

Vietnam Reflections

by Emily Martin

There is a beautiful bell invitation written by Thich Nhat Hanh that we often use before sitting: *Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness, I send my heart along with the sound of the bell. May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness and transcend the path of anxiety and sorrow.* I've always loved these phrases as they bring peace and calm to my spirit even before I settle into my meditation.

In Vietnam, I met a Buddhist University student and young monk named Thay Thanh Hien. He was gentle, kind, and without pretense. His voice was soothing with a tender cadence. Together, we walked through Tu Hieu, Thich Nhat Hanh's root temple. We paused at the large bell. As we gently rang the bell, Thay shared that this sound would wash away his anxiety and bring him peace. If he ever felt anxiety he would return to the bell and ring it. There were some days where he rang the bell almost every hour, but each time the magic would work.

Thay Thanh Hien told me he wanted everyone in the world to know of this man, the Buddha. Every day, he prayed for people to be happier in their life and learn how to love each other through the teachings of the Buddha.

Thay Thanh Hien was like many of the temple abbots we met. Often, monks and nuns would take my hand and walk me through the temple grounds, offering teachings along the way. I was often told: "I love you" by strangers relative to Western standards. As I moved through the country, I could feel that my heart was slowly being massaged into a slightly larger form.

Keeping good spiritual company is something that has become more and more important to me over the years. It started with my first Taking Refuge ceremony where I realized I could rest and trust people who followed the Buddhist precepts. They seemed safe to me as I was going through a very vulnerable time in my life. In Vietnam, I deeply appreciated being among monks and nuns. In this spiritual company, I found myself eating delicious vegan food prepared with love. I also found myself accumulating merit through acts of generosity. We freed fish, paid for others' lunches, purchased gifts, dedicated statues with prostrations, held umbrellas for esteemed clergy, rearranged temple shoes for ease of travel, shared the dharma with tourists, served tea and food, and bowed to the Buddha. My heart slowly expanded with each act.

On our last day in Huế, I met Minh Thuan, a strong-willed and powerful nun. For whatever mysterious reason, we had an immediate heart connection. As we were saying goodbye, she held my hand and insisted that it was our destiny to awaken. "We must awaken!" she told me fervently. "It is even in my name," she said: "Minh Thuan means Bright Contentment." I had to laugh because it turns out, we share the same Vietnamese root name, Minh, because we share the same lineage. How cool is that?! (In the top picture of Emily with the nuns, Minh Thuan is 3rd from left).