

The Monks and Me: How 40 Days at Thich Nhat Hanh's French Monastery Guided Me Home, by Mary Paterson
(Hampton Roads Publishing: Charlottesville, VA, 2012, p. 235)

I have not been a fan of Thich Nhat Hanh's writings. What I had read of the Vietnamese teacher struck me as Hallmark-card Buddhism for the peace-and-love, New Age set, with a hefty helping of Christianity. "Being peace" sounds good, but what does it mean? How does one do it? My training was in Thai-based Theravada Buddhism and I preferred, and still prefer, the harder-edged, tougher-minded teachings of, say, Chogyam Trungpa or Aachan Chah.

And yet, I was pleasantly surprised by Mary Paterson's meditation diary, *The Monks and Me*, about her forty days as a lay meditator at Thich Nhat Hanh's hermitage, Plum Village, in the south of France.

Paterson, a Toronto yoga teacher with years of meditative experience, seamlessly combines her personal experiences with Thich Nhat Hanh's deeper Buddhist teachings, and she persuaded me that this gentle, New Age approach might work for many seekers. The teachings of Thây, as Paterson also calls him, certainly worked well for her. Several times in her book, while pondering Thây's words or writings, she describes non-dual experiences that some traditions call glimpses of enlightenment, although Paterson makes no claim to being enlightened.

So, at her first talk by Thich Nhat Hanh at Plum Village, the monk held up a yellow rose and said, cryptically: "A rose is not a rose; that is why it is a real rose." Many lay meditators are baffled by this Zen-like, "direct-seeing" approach, but Paterson gets it:

And then it happens. I've felt it at other times in my life, but it always delights me. I become suffused with a warm, buzzing sensation at the level of my spine, between my shoulder blades. ... I blissfully think, "Everything makes sense." In this moment I have all I would ever need to feel secure (28).

She adds: "The truth is that everything is simply made up of things it is not—a yellow rose flower is simply a bunch of non-yellow-rose-flower things coming together to create a beautiful, fragrant plant with lovely petals" (29). This is a simple, and very lovely, way of describing the non-self (*anatta*) and transient (*anicca*) nature of all conditioned things,

and very much Paterson's style in the 40 chapters of her book: she has an experience in or outside the monastery, painful or (mostly) pleasant, followed by a lucid and inspiring meditation on the Buddhist teaching.

Paterson had these non-dual revelations, and apparently quite often, before visiting Plum Village. She describes a retreat experience in the New Mexican mountains years earlier:

I stood up to stretch my legs and began walking along the mountain. ... Every step I took melted into the dry earth as the vastness of the sky diffused into me. In those moments, there had been no separation between what I knew of as me and everything else in my view. Within that sense of oneness I had glimpsed truth.

Remembering that revelation while at Plum Village gives her a similar non-dual experience: "With these mindful reflections I go beyond my familiar self, beyond my body. I seem to be only my breath. The defining lines of my body fade as I merge with the space" (129).

After her first *vipassana* meditation retreat, in India, she writes:

My every cell was jumping with happiness. In my state of elation I floated over to this curly haired twenty-something guy to ask how he was feeling, thinking, of course, that he would be as high as me. He wasn't. In fact, the young man had felt as if his mind was a huge garbage bin full of foul, rotting filth, and that the act of meditating had opened the lid on the squalid mess that was his mind (210).

My sympathies are with the young man. For many students, the first years of meditation are more like his than the blissful spiritual practice that Paterson enjoyed.

At Plum Village, Paterson has some negative moments, but they mainly revolve around several fellow meditators with whom she doesn't get along, stiff shoulders, and a bad case of the flu. She, in fact, seems blissfully—and I use that word deliberately—unaware of how unusual she is in finding the meditative practice so delightful right from the beginning. So, is Paterson fooling herself?

I think not. First, her training as a ballet dancer and career as a yoga teacher would give her strong concentration and mindfulness, as well as a supple body, coming into Plum Village. For her, the physical pain that afflicts many new and even experienced meditators, especially sitting on floor cushions rather than chairs, was a minor problem.

Second, the descriptions of her practice hang together and reflect, often in quirky and unusual images, almost every aspect of the Buddhist teachings, from non-self, to suffering, to transience, to coping with anger, to finding infinity in a grain of sand (or, in Paterson's case, the legs of a spider).

On the other hand, she sometimes breaks the lay monastic discipline in ways that, in a more structured meditative approach, would be grounds for expulsion. For example, she doesn't want to attend a particular monastery function. So she gets permission to work on her diary instead, then takes a taxi into town for a lunch with a fellow meditator who is also playing hooky by faking illness. Paterson often ignores the first waking bell to get an extra 15 minutes of dozing. In stricter systems, even lay people get up with the bell whether they want to or not, and they certainly don't go into town for a chat and omelettes. In the more tough-minded systems, scrupulous obedience to the monastic rules is an integral part of breaking down attachment to selfish impulses. Thich Nhat Hanh's system is clearly more forgiving. And, perhaps, if Paterson is an example, Thây's approach may work better than the more rigorous systems for some Westerners, in whom, my teacher believed, the "hate/intelligent" temperament predominates.¹ The *Visuddhimagga*, the Buddhist *Path of Purity*, recommends an easier, gentler discipline for those with the "hate" temperament, and Thich Nhat Hanh's approach seems to meet this criterion.

That said, Paterson could have brought a bit more critical discrimination and detail into her depiction of lay monastic life. We learn little about the daily monastic routine, although this might be of interest to meditators in other systems. And, while the book is very well-written, there is too much gushing description. For example, the people she meets at Plum Village are almost all exquisite or unusual in some way, perhaps based on Thây's teachings that "if you look for ugly, that is what you will see. But if you look for beauty, that grace will reveal itself to you" (163).

¹ The *Visuddhimagga* identifies three basic temperaments: craving/faith, hatred/intelligent, and deluded/speculative, with different teaching styles appropriate for each. And so, in *Visuddhimagga*, Chapter III, Sections 98-99, the dwelling place for a "hate/intelligent" temperament is described as follows: "A suitable resting place for one of hating temperament is not too high or too low, provided with shade and water, with well-proportioned walls, posts and steps, with well-prepared frieze work and lattice work, brightened with various kinds of painting, with an even, smooth soft floor, adorned with festoons of flowers," and so on. This gentler meditation regime makes the world seem like a more pleasant place for those of hating temperament, in which there is "frequent occurrence of such states as anger, enmity, disparaging, domineering, envy and avarice" (Chap III, Sect. 95).

And so, Thich Nhat Hanh is portrayed in terms that make him seem more of an ethereal spirit than a flesh-and-blood human being. Paterson's companions at the monastery are mostly "wise" or "radiant" or "a vision of peace." A 21-year-old American has a "quiet but strong presence" (152). But, if he's like many meditative aspirants of that age I have met, he could simply be bored with a comfortable, middle-class upbringing, and hopes Eastern teachings will bring some exoticism and excitement into his life before he settles down to a career. In general, no group of people is that perfect, that fascinating, that talented. But then, as Paterson says of her moments of negativity: "I have often amplified what is and made it into what it is not" (171). I suspect she has also amplified the positive moments at Plum Village, and the result too often reads like a portrait seen through rose-colored glasses.

That said, *The Monks and Me* meets three requirements for a satisfying lay meditative diary. One, she writes colorfully and well. Two, her book is, as far as I can tell, an accurate picture of the Buddha's teaching, and often delights with the freshness of its images and insights. Third, *The Monks and Me* offers inspiration for both potential and experienced Buddhist meditators.

While Thich Nhat Hanh's style still doesn't appeal to me, personally, I had much more respect for his approach after reading Paterson's book. However, while she gives an inspiring and loving account of the beautiful rose that is Thich Nhat Hanh's monastic system, *The Monks and Me* would be stronger if she had described a few more of the thorns.

Paul MacRae