Like many people across the United States, I’ve been inspired by the bravery and eloquence of our young generation in galvanizing our country to fight for sensible gun control laws after the tragic Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. Trapped in the stereotype that our youths were content to stare at their cellphone screens all day, people were surprised to see such poise and articulation in television interviews and speeches from this generation of teens to the degree that some media reported many individuals being convinced the Parkland students were child actors.

The movement our young generation started made me reflect on our own tradition and how it was built and powered by the mindful hearts and hands of a young Thay and many courageous young Vietnamese adults. Even amidst resistance to modernize Buddhism, they had a deep conviction to practice mindfulness, create a community of brotherhood and sisterhood, and help people with their suffering.

Mindful Action, Mindful Youths, Mindful Community

As a young monk in his twenties, Thay wanted to offer a new kind of Buddhism, one that would help save his country from conflict, division, and war. With four other monks, he formed a movement, deeply believing action must be grounded in awareness and mindfulness. The young monks encountered resistance to change from a majority of Buddhist establishment elders, who dismissed their ideas and silenced their voices—similar to responses we’ve seen from today’s advocates for gun ownership.

Despite confronting these obstacles to their dreams for social justice, Thay and his fellow monks refused to give up hope. Thay turned to community, both monastic and lay, for the support, strength, and energy to continue his efforts to change society; he created a Buddhist magazine, published books, established the Buddhist Student Union in 1960, and launched the School of Youth for Social Service in 1964. This fourfold Sangha was the first incarnation of our Wake Up movement.

“I was a young Dharma teacher, and my students in Saigon were just like my younger brothers and sisters,” Thay recalls in the book Inside the Now. “We shared a common vision and purpose and, even now, whenever I think of them, I still feel so much gratitude—for the love between teacher and student, and for the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood that we shared. This love has endured, and our intimate friendship has been able to nourish every other kind of love.”

My mother, Kimchi Nguyen, was one of those students then, as was Sister Chan Khong. Thay’s first thirteen students, whom he called “cedars”—evoking the symbolism of strong, hardy trees that would help support the Buddha’s teachings—grew into eighty and then over three hundred cedars who were members of the Buddhist Student Union. This was in a time when the Catholic regime—including then-President Ngo Dinh Diem—oppressed, arrested, and tortured Buddhists.