

## **Thay in Disguise**

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***“...the idea that I could be Thay in disguise made me smile. I think that Thay would smile, too, and enjoy this practice. Instead of leading and being up front, he could relax and blend into the Sangha.”***

In the fall of 2017, I had the opportunity to stay at Lower Hamlet in Plum Village for four weeks. This was not my first visit; I had been blessed to attend the 21-Day Retreat in both 2012 and 2014 with Thay, the monastics, and the worldwide Sangha. As I walked some of the familiar paths, and listened to the sounds of the large meditation bells, I felt a sense of coming home. Yet something was missing; Thay's physical presence.

I first met Thay at the “Awakening the Heart” retreat in Vancouver, Canada, just after my mother had passed away with cancer in 2011. I went to this retreat with a heart that felt raw and open, simply wanting to sink into silence and be held by the loving energy of the Sangha. At one point during the retreat, I had the opportunity to sit close to Thay. I looked up and our eyes met, and time seemed to stand still. I received a beautiful transmission of love from his heart to mine. It was a holy sacred moment beyond words. This Buddhist Master had awakened my heart to the all-encompassing love beyond religion, culture and form.

Since that moment, I have attended many retreats with Thay and his monastics, both on his North American Tours, as well as at Plum Village. I have felt his smile light up a whole room. I have walked mindfully with Thay and the Sangha on the earth. I have felt the peaceful presence of sitting with Thay and the beloved community in silence. Like many people all over the world, I have been deeply touched by Thay's teachings and presence.

Yet when I returned to Plum Village this time, I realized how much I missed his physical presence. Thay often reminded us to see him in all his different forms, yet I still felt a deep sadness in my heart that nothing seemed to fill. Through the practice of mindfulness, I took time to breathe, to be with this feeling of sadness, and to see what lay beneath the surface. I realized a longing in me existed to see his beautiful smile, and to listen to his gentle encouraging words one more time.

Yet what exactly was I missing? What was I longing for?

Thay often told us to invite him to walk with us, to breathe with us, and to sit with us during our practice. This has been my way of staying in touch with him after leaving a retreat and returning home. I decided to try it at Plum Village. I began to

imagined I looked through Thay's eyes, and he looked through mine. I invited him to feel my solid footsteps on the ground for him. As I walked along familiar walking paths, I realized how intimately Thay knew these paths and trees. I imagined all the feet from around the world that have walked these sacred paths with Thay, then scattered like autumn leaves in all directions to the four corners of the Earth. I imagined the trees recognizing Thay, and Thay in them. I wondered if they recognized Thay in me? I heard the wind in their leaves, and it felt like they were clapping, so happy to see me, and Thay in me.

As the retreat continued, the idea that I could be Thay in disguise made me smile. I think that Thay would smile too, and enjoy this practice. Instead of leading and being up front, he could relax and blend into the Sangha and just be one of us (which he already is). At the Day of Mindfulness, "Thay-in-me" carefully sat down in the third row towards the center of the meditation hall. He watched as the monastics filing up to the front and listened as they chant beautifully. He didn't have to worry about being bell master this morning. He could allow himself to relax and absorb the sound of the bell and the monastics' voices in every cell of his body.

Sister Chan Hoi Nghiem, the abbess of Lower Hamlet, gave the Dharma talk that morning. She looked so beautiful, yet confident, sitting in Thay's place. Thay would be so proud of her. He knows the resistance she felt towards the heavy responsibility of becoming abbess, but seemed to have really stepped into this position and let go of her doubts. She gave a beautiful Dharma talk on the Four Immeasurable Minds: Love, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity. "Thay-in-me" felt so much of Thay in Sister Chan Hoi Nghiem, and Thay's joy for his continuation in her and the Sangha.

After the Dharma talk and a short tea break, we gathered by the bell for walking meditation. Instead of leading and being up front in walking meditation, Thay could blend into the middle of the Sangha and watch the monastics continuing to lead us beautifully into the future. "Thay-in-me" watched as the line of practitioners wound its way through the forest, becoming a river of peace together. I wondered what people would think if they knew Thay in disguise was walking beside them, behind them, or inside them?

The same happened at the formal lunch, an opportunity for the Sangha to eat in silence in the meditation hall. At a formal lunch, the monks and laymen sit in long lines on one side, facing in towards the nuns and laywomen on the other side. Traditionally, Thay would sit at the head of the front row of monks. Today, however, "Thay-in-me" sat towards the middle of the women's' section. From here he saw the beautiful earnest faces of his monastic sons, and the beautiful upright backs of his monastic daughters. It was a different view, a different perspective. Again, my heart was full of love and gratitude for being able to see anew through Thay's eyes.

As I sit quietly, I realize that some of my sadness has dissolved, that Thay is truly here in both me and in the Sangha. I remember something Thay said in one of his last Dharma talks at the 21-Day Retreat in 2014, seeming to look directly at me. I wrote it down in my journal:

*“Are you caught in longing for something in the future?  
What are you longing for? You are already what you seek.  
The wave already knows she is water.”*

I realize I’ve been looking for Thay outside myself, when he’s been here inside me all along. There’s a Thay in disguise in each one of us. Our practice is simply to breathe and be aware of his presence in each and every moment. That presence ultimately points us back to the love we already are.

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