

Ten Years of Continuing the Path

Sr. Chan Linh Nghiem

After full ordination, Thay always encouraged me to come back to my homeland to share the practice of Plum Village. The first time I came back to Thailand to organize a retreat was in 2002. After that, each year, the Brothers and Sisters of Plum Village in France always came to lead retreats. In 2007, the United Nations of Vesak Celebration organizing team at MCU invited Thay to give a speech at the United Nations Asia-Pacific Conference hall in Bangkok. During this trip, Thay also led a retreat and a Day of Mindfulness, and gave four public talks at different places in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Nakhon Pathom. The Thai participants were touched and happy when they got in touch with Plum Village's practice. Before that, they had wished to have a Plum Village mindfulness practice center in Thailand to get in touch and practice regularly with the Brothers and Sisters. This wish was stronger after they met Thay. This reason was the primary motivation to create a center in Thailand in 2009.

Let the Buddha Take Care

September 9, 2009 was the day the first five Brothers and five Sisters from Bat Nha monastery set their first steps in Thailand to build a practice center. The five Brothers were Br. Phap Toan, Phap Anh, Phap Toai, Phap Tanh, and Phap Xu, and the Sisters were Sr. Hanh Nghia, Tinh Chanh, Dung Nghiem, Cam Nghiem, and Dai Nghiem. At that time, the Brothers stayed on my mother's land, and the Sisters stayed nearby at a big gardening house of uncle Bunlue with many fruit trees. Uncle Bunlue is a gentle, kind retired sheriff. He is one of my family's best friends.

Right after the arrival of the Brothers and Sisters, some Thai volunteers and I sought long-term visas for them. But the Religious Committee refused our request because we do not belong to the Theravada tradition and there are bhikkhunis in our community. The Foreign Office did not help us either because everything regarding monastics must pass the Religious Committee first. Finally, the person who helped us was Br. Wo (Phra Medhi Vajirodom). He is a famous young monastic in Thailand who has read Thay's books and sees Thay as his master. Br. Wo showed us to the Royal Buddhist University of Thailand – MCU (Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya). We went to visit the headmaster – Master Phra Brahmopundit. When he heard our difficulty, he understood and happily supported us. He told us to go to the assistant principal (Phra

Sophonvachira-phorn), and as a result, the first ten Brothers and Sisters to come to Thailand had long-term visas. From then until now, MCU has sponsored Thai Plum Village. Br. Wo was one of the first people who cleared the way for the creation of Thai Plum Village.

Exactly 18 days later, September 27, Bat Nha monastery's crisis happened, and about 400 young monastics were kicked out. Most of them took refuge at Phuoc Hue temple nearby, and in the middle of November, many Brothers and Sisters moved to Thailand. From December 2009 to January 2010, about ten to twenty young Brothers and Sisters came to Thailand every day. We had to be online day and night to receive and answer all the questions from the airport. Luckily the immigration police officers were very kind and respected the monastics because Thailand is a Buddhist country. Our volunteers had to be prepared to "run" to arrange transportation, sometimes at two or three o'clock in the morning. After their arrival, every month the Brothers and Sisters had to take turns going to the border for visa extension, and the volunteers also had to go along with them to help. However, they encounter many difficulties. There were some locations where the police asked many questions; some where they allowed the extension and some where they did not; in one area, sometimes they allowed, sometimes not. So we had to look for help. There were some times when we could not manage it, and the only thing we could do was to sit, breathe, and "let the Buddha take care of it." Everything was out of our control! But, then again, there were Bodhisattvas who appeared and helped us overcome difficulties. The practice of "let the Buddha take care of it" was so wonderful!

Only Today

During those hard times, problems came every day, and I thought, "How can I make today the best?" Even the simplest things, such as where to live or what to eat, could become problems with new people constantly arriving. Sometimes there were more than twenty Brothers and Sisters arriving at the same time. At my mother's land, there were only a few tents and a meditation hall. Because the hall doesn't have a cement floor, the Brothers had to do sitting meditation on bamboo platforms with the nails down. When standing up, their pants were often torn by the nails. That was the reason the meditation hall was named "Thousand-Nails Assembly!" Volunteers around the country called for help. At the same time, sanghas around the world, such as those in France, Germany, USA, Canada, etc., and even Vietnam, also sought ways to support us. Whenever the budget was running out and we didn't know what would happen the next day, Bodhisattvas appeared and donated. I remember, at that time, I only knew how to live with today, to live the best way in this day. With each day came a new difficulty, a new

challenge. So I just did whatever I could for the Brothers and Sisters to have a place to live and food to eat for the day. Tomorrow was too far away to worry. Just need to know that! Do what is best for today for all of us to live together, practicing and learning together. If we live today, there will be tomorrow.

Buddha and the Patriarchs Have Arranged Everything For Us

One day, uncle Bunlue told us that one year before the Brothers and Sisters came to Thailand, he repaired all the buildings. At that time, even he didn't know why he wanted to do it; he just felt that he had to. Then when the Bat Nha crisis happened, seeing the Brothers and Sisters needing to move to Thailand, he understood. Uncle Bunlue's merit helped the Brothers and Sisters live safely and peacefully on new land. How wonderful is the arrangement of the Buddha and the Patriarchs!

At the time of the Bat Nha crisis, the Brothers and Sisters had to leave the monastery and split up to take refuge in different places. For safety and in order to continue practicing with the sangha, they had to leave the country unexpectedly. Isn't it so that, when we moved to Thailand, we felt like refugees, felt like we were wounded and needed time and space to embrace and heal? Fortunately, Thailand is a Buddhist country, and the people are very kind; the Buddha and the Patriarchs here always protect and support monastics.

In September 2010, I had a chance to attend a retreat in Malaysia in Thay's South East Asia trip. I asked Thay about my concern. "Dear Thay, what should I do to help my Brothers and Sisters not feel like they are refugees?" Thay answered, "You should organize retreats in Thailand so that I can come every year." In that trip, Thay also came to Thailand to see his disciples, lead a retreat, and give a public Dharma Talk at MCU. The following year, in the spring of 2011, Thay had a meeting with the headmaster and the assistant principal of MCU. Right after the meeting, on March 26, 2011, Plum Village and MCU signed the "Partnership Agreement" document, a collaboration between the two sides for student exchange and the development of the Engaged Buddhism department. After that, the Brothers and Sisters could stay in Thailand easily, just needing to renew their visas each year. In the year-and-a-half before the MCU sponsorship, we had to cross the Cambodia-Thailand border to be allowed to stay each month. The cost of renting cars was enough to buy a new car. So the Sangha decided that when we had enough aid money from around the world, we would buy a new car and hire a driver.

In the beginning, I had to take on many responsibilities, such as transportation, visa, office, treasurer, diplomacy, etc. There were times I felt stressed. With the feeling of being abandoned, I always thought I needed support from sanghas around the world. I shared with Thay once when he came to Thailand after Bat Nha's crisis, "Dear Thay, right in this meditation hall we have sat in a circle and shared tears." Everyone is wounded! The first elder dharma teacher who came to Thailand to support us was Sr. Doan Nghiem. She is one of the eldest sisters, and taught and guided me when I was in France. Her presence here was a great happiness and comfort for me. After that, elder Brothers and Sisters continued to come to support, such as Srs. Hoa Nghiem, Kinh Nghiem, Dan Nghiem, etc. In my heart, a deep gratitude arose due to their presence in those early days. Even though we lived in a hard and difficult time, we had many joyful memories, the brotherhood and sisterhood was more solid, and we became closer.

Once everything settled down, the question of buying land was developed and promoted to enable the Sangha to have a stable place to live. The lay members of the Thai Plum Village Foundation, together with the Brothers and Sisters, went to look at the lands two or three times a week. In about nine months, we saw nearly all of the nearby land to ask for purchase. But buying land was not easy, and it was quite complicated. There were properties we liked, but which had no legal documents, or whose surrounding environment was polluted, or whose owner changed their mind or increased the price, etc. There were properties we nearly bought, but something unexpected happened. Then one day, just one month before Thay came to Thailand again and we still hadn't found suitable land, Pi Nuch—treasurer of the Thai Plum Village Foundation at that time—met a friend and shared about our work. Fortunately, Pi Nuch's friend knew someone who owned a piece of land lying in the arms of Mount. Khao Yai. The next day, they went to see it. When they arrived, they saw only rocky land. So they felt a bit worried and invited us to go see. But when we arrived, the Brothers and Sisters really liked the vast and majestic natural scene. There was only one issue about which everyone wondered, which was if it was possible to build with so many rocks. An archaeologist and some architects were invited to come and investigate the land. They told us not to worry about the foundation materials for building because the rock layer here is very rare and solid, and about 240 million years old.

The land near Mount. Khao Yai is very expensive, so we had never considered buying there. But unexpectedly, the owner of this piece of land had read Thay's book *Anger*, and liked it immensely. His parents were old and sick and he wanted to do something meritorious for his family, so he decided to sell this land to us. For nine months we

looked at properties which were on the market, but, in the end, we bought a piece of land which the owner had not intended to sell. We saw clearly then, that the Buddha and Patriarchs had arranged everything for us, hadn't they?

At the end of October 2010, two weeks before Thay's arrival, the land purchase was completed, but we only had enough to pay the deposit. We had to ask the seller to wait about six months for us to call for donations from all over, from retreats, and from the Malaysian sangha. By January 2011, we had enough money. A center was officially established.

Later on, the Thai Plum Village Foundation members told me, *"There is something we have learned from you which is 'Faith.'"* At the time of buying this land, in our bank account, we didn't even have enough money to pay the deposit. We had to entreat the landowner to let us deposit less. At that time, I just said to myself, *"Just Trust! I should have faith in the Sangha and Thay's merit."* Because I had already passed through the difficulties of Bat Nha and the Thai visa issues, I knew only to trust in my path. The Buddha and Patriarchs have arranged everything; the conditions will come due to the merits of Thay, the sangha, and Thailand. The heart of Thai people, imbued with Buddhism, will always support the sangha. If we practice wholeheartedly today, there will be a tomorrow. Everything our sangha has today did not come from an individual. We always have gratitude for everything, for the sanghas all around the world, for the ancestral legacy of this country, and for the first people who came to build this community in the most needy and difficult conditions.

These are a couple lines of sharing from the heart from real experiences, a ten-year journey of Thai Plum Village. Today is made of those hard days for us to cherish, be grateful, live, and practice to have so much happiness on this beautiful land.