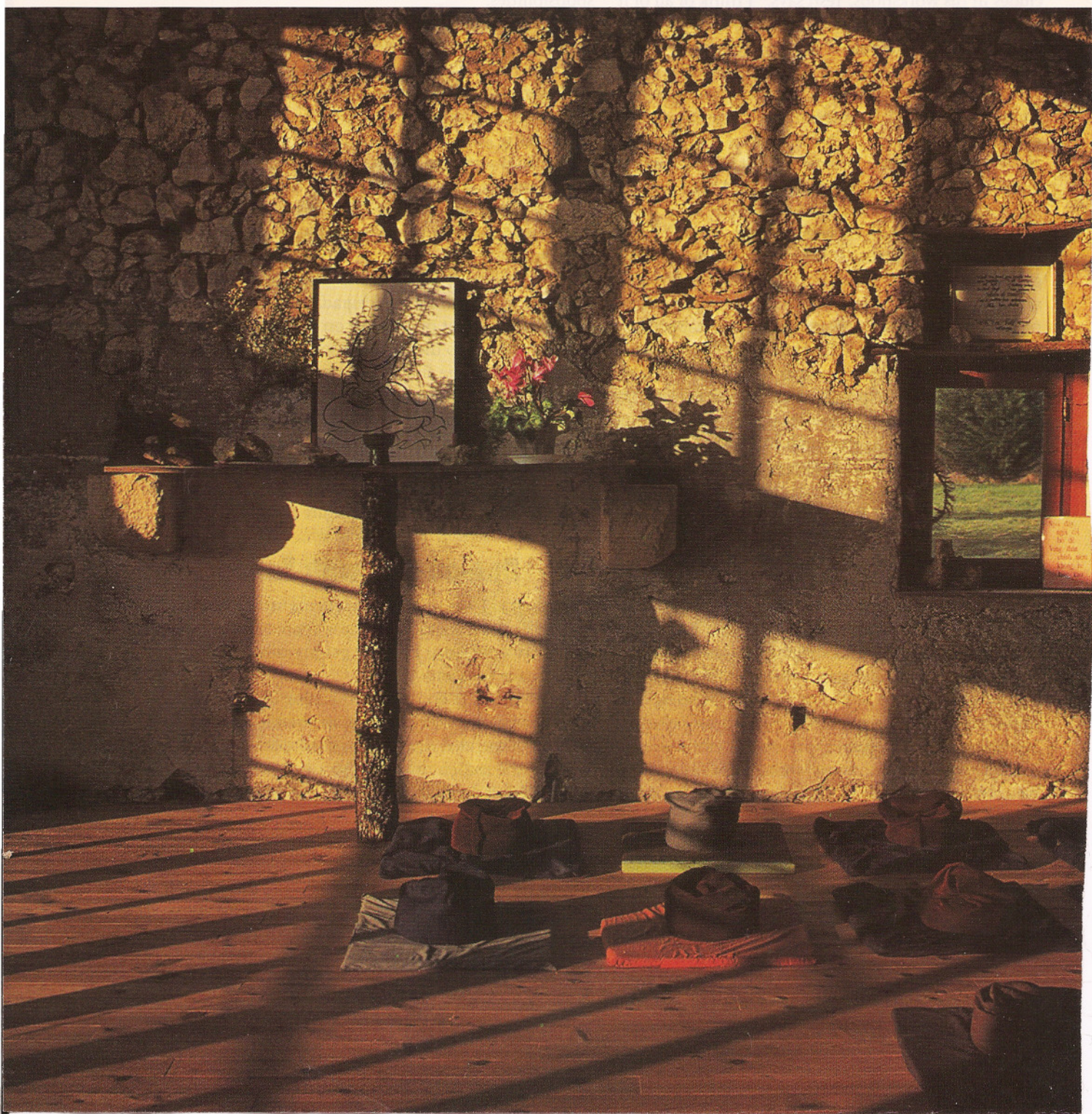


Pilgrimage to



Plum Village

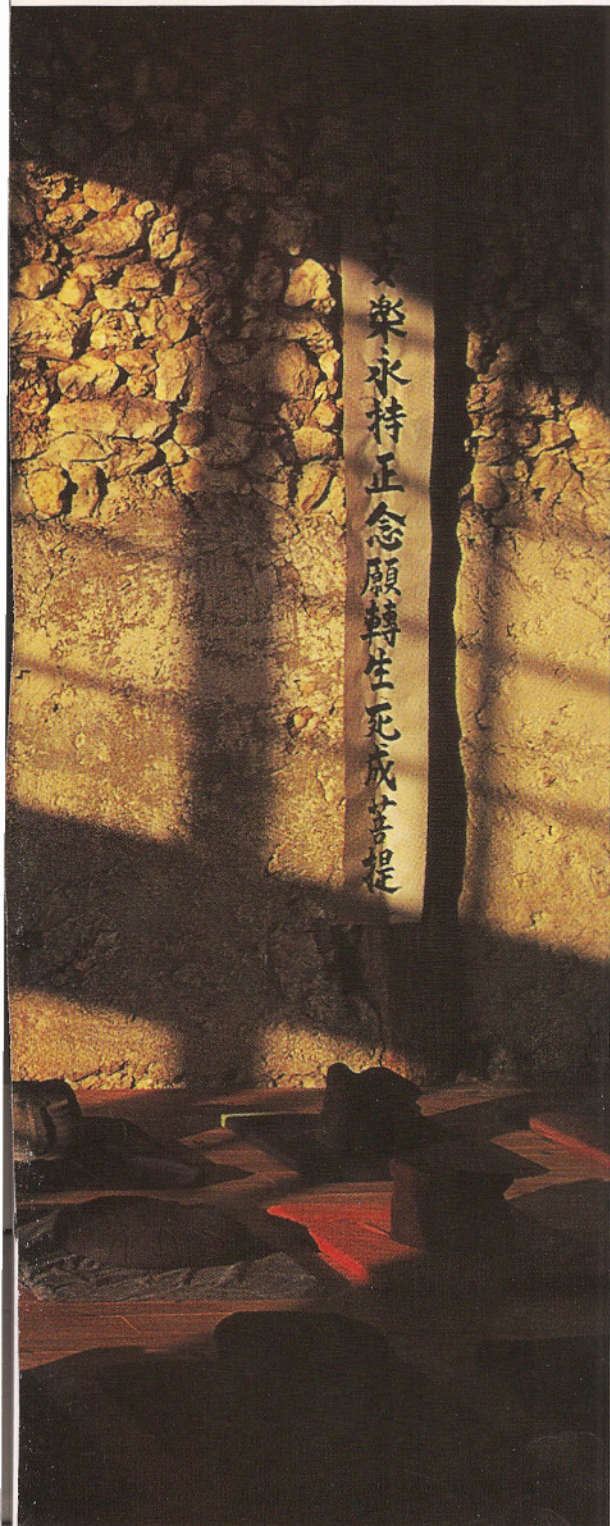
A writer explores the joys and trials of mindfulness practice at the French community founded by Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh.

By Kristin Barendsen
Photographs by Simon Chaput

Two and three abreast, we walk slowly down a dirt path, inhaling with one step, exhaling with the next. The left side of the path opens onto rows of plum trees, and some people veer off to gather ripe fruit where it has fallen. The rest of us continue to follow Thich Nhat Hanh as he leads us on a walk with no destination. "With each step, we arrive," he says.

It is my fourth day at Plum Village, Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist monastery in southwestern France, and I am glad to have finally arrived. After two years of studying with his students in the U.S., I have made my journey to the source, to the practice center where *Thây* (pronounced "tie," Vietnamese for "grandfather teacher") lives and teaches the Dharma. A monk, peace activist, and author of over 70 books such as *Being Peace* and *Miracle of Mindfulness*, *Thây* is one of the most beloved Buddhist teachers of our time.

Exiled from his native Vietnam for his efforts to stop the Vietnam War, *Thây* founded Plum Village in 1982 as a practice community and retreat center where guests such as social workers and peace activists could come to be renewed. Today Plum Village is five distinct properties, called hamlets, spread over several kilometers of farmland and green rolling hills. Each year more than a thousand guests from all over the world come during the summer retreat,



a month-long session geared toward family practice.

Occasionally Plum Village will hold a session such as the one I'm attending—an intensive retreat for adult practitioners. Four hundred of us have gathered for three weeks in September to study the Buddha's core teachings in a retreat titled "The Heart of the Buddha." Though more intensive than the summer session, this is still not your typical Zen retreat. There are no marathon meditation sessions, no strict codes of silence. Since he coined the term "engaged Buddhism" in the 1950s, Thích has focused less on sitting meditation and more on applying the fruits of sitting to everyday life. So we continue the activities of everyday life—walking, working, relating to people—and we learn how to do them mindfully, with full awareness.

The breath is our point of focus. We are encouraged to notice it throughout the day, to follow our natural inhalations and exhalations. From this conscious breathing a stillness grows, and from this stillness we

can look deeply at our actions, thoughts, and feelings. "Be still and know," Thích says.

Every time a bell—or a telephone—rings, we stop whatever we are doing and breathe three times. Thích teaches us *gathas*, verses that keep our attention on the breath: "Breathing in, I know I am breathing in/ Breathing out, I know I am breathing out." Or, "In, out/Deep, slow/Calm, ease/Smile, release."

I repeat this gatha to myself as I walk past the plum trees. Beyond them is a field of sunflowers past their season, scorched and shriveling, heads bowed in contemplation. From up ahead near Thích a bell rings, and we all stop. I breathe three times, taking in the sun, the cloudless sky, and my happiness that I am here.

Many steps later I arrive where Thích and the others are gathered, in a clearing under the cover of trees. His soft voice is amplified by a microphone clipped to his brown robes, but those around him form a close circle. I have to climb partway up a tree to see him.



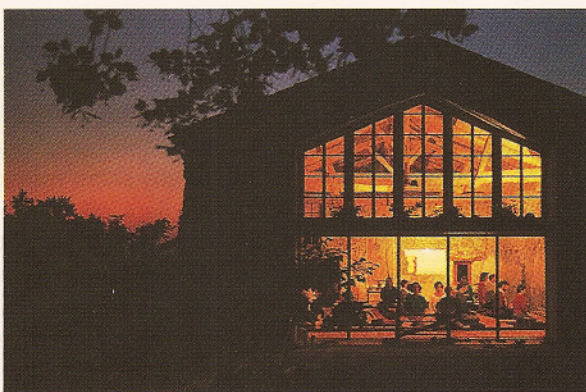
When he walks his feet seem to pay gentle reverence to the ground; his pace is slow and majestic, almost hypnotizing. I think of Richard Baker-roshi's description of Thây: "a cross between a snail, a cloud, and a piece of heavy machinery: a true religious presence."

His demeanor is never somber, however. His eyes often flicker with impish humor, a boyishness that belies his 70 years. In his Dharma talk earlier that morning, Thây described eating a pot of yogurt while watching cows graze along the hillside. "I turned to my attendant and said, 'Dear one, the cow is eating grass in order to make my yogurt, and I am now eating the yogurt to make a Dharma talk. So somehow, the cow is offering the Dharma talk.'"

Thây's talks this retreat revolve around the Buddha's Four Noble Truths: In brief, that suffering exists, that we can find the causes of suffering, that we can remove the causes and thus the suffering, and that there is a path to liberation from all suffering. "Suffering is very important," Thây says. "Without suffering we cannot grow, we cannot get the peace and joy we deserve."

Though Thây talks about suffering, he re-frames it in a way characteristic of his approach to Buddhism. He proposes changing the order of the Noble Truths so that the first truth is "well-being is possible." "We can make it more joyful for beginners. Instead of beginning with ill-being and ignoble path, they may begin with well-being and the Noble Path."

While other Buddhist teachers advocate watching the mind with detachment, Thây urges us to actively cultivate happiness. We do this by "watering the seeds of joy," turning our attention to the blue sky, a child's laugh, the miracle that we have sight. That's not to say we should ignore or suppress unpleasant feelings—rather, we can embrace these feelings and learn to transform them. "Our suffering, our fear, our pain is our garbage. . . . The Buddha smiles to his garbage because he knows, like an organic gardener, that he can very well transform garbage back into flowers."



Left: Evening meditation at Transformation Hall.

Opposite: "I send my heart along with the sound of the bell." Every time a bell is rung at Plum Village, residents stop what they're doing and breathe three times.

Certainly Thây is someone who knows about suffering. A monk since age 16, he was a strong voice for peace when war intensified in his country. He led his fellow monks and nuns in taking their practice into the war zones, rebuilding villages, developing health care programs, and helping refugees reach safety. In 1966, Thây held a press conference in Washington, D.C., calling for a cease-fire. From that day on, the Vietnamese government has forbidden him to return.

A Day at Plum Village

When I am halfway back along the path the lunch bell rings. We all stop to breathe, and resume walking at a noticeably faster pace. My mind plays through one of its usual Dharma discussions: Is it greed to line up early for meals, or is it skillfulness, since the food sometimes runs out?

I take my place in line behind someone I know from back home, and soon become part of the low buzz of conversation that has spread through the crowd. A nearby nun pulls a bell from her pocket and rings it; the line quiets. "Please enjoy waiting in silence," she says.

Lunch is a green salad, white and brown rice, and a Vietnamese stew of carrots, potatoes, tofu, and coconut milk. I carry my bowl to the shade of a bamboo tree, where a circle of people are silently eating.

I look into my rice and remember Thây's instruction to see in each grain the sun, the rain, the soil, and all the human effort that brought this food to my bowl. Before lifting the fork to my mouth, I breathe deeply. The food tastes good, and before my bowl is empty I find I am satisfied.

With the next bell, the silent period is over, and soon I am chatting away with a woman from East Berlin. I am meeting wonderful people at Plum Village, and I for one am glad it's not a silent retreat. It's a chance to make personal connections with Buddhists from all

over the world and to discuss our shared retreat experiences.

After lunch I walk the four kilometers uphill to the Upper Hamlet, my home base. The road winds past farmlands and neat rows of vineyards. Though we are in the heart of French wine country, we won't be making wine-tasting excursions. For these three weeks, we have agreed to follow certain rules based on monastic life, including drinking no alcohol, eating a vegetarian diet, and refraining from sexual activity.

“The cow is eating grass in order to make my yogurt, and I am now eating the yogurt to make a Dharma talk. So somehow, the cow is offering the Dharma talk.”

These guidelines sound easy since, for better or worse, they approximate my normal life. What I do have misgivings about is the prospect of staying in a tent during the inevitable rains, it being September in France. I chose to bring my tent for the privacy and affordability. Indoor accommodations are, well, monastic, with foam mattresses on the concrete floors of dormitory rooms. So I've pitched my tent in a wooded grove just off a walking meditation path, where light slants through a long, colorful tunnel of foliage, illuminating individual leaves.

I am on bathroom-cleaning duty today, and due to some ancestral debt I have been assigned the bathroom with squat toilets, badly in need of roto-rooting. “Try *not* to breathe deeply,” I say to my cleaning partner. We sing a song Sister Chân Không taught us before the Dharma talk: “Whenever I go to the bathroom, I feel happy.” We giggle, but at the same time I think about the message of her song: Many people in Vietnam do not have toilets at all.

At 4 p.m. the bell rings for discussion groups. Guests are organized into “family groups” according to language and home Sangha (Buddhist community); we work, eat dinner, and discuss themes raised in the Dharma talks. My group is

Walking meditation in the farmland of Plum Village.

half Bay Area, half English speakers from more exotic locales like Sweden, Moscow, and Poland. Today's topic is “What causes you suffering?” “Caffeine, chocolate, and unavailable men,” one woman volunteers. Others talk candidly about histories of drug addiction, eating disorders, depression.

David, an English teacher in Japan, tells how he used Thây's reconciliation techniques to mend his relationship with his parents. John, a British peace worker in Bosnia, talks about practicing walking meditation across a field of sniper fire: “You're as much a target whether you run or walk,” he says. “And if you run, you are giving in to fear.”

When the next bell rings, I realize I have only 10 minutes to retrieve my zafu from my tent before sitting meditation. At walking meditation speed, I won't make it on time. So I walk serenely to the forest path and when the coast is clear I take off running, following my breath. It feels good to move; my body has been crying out for exercise. I think, isn't this just as mindful as a slow walk? Certainly a

world-class sprinter runs with perfect mindfulness. Rounding a bend in the path I nearly collide with Brother Doji, a French monk. “Sorry,” I whisper. He tries to ignore my presence, but looks privately annoyed. Perhaps he was just seconds away from enlightenment.

I jog back along a different path and make it to meditation just as the doors are closing. I sit in front of the altar, where candles illuminate a golden Buddha and offerings of fruit and flowers. The group energy fuels my meditation. For maybe two minutes my mind



is empty of thoughts, except for a running commentary on the fact that my mind is empty of thoughts.

After our group shares dinner under the shade of a linden tree, a few of us decide to take a sunset stroll to a nearby church. As we walk the church bells ring, and we stop, breathing in the cool, clean air of evening. Below the church is a lake shaped like a keyhole, with water so clear it looks like an opening to the sky. We watch the Earth revolve to meet the sun, and I feel we are witnessing the essence of impermanence.

When we return it is time for exercises called "Deep Relaxation" and "Touching the Earth," led by Sister Chân Không. We lie on our backs in a posture of receptivity. The nun's soothing voice drops me immediately into alpha waves as she takes us on a tour of our internal organs. We express our gratitude to each organ and try to relax every cell. We then begin a series of prostrations in which we see ourselves as part of the

stream of ancestors and descendants, of all the Earth's people and species, and of limitless time and space. "I let go of my idea that I am this body with a limited life span . . . the disintegration of this body does not touch me, just as when the plum blossom falls, it is not the end of the plum tree."

Afterward we set up the hall for the last sitting period of the day. During the first 20-minute period I am too relaxed, almost hallucinating, so I opt out of the second period and begin a slow walk to my tent. There is no moon out

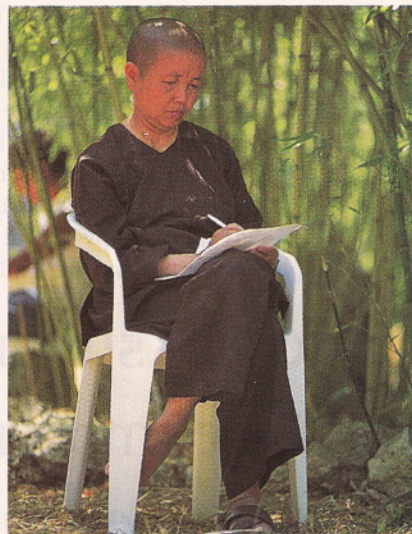
tonight, and I have forgotten my flashlight, so when I reach the grove I extend my arms and trust the ground with each step. It occurs to me that I feel utterly safe here, and I chuckle when I think of doing this in my urban neighborhood at home. I enjoy this safety so much that I walk deliberately beyond my tent and Braille-step my way along the length of the walking meditation path, hoping Brother Doji is not doing the same.

From the beginning of evening meditation until after breakfast the next morning is Noble Silence, a period in which we are to make eye contact and smile only, but not speak. It is a relief to have this haven from speech. So in the small bathroom we navigate around each other with hand signals.

Sleep comes easily and deeply. I sleep straight through the night here, something I didn't even know I could do.

Culture Lay and Monastic

The days pass with this basic framework, plus a liberal dose of special events. There are concerts, tea ceremonies, a wedding. We celebrate Rosh Hoshana and Yom Kippur, the Jewish high holidays, with meditations on forgiveness and evening programs of prayer and singing. A Jewish-German ex-



Above: Vietnamese nun Sister Chân Không.

Left: Thích Nhất Hạnh



change night provides an opportunity for an open, moving dialogue between these groups. Author Natalie Goldberg leads a lively discussion on art and the Dharma, and performance artist Nina Wise shares a hilarious parody of life at Plum Village. Later Nina observes, "Some of the best moments of this retreat have been in contexts where Thây is not present. To me, that's a sign of incredibly skillful teaching—we've integrated the teachings and are applying them on our own."

"You do not suffer because things are impermanent. You suffer because things are impermanent and you think they are permanent."

Those who have been coming to Plum Village since its early days a decade ago talk about how Thây's interaction with the public has changed. "Back then, you could just go up and chat with him," says Paul, a London musician. "Now he's practically a celebrity. It's hard even for his senior students to get an interview with him." I am grateful to be alive and here during his lifetime, but I wonder if I haven't missed the mark by 10 years.

One day, however, I am lucky. Talking with others around a picnic table, I see Thây approaching, flanked by two young monks. I slide over on the bench; to my surprise, he joins us. "This is a dish people ate in the time of the Buddha," he says, opening the lid of a wooden bowl to reveal a yellow mixture of rice, beans, and coconut milk. He curves the fingers of his right hand into the shape of a spoon. "The Buddha ate like this," he says, pretending to eat from his hand. "You can try it." He guides my fingers into the spoon shape and scoops some rice into my hand. It tastes sweet and fragrant. He gives some to the others, and tells us more about the food of the Buddha's time. He is gentle and grandfatherly, and takes an obvious delight in this simple offering.

After Thây moves on, I talk with Terri, a lay resident of Plum Village. I ask her how the community has changed over the years. "It's become much more

monastic," she says. While the number was originally close to equal, monastics now outnumber lay residents four to one. Terri says that in recent years Thây has seemed to focus more attention on training the young monks and nuns. She speculates that after living so long among Western laypeople, Thây is returning to his roots in the Vietnamese monastic culture and developing his legacy. "I am advanced in years," Thây had said in a January Dharma talk. "And I don't know if I am going to arrive at the foot of the 21st-century hill. . . . But one thing is certain. I am going to climb this hill with my descendants. I don't agree with being a teacher for just three or four more years. I want to be a teacher and a companion for thousands of years."

At the same time, Thây continues to be an emissary of the Dharma to Westerners, giving lectures throughout Europe and leading retreats in America every other year. He has ordained several laypeople as Dharma teachers, and he is the founder and leader of the Order of Interbeing, an organization of some 400 laypeople committed to building local Sanghas and following certain codes of mindful conduct.

This odd mix of Asian monastic and Western lay culture forms the core of Plum Village. There is a polite distance between the groups, which is only predictable given the differences in culture, language, vows taken, and the way interaction is structured here. Officially the monks and nuns are not supposed to talk to laypeople except when teaching them, a rule that is not explicitly stated to laypeople but which we intuitively follow.

Rain and Suffering

About 10 days into the retreat, the clouds roll in and stay, bringing the rains I had dreaded. The Dharma hall becomes a cacophony of coughs and sneezes as unmerciful viruses spread through the crowd. Soon I fall prey. At night I try to stay warm with layers of wool and cotton but wake up nauseous and drenched in sweat. On the third night like this I wake at 4 a.m. and feel so bad I wonder if I should wake someone, try to find a doctor. I decide to try walking meditation instead, to see if the feeling will pass. As I focus my attention on lifting each foot, I remember Thây's advice to look deeply into the cause of my suffering.

Part of it is certainly my tent, now damp around the edges; I vow to find a way to sleep inside for a few nights. Another part is that I have forgotten about impermanence. "You do not suffer because things are imperma-

ment," Thây had said. "You suffer because things are impermanent and you think they are permanent." "Sickness is impermanent," I think as I lift my left foot. "Health is impermanent." I walk the perimeter of the meadow twice. The cool air feels good. When dawn comes I return to my tent and fall into a dream about a Plum Village nun shapeshifting, becoming bright autumn leaves that swirl about me as I step through the forest.

The physical discomfort of the rain and sickness becomes a strong Dharma teacher. I had expected a lot of life's difficulties to be removed in the seemingly idyllic context of a retreat center. But they are intensified, and there are no easy means of escape, nothing to do but sit with my discomfort and watch it.

We are beset by small but irritating challenges, such as chiggers, an invisible bug that leaves itchy red welts

in warm places. With infected ears and no hair dryer, I go for days without washing my hair, hiding it under a purple wool hat. I feel hideous, and decide the only thing to do is let go of vanity and my thoughts of impressing any cute international Buddhists.

These challenges tend to bring out the best in people. We share warm clothes, echinacea, cream for chigger bites. When I kneel on a wasp, immediately there are four people around me offering different remedies. I take dinner to a sick friend from Sri Lanka, and she later finds me my symbol of relief from suffering, a hair dryer.

Sometimes it feels like too much, however, to be surrounded by 400 potential friends. I might have six conversations on the way from the meditation hall to the bathroom and find the day's free time has evaporated. Or I try to avoid contact, and that doesn't feel good either. Even Noble Silence is no longer a haven. After 10 p.m., people gather for tea and conversation on the veranda—we call it the Noble Silence Cafe. Even after Sister Annabel turns out the overhead lights and rings bells to quiet us, people continue to whisper in the dark.

I'm part of the problem, not the solution, but at times I long for the deep silence of my first retreat with Thây in California. I had reached a place of such stillness that each moment seemed to unfold in slow motion and infinite detail. I could look into a person and see the whole universe and also be wistfully aware of their impermanence. It was a scary, exhilarating feeling; my mind was blown. I had wanted it to be blown again at Plum Village, but it isn't happening.

I meet with a Dharma teacher in the room above the kitchen, a zafu storage area. Leaning against a tower of cushions, I tell the



Above: Making paper lanterns for the Full Moon Festival.

Left: The altar in Transformation Hall.



continued on page 146

Pilgrimage to Plum Village

continued from page 81

teacher I feel torn between socializing and silence. She encourages me to return to the foundation of the practice, to focus on each slow step as I walk, to take advantage of every scheduled sitting, and perhaps also sit during free periods. "You can be a still center amidst all the activity . . . a mindfulness bell for others."

I walk out of that meeting very slowly and go directly to the Dharma hall, responding to greetings with just a smile. After the evening meditation it is Noble Silence, and I walk past the veranda, determined to sit alone and write in my journal. But three of my favorite people are discussing how they've dealt with family conflicts using the teachings, and I can't resist. As I join them, it occurs to me that the socializing here is not superficial chitchat but explorations of the Dharma in our lives. And we are learning to relate to each other with the tools of practice.

One night our family group gathers for Beginning Anew, a ritual used for resolving conflicts within a Sangha. We practice only the first part of the ritual: "flower watering," telling others what we like about them with the group as witness. At first I am resistant, concerned that people might be left out and feel hurt—perhaps myself included. But as the evening unfolds and people describe the kind and generous acts of others, I feel a part of the connections formed between others, as if our web of friendships is drawing tighter. Early in the retreat I had felt some friction with a few guests, but as their good qualities are enumerated by other Sangha members, I see them in an entirely new light. I can't stop smiling. After the ending bells are rung, we linger, hugging and thanking each other.

It's the night of the full moon, and as I stand staring at the moon I want to cry. This retreat is about Sangha, I realize. About dwelling in appreciation of others. Perhaps it's not my mind that has been blown this time, but my heart.

Suddenly I understand some of Thây's teachings in a new light. He often speaks of Sangha as an element crucial to our planet's survival. "The practice of Buddhist meditation can no longer be the practice of individuals alone. We have to practice as a group, as a community, as a nation. The community that can show the way of compassion and loving kindness will be the Buddha of the 21st century." Through all the Dharma talks he has woven the thread of Sangha—how he believes the next Buddha, Maitreya, will take the form not of an individual but of a Sangha; how we practice not just for ourselves, but to encourage each others' practice. Perhaps that is our challenge as guests at Plum Village—to learn to support each other both verbally and in silence.

My last day at Plum Village a young American monk is playing a rocking version of the Heart Sutra on his guitar. A circle has gathered around him, and people are beginning to swing with the music. The sun is out for the first time in a week, and I feel so much energy I have to dance. Someone whispers to me that dancing is not appropriate in front of the monks. So I walk mindfully off the property and break into a run. I run along the road past the church, past the vineyards. Layers of slowness, of restraint, fall off me like robes. My blood is pure movement. I feel aware of every molecule in my body and my joy to be alive, a joy made more intense and perhaps more accessible by weeks of stillness.

Kilometers later, I turn around and skip back in long strides. I see my friend Maria up ahead and catch up to her. "I think I've just had a mindfulness breakdown," I say. "I couldn't stand to be slow for another moment."

"Being mindful doesn't necessarily mean imitating Thây," she says. "We need to discover our own ways of being mindful and present. That's why it's the *art* of mindfulness."

Reflecting on this, I don't think Thây would disagree. He said that one purpose of a retreat is "to learn to do it at home." By making the practice our own, we are better able to take it home.

Later in the Buddha hall, I pack my clothes. I think about what I would like

to bring home with me: the friendship I've made, the deep sense of calm, the ability to really rest. But I know all I really need is my inbreath and my outbreath—one foot, and then the other.

"We are on equal footing with the Buddha," Thây said in one of his Dharma talks. "If the Buddha can influence the world, create the world, make the world more beautiful, then we can do like him. Because we have Buddhahood in us, the capacity of waking up, of understanding, and of loving.

"It is very comfortable to know that the Buddha has not done everything. He has done what he can do, and there are a lot of things left for us to do. We can do better than the Buddha." ♦

Kristin Barendsen is a contributing editor of Yoga Journal. She wrote about Ecstatic Body Postures in our March/April issue.

RESOURCES

For more information, contact Plum Village, Meyrac, 47120 Loubes-Bernac,