

2026-03-28 Chanting From The Heart - Sr Dinh Nghiêm - Practice of the Highest Understanding

Hello everyone, so I see that on February 28th, when we studied the sutra of the one who knows how to live alone, I had two questions. Regarding the future, I have a new position starting soon. I remember this question.

I have more responsibilities, and that creates anxiety for me. There are challenges. How can I remain detached before it starts? How can I prepare for and then do my work afterward and still be detached from it? I was the one who asked this question.

And yes, it wasn't answered. It wasn't answered. Okay.

And you started your... No, but actually, when I asked the question, it's because I found it easy to take—well, not easy, but I was able to take, you know, I was able to take the past and, by looking at the past, to be able to use it, I could say it like that, to use the past to be in my present moment with gratitude.

But for the future, given the responsibility tied to the position and the work, it's difficult to—that's it, that's my question. I found it difficult to use—well, I'm using the word "use"—the future tense to be in the present, you know, how can I be in... Yeah, it might not be clear, but anyway.

Yes, it's clear. Yeah, it's not easy because it generates anxiety because we have a responsibility in our work. I received a great text from Chantal that's helping me, but I was interested to know what you had to say.

Yes, so I think the question you asked is how to remain detached before it starts? How to prepare and then do my work afterward and remain detached from it? For you, it's about being detached, but sometimes you don't need to be detached. You can be fully present, very focused, but you do one thing at a time. And when you're not focused enough, then there's room for fear, anxiety, worry. But when you're truly focused, there's no room for those negative feelings like fear, anxiety, all that.

So, let me give you an example. For instance, when we're doing theater, before going on stage, we're very anxious. I always remember my teacher telling me, "Take three deep breaths, don't think about anything."

"Take three deep breaths." At that time, I was in high school, I didn't know about meditation. I don't think my teacher meditated either.

I didn't think about anything, I didn't think about anything. I took three deep breaths, I was fully focused, my body completely present, and there was no room left for anxiety. And then, I went on stage to perform.

It's the same when we have responsibilities; we focus intently on doing one thing at a time, one by one, fully concentrated, not only with concentration, but also with joy, interest, and curiosity. Then, there's no room left for fear or anxiety. Do you agree? I heard you.

Yes, I agree. Thank you. And it's the same when preparing at home. At any time of day, you practice being 100% present, body and mind, 100% engaged in what you're doing, with curiosity, with joy, with—and I say curiosity—meaning with a completely open mind to observe and discover what will happen next.

Because when we do the same thing, if we repeat it, in daily life, there's a routine. We repeat things, and then we lose that curiosity, that interest, and we're no longer fully present because we think, "I know this," it's always the same thing repeating itself.

And so, we're no longer fully present, body and mind. Now, if we do something, whether it's washing dishes or walking from one room to another, and if we do it as if it were the first time, with curiosity, to look deeply, to see what will happen, then there's interest, there's joy, there's curiosity.

And one of the practices of meditation is to do or look at something as if it were the first time, with fresh eyes, with a completely new perspective. And another practice is to do or look at it as if it were the last time in our lives. With great appreciation, we rejoice because we know it's the last time.

And like this, we are fully focused, and there's no room for worry, fear, or anxiety, and we don't get bored. Thank you very much. You're welcome.

Now, we will continue with the Sutra of the Heroic March of Perfect Understanding. You know, to begin the week of transmission, I gave a talk and also reminded everyone of the practice of a bodhisattva, the practice of a member of interest, because we found ourselves with... everyone was a member of interest or an aspirant, and the next day, no one was. In the afternoon, they all became members of interest, 23 of them, and then the people who were there to receive the lamp.

And that's why, in the talk, I spoke about the practice of a bodhisattva, the practice of a member of the community. Thanks to the session I had with you earlier, I thought of reminding all of us of our practice, firstly for the good of the world,

and secondly to put an end to all obstacles and all suffering. And I think these two elements are extraordinary because a few months ago, someone who came to practice with us—a nurse and a doctor—told me during our conversation that she sees a difference in the new generation.

Their generation works hard, they have a lot of stamina, they have a lot of aspiration to help their patients, the people in the hospital, but they've noticed that the younger generation doesn't have as much stamina. They work less and they can no longer work as hard as their generation.

And then they said yes, because their generation, when they went to school, rode their bicycles, and so in their daily lives, without even meaning to, they got a lot of exercise by cycling to school.

But the younger generation today gets in the car, they walk much less, and they cycle less, and therefore get much less exercise. And that's why their bodies get much less exercise, and therefore they have less endurance. And then the younger generation also focuses a lot on what they say is living in the present moment.

We have to make the most of life with everything it has to offer. For them, the younger generation, of course, takes good care of themselves, living in the present moment and savoring everything that is there, everything that life offers. But they think less about others.

And that's why, when we talk about the practice of being happy in the present moment, when we talk about practicing living happily in the present moment, it can cause misunderstandings today.

If we talk about this practice in parallel, we also have to talk about the second element of the Mahayana school: it's for the good of the world, for the good of others. It's not just for me, for me all the time.

And then, in the past, past generations also used to do everything for others without taking care of ourselves. And many, many people who learn through meditation practice learn to take care of themselves. And taking care of ourselves means relieving suffering within ourselves.

And it's extraordinary to see these two elements in parallel. We need a balance for the good of the world or for the good of others, and also to put an end to affections, to all suffering within ourselves and others. Because otherwise, otherwise it won't work, as we already said last time.

And to remove all obstacles here. Obstacles here mean those formed by our emotions. In Buddhism, the Buddha spoke of emotions, of suffering, as an obstacle.

Because when we are overwhelmed by suffering, we cannot practice. When we are consumed by anger, by despair, we cannot do seated meditation, we cannot practice mindfulness. And for this reason, suffering can be an obstacle to practice.

And then there is an obstacle that is even more important, greater than suffering: knowledge. When I think I know something, or I understand this, I know the practice, this practice, yes, I know it. And this knowledge is also an obstacle for me, for my practice.

Because I think I know, and that's why, I think I know everything. When I believe I know everything, I am no longer open to learning, to receiving, and to practicing, to improving. And that's why knowledge is such a big obstacle.

When I was a novice—I've already told you the story—Thay asked me, "So, what Buddhist books have you read?" And I replied, "And what books have you read?" I searched my mind to tell Thay, "All the books I've read, all the books on Buddhism I've read."

And I was a little proud that I'd read all those books. Then, at the end, Thay didn't say anything, but later in the same conversation, Thay said something that I understood to mean that he prefers me to know nothing.

Because if I know nothing, I'm like a blank slate, and the training will be much faster, and Thay will... it will be much easier for Thay to train me, to give me the monastic training.

Like a blank sheet of paper or a completely dry sponge, Thay could write on this blank sheet what he thought was important, necessary. Or like a dry sponge, Thay could add the water he wanted the sponge to absorb.

And you all know the story, many of you know the story of why Thay wrote the calligraphy "Drink your tea," because a student went to see a Zen master, and this student had a great deal of knowledge.

And when he had the chance to sit across from the Zen master, he was very excited, he asked the Zen master many questions. And the Zen master said nothing, the Zen master didn't answer any of the questions, he remained silent for a long time.

And then, to break the silence, he said to the student, "Drink your tea," because the student had a great deal of knowledge, which was the obstacle, which was a great obstacle, and the student was living with all these notions. And then, he lost everything.

The student, because of his knowledge, was completely absorbed in all these concepts, and he didn't see that it was a chance, a great chance, for him to be with the Zen master. He couldn't enjoy the Zen master's presence, he couldn't enjoy the tea offered,

Instead of being there, peaceful, instead of breathing together with the Zen master and enjoying his presence, he asked a lot of questions. He couldn't enjoy anything, and at one point the Zen master reminded him, "Drink your tea." That's a story.

And then, when we studied the twelve links of interdependent causality, the multiple causality of things, I wanted to tell you something, I wanted to say a sentence, but after the session, I thought, "Oh, I didn't say that sentence."

Once, when the Buddha had finished teaching the twelve links of co-creation, the multiple causality of things, the Buddha asked Master Ananda, "Have you understood?" And Ananda immediately replied, "Dear Buddha, yes, I understand."

Buddha said: Don't be sure, don't say right away that you understand. And I remember when Thay taught us this in a teaching; ever since that teaching, I never dared tell Thay that I understood this, that I understood that. Because what we understand, sometimes it's just on this intellectual level;

we haven't yet put it into practice, and we believe that we understand. And when we believe we understand, we no longer seek to understand; that curiosity is gone, and we can stop there, and we no longer progress. That's why knowledge is such a great obstacle.

To put an end to all obstacles and all suffering. I remember, after a teaching from Thay, or a teaching from a Dharma teacher, if someone shares something, saying, "Yes, I completely agree, I very much agree," I share, showing that they understood everything, they knew, they had known, they were aware of all that.

Before the teaching, she knew it, and she very much agrees, she completely agrees, and Thay said that this person understood nothing, understood nothing more.

Because if she thinks I agree, I agree, because she already knows, and it corresponds to what she believes, to what she already knew, then this teaching is useless to her, because she already knows everything, because she already knows everything.

And if we listen to a teaching with this mindset, "Oh, okay, I agree, he said this point, I agree." And then if he says something else, then I disagree.

So, with this mindset, if we listen to a teaching with this mindset, we learn nothing; we don't have an open mind to truly listen without comparing it to our existing knowledge to say, "I agree" or "I disagree."

And we can measure our level of Bodhisattva by the suffering we experience. If, over time, we practice and experience more joy, more happiness, less suffering, less anger, then we know we are on the right path. We can gauge the standard of our practice against that.

If we are more and more engaged in the Sangha, and in the name of the Sangha, we have more anger, more discrimination in this, oh, this person practices well in the Sangha, this person doesn't practice well, I like people who practice well, and we make a group, and the other people who don't practice well, I don't hang out with, and with time, this phenomenon develops, and there's more suffering and more discrimination, and there's more anger, we know we're on the wrong path. Because we're not taking away obstacles and suffering, oh yeah, I'm doing this for the Sangha, I'm doing this to protect the Sangha, and often Thay would say, I didn't ask you to protect me, you don't need to protect me, or to protect the Sangha to become like this, and Thay would smile and say, he would often say that with a smile. Let's continue with six, the last time we studied four of the gaffas in this, so there's a difference between the name of the sutra in French and English, but it's the same thing.

The French translation was made from the text of the Chinese canon, but the English text was made from the Pali translation by Sister Chan Duk, Sister Annabelle, so yes, the title is slightly different, but the rest is the same. So the first gaffas speak clearly of the mind, and the spirit of this teaching in the Mahayana tradition, the first gaffa speaks to the practice of being a bodhisattva, what is it, and they aspire to become pure in nirvana. The last time we

said that the bodhisattva never loses hope, they are never in despair, because they have a very deep faith in nirvana, in happiness, in the end of suffering, a confidence that is unshakable in nirvana.

It's like the eightfold path that brings us to happiness, the four noble truths, so these bodhisattvas, even surrounded by grief and suffering, without end, do not lose hope, because they have a deep faith in nirvana, in the end of suffering, and these bodhisattvas, they should all be on the path of deep understanding. And the second gaffa, the origins of this teaching of perfect, of the highest understanding, because in India, they believe that in the Himalayas, in the Himalayan mountains, there is a lake, and the Vantatta, it's at the top of the mountains, and this lake is always cool, and has fresh water, and all rivers emanate from Lake Manasarawara. So from this lake, up the Himalayas, there are rivers, streams, streams of water, that water all the continent, the whole continent of India.

That is part of the Indian mythology, I think. And so all the vegetation, the flowers, the fruits, the healing herbs are watered and nourished by the water of this lake. And it's the Naga king who takes care of this lake, and so all the living beings in India, if they are here, it's thanks to the water of this lake.

And the Naga king is the king of this lake. And it's the same if all the hero-disciples of the Buddha use skillful means to teach the Dharma, help people experience joy, taste the fruit of happiness, and practice the holy life, it is due to the sacred power of the Tathagata. Like I said last time, this sutra is one of the first sutras of the Mahayana movement.

And for a long time, like many centuries later, we had the Heart Sutra. And this sutra is much longer, but it's also part of literature, the Prajnaparamita. In this Prajnaparamita literature, there are many sutras that talk about the highest understanding.

And the sutra that we chant at all ceremonies is the shortest, and at the end of years of writing of the sutras of the highest understanding. And this one is the earliest, that was written the earliest, one of the first. And so this Gatha means that this movement of the Mahayana school with the new sutras, the new teachings, all of this came from the Buddha.

Thanks to the Buddha, these masters, who are also disciples of the Buddha, teach so that they can enlighten others, that everyone can live happily, thanks to the Buddha's teachings and the skillful means. They help people experience the fruit of happiness. Like the whole continent of India enjoyed the fruits, the flowers, and the healing herbs.

It's thanks to the fresh water of this lake up the Himalayas. It's a comparison. And the teachings in the sutra come from the Buddha.

What is said here, there's nothing new, nobody invented it, it comes from the Buddha. Like Thay, even if Thay put the light on the practice of living happily in the present moment, for centuries, many, many Buddhists practiced so that at the end of life, they could be reborn in the Pure Land. And the Buddha has put the light, the practice of living happily in the present moment, and Thay, and they kept on saying that it's the teaching of the Buddha.

And there were also masters, ancestral masters also taught this. They didn't invent today in the news, in the newspaper, the magazine, there were articles that were calling Thay like the father of mindfulness. But Thay was always saying, no, it's not Thay, it's the Buddha.

They just put the light, simply. So Thay said exactly the same as what is written in the third Gatha, and using skillful means. They taught, they put the light on, and renewed the teachings using skillful means, so that people could understand better.

And the skillful means are often talked about in the Mahayana, in the Lotus Sutra, there is a chapter talking about the skillful means. There are very, very beautiful stories, for example, a doctor, a very, very good doctor, who could heal all diseases, and he could help many, many people. But his own children, his own children were never listening to him, and when they got sick, they didn't want to take the medicine that their father was offering them.

And they knew that their father was a doctor, and so they were not worried, they kept on playing, and they didn't know how to take care of themselves, because they knew that Papa was there, Daddy was there. And one day, so that the children knew how to take care of themselves, the father, when they disappeared. He disappeared, and when Daddy disappeared, the children started to take things seriously.

So what Daddy used to tell us when we were sick, what do we need to take, and so they were trying to remember what was Daddy saying, and they searched, and they tried to do the same as what he was telling them. And that's how they started to take things seriously, and to follow, and to remember what they had to do, and then they started to take care of their own health, and that's how they could heal themselves. And once they were healed, the Papa, the Daddy came back, so the Buddha did the same.

Buddha entered nirvana so that we could practice properly, that's one story. So the father did, used a skillful man to help his children, and there is another story in the desert, there's a group, excuse me, so another story, so there's a group of people, they had to cross the desert, and the guide of this group, oh try, try, you see over there, right in front of you, there is an oasis, once you reach there, once we reach there, we can rest, we can drink, and this guide, he knew magic, he had magic power, and he could create a manifestation of a real oasis, and the group was so happy, and from far, they were making efforts, and efforts, so that they could reach to the oasis, and so that at the end of the day they could rest, and drink, and continue their journey the next day, and this guide, thanks to his magic power, he could do that to help the group, and at the end, the group managed to go out of the desert, and Buddha did the same with a skillful means, so that to encourage us, and to push us to practice, he taught, for example, he taught the children, many people think that by reciting the names of the Buddha, then when we die, if we remember, we can recite the Buddha's name, and the Buddha will come, and will bring us to the pure land, it's like a country in the west, this is also a skillful means, there are people who don't manage to, for example, to practice sitting meditation, or walking meditation, but they manage to recite the names of the Buddha, and that's why the Buddha created 84,000 practices as skillful means. And the word skillful means is a specific word of the Hinayana tradition, that you find in the tradition, and the Buddha used skillful means in his lifetime, obviously.

The Buddha transmits the eyes of the Dharma, his disciples training according to it, practice, realize, and teach it to others, all that is due to the power and strength of the Buddha. So the Buddha, without discrimination, has transmitted the eyes of the Dharma, deep viewing, insights, and understanding, and so we just have to follow them in our practice, to awaken ourselves, and to help others awaken, and all that comes directly from the Buddha, his energy of compassion and deep understanding. The supreme object, or the incomparable, the incomparable understanding is not to be grasped, it is not an object of realization, there is no awakening.

Someone who hears this without feeling terror is a bodhisattva, who has the capacity to understand the Buddha. So these four first gathas speaks of the fruits of the practice, and all this is due to the Buddha. All teachings of all the schools, Buddhist schools, come from the Buddha.

Even though there are some differences, they all come from the Buddha, and they're all skillful means to help us transcend suffering. There's no discrimination or difference from one school to the other. All of them wish to bring an end to suffering.

And the fifth gatha, so what is perfect understanding? The object, the incomparable understanding is not to be grasped. So being awakened does not exist in a way. So when we want to practice, we come together.

We come together to practice, to awaken. And here it is, this gatha is saying the opposite. And if we are not feeling terror in hearing this, we have understood the Buddha.

So our intention and our aspiration is not to be grasped, because we can't grasp things. And to grasp with what? We can't grasp it with our hands. We can't grasp it with our mind, with our thoughts.

It's impossible. So let's not try to grasp. But we have this habit of attaching ourselves to things.

Everything we're used to, we are attached to. It's a general habit to be attached. And here it is very clear that we cannot grasp.

And it's true. When we die, we don't take anything with us. We don't grasp anything in death.

We spend our whole life working hard to get things. But when we die, we can't keep any of it. So the object of realization is not to be grasped.

So there is no awakening. And someone who hears this without feeling terror understands the Buddha. So forms, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are all empty.

The bodhisattva is not the least bit caught in anything. He does not settle or abide in any dharma and realizes the unattainable awakened mind. So in this gatha, there are the words that are very important.

The first line is the five skandhas, the five aggregates, form, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. So for you who have learned Buddhism, you know that sensations can be positive, negative, or neutral, or mixed. Perceptions, we have a perception of a person, of a thing, of a phenomena.

And mental formations are mindfulness, love, anger, generosity. All these mental formations are in us in the form of seeds. And when they manifest, we have anger in our mind.

And it will be translated into speech, and actions, and consciousness that embodies everything. And so we are made, every person is made of these five aggregates. And each of these aggregates is empty, because our body cannot exist alone.

It is made of all the elements of the universe. All the conditions in the universe need to be united for this body to manifest. If one condition is absent, and this body can stop functioning.

For example, if breathing ceases, our body no longer functions. If blood is no longer circulated, just this one condition is removed, and this body is no longer. So this is why this body is considered empty of a separate self.

Because it cannot, it is not a single unit that is independent. It is made of all things, and it is empty of a separate self. And it is the same thing for feelings, for perceptions, for mental formations, and consciousness.

And it's the same with all the aggregates. And we see the same teaching in the Heart Sutra. The five aggregates are empty.

The Heart Sutra, the Heart Sutra speaks of emptiness of the five aggregates. And when we look deeply, and we see that this sensation of anger is made of so many elements, and that itself is empty. And if we understand the true nature of this sensation, we are not attached to it, and we are free of it.

And in the Heart Sutra, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, in looking deeply at the five skandhas, or the five aggregates, and when the Bodhisattva understands that they are empty, he transcends all suffering, because he's no longer attached to these five aggregates, no longer suffers. So attachment in this gatha, and feeling terror in the previous one, are important sufferings. We are terrorized when we are attached to something.

We are very fearful of losing this thing. And only when we, like in other sutras, like in the Sutra of Mindful Breathing, there's one of the exercises that teaches us to look deeply, to see that this thing is not worth being attached to. It's not worth it.

We need to let go. We need to understand the nature of this thing, because attachment is the root of fear and of suffering. We are attached to a person, or to several persons.

We are attached to objects, like material objects. We are attached to ideas. We are attached to many things.

So for the upcoming two weeks, I propose to you and to myself, because I'm going to do the same as you, each one of us will look deeply at our attachments. What is my most important

attachment to a person I love, to my house, my comfort zone, my responsibility, my work, my place, like my position? We can look deeply so that we can identify the three attachments, the three most important attachments. And if I get separated from this person, or from this object, this thing, how will I live? Attachment is one of the roots of our suffering.

And fear is also the root of our suffering. What are we afraid of? What are we most afraid of? It's a topic of contemplation for all of us, for the upcoming two weeks. And now, if you have some questions, you can ask them.

We still have 10 minutes. Good morning, dear sister. Morning, Sylvie.

I really appreciate your teachings. I would like to say that first, and I hope, I can't wait to see you in Plum Village this summer. I wanted to tell you that we often say that the obstacle, the main obstacle is ignorance.

And you just said, you put the light on the fact that knowledge is also an obstacle. So ignorance is an obstacle, one of the main, and knowledge is also a big obstacle. So I just wanted you to, I understand, but I just wanted you to share in parallel that they're like opposites.

But ignorance is an obstacle. So I wanted to hear you about this. Thank you.

When we say that knowledge is an obstacle, it's the same as ignorance, because we are still ignorant, but we think we know everything. And we think we know it all. That's what it means.

We know very little. We have an amount of knowledge, and we think we know everything. Like the Buddha, when he asked his disciples, you think that the leaves in my hand are as numerous as the leaves in the forest? Or not? And the brother said, no, there's very few leaves in your hand, compared to the leaves in the forest.

And the people with a little bit of knowledge, it's the same, like they have just a few leaves, and they think they know everything. Then that person is ignorant. Because this knowledge, when it's the insight, it's not an obstacle.

When it's an insight, it's the fruit of the practice. It's not concept or ideas anymore. And when it's an insight, it frees us.

It's not an obstacle. And when we talk about knowledge as an obstacle, it's like the intellectual knowledge. Superficial, but we think that we know everything.

And then it's ignorance. It's also a kind of ignorance. And that's why earlier I said that measure is suffering.

We can use suffering to measure a level of practice, of understanding, of insight. Any other question? Thank you, Sylvie. It's a beautiful question.

As an example of ignorance, I always think that I know a little bit more about emptiness, but still today I realize that I don't understand. For example, you said that anger is made of

numerous, several elements, but that sensation itself is empty. So I try to reconcile both, and I have some difficulty.

So I said anger is a sensation, also a mental formation. Anger is also empty. And that's why it's made of many, many elements, several elements.

And it's the same for a sensation of our body, or consciousness, or mental formation, because it's empty of a separate self. That's why it's full of all elements. It cannot exist by itself.

It can only exist with all the other elements. And it's empty of a self, non-self. And because it's made of many other elements, then there is no sovereignty, cannot control all those elements.

And all those elements are impermanent, changing, and one element or several elements can disappear. So it has no sovereignty, and that's why it's empty. It's dependent on so many other things.

That is why we call it empty. Is it better for you? It helps me always to hear empty of a separate self, when it is made of many things, many elements in the cosmos, and then it cannot control anything, cannot be autonomous, cannot do anything. It's dependent on all those conditions.

So empty of herself, of itself. So if you want to tame the anger, then we need to do it with the conditions. Yes, there are several conditions, because we cannot control all the conditions, what we can do.

But you can do your level, and what is inside you, breathing, the body, using your breathing, your breath, you calm the sensation, you calm the body within, the anger within, and you look deeply, you change the perspective, you change the way you look at things, so that you can calm and transform this anger. Let's imagine a person gets you angry, so you cannot do much with that person, cannot control that person, you cannot make that person behave the way you want, beyond your capacity, but what you can do is you, your breathing, your body, your way of looking at things, and even without the practice, you cannot even handle yourself. That's why we need to train to be a master of ourselves, to train to know how to use our breathing to calm our sensation.

We need to look at things in the light of interbeing, we need to train to direct ourselves in the right direction, with the light of interdependence, interbeing, because we have a way of thinking that makes us suffer, because we think with discrimination, with judgment, that are not correct. Thank you, I understand better. Thank you, thank you for feeling better, it makes me feel better too.

Now it's time to stop, so you can continue with your next activities. The next time we meet, I hope you will have time to contemplate and to share your experiences. When you recognize this attachment, you put the light on your attachment, and you can see with more clarity and it helps.

You know my dream, we could not do it last year, but my dream is that at the end of those sessions, it will end in June, you will write to me, maybe a page or two or half a page, to tell me what are those study sessions of the sutra bringing to you, is it helping you in your daily life? Just two questions. Is it helping you in your daily life? What is it bringing to you? And I hope now we are end of March, April, May, we still have two, three months, and then you'll have summer break, summer holidays, and I hope I tell you that early enough to put the seed of contemplation within you, so you have time to contemplate and you can write to me. Om.