DOM April 25th, 2026
Chanting From The Heart - Sr Dinh Nghiêm - Practice of the Highest Understanding

Thank you. We at New Hamlet, we have two weeks of retreats for happy farmers. There are many young people, wake-uppers the first week.

There was about 70 people that came. And everybody is so happy, and everybody loves to work with the earth. The weather is beautiful, it's not too hot, not too cold, it's sunny.

And someone from the hatchet book publishing firm, they want to publish one of Tai's calligraphy books with 90 calligraphies, and each calligraphy will have an explanation. And at the end, they ran to the farm to speak with the person who is responsible. And he let go of the books, and he wants to come back, not for the book, but for happy farms.

So, these days, we're seeing more and more need to be close to the earth, to be connected, to work in the garden. It's a real luxury. This morning, someone came to clean the well.

We have six wells, and since two years, we've been looking for someone to clean and reactivate the wells. And there's less and less people who do this kind of work. So the first man we found, he closed his, he took his, he retired.

And so this one that we found, finally, he is the only one for the whole region. He's very nice, but he has a monopoly on our region. So it's a trade that has been lost, and he's so precious.

He's like the prince of the region, because he has a monopoly on such an important role. So that's the news here at New Hamlet. I'm telling you these things so that you can feel like you're here with me at New Hamlet.

So now, let's get down to the sutra, the hardest sutra. So we stopped at the 16th verse of the store of precious virtues discourse, the practice of the highest understanding. So did you hear the bell that just rang on my phone? No? Okay.

So there's only me that hears it, okay. So whom, so this is where we stopped, whom do we call the bodhisattva? She who is no longer caught by sensual desires, she who aspires to the fruit of awakening without being caught in it is thus called the bodhisattva. So we've seen non-attachment, non-self, non-form.

And when we practice these things, the result is non-fear. The result is non-fear. The next verse, what is a madhasattva? Mahasattva is a great being, maha is great, and sattva is being.

What is a great being? He who has comprehended the absolute truth and cuts through all wrong views in the world. He is thus called mahasattva, a great being. This is verse 17.

So here I'm thinking about our study of consciousness. When we practice every day mindfulness, concentration, to get closer to truth, to transform our false perceptions, at one moment when we, when a person can transform all their false perceptions in their

consciousness, so their store consciousness becomes like a large mirror, very clear, a big mirror that reflects all realities such as they are. That is a mahasattva, a great being.

So this person can see the ultimate dimension. And we know that Thay often said that we don't need to reject the historical dimension to reach the ultimate dimension. But as we live in this world, in the relative reality, we can always touch the ultimate reality as well.

And because they touch the ultimate dimension, the mahasattva can cut through all wrong views in the world. And they practice generosity, great wisdom, and virtuous power. And they sit in the highest vehicle of the Buddha and give rise to the awakened mind to save all being.

And that's called great being. So they practice great generosity, great wisdom, and virtuous powers. So here, great generosity and wisdom are parts of the six paramitas.

But here we understand that this verse is speaking of the six paramitas. If they're working patience or diligence or meditation, at the same time they practice great generosity and wisdom. And this is the foundation.

And so they sit aboard the highest vehicle of the Buddha and give rise to the awakened mind. So the fruit is great. Great authority, great virtue, spiritual.

You know, in general, the word authority is not something that is seen as very positive. But in spirituality, when we speak of spiritual authority, it can be beautiful. It means that that person does not need to use authority, force, in the regular sense.

They don't need to do anything but their presence inspires. The truth, the right way. For example, someone in our community who, like Thay or Sister Annabelle, Sister Chenduk, or an elder sister or brother, when they appear, Thay or Sister Annabelle, when they appear, there's a sense that everybody corrects their posture.

Where immediately we come back to ourselves to be mindful, to be concentrated. Because this person, as they enter the room, there's an energy. There's an energy that invites us to stay mindful.

And even if Thay or Annabelle say nothing, they're smiling, they're very happy and very calm. We immediately straighten up and become more mindful in their presence. It inspires our practice.

That's what spiritual authority means here. And this spiritual authority. And this also comes from the practice of non-practice.

They're not doing anything at all. And it gives you this energy. And they sit aboard this highest vehicle of the Buddha.

And in this vehicle they can bring a lot of other people to go to the other shore, the shore of liberation. They give rise to the awakened mind to save all beings. And thus they are called a great being.

So the great understanding, the great vehicle, they are the signs of a great being. They want to help many people. And the great wisdom is the foundation.

In the next one, 19, like a magician at the crossroads, giving rise to an illusory crowd and cutting off their heads, all worlds are just as illusory. Knowing this, he feels no fear. So it's a bit of a repetition of the verse 14, which is at the top of the same page, that says the bodhisattva sees what's happening before their eyes.

It's like a magic trick. And even if there are horrible scenes, the bodhisattva is not afraid of anything. And when I read the sentence, giving rise to an illusory, everything is illusory.

You know, I work a lot in the archives of Thay's and Sister Chan Khang's archives. And right now, I'm redoing the New Hamlet museum. So I'm often touching the archives of the past, objects of the past.

And what often comes up in my mind is all this is illusory. And it's hard to explain because it's true, it's real, but at the same time, it's illusory. It will stay for future generations.

It helps people understand. But when I think of Thay's entire life, and all the years he has dedicated himself with his heart, in the smallest little details, that he was really careful in his teaching, in his trainings, in the publication of books, he did everything with his heart, with so much meticulous detail. And I remember the moment when he became sick.

In a moment, he let go of everything. In a moment. And he understood that this was the moment for him, that he had to come back to himself and take care of what was happening to him, what was happening to his body.

And what he used to do before was he was always very attentive. He did everything with his heart. And his capacity to let go was extraordinary.

And when I think back, I see that he was doing everything wholeheartedly. And everything was really important to him. We always felt that when we were with him, we were the most important person in his life, the person right in front of him.

Or the work he was doing at that moment was the most important work to be done. But, but all of this, all these things that were so important to him, he did not let himself, he didn't let himself be affected by it, that his everyday joy was still present. So he was not attached.

He could see already that one day when he would be sick, or that he would die, he would pass, physically, he could not bring anything with him. So he was not attached to anything, even though he did everything passionately and wholeheartedly. This was the most important thing to do for him.

And so what I want to say here is not because everything is illusory. We do whatever we want because it's not important. With the energy of mindfulness and concentration, we do everything with our heart.

And when this person is in front of us, this person is the most important person. What we do at that moment is what's the most important because we do it with 100% of our being, with mindfulness and concentration. It doesn't mean that we're attached to it.

It doesn't mean that this person or that thing can influence our inner peace and joy and happiness. And when we observe people who practice solidly, we can learn a lot without attachment. And that's why it's illusory.

We don't let ourselves to be attached or affected by anything. But the energy of mindfulness and concentration is always there. And so everything we do, we do it with all our attention and concentration.

So the next verse, the five aggregates are ropes that bind. Knowing they are not real, she needs no more dwelling. She practices with her awakened mind, not caught in anything.

That is why she is called the highest bodhisattva. But I think Thay would say that these five aggregates, they don't allow us to get tied up. If we're all tied up, we allow that.

The five aggregates are not there to bind us. And that's why the bodhisattva, if the bodhisattva practices the non-form, if the bodhisattva sees the true nature of these five aggregates, then the bodhisattva doesn't attach itself to these five aggregates and doesn't need to unbind because he knows that these aggregates are illusory. And he practices with the spirit of a bodhisattva.

And that's why he or she is called the highest bodhisattva. Whom do we call a bodhisattva? The one who rides on the great vehicle to rescue all beings. The great vehicle is as vast a space.

All beings can ride on it in joy and safety. And so in this verse, we talk about the great vehicle, the Mahayana. We practice to help all beings.

And not for ourselves alone. And because the great vehicle is as vast a space, he or she can bring all beings, an innumerable number of beings to the other shore. The great vehicle cannot be grasped by ideas.

It goes to nirvana, but nirvana is everywhere. We cannot recognize the destination. It is like a great fire gone out.

That is why it is said he enters nirvana. By great understanding and all other things, when we think things like a pen, it cannot be grasped. And this vehicle brings us to nirvana.

We cannot recognize the destination. It is like a fire gone out. The fire has already gone out.

And we cannot talk about nirvana. It is something we cannot grasp. We cannot perceive it.

And that is why it is called nirvana. The object of her practice cannot be grasped. It cannot be found three times.

It is silence of ideas, fearless and beyond speculation. It is practice of the highest understanding. When a bodhisattva engages in a practice of the highest understanding and gives rise to great love and compassion to help beings, he never does he think in terms of living beings.

This is the highest understanding in action. So the three times is, among others, silence. Silence of the notion of time, of all concepts.

And the great understanding is the silence of non-fear and non-speculation. The last years at Plum Village, we organized a lot of silence retreats. And a lot of people enjoyed these retreats.

Because it calms. It allows us to really come back to ourselves. To observe.

And if we don't have the chance to attend a silence retreat, these moments of silence during the day, for instance during a meal or during sitting meditation, walking meditation, we have all kinds of these moments during the day. And you know, if you observe, the more we practice, the more we are calm, at ease, and we talk less. Isn't that true? I say that, but I'm actually very talkative at New Hamlet.

And during an hour and a half, it's only me that talks. Today I'm going to try to finish a little bit earlier to allow you to talk. So that I can listen.

So if we observe, when our consciousness doesn't run after things, when our consciousness, just our mind stops, and we speak less, and it's true that in meetings at Plum Village, these people who speak less, we can see that they listen deeply. When our mind doesn't run, then we're not mindful. And then every word, when our mind doesn't run, then we're more mindful.

And so when we speak, every word has a deep meaning. And in this sutra, the highest understanding in Nirvana, words that have a lot of meaning, they cannot really describe the true reality of things. And practicing great understanding and allowing, when a bodhisattva gives rise to the notion of living beings, and practices this, if a bodhisattva clings on to this notion of a living being, when the bodhisattva gives rise to the notion of living beings, and practices austerities caught in the sign of suffering, she is caught in the signs of self and living beings.

So back in the day, there was these practices of austerities. So if we do walking meditation, I do walking meditation for my parents. And if we're attached to these ideas and concepts, then it's not yet the highest practice.

In the beginning, we practice to see the direction of our practice. But when we do walking meditation, and we're truly concentrated, we don't have these concepts of these ideas anymore. And we can truly feel the presence of our ancestors.

And we walk, we can feel when we're walking, that our ancestors are walking with us. Okay, there's a sound of the bell. But it's a feeling, an experience, a sensation.

It's no longer the words. It's no longer a concept or an idea. We know deeply when we and others, that birth and death are not two distinct things.

And that's the practice of highest understanding. I don't know what's happening with my computer at the moment. And it's probably because I put my book on the keyboard.

No, there's still something. There's only Maria and Barbara that can help solve the problem. Okay, because you're not there, I'll have to continue.

Here we talk about duality. To abandon the practice of non-duality is compassion and understanding. When we don't see the true nature of things, we are not attached to them.

And then we see that everything is just a means. Even the practices, the words and the teachings, all of that is just a means. Like the Buddha, who taught us to think about the figure that shows the moon.

It's a means to bring us closer to the true meaning of things. And like the finger, we are not attached to the finger. But we point to the moon.

If she does not rely on form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness, and only relies on perfect teaching, this is the practice of the highest understanding. And that's why in our daily lives, if we establish ourselves in form, the form can be appearance or speech, words, and then we suffer. We suffer by generating anger and frustration.

And then we don't practice. We don't practice what is said in this verse, in this sutra, because we are establishing the form. And sometimes we are angry with someone.

Yeah, because you said that or you did that. And the other person, no, that's not true. And then we don't want to believe the other person.

And then we insist and we continue to say, yeah, but you are denying. And then we are attached to the form. And we don't want to believe the other person.

We want to establish ourselves in these sounds, in these images, in this form. Even if the other person says, no, that's not true. We don't want to believe them.

And that's what is meant by establishing ourselves to rely on form. Permanent and impermanent suffering and joy, self and selfless, all are empty. He does not abide in the world of conditioned or unconditioned elements.

Like the Buddha, he abides in the practice of signlessness. So not even the ultimate dimension. The only thing that remains is the practice of non-form.

If you aspire to attain the career of the hearer, the enlightened one, the Buddha enlightenment, if you do not have endurance. So the hearer is somebody who practices, who meditates. And they're self-enlightened and don't have a teacher to practice.

And so to attain these three realizations, we must not remain in this endurance. If you do not have endurance of the above. So this endurance, what does that mean? It's our capacity to contain.

For example, I remember when Thay was still alive. Every time we had meetings to see if this person was ready to become a monastic. Thay, every time, he would want to ordain everyone without exception.

And we in the meeting, we would say, no, no, no, no. This person is not yet ready. So this person, 50%, this person, maybe 50%, that one, 75%.

And at the end of the meeting, we would show the meeting minutes to Thay. And Thay would want to ordain everyone. And that's what's meant by endurance and containment.

In our heart, we have our fears of that person. Oh, no, no, no. It's not yet ready.

And if he or she becomes a monastic and has difficulty, as a sangha, we're not sure if we can really take care of this person. But Thay would say, no, it's okay, ordain them. Because Thay was able to embrace all of these persons.

And even if a person would have difficulty, Thay knew that he had the capacity to embrace this person. To embrace all of these persons. That's what we mean by endurance.

By this capacity to contain all. If you hear these teachings and are determined to realize the highest awakening, witness the awakened mind, and see the nature of all things is your own nature. That is the great wisdom the Tathagata is describing.

That means that there's no longer a self. There's no me and the other. There's no more mine and not mine.

You know, when we live in a community, we see clearly in every person how they practice. When it's our room or our table, when it's ours, I take really good care of it. But I take really good care of it.

But if it's not mine, if it belongs to the community, then I only clean a little bit. And then I carry on with the next activity. And that's why living in a community, it's a great means to practice, to see who we are.

Because everything just appears. Everything becomes clear. That's why when we practice as a Sangha, it's easier for us to see ourselves.

The emotions, because there are many interactions every day. A Bodhisattva who practices great wisdom this way does not train in the way of a hero or a self-awakened Buddha. She trains only in the boundless knowledge of the Tathagata.

True learning is the learning of no learning. We can see again the Diamond Sutra. And I would like to modify a little bit the translation.

True learning is the learning of no learning. Because in Buddhism, there are two different terms. The ordinary beings, we still have a lot to learn.

And the awakened ones, like the Buddhas, they have nothing left to learn. That's why true learning is the learning of no learning. To learn what is not to learn.

But it's impossible to learn. Learn what is impossible to learn. I don't know if you see the difference.

The bell is invited. To learn what is impossible to learn means the object of learning is impossible for us to learn. But to learn what is not to learn means that the person has nothing left to learn.

But the person is learning. True learning is the learning of no learning. Here this sentence speaks about the people who have nothing left to learn.

Like the Buddha has. He trains in the non-increase and non-decrease of forms. He does not train in any other way.

His only joy is to train according to boundless knowledge. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. And for the last line, I would like to change the translation.

Therefore you will be freed. That's for the French version. I don't know why when I did the translation, maybe I mixed.

I found a mistake when I read those verses. He trains in the non-increase and non-decrease of forms. The same is true of feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

He does not train in any other way. His only joy is to train according to boundless knowledge. Form is neither wisdom nor the absence of wisdom.

Feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are also like that. The nature of form is like empty space. Equality, non-duality, and non-discrimination.

The perfect form is inside the form or outside of the form or in the feeling or outside of the feeling. That's why here the form is neither wisdom nor the absence of wisdom. And it's the same for the four other aggregates.

The nature of form is like empty space. Equality, non-duality, and non-discrimination. The basic nature of one's perception is without limits, as it is the basic nature of all living beings.

The nature of space is without obstructions, so is the wisdom of the one who perfectly understands the world. The nature of space is without obstructions. It's the same way with compassion, with no limits.

And right away we can see, because of interbeing, when the nature of great understanding is boundless, the nature of suffering and ignorance is also boundless, unlimited, without limits. Buddha has said that wisdom is not form. When clinging to perceptions is released, nirvana is there.

Whoever has given up clinging to perceptions, her mind and speech are set to dwell in suchness. I told us about an experience one day. In autumn, he saw a leaf.

The color of that leaf was a mix of yellow, orange. He was with children, and one child asked, What is this color, Thay? This leaf. And Thay could not find any answer.

He said, It is this color. It is this color. And Thay, everything he could only say was to show, show the leaf.

This is it. This is the color. There was no word for this color, for this specific color.

But in the end, everything is like this. We cannot use speech, thoughts, and concepts to speak about reality or say suchness. For as many lifetimes as there are grains of sand in the gorge, he will not hear the Buddha utter the words, Living beings, living beings are birthless, pure and silent from the very beginning.

This is the practice of the highest understanding. So we are reading again the Diamond Sutra's teachings. And every word I have ever uttered contains the meaning of the highest understanding.

The last Buddha transmitted to me the prediction that I would awaken in this very life. The actions of one who receives and practices this understanding are not less than that of the Buddha. Swords, poison, fire, and water, and all the efforts of Mara will not touch him.

When we have the perfect understanding, we are not touched anymore by the form, by anything. Because today is the last session on this sutra, that's why I did like a marathon. I ran very, very fast.

We finished all the verses. Because there are several verses that were repeating the same practices. And if we make the list of all the practices mentioned in this sutra, practiced by a Bodhisattva or a great being, I wrote down emptiness, non-dwelling, non-attachment, non-form, non-appearance, multiple causality, the practice of no-practice, non-discrimination, non-duality.

Those are the practices that are mentioned. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. There are 10 practices.

And because everything or every practice cannot be grasped, and when we practice this way, the result is non-fear, silence, absolute peace, with great compassion. And often, often we have like a flash when we practice mindfulness, and often we have an understanding of something, like we understood something, like we really felt we have an experience of, for example, a deep connection with the cosmos, a deep connection with Mother Earth, or with our ancestors. And this moment is a moment of awakening, thanks to the practice of mindfulness.

But this moment of awakening doesn't last for long, and it goes away, and we have to practice, practice, practice. And we wait for this moment to come back, because we could touch something that freed us, that made us so happy. And so we practice, practice, so that we can touch this moment again, this moment of loving, thanks to awakening.

And by having this experience, we understand that to go further, we need to maintain this vision. We need to make sure that this moment of awakening lasts, and if it lasts, that is concentration. In the sutras, when you hear, when you read, concentration of emptiness, concentration of multiple causality, concentration of non-being, this is the state of awakening that lasts, and that's why Thay sometimes would say, for example, scientists, like Lavoisier, he said, nothing is created, nothing is lost, everything is transformed.

He attained awakening, and with the scientific tools, he could even prove all of this. But what is the most important is that in our daily life, can we maintain this insight for 24 hours, for the whole day, because if we manage to maintain this insight, this awakening, the whole day,

then all our thoughts, everything we do, will have the light of the insight, and then we won't suffer anymore. This is it.

This is the point. I will stop here, and I will let you ask questions today. I see that Geraldine laughed a lot today, and I saw also Barbara and Emmanuel, very happy, because they have an assistant, and they kept on laughing as well, and it makes me very happy and joyful to see you laughing, and I'm also very happy that we finished this sutra, this long sutra, quite hard.

Now is the moment of relaxing for me, if you have any questions. Thank you very much for this teaching. I was very touched, so I have a question concerning the touching the earth.

You were talking about meditation. Can a moment like this happen? Maybe we would have practiced or listened to something, and we go back to our activities, and all of a sudden, there will be like that, something that will come in the mind, and we will be like, oh yeah, this is it, and it will go back. Can it happen also this way? Because that was my question.

Or is it just a little moment of joy in my historical life? Actually, I would say, no, no. I wonder if it's possible. Thank you.

And your question is, you said that concentration is when we have the capacity to maintain a moment where we felt that we touched maybe something or true nature, Buddha nature, that we were mentioning meditation. And my question is, can we have this feeling, not in our meditation, but in a moment of our daily life? Maybe we are doing the dishes or cleaning our feet, something like that. That's the question.

How to maintain these insights, these moments? How do we go back to it? First of all, when it happens to us, first, we recognize and we stay with that vision, with that insight, with that sensation. We stay and we contemplate in which state we are, we were. What were we thinking about? What were we doing? What led to this? For example, if at some point I could feel a deep connection with my father who already passed away, I can feel that I am his continuation, I can feel that he is here with me.

So what I do is also doing. And I have this sensation. So I feel and I also see that this sensation comes from a contemplation that I'm having, that I just did, that I just had.

So I stay with this sensation and I continue to sing in the direction to maintain this insight. If I stop directly and I do something else, and I drop it, of course I cannot maintain it. And if I need to do something, for example, I need to get up and do the dishes.

But while I'm doing the dishes, I can keep on nourishing this contemplation and this insight. And when I walk, I can still nourish this sensation with my mindful breathing. I don't direct my attention towards other topics, other things.

I stay with this topic. You know, to stay on the same topic, it's not easy. Because if we are used to always think about one thing and the next one, jumping from one to the other, to stay on the same topic is not easy.

You know, once I read an article on myopia, like many, many children have to glasses. At some point, they realized that it was not really myopia that the children had. But the children, many children didn't know how to concentrate with their eyes.

For example, when they play video games, very quick, the eyes really go from one to the other very quick. So when they play video games, they can jump from one topic to the other with their eyes, also with their thoughts. And to stay with one specific topic becomes difficult.

And the eyes, they keep on running and jumping this way. And at some point, they discovered that it's not short-sightedness, myopia, it's the lack of attention because the eyes cannot stay long enough on one specific thing. It was an article, a long time ago, I read that article on the French newspaper Le Point.

And you know, now the span of concentration today for our students, today is shorter, it's not as long as the students before. That's what I heard. And the practice of mindful breathing, of mindful walking, really helps us to slow down, to establish ourselves and concentrate on one single point, without running, without jumping, without constantly jumping from one thing to the other.

Is there any other question? Something is wonderful and we have these moments of wonder, these strong insights, and if we want to maintain them, it's like we want the present moment to last forever. It's a sharing. My name is Nadine speaking.

I have a question. Because we live in this illusory world, to live without attachment, we need somehow to get out of our character in this historical dimension. And actually, thanks to mindfulness, when we go back to our mindful breathing, when we listen to what is vibrating within us and around us, is it somehow connecting to a form of energy that could be aimed as a non-form? But how to maintain the state of listening without attachment? How to be out of this character? Thank you so much.

Earlier, I took the example of Thay, and I understand that when we are aware that this life is illusory, it doesn't prevent us to be engaged. And like we do things deeply, when we do things deeply in our life, we are really, really, really connected when we practice wholeheartedly in every action of our daily life, we are totally engaged. The only thing is that we are not attached.

We are not attached to the idea or desire that it has to be this way or this way. And if it's not this way, not as planned and as wished, then we will suffer. With the energy of mindfulness and concentration, when we do something, we do it 100%.

With 100% of our attention, of our being, of our soul, because we are mindful, we are well-concentrated. But we know that the object of our concentration can change, and it's impermanent. And when things change, when things evolve, we don't suffer because we are not getting attached to the form.

It needs to be this way, it has to be that way. Thank you for your question. So we will stop here.