

When Nature Becomes My Sangha

By Anita Constantini

It started with a dream: to practice Thay's teachings immersed in nature, in contact with the elements outside and within me. I shared my aspiration with Sister Tue Nghiem and Sister Anh Nghiem in 2005 at Tu Hieu Pagoda in Hue, where we accompanied Thay on his first journey back to Vietnam. I invited the sisters to lead the first hiking retreat in the Dolomites, known as the Italian Alps.

Within a few months our Sangha, a heterogeneous group of twelve, had begun. We climbed up a path with our backpacks under majestic rock formations. My wish was fulfilled: the woods were the meditation hall; the mountain's rhythm became our beat. On the first day's journey, heavy rain thoroughly cleansed us. The next day blessed us with crisp sunlight that made the grassland greener and the blue sky ever more radiant. A few days later, snow came as a surprise for a joyful snowball fight!

Since this experience, Sister Tue Nghiem and I have continued to meet for one or two annual hiking retreats in Italy. We've meditated on the mountain of St. Francis at La Verna and walked in pilgrimage among sacred beech and fir tree groves to reach Camaldoli, the hermitage of St. Romualdo. These woods have been the home of two monastic communities, the Franciscan and the Benedictine, over the last thousand years.

Mindful walking in St. Romualdo offers us a truly nurturing "forest bathing," as the Japanese call it. The beneficial effects I experience in body and mind each time are confirmed by scientific studies: beech woods, in particular, have a high capacity for releasing volatile substances called monoterpenes—which act positively on our immune systems—from their foliage.

Our encounters with nature are a sacred communion, and our days flow with the rhythm of a meditation retreat. We give instructions at the beginning of each morning and afternoon walk. These can take the form of gathas or prayers we carry in our heart as we proceed in silence. The instructions also can act as guidelines aimed at making our body/mind a sensitive organ of perception. Sometimes I suggest focusing on the contact of our bare feet with the ground. We make our steps light, precise, and friendly to the Earth.

As a walking Sangha, we are nurtured and supported by each other's presence. By letting go of the idea of a separate self, we



Hiking in nature

photo by Anita Constantini

experience walking as one body. The attention shifts from the individual to the group. Each person is like a pearl in a necklace; we stay in a single row, close together, no more than an arm's length apart. Our sight focuses only on the feet of the person in front of us.

Tuning into the group's rhythm requires great concentration while still focusing on our breath. The energy created pulls us like a magnet or a wave that carries and supports us on steep inclines. Flowing as a river, as Thay reminds us, we become a body capable of going much further than any one person. For example, those who are weaker stay in the middle of the group so they can be supported by our collective energy.

Personally, I set a pace that's best for everyone, often feeling a warm wind of energy gently pushing me ahead. The group follows, silent to my ears. I delve into the practice, putting aside thoughts of directing others, and just enjoy the moment. The fertile seed of hiking retreats has grown within me in the last four years, gathering the threads of my life. Today, I offer my experience and enthusiasm; I bring our special Sangha greater awareness of nature and a sense of togetherness in concentration and joy. 🍃



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