy of his understanding. He had many plans but saw the reality of what was happening. He smiled, as he smiled often, a smile of great compassion and loving-kindness for all the world.

Read a chapter from Dr. Thien-An's book, *Zen Philosophy, Zen Practice*. 🌸

