DOM May 23rd, 2026
Chanting From The Heart
Sr Dinh Nghiêm - The Three Doors of Liberation

Hello dear friends, today is the 23rd of May and I am currently on retreat in Switzerland with a Sangha, a francophone Sangha, and I have just learned that this year, in October, for Thay's 100th birthday, the Sangha in Lille will be organizing an exhibition of photos of Thay and his calligraphies. In the last retreat in Belgium, with our francophone brothers and sisters there, they worked really hard to prepare for this exhibition, and when I heard this I was very happy, because this is a very special year. We will celebrate 100 years of Thay on many occasions.

We will also have the book of Thay's calligraphies in French this fall. I hope it will be available shortly before his birthday. I am asking our Vietnamese brothers and sisters to republish Thay's very first book.

It was originally published in 1950, a collection of poems entitled Autumn Twilight Flute. I hope this collection of poems will be available in June in Vietnamese, French, English, Spanish and Chinese. And the second book that will be posted on Làng Mai's website has been ready for over a month, but since we have not yet been able to upload it, it is still waiting. The book itself is finished, and maybe we will also have about 100 copies available at the retreat in June at Plum Village.

These books, even Thay's oldest students, even Vietnamese students, have never seen them. I believe even Sister Chân Không has not seen them. A few of us have seen a very old copy of the second book, which is a book of fables.

There is one copy in the archives, but otherwise these books disappeared during the war. You will now have the opportunity to see them again. We have translated them into French, and I think this translation is still a bit rough.

I am still waiting for better translations, and no doubt there are people among you who will be able to improve on the draft translation.

Okay, now let us start a new sutra. It is the Discourse on the Dharma Seal, the Three Doors of Liberation.

Why "Dharma Doors of the Three Liberations"? Why do we speak of Doors of Liberation? It is a little different from "Dharma Seal", but that is the translation used in French. I think that at times we have the impression that we are stuck, that there is no way out, no emergency exit.

We are completely stuck in our suffering, in pain, in despair, and we simply cannot see the way out. We cannot see a solution. But with our practice of deep looking, with understanding,

we may have the feeling that we can open a door and enter a completely different world, a horizon of freedom, a freer world.

It is vast and spacious, as if we were in a small dark room, and when we open a door we step into a wonderful world, full of light, beauty and space, and we see a huge difference. In a very short moment, we get this feeling, and that is awakening, that is enlightenment. I remember when Thay translated this sutra in the 1980s, he chose another title, and the title he used in the 1980s was The Discourse on the Dharma Seal.

Some of you might have that early version from the 1980s. Those old books have the title Sutra of the Dharma Seal, and in the third chapter it also mentions the Dharma Seal – actually in the first chapter as well.

In the explanation of this sutra, it is written that this sutra was translated from sutra no. 104 of the Chinese canon, translated into Chinese by Master Dhanapala at the beginning of the 10th century. You can also refer to sutra no. 103, translated from Sanskrit by Master Dharmaraksha at the end of the 3rd century.

There is a whole series of sutras mentioned at the back of the book that explains the sources in the Chinese canon, and also in the Pali canon. So this sutra exists both in the northern and in the southern schools.

So we will read the first passage.

“I heard these words of the Buddha one time when the Lord was residing at Vaishali with his community of bhikshus. One day he told the community:

‘Do you know that there is a wonderful Dharma Seal? Today I would like to tell you about it and explain it to you. Listen attentively and make use of your pure understanding so that you may understand it deeply. Use your intelligence skillfully to remember it and put it into practice.’”

Here, nobody asked any question, unlike in other sutras such as the Diamond Sutra, where Subhuti asks a question to the Buddha. In this case, nobody asked him a question; the Buddha simply gave this teaching.

That means the Buddha felt that this was very important, or he could see, within the community, that there was a need. So he wanted to take the time to offer this teaching at that moment. He also saw that his students were ready to receive it.

This sutra is part of a category of sutras that the Buddha offered spontaneously, without being asked, without his students posing a question.

“Listen attentively and make use of your pure understanding so that you may understand it deeply. Use your intelligence skillfully to remember it and put it into practice.”

So there is the intention to receive the Dharma. To receive the Dharma, we must listen attentively. It requires our attention. It requires pure understanding, a pure mind, in order to understand deeply.

We have to listen deeply, without preconceived ideas, because it can happen that we listen only with our intellect and start comparing, saying: “Oh yes, I agree with that,” or “Oh no, I do not agree with that.”

If we listen to the teaching while thinking, “I agree with this, I don’t agree with that,” then we are listening with our intellect. We are not listening with our whole being, with our body, with a pure mind.

We need to use pure understanding, without relying on concepts and comparisons, because when we compare while listening, we are only comparing concepts and ideas.

For a deep understanding, it is our lived experience that matters; we need to feel it in our body, and not turn it into just a mental game.

In order to understand it deeply, remember it and put it into practice. Here, the Buddha speaks of skillfulness in putting the teaching into practice according to the situation.

We do not remain rigid. We are not attached to each word, trying to apply the teaching at all costs. With skillfulness, we put it into practice appropriately, depending on the situation we are in.

And the bhikshus replied: “Wonderful, World-Honored One, please teach us. We are very eager to listen.”

You know that in the Vinaya there is a precept that we should teach the Dharma only to those who wish to receive it.

So, in this case, nobody had yet asked a question, the Buddha began, and then the monks replied: “Please, teach us, we want to listen, we are very eager to hear you.” And then the Buddha gave the teaching.

For us monastics, if we see that a person does not want the Dharma and we insist on teaching and pushing that person to listen to us, then, according to the Vinaya, we are breaking a precept. If that person does not have respect for the Dharma, does not see its value, does not appreciate it, and does not want to listen, and we still give the teaching, then we break that precept.

That is why we need skillfulness; we must wait for the right moment, even if we see that the person is suffering. If the person does not want to practice, we will not force them to practice; we will not talk about the Dharma directly. Through our way of living, through an inspiring way of life, we can still offer something. But with words, if we are not skillful, we may create resistance, rebellion or conflict. In that case, we are not skillful.

When we are skillful, the person who shares the Dharma understands the needs and the situation of the other person, so that we can offer something truly appropriate and helpful. And the other person also has the desire to receive. When both sides are like this, communication is very good, and transmission and reception can really happen.

The Buddha said:

“Emptiness is neither being nor non-being. It is free from all wrong views. It is neither produced nor destroyed, and it cannot be grasped by views.

When we hear this sentence, we do not yet know what emptiness really is, the true nature of emptiness, but we know that it is neither being nor non-being, that it is not within wrong views, and that it is free from birth, death and all other concepts. So we can immediately sense that we are entering the ultimate dimension, because it goes beyond birth and death, beyond form and concepts.

Why is it so? Because emptiness cannot be located in space, it has no form, it is not an object of perception, it has never been born, and the intellect cannot grasp it. Because it cannot be grasped, it embraces all dharmas and dwells in non-discursive, non-discriminative wisdom.

This is true and right understanding.”

We hear words such as “inconceivable”, “cannot be grasped”, “non-discriminative”, so we can feel that we are entering the ultimate, right? This is true and right understanding.

“Bhikshus, you should know that not only emptiness, but all dharmas are like that. This is the Dharma Seal.”

Even if we do not yet understand what emptiness is, we know that it is the true nature of all phenomena, all dharmas. This is the Dharma Seal.

The Dharma Seal is like the Buddha’s signature. In a teaching, when we see this element, we know that it is the teaching of the Buddha. This is the Dharma Seal, one of the seals of the Dharma.

You know that, in the sutras that speak of the Dharma Seal, generally we have three Dharma Seals, and in other sutras there are four. Here, we can see that there is only one.

That Dharma Seal is the seal of ultimate reality, because it cannot be grasped; it goes beyond intellect and form, beyond birth and death. We can see that it is the seal of ultimate reality, and that ultimate reality is nirvana.

So in several sutras there is only one Dharma Seal, in others three, or sometimes four.

In many sutras we hear about and learn the three Dharma Seals: impermanence, non-self and nirvana. These Dharma Seals can be found, as we said earlier, in sutras of both the northern and southern schools, but specifically the trio “impermanence, non-self, nirvana” is found mainly in the northern school.

It is good that, at the beginning, we spoke about the northern and southern schools, because now when I speak about this, you can understand right away.

In sutras written in the second century, we already see these three Dharma Seals: impermanence, non-self and nirvana. There are also sutras in the southern school where we find three Dharma Seals, but with a different list: impermanence, suffering and non-self. There is no nirvana; suffering appears in place of nirvana.

Later, there are other sutras that speak of four seals: impermanence, non-self, nirvana, and the fourth is suffering.

Thay did research, meditated and contemplated, and Thay said that, in the transmission over generations, there were schools and also students of the Buddha who constantly heard about suffering and therefore believed that suffering was also one of the Dharma Seals. That is why, in the transmission, suffering was introduced into the seals.

Then, at other times, some students said: "No, it does not work if nirvana is not present in the seals, because nirvana really is a seal of the Buddha's teachings." The Buddha always taught us the two dimensions: the historical dimension in our daily life, with the relative truth, the conventional truth, and also the ultimate dimension that goes beyond this dimension. So something is missing if, in the Dharma Seals, we do not find nirvana.

So the Buddha's students reintroduced nirvana into the Dharma Seals and kept suffering. That is how we later had four Dharma Seals.

Thay passed away four years ago, and even Thay's teachings are sometimes misunderstood. So, with the Buddha gone for more than 2600 years, it is easy to imagine.

Thay has been gone for only four years, and already some students misunderstand his teaching. For example, when Thay repeated the practice of being happy in the present moment, some could misunderstand and want only to enjoy the present moment: "Okay, let us forget about the future and be only in the present moment."

But if we just enjoy the present moment and separate it from the future, as if those two periods of time had nothing to do with one another, then we misunderstand the teaching. According to non-self – non-self is interbeing – there is no separate self. The self is made of all non-self elements; that is interbeing.

With the understanding of interbeing, we can see that the present moment contains the future. But if we say that the present moment has nothing to do with the future, we discriminate between these two periods of time, and then we do not see the consequences in the future. And that is not the right way, is it?

Let us continue.

Dear bhikshus, this is a basic teaching, the destination of the Buddhas. Please listen carefully in order to understand it, so that you may be able to contemplate it in reality. The Buddha underlines the importance of these three doors. This is the destination of all Buddhas.

Bhikshus, as practitioners, find a quiet place to meditate, such as in a forest or under a tree. There you can see that form is suffering.

You see, the Buddha is asking us to sit and meditate, to contemplate and look deeply. This morning, I spoke a bit about moments of awakening, of enlightenment. We have all had very deep moments, very, very deep moments in our practice.

Once in a while, we realize something deeply. For example, there are moments when, while I was walking in the forest – just two days ago – a strong feeling came over me. I was in a very beautiful forest close by, and I saw how beautiful it was.

Deep inside me, I said to the forest: “Oh, you are so lucky. All of you, all the trees, you are so lucky. You are so well here. You are well cared for and well protected here.

You are not like the trees in Asia, where forests are ravaged and trees are cut down. Here you are protected and preserved.

If you were in Asia and you became sad because of the ravaged forests, and depressed and weakened so that you could not be strong and green, it would be very unfortunate. Precisely because, over there, forests are being destroyed, you, here, in Switzerland, must stay strong, green and beautiful, twice as much, for all the other trees that are being destroyed and ravaged, because we are counting on you.

If the other forests that still remain can stay strong, perhaps you will be able to – I do not know – maybe save the planet, at least give us hope. We are counting on you.”

That is when I truly felt interbeing. When we broaden our view, in time and in space, we are no longer stuck in a small corner, and we can see interbeing.

And this insight was very strong in me, very strong.

Even we, as humans, must not let ourselves be invaded by despair. Some of us believe that, to show we love, we must be angry; otherwise, it is indifference.

Oui, je peux nettoyer aussi ce bloc en anglais. Voici la version corrigée et fluidifiée, en un seul morceau.

So imagine these forests are sad or depressed; then the trees will die as well. And we humans are the same. We need to make good use of the favorable conditions we have in order to cultivate peace, non-violence and loving-kindness for others, for the world, because that is what the world needs.

We cannot live with guilt and complexes. We must use all our good conditions for ourselves and for the world. There are these powerful moments when I feel I am truly touching interbeing.

But how do we maintain this vision, this insight? It may be just one of those little moments of awakening. We all have these moments of awakening, small or great; we have moments of deep understanding.

The question is: how do we maintain these moments? We are very busy in our daily life. We realize something, and then we move on because we are busy and there are other things to

worry about. The Buddha says here: find a quiet place to meditate in the forest, because we must put ourselves in favorable conditions to be able to look deeply into this teaching.

When we have a vision, we cannot always sit in meditation all day long to maintain that deep insight. We have other things to do. So how do we maintain this awakening and this understanding throughout the whole day, so we do not lose it?

Scientists also awaken in a very scientific way. They have discovered truths like “nothing is created, nothing is lost”. But how can we maintain this light in every moment of our day so that we do not suffer? That is the important point.

Thay repeated a thousand and one times: integrate mindfulness into every daily activity in order to maintain this awakening in us.

“See that every form is suffering, empty and impermanent, and as a result you will no longer be attached to form. You will attain non-discriminative understanding of form; then do the same for feelings.”

This reflects the belief that “everything is suffering”, because the Buddha taught us the Four Noble Truths, and the First Noble Truth is the existence of suffering. But the Fourth Noble Truth is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

So when you see this sentence, “form is painful”, you can recognize that it expresses only one part of the Buddha’s teaching. It comes from the effort to repeat the teaching, but it shows only part of it.

Saying that form is painful or suffering corresponds to the First Noble Truth. The cessation of suffering and the path leading to its cessation are not mentioned here.

Thay would often say that form itself is not suffering; it is our perception of form that makes us suffer. So here we must understand that our false perception of form causes suffering, but form itself is not inherently painful.

Form is empty and impermanent – that, we can agree with. And as a result, we will not be attached to form. We will attain non-discriminative understanding of form.

When we speak of “form”, we refer to the body and everything we perceive. Everything is empty – empty of a separate self. That is what we mean by emptiness. Everything we see, all these objects, is also impermanent.

When we see that they are impermanent, constantly changing, and made of non-self elements, we can stop being attached to form and come to rest in a non-discriminative understanding of form.

For example, take our own body. If everyone practiced like this, cosmetic surgery would go out of business. I see, I know people who are very attached to their form.

I know people who are attached to their youth, to having a young and beautiful body, and they suffer; they are sad when they see themselves growing old. That is why cosmetic surgery still exists.

We are not only attached to form; the same is true for sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.

“See that they are impermanent, subject to change and empty, and rise above all wrong views about them. Realize non-discriminative understanding of feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.”

We can also be attached to sensations – for example, the feeling of being useful, or of being fit. People who work a lot, when they retire, sometimes cannot stand the idea of being “retired”: “Now I do not work anymore; I am not as good as before.” When we are busy, working and doing many things, we have the feeling of being useful. When we no longer do anything, we may have the feeling of being useless. This too is an attachment to feelings or mental formations.

You know, about a month ago, I had the chance to speak with someone who was a flight attendant, a chief flight attendant. When she shared what her job was really like, I learned a lot and felt a great deal of love.

When we take a plane, we see flight attendants and pilots; we only see the outer appearance, but we do not know that these people work very, very hard.

This friend, who was a flight attendant, told me that when she was very young, she had cancer in her eye. She said that people who work as flight attendants, who spend a lot of time in planes, have a 50% higher risk of developing cancer because of radiation. Very young, she had eye cancer, and recently she had a second cancer.

There are flight attendants who, when they retire, very quickly fall ill and die. One reason, at least in part, is that they cannot adjust their way of life.

It was a life of continuous movement. There was no longer any regular day-night rhythm; they often did not even know what time of year it was, which season. Everything was upside down, the rhythm of day and night, and they were always on the go. Then, all of a sudden, when retirement comes, there is nothing.

The body cannot adapt to such a brutal change. Even now, this friend is always finding new activities; it is very hard for her to slow down. She does manage to slow down a little, but she still needs time.

The body also gets attached – not only the mind – to a certain rhythm of life, a way of life, to certain feelings, to a certain state of consciousness. In this life, in this world, each of us has a job, some work to do, and we see that behind that work there are always a lot of efforts and a lot of stress, just to live or to survive.

Listening to her sharing, I felt a very deep sense of interbeing and gratitude. Even if I rarely fly, even if now I would take a vow not to fly at all, I still see that, in order for us all to live

together and for this world to function, we are deeply connected. Together, we make this world.

Together, through our way of consuming and living, we build this world. This is interbeing. I can never say: “Oh, I didn’t do anything. If things are the way they are, it’s them, not me.” No – all of us take part in this world.

Like the gatha we recite before we drink or eat: we remember that, for life to continue on this planet, all beings “kill” one another to maintain life. Birth and death: there is always, continuously, death giving rise to birth. We need death for there to be birth. Death leads to the birth of other beings, and the birth of those beings leads also to the death of other beings.

All of us are part of this world, part of this continuous exchange, this interbeing between birth and death in the historical dimension. Fortunately, there is the ultimate dimension, which allows us to go beyond all these notions.

This ultimate dimension is nirvana, which is the foundation of all beings and all phenomena. When we understand the nature of emptiness of all things – that everything is empty of a separate self – and if we maintain this vision in our daily life, then, when we are mindful, we have this insight. When we manage to maintain this insight, that is concentration – this is the specific term in Buddhism.

Concentration on emptiness, concentration on non-self in daily life. If we manage to live in that concentration, then we are no longer attached to form, to this form, to these feelings and perceptions that are continually changing. We are no longer attached, and we no longer discriminate between these feelings and perceptions.

When we discriminate, it is between left and right, beautiful and ugly, good and bad. But when we see that the beautiful is made of the ugly, that the good is made of the bad, we see that one is in the other. We no longer discriminate; we embrace both extremes.

“Bhikshu, dwelling in concentration, you see what is also taught in the Heart Sutra: see the dissolution of form and be free from the illusory nature of perception with respect to form.

Our consciousness gives rise to perceptions; in the Avatamsaka Sutra, it is said that our consciousness is like a painter, who paints all sorts of things. Our perceptions, ideas and mental constructions are like drawings made by our mind, by our consciousness; they are products of the mind.

See the dissolution of sound, smell, taste, touch and mental objects, and be free from the illusory nature of these perceptions.”

The subject and the object are like the two sides of a coin: when one is there, the other must be there as well. When one no longer manifests, the other does not manifest either. The two go together.

If you can see this, you can find liberation. You will be free from all views. Emptiness – this is the first Door of Liberation.

We find the same teachings in the Heart Sutra and in the previous sutra we studied on the Perfection of Understanding. We talked about the five aggregates.

When we establish ourselves in concentration, we see that the images dissipate, the illusory nature of these perceptions fades. We have the feeling that we are seeing the same teachings as in the previous sutras.

The illusory nature of perception, of these sounds, smells, etc.: the five aggregates and their objects – sounds, smells, tastes, touch, mental objects – are empty of a separate self and constantly changing.

All these sense objects will also disappear. When one disappears, the others disappear as well. But here, disappearance does not mean death; it simply means non-manifestation.

In this way, you are freed from the illusory nature of perception. This contemplation is the second Door of Liberation: signlessness.

Once you have entered this door, your knowledge will be pure. This means that in your view there are no longer wrong perceptions. Your view is right, because you see reality as it is, without attachment to form.

And when your understanding is pure, you will be free from greed, hatred and delusion. Because you understand the true nature of form – changing and empty of a separate self – you see that it is not worth clinging to.

You no longer cling to a particular perception or form of this person, this object or this phenomenon in front of you.

With these three rooted out, you dwell in non-discursive, non-discriminative knowledge. You see that everything inter-is. In goodness there is wrongness; in right there is left.

When you dwell in this kind of knowledge, views concerning “me” and “mine” – that is, all wrong views – no longer have any ground or opportunity to arise.

Okay, it is already 9:22. There are eight minutes left. If you have any questions, I would like to tell you a little story.

And Nathans, you can ask your question afterwards.

I remember when I became a novice. It makes me smile now when I think of it. Thay would often say: “Can you imagine Sister Dinh Nghiem when she is very old and has lost her teeth, when she is 80 or 90?”

At that time, when Thay said that, I wondered: “Why is Thay telling such jokes?”

Now I can see that, when he ordained me, Thay could already see me 40, 50 or 60 years later. He was not at all attached to my present form; he could already see how I would be many decades in the future.

Now I see why he spoke like that to me and to his other students. He saw something beyond our present form.

That is why he poured all his time and energy into transmission. It was not a joke, as I believed then. He was speaking the truth; he could see the truth.

They were not jokes, as I had thought.

Okay, I will listen to your question now.

“Dear Thay, dear Sister Dinh Nghiem, dear friends, my question concerns the beginning of the sutra. You said that the bhikshus expressed their wish to be taught, and you spoke about this precept, this rule in the Vinaya, that we transmit the Dharma only to those who want to receive it.

I make a link with a question that regularly comes up in my mind. I hear very beautiful testimonies. In the lay community, many people share about the Dharma, but they say they speak about Dharma without naming it, saying that this is a skillful means to transmit the Dharma in a way adapted to people.

I am not very knowledgeable about skillful means, but I always feel a bit uncomfortable with this way of approaching things. So I connect it to the monastic precept, and I wonder whether it should also apply to lay practitioners.

I find it a bit disrespectful towards the Dharma not to say explicitly that this is the source; as if people did not deserve to know that our source is the Dharma, and we had to hide it so that they would accept it. It also seems disrespectful towards people, as if we thought they were not open or intelligent enough to accept what we say if we say that it comes from the Dharma.

So my question is: could you share some light on this point, and would this monastic principle not be good to apply also to lay practitioners? Thank you.”

When I speak about the beginning of the sutra, there it is clearly about teaching the Dharma, teaching the sutras.

But when, through our way of life, through our way of living, we transmit something to others, that is something else.

I understand your question, but it is very difficult to answer it in a general way, because I know it is not easy; situations are very different. In certain cases, I can imagine saying: “Oh, this is not explicitly Dharma, we can share it.” In other cases, I can understand that I would say: “No, perhaps here it is not so skillful.”

To really share what I think, I would need very concrete examples. It is difficult to answer in general like this. It is difficult.

Thank you, Laurence. Within the Sangha, this is something you can share in Dharma sharing, especially with members of the Order of Interbeing, within the community of Interbeing.

That is why the question of skillfulness is a vast topic. We can spend our whole life learning skillful means. That is why there are so many Buddhist schools, and 84,000 Dharma doors.

The more we practice, the more we learn. Thank you, Laurence, for your question.

Okay, please write to me.