

The Miracle of Sangha

Dear Brothers, Sisters, and Friends,

A miracle took place at the One Buddha Is Not Enough retreat in Estes Park, Colorado. Each person at the retreat experienced that he or she was surrounded by Thich Nhat Hanhs (Thays) and that he or she was indeed also Thay. In fact, there were over one thousand Thays practicing deeply and joyfully together. The retreat came to be affectionately known as “One Thay Is Not Enough.”

It all started when Thay was unable to attend the retreat. He was diagnosed with a severe lung infection while conducting a retreat at Stonehill College in Massachusetts, and he was admitted to Massachusetts General Hospital for a two-week course of IV antibiotics. Seven monastic brothers and sisters stayed with Thay; the rest of us, over sixty people, went to the YMCA of the Rockies to prepare for the retreat as it had been planned. It was the largest retreat that the monastics would conduct without Thay’s physical presence.

Even though the retreats on this teaching tour were advertised as led by both Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village Sangha, all of the retreatants expected to be with Thay. The monastic brothers and sisters had several meetings to discuss the best way to support our teacher and our retreatants. The practices of deep listening and loving speech were followed more earnestly than ever. Unified by the urgency of the situation and by our love for Thay and for our lay brothers and sisters, we experienced a profound solidarity. Every person stepped up to take on responsibilities, even those who might have hesitated in other circumstances. We realized that the success of the retreat depended on each one of us contributing our best.

On the night of orientation, all of the monks and nuns arrived early. Without planning it, when we got on the stage, we stood closely together as one unit. Those of us who were present will always remember that moment. The Sangha was invited to listen to three sounds of the bell and touch a spacious and calm place within, so that Thay’s love letter could be received. As it was reported later, many people became immediately alarmed: “Love letter! What?” “Where is Thay? Is he O.K.?” “Where is Thich Nhat Hanh? Why is he not on stage?”

Brother Phap Khoi read Thay’s letter slowly and clearly. “Boston, August 21, 2009.... My dear friends, I am writing to you from the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. I know the Sangha has manifested today in Estes Park. I miss the Retreat. I miss the beautiful setting of the Retreat. Especially I miss the Sangha, I miss you....”

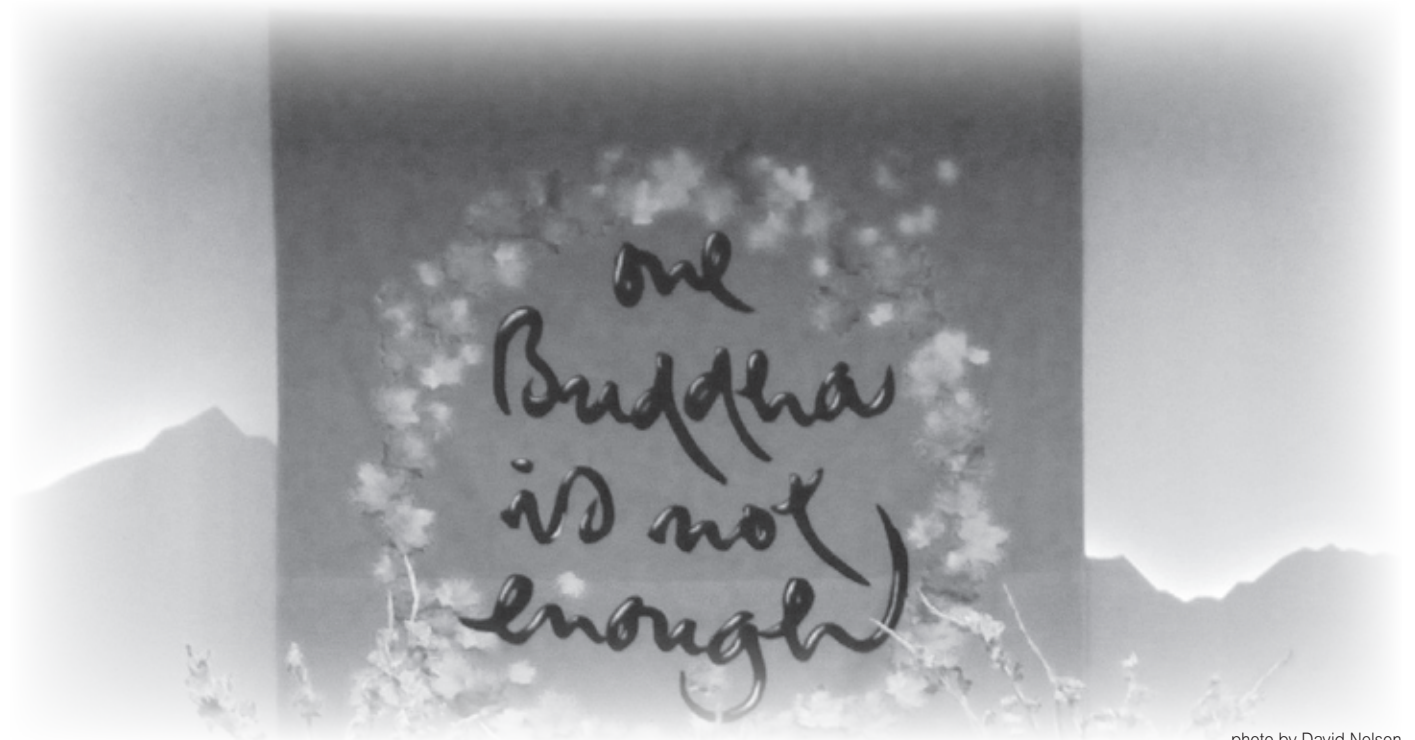


photo by David Nelson

Tears were streaming down faces. One retreatant later shared that she felt a strong urge to scream at that moment, but everyone was so still, she did not dare to. People said that they felt overwhelmed by disappointment, worry, and grief; but as Noble Silence started immediately after the orientation, no one gave voice to these feelings. Instead, there was an opportunity to listen to one's unpleasant and painful feelings and to embrace them. Leaving the meditation hall that first evening, everyone walked ever so quietly and attentively.

Many of us had to ask ourselves: did we come to a retreat to see Thay in the same way we would go to a concert to see a rock star? If the rock star did not show up, we would be entitled to a full refund. Then, should we also demand a full refund and leave the retreat, since Thay was not there?

Thay's absence forced everyone to re-evaluate their intention for the retreat. Thay could not be looked to as the main focus, nor could he be relied on for energy and inspiration. During the next five days, the retreatants came to a decision to invest wholeheartedly in the practice. The monastic and long-term lay practitioners became Thay in the way they walked so stably, in the way they spoke so compassionately, and in the way they thought so gratefully—for Thay, for each other, and for the shared path of practice.

There were over four hundred first-time retreatants, and they, too, practiced deeply. From the early morning first activity to the late evening last activity, all were fully present. Thay was not at the retreat. Yet, Thay was everywhere. All of us experienced Thay's presence, in ourselves and in one another. This powerful energy of our collective practice enabled everyone to look into their own past experiences with love, loss, expectation, and disappointment. By staying together as a Sangha, we broke through habitual patterns of avoiding and running away from pain. Transformation and healing took place in every person, monastic and lay, long-term practitioner and beginner.

We experienced directly the immense value and strength of the Sangha. We realized that Thay and the teachings will be continued well into the future because we are a Sangha. Wherever we are, as long as we come together as a community of practice, we can generate this powerful energy of peace and healing. The miracle of Sangha manifested because each one of us took the practice to the deepest level, in which we experienced the nature of interbeing with Thay and with one another. No individual talent could have performed this miracle. It was the success of a community of practitioners.

The Be-In on the last night of the retreat was truly a joyful and meaningful feast of the practice. Thay's second letter was read at the beginning. In response to Thay's proposal that a retreat in Colorado should be conducted every year, with or without Thay's physical presence, we all bloomed flowers with our hands.

One teenager said he was very happy that there would be a retreat in 2010, since he could not bear the thought of having to



photos by Paul Davis

wait for it for two years. Over seventy-three people signed up to help organize the 2010 retreat in Colorado. One person reported that after he left the YMCA, he shared with many friends about his wonderful experience at the retreat. He realized that he was saying to them, "I was at the retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh." Indeed, we were all at the retreat with Thay in the deepest possible way.

Dear spiritual family, together we can continue our awareness and realization of the miracle of Sangha. Thay has suggested that we write a book about our beautiful experience at the One Buddha Is Not Enough retreat. Please send us your writings and photographs from this retreat. Already we have received many poignant, enlightening letters and articles from both lay and monastic brothers and sisters. Thay has thoroughly enjoyed reading each one of them. For those of us who did not attend the retreat in Estes Park, Thay encourages us to write about our direct encounters with the miracle of Sangha in other places.

May we allow the Dharma and the Sangha to take care of us in our daily lives. May we take good care of the Dharma and the Sangha, so that all beings may receive their wonderful benefits.

Sincerely,

Brothers and Sisters of the Plum Village Sangha

Please send your writings about the YMCA retreat in Estes Park to clarity@dpmail.net, with subject line: Sister Dang Nghiem (or Sister D), re: YMCA (or Miracle of Sangha).

