

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Novice

by

Thich Nhat Hanh

1. Kinh Tam's parents obtained permission to let her attend a classical Chinese class for boys when she was younger, yet they refused to let her go to university as a young woman, their reason being that a woman's role was to get married and raise a family. Do you feel that her parents raised Kinh Tam with mixed messages about education and the role of women in their society? How does Kinh Tam's education and upbringing contribute to her decision to leave her home and "travel for the sake of learning" (p. 25)?
2. In chapter 2, Kinh Tam thinks, "People, it seemed, were always allowing jealousy, sadness, anger, and pride to determine their behavior. So much suffering was caused by misunderstandings and erroneous perceptions about one another" (p. 20). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

3. Kinh Tam had a very tangible and positive effect on the temple and those around her. Even in death she continued to change people's lives for the better. Is it Kinh Tam's innate personality or her deep faith in Buddha's teachings that contributes more to her ability to do so? Do you know anyone who has a similar effect on people? What makes him or her stand out?
4. In chapter 6, Kinh Tam faces the decision to either reveal her true identity to prove her innocence or endure the false accusation in order to continue living the monastic life she loves. Why does she make the choice she does? If you were in her position, what would you choose and why?
5. Have you ever been falsely accused of something? How did you respond? After reading *The Novice*, would you act differently next time an injustice is committed against you? No matter what your faith tradition is, what lesson(s) can you take away from Kinh Tam's story?
6. What is it about the Buddhist faith that helped Kinh Tam endure the hardships in her life? How does an active spiritual life, of any faith, help an individual live out his or her life?
7. "The Buddha taught that hatred is never removed by adding more hatred. The only stream that can wash away the pain of unjust acts is the sweet water of loving-kindness and compassion" (p. 83). Jesus also taught to love your enemy and turn the other cheek. Why is love an appropriate response to hatred and enemies?

8. Thien Si and Thi Mau commit the two great injustices against Kinh Tam and thus act as foils to her character. What personality traits stand out in Thien Si and Thi Mau when compared to Kinh Tam? What does Thich Nhat Hanh want to teach his readers through these two characters?
9. At Kinh Tam's funeral, the abbot reads an extended excerpt from a sutra on how to deal with various situations in life. He reads, "You should learn from the Earth. Whether people spread pure and fragrant flowers, freshwater, and sweet milk on the Earth or discard onto it things of filth and stench like blood, pus, urine, and garbage, the Earth quietly receives everything without feelings of pride, attachment, grievance, or being humiliated. Why? Because the Earth has immense embracing capacity and has the ability to receive and transform whatever it takes in" (pp. 101–2). Why is this excerpt an appropriate way to end the novella? How are the four elements—earth, water, fire, and air—an accurate metaphor for our spiritual life?
10. Thien Tai grows up to be very much like Kinh Tam, in both temperament and looks. Since there is no biological connection between Kinh Tam and Thien Tai, how do you account for their similarities? What role does meditation play in Kinh Tam's rearing of Thien Tai?
11. *The Novice* is based on the Vietnamese legend of Quan Am Thi Kinh, "a real, live bodhisattva renowned in Vietnam for manifesting infinite forgiveness and endless, patient forbearance" (p. 108). Her story is told to children to teach them to be strong in the face of hard-

ships. What makes her story so compelling as a teaching tool?

12. If Kinh Tam was able to attend university, do you think she still would have pursued the life of a Buddhist monk? What is it about the monastic life that appealed to her so much that she would risk all that she did to continue to live that way of life?