

# Richard Brady: Plum Village Tears, Plum Village Joy

Seekers Sermon of 2/10/02

by Richard Brady

## Plum Village Tears, Plum Village Joy

Let me begin by thanking Seekers for this invitation to preach. Those of you who were here [last week](#) know the practice of listening to the bell. I will use it again this week. When Elisabeth invites the bell to sound, you all might try the practice of breathing slowly in and out three times, each time saying silently, "Listen, listen, this wonderful sound takes me back to my true self." If you were here last week, you heard Elisabeth read the poem about freedom, which I wrote for my Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, on my receiving a transmission from him to become a dharma teacher, i.e. a teacher of the Buddhist path. Besides presenting that poem during the transmission ceremony, I also gave a dharma talk about my experiences with freedom.

When I received Seekers' invitation, my first thought was to share these same experiences with you. However, I realized that I wanted instead to share with you an experience I had several years ago in Plum Village, Thich Nhat Hanh's monastery in southwestern France. The experience involves my brother, Bob, whose picture you see on the altar. I must admit that it was only after writing the sermon that I read the passages in the lectionary for Transfiguration Sunday. It seemed to me more than coincidence that the passage from Matthew relates the story of the three disciples being confronted by the voice of God, reacting with terror and receiving comfort from Jesus.

Let me go back to the beginning, the first time I heard of Plum Village. It was in 1989 at Omega Institute in upstate New York during my first retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh or Thầy (Teacher) as he is informally called. A woman in our Dharma discussion group told us this was her first experience with meditation. Tears were coming to her eyes every time she meditated. She said that her life was happy and she had no traumas in her past. She wondered whether her situation was normal. If this was what meditation was like, she was not sure that she wanted to continue. People who responded told her that her experience was not so unusual. One said, with a bit of humor, that in Plum Village, Thich Nhat Hanh's community in France, there was a rule against crying for more than five minutes. It was not uncommon, he added, to find Westerners hidden in the bushes sobbing.

In the years since, I have experienced intense emotions including tears many times during my visits to Plum Village. Sometimes I have been alone, sometimes with others. One of these times will always be with me. It was a Dharma discussion with two other men. During the previous Dharma discussion, "James" shared that ever since coming to Plum Village he felt he had been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He could not account for this feeling. During the question and answer session, the next day James told Thầy that his brother and sister-in-law had committed suicide. He asked Thầy for advice. Thầy responded that each of us has the seed of suicide and the seed of joy. Which of these seeds sprouts depends upon which is watered. Thầy went on to say that from what James had shared, it was clear that the seed of suicide had been watered in him. James was at risk. He needed to examine carefully his life choices (his home, his job, his friends) and change any elements that were not watering his seeds of joy.

That evening our Dharma discussion group met again. There were just three of us. Our discussion soon turned to James' sharing of that afternoon. James added that earlier in his life he had

had alcohol problems. He felt that his sister-in-law was the only person who had supported him. It was this sister-in-law who took her own life during a period of depression, leaving her husband and two small children. Two years later the husband, James' brother, took his own life as well. We were listening deeply.

Following James' story, "William" told us about his brother, a doctor. Two years earlier, his brother developed an aggressive brain tumor. William booked a flight to visit him but was then told by his brother, whose mood the tumor had darkened considerably, not to come. With his ticket in hand, William decided to ignore his brother's wishes. At the end of his long flight, William was met by a grief stricken, orphaned nephew. William's brother, pessimistic about the future of the world, had killed his wife and then himself.

Our group fell into an extended period of silence. Our tears were flowing. We knew that this suffering was not just personal or even the suffering of our generation. It came from our ancestors as well, suffering that had been denied, hidden behind stern and proper behavior, held at bay by living lives protected from feeling. Now this suffering had burst into the open. For us it was inescapable. The three of us were holding all this suffering, knowing it was on behalf of our ancestors and on behalf of future generations. At Plum Village, we had learned to touch both our ancestors and our descendents through the practice of prostrations. Now we were able to experience their suffering as our own.

Finally, I shared the story of my younger brother, Bob, my only sibling. As a teenager, Bob had a series of physical and psychological problems. Eventually Bob's condition caused him to drop out of school. He left our home in Illinois and moved to California where he hoped to regain his health. Bob became attracted to the idea of fasting to cleanse his body of toxins and began a supervised water fast at a health center. After 45 days, the medical staff advised Bob to stop. He did not follow

their advice and continued 15 more days. Two days after completing his fast, he went into a coma. Bob came out of the coma with a stiff hip and brain damage that severely impaired his short-term memory and left him subject to seizures. Since then Bob has lived with our parents and in several communities for people with mental disabilities. He refers to his first life, his death, and his second life. This sharing with James and William was the first time I had ever told my brother's story and been able to feel my grief fully.

Through our tears, we contacted a truth beyond suffering. We had learned from Thây to embrace and cradle suffering as we would a crying infant. Whatever liberation we might achieve through our practice, we were sharing it with the next generation: James with his young niece and nephew as well as his own son, William with his son and his grown nephews, and I with my daughter. We were in Plum Village, home to many joyful monks and nuns, Vietnamese refugees who had experienced tremendous suffering in their lives. Thây had shown them how to water the seeds of joy as well as how to hold their suffering. In the depth of our connection with them and with each other, we found ourselves touching our own seeds of joy.

Seven years have passed since this experience. The process of opening to suffering has been a slow one for me. It has not been easy on my own to touch my suffering or that of others. Sometimes, when I have been able to hold emotional upheavals in my current relationships with awareness, I have opened doors to old pain. Tension in my body has also connected me to old fears and old anger. I learn to be with both old and new suffering in an accepting way, to hold it with the help of my ancestors and descendants. It is no longer just mine. I have begun to feel lighter and happier.

My brother, Bob, continues to have difficulties. Last January many of you will remember that he was hospitalized with a life threatening condition. Our family was most grateful for your prayers at that time. I was in Plum Village when I heard the

news and immediately went to the meditation hall. As I did prostrations, tears welled up in me. I sensed that Bob would die soon. I understood that I would be his continuation. Then, in my mind, I heard Thây telling us that his students were already his continuation. I knew in that moment that I was already Bob's continuation. I saw that for the 32 years since Bob's tragedy, he had been providing energy and direction for my life and work. Continuing Bob's search for well-being, I saw that I had embarked on a spiritual path that lead me to Thây. Now I was sharing mindfulness practice with others so that in the future people like Bob, like us all, might better embrace life's tears and joys.

I would like to conclude with a short meditation. Please take a few moments now to close your eyes and make contact with some suffering you have experienced. It may be current or very old, personal or global. As you become aware of this suffering, embrace it with great tenderness just as you would a crying infant. Do not think about it or try to change it, just allow it to be whatever it is. As you watch it, you may see it change. Perhaps you will experience joy on its other side. The bell will sound to begin and end the meditation.