

Planting a seed

Memories of Thay

When Thay led walking meditation at Plum Village, he would sometimes stop for a few minutes in silence in front of a group of trees that stood right next to the Upper Hamlet car park. He had planted them himself years before and affectionately referred to them as 'my friends'. One day, Thay told us that he always looked at the forests in the valley while having breakfast in the morning and made contact with the trees inside. He reminded us that we are not separate from the plants. When we breathe in, the trees touch every cell of our body through the oxygen they produce. The trees are in us and we are in them. Then he asked the sangha to buy the forest in the valley to save it from being cleared at some point.

During another walking meditation, he led us into a small forest that did not belong to the sangha. In the treetops, nets and cages had been set up to catch songbirds, which are considered a delicacy in southern France. There was a ghostly silence. Thay walked carefully through the forest, while we followed him slowly, shocked by the sight. He wanted to teach us not to close our eyes to suffering and pain – neither to our own suffering, nor to the suffering in the world.

When we start to practice mindfulness, the first thing we often have to do is take care of our own pain. For most of us, this is the normal process. But over time, it is necessary to extend our compassion to other beings. Thay's compassion was especially directed towards the weakest: children, refugees, victims of war, people suffering from hunger, but also animals and plants. He took his heart and his practice wherever they were needed.

However, when we extend our compassion and turn to the suffering in the world, we can quickly become overwhelmed and fearful. We see the great pain in the world – with the wars; climate change; environmental destruction; refugees and discrimination – and we slide into despair and helplessness. What can we do?

In my practice, I follow 3 instructions from Thay to avoid slipping into feelings of being overwhelmed, powerless or afraid:

1. Stability

Thay emphasised again and again that we must be stable. Because if we are not stable within ourselves, we cannot take good care of others. We must practice and live peace, freedom, joy, lightness and love – here and now. Only then can we be there for other beings.

2. You are not alone

Thay often asked us to look with the eyes and the heart of Buddha; to walk with the feet of Buddha; to eat with the hands of Buddha and to speak with the mouth of Buddha. Because Buddha is within us. We just have to learn to touch him.

In my practice, I have replaced Buddha with Thay. When I make a decision, I often ask myself beforehand: 'What would Thay have done? What would Thay have decided?' This is how I make contact with Thay within me. Who or what is Thay within me? It is the energy of compassion and silent presence that is present in all of us – our Buddha nature.

3. Planting a seed

When we meditate while walking or working, we do not focus on the goal, but instead invest 100 % in this one step or in this one action. In the same way, when we are committed to climate change, equality, peace or animal welfare, we should not think about the results we want. We plant a seed – here and now – through our commitment, however small or large it may seem to us. Then we let go. We cannot know if and when the seed will grow. We trust that the energy we put in now will have an effect.

The very first suffragettes who campaigned for women's suffrage never voted themselves. Nevertheless, their efforts had a huge impact on all subsequent generations. Your efforts are effective, even if you may not see the result directly.

In a television programme, a former sex worker who now helps other women to leave prostitution was interviewed. The reporter wanted to know what the decisive moment was that made her decide to quit. She then told the reporter that she had been completely down at the time, but one day she was riding up an escalator in a subway station. A woman was coming up the opposite escalator. When their eyes met, the woman smiled at her. It was this smile that flipped a switch in the sex worker and she decided to quit her job.

Sometimes the seed you plant is a smile. And you never know what effect that smile will have. Here and now, you give the best that you can, and maybe it's 'only' a smile.

It's not about how much we do when we get involved. It is about doing it from an inner stability, with the knowledge that we are not alone and the desire to sow a seed of peace, hope and compassion in that moment.

Commitment was important to Thay. It was important to him to stand up for the weakest, to get involved and to speak up and out. That is why he coined the term 'Engaged Buddhism'. One of many examples comes from 2006. When another war broke out

between the Palestinian Hezbollah and the Israeli state - which was militarily supported by the American government - Thay wrote the following letter to the then US President George W. Bush:

Honourable George W. Bush
The White House
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.
Plum Village
Le Pey, 24240 Thénac
France
8.8.2006

Dear Mr President,

Last night I saw my brother (who died two weeks ago in the USA) coming back to me in a dream. He was with all his children. He told me "Let's go home together." After a millisecond of hesitation I told him joyfully: "OK, let's go."

Waking up from that dream at 5.00 a.m. this morning I thought of the situation in the Middle East and for the first time I was able to cry. I cried for a long time and I felt much better after about one hour. Then I went in the kitchen and made some tea. While making tea I realized that what my brother had said is true: Our home is large enough for all of us. Let us go home as brothers and sisters.

Mr President, I think that if you could allow yourself to cry like I did this morning, you will also feel much better. It is our brothers that we kill over there. They are our brothers. God tells us so and we also know it. They may not see us as brothers because of their anger, their misunderstanding, their discrimination. But with some awakening we can see things in a different way. And this will allow us to respond differently to the situation. I trust God in you. I trust the Buddha nature in you.

Thank you for reading

In gratitude and with brotherhood

Thich Nhat Hanh, Plum Village

Präsident George W. Bush, Das Weiße Haus, Washington, D.C., Vereinigte Staaten von Amerika

Plum Village
Le Pey, 24240 Thénac,
Frankreich
8.8.2006

Sehr geehrter Herr Präsident!

letzte Nacht sah ich meinen Bruder (der vor zwei Wochen in den USA gestorben ist) in einem Traum zu mir zurückkommen. Er war mit allen seinen Kindern zusammen. Er sagte zu mir: „Lass uns gemeinsam nach Hause gehen.“ Nach einer Millisekunde des Zögerns sagte ich ihm freudig: „OK, lass uns gehen.“

Als ich heute Morgen um 5.00 Uhr aus diesem Traum aufwachte, dachte ich an die Situation im Nahen Osten, und zum ersten Mal konnte ich weinen. Ich weinte sehr lange und fühlte mich nach etwa einer Stunde viel besser. Dann ging ich in die Küche und machte mir einen Tee. Während ich Tee kochte, wurde mir klar, dass das, was mein Bruder gesagt hatte, wahr ist: Unser Haus ist groß genug für uns alle. Lasst uns als Brüder und Schwestern nach Hause gehen.

Herr Präsident, ich glaube, wenn Sie sich erlauben könnten zu weinen, wie ich es heute Morgen getan habe, würden Sie sich auch viel besser fühlen. Es sind unsere Brüder, die wir dort drüben töten. Sie sind unsere Brüder. Gott sagt es uns, und wir wissen es auch. Sie sehen uns vielleicht nicht als Brüder, aus Wut, Unverständnis und Diskriminierung. Aber wenn wir aufwachen werden, können wir die Dinge anders sehen. Und das wird uns erlauben, anders auf die Situation zu reagieren. Ich vertraue Gott in Ihnen. Ich vertraue auf die Buddha-Natur in Ihnen.

Danke, dass Sie diesen Brief lesen

In Dankbarkeit und in Brüderlichkeit

Thich Nhat Hanh, Plum Village