

Duy Le (HSPS) – Vietnamese Buddhist retreat, France, Summer 2016

Thanks to the support from the B M Rowe trust fund, I was able to travel to France to attend a meditation retreat at Plum Village, a Vietnamese Buddhist community in Thenac. It was an eye-opening and inspiring experience that will no doubt lay the basis for my dissertation in my 3<sup>rd</sup> year. The Village was founded by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk in exile who was nominated by Martin Luther King Jr for the Nobel Peace Prize.

I treated my stay at the monastery as a nascent and amateur encounter with the ethnographic method. I quickly settled into the routine of the monks, waking up at 5, going to bed at 10, doing everything else or doing nothing mindfully in between. The hallmark of Plum Village is mindfulness. You do not rush through anything. You do not do to get things done. You do to do. You wash the dishes to wash the dishes, not to get clean dishes. It is a stark contrast to how I lead my life. Usually, we find ourselves waiting for time to pass to get on to something. And when we are doing that something, we are already looking forward to the next thing. Mindfulness is to start living and stop waiting. Before the trip I read a lot on the topic of mindfulness, but to be able to live in a community that upholds the practice minute by minute is more revealing than any amount of reading can do. I noticed a shift in my attitude very shortly after arrival. I paid much less attention to time; I was much less concerned with finding something to do, to make the most out of my time there; I was relaxed and instead of doing something, many a time I allow myself to just be.

My experience at the monastery raises several questions that are of academic interests that I will further investigate in the coming school year. In particular, how is the self constituted? How easy is it for a change in environment to change a person's habitus? Also of significant interest to me is the question of community. How do the Vietnamese monks navigate the fraught relationship with the Vietnamese state? How are the non-Vietnamese monks integrated into the community? How are the Vietnamese monks facing the fact that most of their new recruits are non-Vietnamese? These are some questions I wish to further explore.

Aside from the above-mentioned academic benefits, I learned many valuable personal lessons from the retreat. I could not recommend it more. This is the place to have a glimpse of the alternative to our fast-paced, competitive, efficiency-worshipping capitalist culture.