

Where is Thay?

Vulture Peak Gathering, 2016-06-08 Upper Hamlet

Lay dharma teacher Eveline Beumkes offers a teaching during the 21-Day Retreat.

Yesterday the Dharma teachers were invited to meet in Upper Hamlet and Sister Chan Khong started our coming together with a question: "Dear Friends, I have a riddle for you: *Where is Thay?*" No one answered, but we all smiled. And I thought, right away, "Wow, this is exactly the theme of my talk. This is what I want to speak about tomorrow: *Where is Thay?*" A little bit more precisely, for me the theme is 'in what way Thay is with me?'

This has been a burning question for me, right from the moment I met Thay. I came from a very dark place. I had been looking for so long and finally I found Thay and the practice. So precious! And right away I was afraid that I might lose Thay, that I might lose him before knowing what I needed to know. Because I felt very closed, I felt very fearful, unhappy and hopeless and I knew that I needed to learn from Thay in order to find the way out. He was the only one who could teach me. So I was afraid that he ... that he might continue his journey before I had received the information I needed to be able to swim by myself.

I'll give you a little bit of background information about the place where I came from, so you may understand better my happiness to find Thay.

When I was eleven or twelve years old, the world turned grey. I lost my joy. I was very surprised, I didn't understand it. I used to enjoy playing and going to school and all of a sudden everything lost its meaning. I didn't care anymore doing this or that. I didn't understand it. This state of mind stayed for about a year, and then it fortunately dissolved. But it has been coming back, more or less intense. And it made me question, "What am I doing here on earth? What is the reason of my life? What is the meaning of life?"

When I was 18, there was a booklet about the state of the environment, a report from the Club of Rome. It was called **Dead Spring** and on the cover was a dead tree. I haven't read the book. I understood right away what was in it and I felt hopeless. Already for some years, when I was washing the dishes in the evening, I wondered ... "When everybody in Amsterdam, in Holland, all over the world, is putting soap in the dish-washing water a few times a day, how can we drink the water? How can we continue to survive?" And then this is only dish-washing water.

So when I saw this booklet with the dead tree, it confirmed my fear. When I spoke about this with other people, they said, "Eveline, don't worry. Nature is very strong. It can heal itself." Nobody understood my fear. I felt very alone for a long time, and I stopped talking about it. But I always had this fear of what is going to come. I felt a black cloud above my

head and I didn't see a way out. It felt meaningless to me to do anything. There was no sense in doing anything. So this was not a happy place to be.

I thought, "Well, this is it. This seems to be it. I will have to put up with this and live my life." I did, not very happy. And then when I was 28, I read a book about parapsychology. When I finished reading it, I thought, "You never know, maybe there is more between heaven and earth than I know, maybe..." So there was a small opening and I started to explore different spiritual traditions. I started to read books and going to workshops and I found a book of Etty Hillesum, the Diary of Etty Hillesum.

Etty was a Jewish woman in the Second World war. She was 28, just like me at that time and she became a friend. Every day i read a few pages of her diary. Etty showed me a way. She died in the war, so she didn't survive, but I read in her book that... You could follow her way, day by day, you could see how she was growing, how compassion and understanding were growing in her. And I saw that the darker the situation she was in - she went to a camp and the situation for the Jews in Holland became more and more difficult - the faster her inner light was growing and shining. Her strength was growing very fast. That gave me hope, because with the idea that in my life very dark times might come, now I had hope that, however dark it might get, it may help me to grow in the direction of the light faster. So I was less afraid of the darkness to come.

As i kept looking in different directions, the longing to find a teacher and a path grew stronger and stronger. But i didn't want to make a compromise, so I continued searching. Then, one day, I was so lucky to find **The Miracle of Mindfulness**, a very small booklet written by a Vietnamese monk. Before finishing it, I knew, "This is it. Now I have found what I have been looking for all these years."

Half way the book is an exercise, "washing the dishes in mindfulness". I was eager to try it and I clearly remember my experience. It felt so different to wash the dishes and really be aware of the movement of my hand, the temperature of the water and the contact with the cup i was holding and suddenly joy opened up in me. This was what I had been looking for. I felt out of touch and hopeless; what I missed was feeling the connection with things. And here I felt a real, direct connection. So I was very happy. I knew "this is my path."

But now, the teacher... The author was a monk, living in Vietnam, i thought. Who can describe my surprise when, two days after finishing reading this book, I read somewhere in a newspaper that the author, Thich Nhat Hanh, was coming to Amsterdam - yes! - giving a meditation weekend there. I was very curious to meet him. As I came from a slightly Christian background, Buddhism was something to be very carefully explored. When i met Thay, right away, I felt so moved. His gentle energy, his smile, touched my heart.

It was May when Thay and Sister Chan Khong came to Amsterdam and when i heard about Plum Village I decided to go there that summer. When I arrived (Lower Hamlet then hosted about 60 people, mostly Vietnamese and 6 westerners) I felt so happy, I felt so extremely

happy. It felt really like coming home. And I've heard so many people after me using the same words: "It feels like coming home here."

When I went back to Amsterdam I thought "Now my life has changed, now I will be happy." I really believed that. And I was so surprised that within three days I was back in my old track ... feeling as I used to feel before. There was no Sangha in Amsterdam at that time!

The next summer I went back to Plum Village and again I enjoyed it so deeply. One day I happened upon a magazine in the library. Until the day of today I remember what I read there. It made a very deep impression. It was an article about Rumi, a Sufi master from the twelfth century. In the article it was described how much Rumi loved his master. He loved him so dearly. I really could connect with that. Then, his master died and Rumi was inconsolable. And surely I could connect with that. There was a description of how Rumi kept looking for his master. He kept looking and looking and looking for years. And then, after 5 years, it was written, he found his master. He found him everywhere... That was such a hopeful news to me. I thought - and it was a deep determination in me - 'this is what I want; I want to find Thay everywhere'. But in the magazine was no description. I had no clue *how* Rumi had found his master. It was a koan. I had to find out for myself. So I was holding this question in my heart and I carried it along: "How can I find Thay everywhere?"

Around Christmas that same year, Thay and Sister Chan Khong offered a retreat in Paris, in *Fleur de Cactus*, which is now *Maison de l'Inspire*. I think we were about 20, 25 people. I had started to think about quitting my job. I felt so unhappy at my job. At first I had been thinking that, with the practice, I should be able to make myself happy there. I tried, but I did not succeed. And then, one day I heard Thay say that a seedling - you know, a seed that has just sprouted - a seedling needs *protection* in order to grow. And then I knew I had permission to leave my job.

But I was deadly scared to do so. During that winter retreat in Fleur de Cactus I spoke about my situation and my fear with Thay and Sister Chan Khong. When I left, Thay said to me, "Eveline, we are with you." Those were precious words: "*we are with you.*" I don't know how often I have turned these words around in my mind, wondering what exactly Thay meant with "we are with you." In what way Thay was with me?

What came up was a story I had read in a book a few years ago, one of the books I read on my quest for a path. The book was called **Living with the Himalayan Masters** and one of the stories in the book described a disciple who was walking by night on a very small mountain path, alone. All of a sudden, he slipped from the road and fell into an abyss. And then, miraculously, his master lifted him up and put him back on the path. So that story came up, reflecting on the question, "How is Thay with me?" It didn't feel like this was the way that Thay was with me.

A few months later, I did quit my job and I went to America on invitation of a monk and a friend, who both lived in San Francisco, and whom I had met in Plum Village. Again, I was

deadly scared to make such a big trip, with an airplane ... all by myself ... to America! But, I wanted to explore the different Zen centers there and meet other teachers. Thay was the only teacher I knew. (My stay in America strongly confirmed that I was on the right path being with Thay.)

So I went to San Francisco, invited by Thay Tu Luc, and for a while i stayed in the Vietnamese temple where he lived. One day he said: "Eveline, if you want to, I'll bring you to the monastery in the mountains, in the middle of the woods, the Kim Son monastery." That seemed a very nice adventure. So I went to the Kim Son monastery and i enjoyed it very much. There were redwood trees and nature was really wild there. After a few weeks, guess who came to visit the Kim Son monastery?

Yes, yes, Thay came. I had no idea! For me Thay and Kim Son were worlds apart and all of a sudden, there he was. And he recognized me, 'the woman with the bicycle' - because I had come to Plum Village on my bicycle.

It was my intention to stay in America for half a year or a year, but I was so happy to be with Thay, so happy, and I started to wonder, "Is it a good decision to stay in America? Shouldn't I go back to Europe and spend the summer in Plum Village? It's so precious to be with Thay. Who knows how long he is around?" (I always was aware of that.) "Shouldn't I go back?" I was doubting and doubting. It was a squeezing question because finally I was in America - it had taken me so much courage to make this step - and now that I was here, should I go back again? I haven't asked Thay many questions in my life, but this is one of the questions I asked him. I went to him and explained the situation and asked him, "Thay, what do you think? Should I stay or should I go and be with you in the summer retreat?" And you may guess what Thay answered... He said - a very nice answer that I always keep with me when I have to make a choice - "Both are OK."

I decided to stay. And then after about ten days, the moment came that Thay left us again. It was a beautiful day, a beautiful evening. Thay was gone and I had decided to stay, and I knew I wouldn't see him for a very long time. I felt sad and went into nature. I sat on a tree. I sat for hours there in the woods in the neighborhood of the temple, looking at the trees and the sky, while the sky was turning dark. And of course, I was wondering 'in what way Thay is with me'. And then as I was looking at the sky, i saw mountains, mountains very far away. And all of a sudden I noticed there was some light above the mountains. I was surprised. I thought I must not have been looking very well before, because I had never noticed there was a city over there. But the light grew intenser, there was more and more light. And then, all of a sudden, there was the moon ... It was not a city, it was the light of the moon! And as the moon was rising, it wasn't just the moon. It was the most amazing, biggest, radiant moon I have ever seen. It was huge and it moved so gracefully. There were no clouds in the sky. It was a very silent evening, no wind at all, very peaceful. And very, very slowly, without moving, the moon was moving and rising and rising. And all of a sudden there was a sound ... the sound of the bell: the bell inviting us to come to meditation.

I didn't feel like going inside. I was gazing at the moon and I felt completely connected. I was happy - and unhappy at the same time as I was missing Thay. Yet I got up and went in. As soon as I was inside with the other people, I did regret it. I thought, "What have I done? I should have stayed outside!" Fortunately, the Kim Son monastery has huge glass windows - from the floor to the ceiling, in my memory. So I choose a place from where I could see the moon. I continued to look at the moon. I wasn't very concentrated. I felt sad. Thay wasn't there. I had come inside. I should have stayed outside. And as much as possible, I tried to stay connected to the moon. And then something happened. I've never understood it. Not even today. But what happened was that this huge, brilliant, radiant moon that I saw shining over there, began shining from my own belly, just as big and radiant. I saw it shining. It wasn't something I figured with my mind, it just happened to me and I observed it happening, in utter surprise.

Something else happened at the same moment. As this moon was shining - now there were two moons, the moon outside and the moon inside - at the same time, I felt Thay's smile sinking into me. I really felt it. I had seen Thay smiling so often. And his smile, his serenity, was just sinking into me, and I felt it resting at the bottom of my being. And I knew, I would always find Thay there.

I had (from Store Consciousness I think) received an answer to my question, "How is Thay with me?" Although there have been waves - on the surface - in the depth of my being I feel Thay's presence.

For one year I stayed in America. When I came back to Europe, Plum Village opened its doors for the very first time to residents, permanent residents, and I didn't need to think twice: I went to live in Plum Village (and this could be a story in itself).

I was given a room from where I could watch the sunset every evening. It was so beautiful. That was a few months after coming back from America. Thay visited us twice a week and he invited all of us - that means eight people - to express our experience with the practice in a creative way. He encouraged us to sing and to write songs. So I wrote a song about my experience of the moonrise in America and the sunset in Plum Village.

The sun is going down and the sky is turning grey.

The day has not yet ended while the night is on its way.

I hear a last bird singing, and I join it in its song,

And then everything falls silent while the twilight lingers on.

Now the stars are growing brighter, we are waiting for the moon.

It is rising from a mountain like a luminous balloon.
Shining brighter than the sunshine, smiling limitless serene,
Shining inside, shining outside, it's a moon I've never seen.

I keep looking in amazement, I keep looking in delight.
Every leaf has turned transparent, now it seems no longer night.
I would like to look forever, and I pray we never part.
Then at once I find it shining from the bottom from my heart.

Shining brighter than the sunshine, smiling limitless serene,
Shining inside, shining outside, it's a moon I've never seen.
I keep looking in amazement, I keep looking in delight
And my joy surmounts the mountains, I have found the moon inside.

This is one of the ways I have found Thay. There are other ways I've found Thay in the course of years. I've discovered that when I am concentrated in my practice, really concentrated, then Thay's energy is there. The more I am concentrated, the more I feel Thay near. He is there, in my practice.

My favorite practice is walking meditation. Many years ago, Thay taught us what he did sometimes during walking meditation. He said: "Sometimes I walk with my students, with one of my students. On my in-breath, with each step, I say the name of that student. And on my out-breath, with each step I say, 'I am here, I am here, I am here'."

I thought, "This is a very nice practice. I'm going to try that for myself." I tried it when my father died. And I said, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, I am here, I am here, I am here." And as I continued to walk in this way, my father became so present that all by itself the words "I am here" changed into "We are here, we are here, we are here." The same happens when I invite Thay to walk with me. I always begin with "I am here" until I really feel the presence of Thay and then I change it - or it changes itself - into "We are here, we are here." So this is another way I have found Thay in my practice.

Also, much to my relief, after coming a few years to Plum Village and making friends here - dear friends, Dharma friends - I began to sense that when I was with my friends, I began to

sense, Thay is here ... he is in my friends. That took away my fear. I knew that when Thay is no longer there ... I will have my friends, I will find Thay in my Dharma friends.

When I heard about Thay's stroke, I was shocked at first. That week I went to the Sangha in Amsterdam. Though there were mostly people who had not been coming very often, the energy of the Sangha was there yet and I experienced Thay's presence. I was so relieved, it was such a reassurance to feel Thay is really here. I could feel his presence.

I am also aware that Thay is in the way I look. I have taken in so much of what he has taught, that the way I see, the way I hear, the way I think is so interwoven with what I've learned. So Thay is there in what I see, in what I hear, in what I think, at least when I'm mindful.

And now, sitting here, I am in the most lucky place to see Thay all around me - inside and all around.