



SURRENDER AND A LOTUS

Ian Prattis
Professor of Anthropology and Religion
Carleton University
Ottawa, Canada K1S 5B6

ABSTRACT

In “**Surrender and a Lotus**” I pay homage to my Buddhist teacher, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Before leaving for India in 1996 to study and teach meditation, at the last moment I picked up his book of meditations, *The Blooming of a Lotus*, and placed it in my backpack. In December of that year I became terribly ill in India. My companion for this passage with death was Master Hanh’s book of meditations. To this day I am still astonished by the calmness and lack of fear. I include a number of diary entries, written in a small ashram in Mumbai, and hope that I can find a similar equanimity for death’s next visit. This was also a time for concepts and perceptions to shatter, and I felt a depth not previously known. This is something I remember, and call upon, when perceptions and judgements crowd into my consciousness.

Thay Nhat Hanh is my Buddhist teacher. He is a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Master presently based in France, and has brought the Buddhist Dharma to the West in a gentle yet penetrating fashion. After attending his “Heart of the Buddha” retreat in the fall of 1996 at Plum Village, in the south of France, I went to India. There I taught and trained in Siddha Samadhi Yoga, a system of meditation for adults and children. I was initiated through many levels and was eventually ordained as an initiator and teacher. The Vedic tradition I was studying and teaching was ecumenical in character, and represented a universal consciousness that manifested in very practical ways as a wisdom tradition totally relevant to the modern day. It was a sterling example of engaged spirituality, as it necessarily entailed rural development, civic responsibility, anti-corruption programs and praying with all the religious communities in India on a regular basis. This particular commitment to Global Religious Harmony was an active engagement to heal and transform the deeply rooted schisms in Indian society. It also had a marvelous priority – an outreach program to introduce meditation into schools,

training colleges, universities and factories. I was very privileged and honored to have so many of the treasures of India's wisdom traditions opened up to me.

There were two circumstances that I believe opened so many doors for me in India. One rested on Thay Nhat Hanh's book of meditations – *The Blooming of a Lotus*. In November and December of 1996 I became seriously ill in India, and as I observed all my systems crashing one by one, I knew there was a distinct possibility of death. I was surprised at the calm and lack of panic I felt, and as December drew towards its close, I totally surrendered. I will always remember that particular date. It was Saturday, December 21, 1996, and on that day I let go of all attachments to my body and surrendered directly to God. Throughout the day and evening of December 21st I read *The Blooming of a Lotus* from cover to cover, doing those meditations that spoke to me, and felt at one with all my spiritual ancestors. I felt Thay Nhat Hanh's wisdom, love and gentleness as a tangible presence. I was in a small ashram in the city of Mumbai – reserved for saints and holy men, and I also felt their grace close at hand. When I went to sleep that night I was content and happy, and the vehicle of meditations in *The Blooming of a Lotus* carried me over many thresholds, some of which I was aware of at the time, most, however, I did not discern their significance until months later.

The meditations took me deeply into my roots of being, and I felt very calm about the impermanence of my bodily existence. My heart opened very wide. While I did the meditations on "Looking Deeply and Healing" I thought about my many mistakes and chose not to deny them, or brush aside the bodily pain, for I knew that the experiences of joy and freedom that were flooding through me, at that time, were dissolving them. During this whole period of time I felt very simple, that I was living properly, without panic and was present with whatever was happening or arising. There was no fear about death, it just did not compute. This gave me a sense of freedom and strength, which opened a huge door to send love and joy to all. I felt truly like me, very peaceful, not pulled by anything in any direction. Despite all that was going on, I was solidly with each second of time in a totally timeless way. Whatever gifts, skills and energies I could contribute to bring joy and love to others, I just knew it was there to freely share. That is the only manner in which I can describe what was happening. I

finally understood the real significance of the Buddha's words about the Five Remembrances:

I am of the nature to grow old; there is no way to escape growing old.
I am of the nature to have ill health; there is no way to escape ill health.
I am of the nature to die; there is no way to escape death.
All that is dear to me; and everyone I love are of the nature to change.
There is no way to escape being separated from them.
My actions are my only true belongings.
I cannot escape the consequences of my actions.
My actions are the ground upon which I stand.

To be with myself at this time, happy and content with the existing moment was all that I had, and it was enough. This was embedded further in my consciousness when I did Exercise Fifteen in *Blooming of a Lotus*. I will write it out in full:

Five Remembrances Meditation

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| 1. Knowing I will get old, I breathe in. | Getting old |
| Knowing I cannot escape old age, | No escape |
| I breathe out. | |
| 2. Knowing I will get sick, I breathe in. | Getting sick |
| Knowing I cannot escape sickness, | No escape |
| I breathe out. | |
| 3. Knowing I will die, I breathe in. | Dying |
| Knowing I cannot escape death, | No escape |
| I breathe out. | |

- | | |
|--|--|
| 4. Knowing that one day I will have to
abandon all that I cherish today,
I breathe in,
Knowing I cannot escape having to
abandon all that I cherish today,
I breathe out. | Abandoning what I cherish

No escape |
| 5. Knowing that my actions are my
only belongings, I breathe in.
Knowing that I cannot escape the
consequences of my actions,
I breathe out. | Actions true belongings

No escape from consequences |
| 6. Determined to live my days deeply
in mindfulness, I breathe in.
Seeing the joy and the benefit of
living mindfully, I breathe out. | Living mindfully

Seeing joy |
| 7. Vowing to offer joy each day to my
loved ones, I breathe in.
Vowing to ease the pain of my
loved ones, I breathe out. | Offering joy

Easing pain |

I know from Thay Nhat Hanh's commentary on this exercise, that the Buddha called on his monks and followers to do this meditation on a daily basis, so that their fears and anxieties are welcomed into consciousness rather than hidden away. As I did this meditation I felt something more, that each moment of life was absolutely precious and somehow I was communicating this to all that I connected to. Before sleeping that night I did one last meditation that secured me in the refuge of all my spiritual ancestors. Although the focus was on the Buddha, I felt that all my teachers and guides throughout lifetimes were gathered together inside and around me, without boundaries, and stayed there while I slept:

Buddha Meditation

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Seeing the Buddha before me in the seated meditation position,
I breathe in.
Joining my palms in respect,
I breathe out. | Buddha sitting

Joining palms |
| 2. Seeing the Buddha in me,
I breathe in.
Seeing myself in the Buddha,
I breathe out. | Buddha in me

Me in Buddha |
| 3. Seeing the boundary between myself and the Buddha disappear as the Buddha smiles,
I breathe in.
Seeing the boundary between the one who respects and the one who is respected disappear as I smile,
I breathe out. | Buddha smiles, no boundary

I smile, no boundary |
| 4. Seeing myself bowing deeply to the Buddha,
I breathe in.
Seeing the strength of the Buddha enter me,
I breathe out. | Bowing deeply to Buddha

Strength of Buddha in me |

The next morning, to my surprise and joy I woke up, and over the next six months slowly recovered my health. Friends in North America who tune in to me very closely had in December booked airline tickets to take me out of India to recover in their home. While I was touched by their love, I said “No” to their proposal, as this particular journey for me, whatever the outcome, was to be in India. I had also written countless Christmas cards to friends and loved ones all over the world and signed them with “*Blessings and Love from Ian*”. That is what I wanted to send out before my death. Then I lived! And was even more happy that the cards were sent.

The second circumstance that opened so many doors had to do with the shattering of my concepts on an almost daily basis. I would have perceptions and judgements about a situation, person or event and would rapidly discover that my perceptions were without foundation, and I allowed my concepts to shatter. They were, of course, replaced by further perceptions and judgements, but I allowed them also to shatter. I believe that this willingness not to hold on to concepts, or to even hold on to being with my body put me into a different orbit of consciousness. In this orbit, doors opened inside me, and externally, that otherwise would not have opened. Furthermore, I felt unseen hands supporting and guiding me through a stupendous year of initiations, training and transformations. I know I can never be as I was, nor do I wish to be. I am simply grateful for all the gifts and privileges of transformation I received while in India. I also wonder about sharing these, and other deeply personal experiences, for I do not hold on to the experiences. I just note them and their effects on particular steps I took on my path. The sharing is to illustrate that my approach to meditation comes about through experience, crises, difficulties and joys that may have common ground with many readers. That if I can take steps along the spiritual path, then anyone can.

I am glad that at the last moment before leaving for India I intuitively packed Thay Nhat Hanh's book into my backpack. *The Blooming of a Lotus* has always been one of my favorite books, as it never failed to take me deeper into myself. I love it for additional reasons now. I can recommend it to people I meet as a "lifesaver", for indeed it was such for me - a Lotus that carried me through.

DIARY ENTRY, DECEMBER 20, 1996

Prem Kutir Ashram,

Mumbai, India.

Feel weaker than ever this morning. Could hardly make it from my bed to the bathroom. Hope the saints who have passed through this little ashram are casting a protective eye over me. Perhaps they can cheer up Chotolal, the Nepali cook here, who has become quite anxious, specially as I have not had the energy or inclination to eat the special dishes he prepares. He only has me to look after at the moment, and my state of

health is not a good advertisement for the care he gives. He is watching me write in my diary, so I will change hands and write with my left hand so he can laugh and feel less anxious about me. It worked! It feels as though all my bodily systems have gone off line. Why have I become so ill? Is there some major purification going on in my body, is there something I do not see? What lessons are there in this for me? Or are my days drawing to a close in the silence of this ashram? My blood tests from the hospital show that I am low and deficient in just about every category, and the antibiotics and other medications only make me feel worse. So many questions and worries, yet they do not seem totally important. I ask them, then they fade away. It is a bit strange. A few days ago I collapsed and passed out while at dinner at Madhuma's house. I know she and her family would take me in, yet this saint's refuge is where I feel most comfortable right now. The quiet and simplicity of the place speaks deeply to me. I guess it allows me to prepare.

Have been in an almost constant state of meditation for days now, a deep quiet silence. Making entries in this diary is almost an interruption to the silence. Yesterday, Tom and Bev phoned from Tuscon in the States and it was wonderful to talk to them. They know how ill I am and sent prayers from the desert. Another friend, Barbara, from Michigan also phoned. She tunes into me very closely and was sufficiently alarmed to offer to fly to Mumbai and take me back to the States to get well in her home. Their love and care is very moving, but I know that whatever is to happen is to be here in India. For sure.

Have sent Chotolal on an errand as he was moping a bit and needed something to do. I gave him some money and asked him to buy some cards and stamps for me. The cards are beautifully hand painted ones on pipal leaves, and have pictures of the Buddha, Krishna dancing and other such scenes. Want to make sure I finish my Christmas list. Sending tons of Christmas cards to friends and loved ones. Feel such a calm about all this that would normally surprise the heck out of me. The calm is just there, sitting with me, just fine. I know there is a distinct possibility I will not live beyond Christmas and want to send out a Christmas message from India – "Blessings and Love from Ian". Guess there is some ego in that, but it is what I want to do. Just addressed a card of the Buddha to Thay Nhat Hanh in France. Writing and addressing the cards has

exhausted me, but feel very satisfied and full – a sort of mission accomplished. Chotolal brought in a package of mail from Canada: letters and cards from family and friends. Made me very happy, also made me cry as I thought of friends I may not see again. Yet they were strange tears – not full of sorrow or anything, just tears as I thought of loving friends.

I keep falling asleep very quietly, then waking up very quietly. Sleep is like a light breeze that seems to visit now and then. Ate a little bit of dinner to allay Chotolal's anxiety, but it is my supply of rice malt and vitamin C that is keeping me going. Chotolal is usually very jolly but I think my poor health has caused him to become quiet. He left some fruit and water on the table by my bed, then left to spend the next day with Nepali friends in another part of the city, taking my pile of Christmas cards to post. Care and love just beam from his eyes and drip off his moustache. I am enjoying the silence and aloneness, now that he has left. Going to bed now, it is about nine o'clock in the evening and I am drifting off to sleep as though gentle wings are carrying me.

DIARY ENTRY, DECEMBER 21, 1996

Prem Kutir Ashram,

Mumbai, India.

Waking up was easy, getting up was a bit of a struggle but did that in stages. The quiet and silence inside the ashram is quite palpable and almost visible – maybe the lack of noise from the kitchen. But that is not it. I remembered my shamanic training with White Eagle Woman. Had a dream about her during the night, but do not totally recall all the details. I do remember that she told me to call in my guides, and construct a mental medicine wheel around me, and include all my spiritual ancestors. Did that and feel an incredible constellation of energies, like millions of guardian angels from every conceivable dimension. This place is really hopping with energy. I just know that today is about surrender to God's wisdom, and I freely place myself in his hands. Feel a funny kind of delight inside me, want to dance to an imaginary orchestra, but do not think my legs would move too well.

Took some fruit and returned to my book of meditations and began to read. The book is by my Buddhist teacher and I feel so grateful to have been around long enough to receive his teachings. I read slowly, stop frequently to close my eyes and feel the words. Doing quite a number of the meditations and have no sense of time or space today, as each meditation seems to move me with its own measure and carry me along. Feel such a deepening in my heart, all the way inside my body. Aware that there is no fear or panic, just a sort of simple and happy acceptance. That is all that is there. I have never experienced anything like this. Have no thought of anything and feel deeply content for no apparent reason. Is this surrender? Peace with God? No flashing lights, visitations or visions – only a quiet surrender and being with the inevitability of it all, whatever “IT” is.

DIARY ENTRY, DECEMBER 22, 1996

***Prem Kutir Ashram,
Mumbai, India.***

I woke up this morning, heard the crows saying hello from the tree outside the window. Feel so happy to be alive. Chotolal is singing in the kitchen and rattling his pots and pans, so I will celebrate this new day with a little breakfast. That will make us both very happy. A clear insight that this “death” is a spiritual one, as is the “rebirth”. I feel completely new this morning, as though I have been rewired and plugged into sockets with a bigger voltage. Part of my preparation to continue moving along. I feel such gratitude to all the saintly energies, guardian angels and spiritual ancestors that supported me through the most important experience of my life. I will eat a good breakfast for all of them.

DIARY ENTRY, JUNE 1, 1997**R.S.V.K. Ashram,****Bangalore, India.**

Final preparations for leaving India. My training is complete, and the ordination as an initiator and teacher took place this morning. It has been a year that cannot be adequately expressed in words. The experience of the wisdom traditions in India has worked on multiple facets and levels of my consciousness. My near death experience in Mumbai and spiritual rebirth took me into a state of surrender to God. This in turn allowed me to absorb so much more of the essence of India's wisdoms and teachings. I have been fortunate enough to be exposed to the teachings of Ramana Maharshi and Gandhi, and have a deeper and fuller appreciation of the Vedic traditions through my training and initiations in Siddha Samadhi Yoga. It has been an incredible experience to teach meditation classes in Bangalore. My first class consisted of 11 Indian gentlemen, who dubbed themselves as Ian Guruji's cricket eleven! Subsequent courses included their friends and wives, and when I taught childrens' meditation classes, it was to the children of the friends I had already taught. It was a wonderful expanding family. They gave me so much love and taught me so much about how to simply be. To teach meditation in a community that is richly imbued with the culture of meditation was an awesome privilege. It was great to be with Indians on their own terms – shopping in the bazaar, getting my laundry done, my hair cut, and talking to the many people who came to my simple quarters in the ashram in Bangalore. Throughout my experiences in India I had the opportunity to be with myself in a way I had never before allowed. The deep silence, even in the midst of crowds, enabled me to grow and expand my consciousness in ways I perhaps do not fully realize. India gave me the opportunity to deeply journey into myself, something I have always wanted to do – to enjoy freedom.

Yet how difficult I made it for myself at times, with self-doubt, stringent endeavors to get it right, struggles of purification and the like. It is so much simpler than all that. It was to just see what is basically there. That my happiness and delight comes through simply Being with humanity, the planet and the universe, and Serving the same with joy. I see that the struggles are a necessary part of my journey, but Being and

Serving continues that journey in a totally different paradigm of existence. I know this to be true, as I got caught at times in the process of struggle and purification. Then for no apparent reason the veils of illusion dropped away and a natural, overflowing delight in Being and Serving arose spontaneously inside me. This energy has been inside me since childhood and has been put into practice in many different ways as I made my way through life. The experience of India allows me to do this from a much deeper level within myself. Thank you India.