DOM June 6th, 2026

Chanting From The Heart - Sr Dinh Nghiêm

The Three Doors of Liberation - Part 2

Good morning, everyone. I can't believe this is already the last session before the summer holiday. Time has passed so quickly.

We are going to continue with the Sutra Discourse on the Dharma Seal and the Three Doors of Liberation. During this first week, Chantal is here with us. You may notice that the background is different from usual because I am now in an office, and a little further away, Chantal is translating together with Sophie Tudor. I can also see the whole Montreal community.

We will continue, and I am going to reread the paragraph we covered last time. The third paragraph: "Dwelling in concentration, one sees the dissolution of form and becomes free from the illusory nature of perception in relation to form."

When we speak about dissolution while dwelling in concentration, we mean sitting quietly in a शांत environment and stopping. We try to calm the emotions and thoughts that come and go, and we return to mindful breathing in order to cultivate mindfulness. We aim to maintain this energy of mindfulness for several minutes—15 minutes or 30 minutes—and from that, concentration arises.

Concentration means mindfulness that is sustained over time. To observe an object deeply, we need concentration. If we keep jumping from one object to another, we cannot focus long enough to truly observe or understand it. In that case, concentration cannot be established.

This means we remain with one object for a certain period of time without shifting our attention. Concentration is sustained mindfulness. When this happens, you will see that the image of the object gradually dissipates.

This does not mean the object disappears and nothing remains. It means that the image transforms. For example, when we see a flower and look deeply, we see much more than just a flower. We do not see only petals and a stem.

We also see the air, the earth, and all the elements that make up the flower. As these deeper insights arise, the initial image dissolves, and we free ourselves from the illusory nature of perception. We are no longer confined to the idea that a flower is only its visible parts.

At the beginning, our perception is limited and illusory. But with deep observation, we see more and are liberated from that initial, superficial image.

We also speak about the objects of the mind—actually, I should correct that. We speak of the six sense bases: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and consciousness. In Buddhist psychology, each of these has a corresponding object: form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental objects.

For example, smell is the object of the nose, taste is the object of the tongue, and so on. When we look deeply into what we hear—words, music, or any sound—we see that these phenomena are fluid.

Looking deeply into sounds, smells, and mental objects, we realize that they are composed of many elements. We begin to see the interbeing of all things, and we are no longer imprisoned by our initial, superficial perceptions.

The Buddha used images to illustrate the illusory nature of phenomena, such as water bubbles or a rainbow. We try to approach a rainbow and touch it, but we never succeed. A rainbow appears as an arc of colors, yet it cannot be grasped.

The same is true for bubbles. As soon as we try to touch them, they disappear. These images show that reality cannot be grasped with our hands.

Nor can it be grasped with our consciousness, ideas, or perceptions. As soon as we form a perception, it is already limited and therefore illusory, because reality is not exactly as we perceive it.

That is why the Buddha said that most of our perceptions—up to 96%—are erroneous. By observing deeply, we become free from the illusory nature of perception in all domains: smell, taste, touch, and mental objects. This meditation is called signlessness, the second door of liberation.

Once you enter this door, your understanding becomes pure. Your views are no longer distorted. It feels as though you enter a vast, open world, no longer confined to a narrow space.

With this clarity, greed, hatred, and delusion are uprooted. As a result, attachment diminishes, and we no longer cling strongly to things.

When we are no longer attached, we do not become angry due to others' words or actions, because we see them simply as sounds, gestures, or images. In this way, we are freed from ignorance.

You then dwell in non-discriminative awareness. This means you no longer divide reality into categories such as true or false, beautiful or ugly.

You see interbeing: in birth there is death, and in death there is birth; in left there is right, and in right there is left. In this understanding, views such as "me" and "mine" no longer arise.

There is no longer a sense of opposition—no more "self versus other." When you are free from the idea of "I am," you no longer see what you perceive as existing independently from your consciousness.

In Buddhist psychology, perception and its object are not separate. When there is no discrimination, there is no separation between subject and object.

As we saw earlier, the nature of form is emptiness. Likewise, perception is also empty. What you see, hear, and know does not exist outside your consciousness.

Why? Because perception arises from conditions, and these conditions are constantly changing—they are impermanent. Consciousness itself also arises from conditions and is therefore impermanent. Because it is impermanent, it cannot be grasped.

This meditation is called wishlessness, the third door of liberation. When you enter this door, you experience the true nature of all dharmas and no longer cling to anything, because you have seen their unconditioned nature.

The Buddha told the community: this is the wonderful Dharma seal—the three doors of liberation. If you study and practice them, you will attain pure insight.

The monks were delighted to hear this teaching. They paid respect to the World-Honored One and committed to practicing it.

Last time, I spoke about the three seals and the three doors of liberation. The three seals are non-self, impermanence, and nirvana. The three doors of liberation are emptiness, signlessness, and wishlessness.

Although the wording may differ slightly, they point to the same reality: interbeing. The cessation of all views is nirvana. Impermanence implies non-self, and non-self is emptiness.

In Plum Village, the foundation of practice is the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing, which is closely related to the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. Thầy taught that these are the basis of all practice.

I once asked Thầy why he taught so many sutras if one or two were enough. He replied that studying other sutras helps us better understand the fundamental one.

If we return to the sixteen exercises of mindful breathing, we see that the first four are very simple: when I breathe in long, I know I am breathing in long; when I breathe in short, I know I am breathing in short.

Breathing in, I am aware of my body. Breathing out, I am aware of my body. Breathing in, I relax my body.

Breathing out, I relax my body. These four exercises prepare us and help us to look deeply into the nature of phenomena, including signlessness and wishlessness. They help us establish concentration and mindfulness.

The 11th exercise is: breathing in, I concentrate my mind; breathing out, I concentrate my mind. The 13th exercise: breathing in, I contemplate the impermanence of all things; breathing out, I contemplate the impermanence of all things.

The 14th exercise: breathing in, I contemplate that all things are free from attachment and desire; breathing out, I understand that nothing needs to be grasped or desired.

You can see that the three doors of liberation help us better understand and practice these breathing exercises. They are also practices of deep looking. In short, meditation can be summarized in two elements: stopping and deep looking.

When we examine these sixteen exercises of mindful breathing, we see that they help us stop—stop our mind, our thoughts, our fears, and our anxieties—in order to establish concentration and mindfulness. At the same time, they guide us in the practice of deep looking.

This sutra helps us better understand and apply these sixteen exercises. In these paragraphs, we can also see similarities with other sutras we have studied, such as the Sutra on the Middle Way and others found in the chanting book.

Is it raining in Montreal? It sounds very loud. Yes, I can hear the rain in the background. I love the sound of rain on the roof.

As you can see, having studied many sutras helps us understand this Sutra on the Three Doors of Liberation more quickly.

I would really like to hear from you and take time to listen. But first, I would like to share one more thing. Yesterday, I gave a Dharma talk at New Hamlet, and I would like to share part of it with you.

I deeply felt the joyful atmosphere of a large spiritual family gathering. It is only the first week, and the retreat is open to everyone. Many members of the Order of Interbeing are present as volunteers. Whenever the three hamlets come together, it feels like a joyful reunion.

And this is only the beginning—next week there will be even more people. This year is especially meaningful, as we are celebrating Thầy's 100th anniversary.

I also shared a story about a book being published by Hachette, currently the largest publishing house in France and one of the four largest in the world. Out of Thầy's 204 French calligraphies, they selected 90.

In addition, they chose two calligraphies written in Vietnamese. This surprised me. I thought they might include some in English, but instead they selected two in Vietnamese—because those particular calligraphies exist only in Vietnamese.

I would like to show them to you. Can I take a question? This question is from Martin.

I am very happy to be with all of you. Thank you. My work starts in ten minutes, so I will ask a quick question.

When we practice, sometimes a strong feeling or suffering arises—perhaps due to something someone said. We feel it in our body, in our sense organs. We stop and observe it.

My question is: later, this feeling comes back. Does it eventually get transformed? Or does it simply disappear? When does acceptance arise?

To clarify: when the suffering is new, how do we transform it? We may wish for it to disappear completely, but it often returns. So we practice stopping again. I observe the sensations, but I notice that it keeps coming back.

So over time, will it be transformed?

Yes, the question is clear. You experience a new form of suffering, you try to transform it, but it keeps returning.

This relates to what we discussed earlier. Sometimes we feel awakened—we understand emptiness, non-birth, and non-death. But how do we maintain that deep insight?

If we look at our day, we can estimate how much time we spend in mindfulness. Perhaps one hour, perhaps two. If we add up all the small moments—each time we hear a bell, each time we remember to walk mindfully—we can see how much of the 24 hours we truly spend in mindfulness.

We can also observe how stable our concentration is, and how long we can maintain deep insight.

When mindfulness is absent, suffering naturally returns. When it returns, we come back to mindfulness and concentration. We bring our thoughts back to reality—to interbeing, impermanence, and non-self.

When we observe from this perspective, suffering decreases. And each time it returns, if we maintain mindfulness, it becomes weaker.

"I have to leave now, I am about to start work. Is there another question?"

"Yes, Emmanuel here. First, thank you very much for your teaching. I notice that you smile a lot, and I feel that smiling is very important.

What is the connection between smiling and mindfulness? Mindfulness is not always easy, so how can smiling and mindfulness exist together?"

So the question is whether mindfulness is difficult. Not exactly—rather, mindfulness can bring up difficult things. And yet, when we observe the brothers and sisters, they are often smiling.

Before answering, I will show the calligraphy.

Yes, you can see it clearly. This is one of the calligraphies selected by Hachette.

"Within each of us, there is a tiger." This tiger is powerful and can make us afraid. It represents our strong emotions, our anger, and our deep habits that can arise suddenly.

The point is not to lock the tiger in a cage, but to hold it gently with a strong rope. Sometimes the tiger resists and struggles.

When we try to suppress what we do not like, we create pressure within ourselves. At the beginning, when we focus on the breath, it may feel uneven or noisy.

And the more we practice mindful breathing, the softer, deeper, and lighter our breath becomes—until it is as fine as a thread of silk. It is through loving-kindness and nonviolence that we are able to tame this tiger.

Even with mindfulness, we remain aware of suffering, anger, and the parts of ourselves we do not like. But when mindfulness is deep and accompanied by a non-discriminative view, acceptance naturally arises, along with love for ourselves and for others. With this energy of mindfulness, we are able to embrace and welcome everything.

Mindfulness, when supported by concentration and insight, becomes calm and stable.

I once mentioned Master Tăng Hội, an early Vietnamese Zen master from around the second or third century. He proposed a practice of awareness of the face—mindfulness of the face.

In the exercise "breathing in, I am aware of my body," Master Tăng Hội simplified the practice by focusing on the face. The face is a smaller area, and it is easier to observe. We can notice whether it is tense or relaxed. The face changes according to conditions, and since body and mind are one, awareness of the face also brings awareness of what is happening within us.

Simply by being aware of the face, we cultivate mindfulness. Thầy would say that smiling is a practice—a kind of yoga. When you smile, your face relaxes, and your body relaxes as well.

When you relax in this way and guide your mindfulness with loving-kindness and acceptance, the practice becomes gentle. It is not overly serious; we recognize that things are not the end of the world, and we can smile at whatever arises.

Thank you—that was a very good question.

In the Plum Village tradition, meditation is always accompanied by nonviolence, both in form and in content. Thầy grew up in a context where ritual forms were very important, but he simplified those forms to help us access the essence.

And that essence is loving-kindness and compassion.

I mention this because this retreat is open to anyone who wants to learn the Plum Village tradition. In practice, you can apply Master Tăng Hội's method of awareness of the face.

Eugene: Hello, thank you very much for sharing the Plum Village tradition. It does me a lot of good. I was supposed to come, but for various reasons I could not go to France.

I really appreciated your comparison today. It helped me reflect on why I am here, why I am alive. The image of the water bubble gave me hope. Thank you for these teachings—they help us a lot.

I have to leave now, but I wanted to express my gratitude.

Thank you, I am happy to see you again.

Eugene, I would like to add something about the image of the water bubble. This is an image used by the Buddha, not something I created.

We need to be careful. When you touch a bubble, it may seem to disappear, but that does not mean the root of suffering has been transformed. The bubble may reappear.

If we do not maintain mindfulness and insight in daily life, what we experience may not be true transformation—it may simply be avoidance or denial.

So when we "touch the bubble," we must also look deeply with the energy of mindfulness.

Master Linji gave a similar image: we tend to avoid suffering, like an animal that hides its head in the sand when faced with danger. He would say: do not behave like that.

Instead, we should face our suffering directly, with mindfulness and insight.

Michel would like to ask a question.

“When I look at the calligraphy, I see the signature with four characters. I tried to understand them but could not. Could you explain their meaning?”

That is a very good question, and one that many people—even Vietnamese—do not fully understand.

In the square seal, on the right side, there are two characters: “Tùng Quan.” This is the name given to Thầy by his teacher—his lineage name.

On the left side, there are the characters “Nhất Hạnh,” which is the Dharma name he chose for himself, with his teacher’s approval.

These characters are written in a classical Chinese seal script, which is not commonly seen in modern texts and can be difficult to read. This style is traditionally used for seals in calligraphy.

Today, many monastics also create calligraphy and use their own seals, so their work is not confused with Thầy’s. Sometimes they use Vietnamese characters for clarity.

I remember that in 1999, when we traveled to China for the first time with Thầy, we visited a shop that made seals, and Thầy offered each monastic a personal seal.

So now it should be clearer. Rong, our Chinese friend, is very familiar with these seals, right?

Now, I would like to ask something of all of you. You will soon have a few months of holiday, so I invite you to write to me.

This time, I truly look forward to receiving your letters. Please tell me honestly: what have these sutra studies brought you?

Write to me sincerely, from your heart. I promise I will not judge. And if you write sincerely, I will respond sincerely.

Next time, I hope to do even better. I want to gain more experience for next year.