

My Beloved Teacher,

Thirteenth-century poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī once wrote, “If you only say one prayer a day, make it ‘Thank You.’ On your 94th continuation day in this body, I and my family offer your this prayer of gratitude—for your wisdom, for your guidance and for your presence in our lives.

My husband and I discovered you in the early 2000’s. We had recently moved to Massachusetts with our two very young children, and had not yet settled into our new life fully. Having moved from South Carolina to the northeast, I and my husband, who is an Iranian immigrant and a Muslim, desired to give our girls the opportunity to grow up in a part of the country we believed would be more amenable to our bi-cultural family. Then the tragic 9/11 attacks occurred, throwing our lives and those of the entire nation into absolute uncertainty and fear. My husband eventually lost his job and I found myself in a very deep and dark depression.

A year or so later—anxious for a change of scenery and desperate to get out of the house for a few hours—my husband took me to Providence, RI. He told me that a renowned Buddhist monk and his monastics were hosting a “picnic of sorts” in the park, after which there would be a talk. “We don’t HAVE to stay for the talk,” my husband said, “but I think that a picnic in the park sounds great, don’t you?” Reluctantly I agreed. I will admit that I knew nothing of you at this time, nor was I familiar with the practice. Thus, when we found our spot in the park and set down our blanket, we simply began eating, confused as to why no one else was and marveling at the stillness that could be achieved despite there being hundreds of people.

After a good while (I was almost finished with the lunch I had brought), you and your attendants arrived. You sat no more than fifteen feet away from me and as you sat, you turned to us and you smiled. One of your attendants poured you a cup of tea from a small thermos. You held the tea up to your lips and sipped slowly...mindfully...peacefully. I was captivated. As you began to eat, so too did everyone around us. Though I wasn’t entirely sure why, I found myself suddenly taking my time chewing what was left of my meal. Those last bites were delightful!

Following lunch, we participated in walking meditation—800 or so human beings walking in silent unison along the banks of the man-made lake—with you in the lead. We followed you to the conference center. Though I cannot tell you exactly what you said, I remember that you spent a lot of time talking about Americans’ interbeing with the terrorists. I remember you saying that in the same way that a flower is made of ‘non-flower elements’, a terrorist is made of ‘non-terrorist elements’. Truly, for the first time in months, I felt at peace. I bought your book *Peace is Every Step*, beginning a beautiful journey that has taken me down paths I could never have imagined.

My children spent their weekends and summers at Blue Cliff Monastery—before that at Stonehill College—where the friends they made became their family. Many of the children whom my girls played with...sang with...walked with...roomed with on retreats are to this day their closest confidantes. When my oldest child was diagnosed with brain tumors and developed anorexia as a result of the stress, it was Sister Dang Nghiem who spent hours with her, reminding her that her body was precious and worthy of care. When my youngest had a bad week at school or trouble with friends, she begged me to take her to Blue Cliff where she could “be free for a while” and “see her friends.” Over the years, we have celebrated birthdays, graduations and awards with our monastic and lay family. We have also cried together when we lost loved ones or suffered setbacks. Our spiritual family has

always accepted us with open arms and hearts; even my husband, who has said that he first felt whole when visiting Blue Cliff.

On this, your wonderful continuation, I want to say Thank You. Thank you for your teaching. Thank you for your compassion. Thank you for your presence. Thank you for the beautiful monastic family you have given us—for Sister Dang Nghiem and True Vow, Sister Blue Sky, Sister Bamboo and Sister Tranquility, Sister Empathy and Sister Chi Nghiem, Sister Khe and my best friend, Hai An. Thank you for my dear brothers Phap Khoi and Phap Khong, for Brother Man and Brother PD...for Phap Sieu and Brother Promise...for Phap Tue and Phap Nguyen...Ngo Khong and so many others whose presence and compassion have touched my life and those of my husband and children. Thank you for my sangha, too—for Joanne and Steve and Peggy and Jungwon...for Jindra and Janey and Anne...for Clytie and Zoe and Asha...for Leo and Stephanie, Michelle and Nico...for Donna and Tom and Danielle and Erica...for Kev and Ana and Rita and Aviva...Jasdeep and Jody and Joni.

Thank you, Thay, for helping me to see that my life is beautiful; for reminding me daily that the Kingdom of Heaven is here and it is now. You have been a light to me and to my family; a gift. And so, for today and tomorrow and the next day and the next, I will offer my prayer of thanks for wonderful you.

Bowing Deeply,

Heather Panahi, OI Aspirant
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