

DOM Saturday, February 28, 2026
Chanting From The Heart - Sr Dinh Nghiê
The Sutra of Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone
Audio to text

Today we will study the Sutra of Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone from the Chanting from the Heart book. It is the chant on page 282 in the English version. During my first years at Plum Village and during retreats outside Plum Village, when there was a five-day retreat, Thay always taught this sutra.

This one, along with the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, this is the foundation of the Plum Village practice. Thay discovered this sutra, I think, about at the same time as he discovered the Sutra of the Sixteen Mindfulness Exercises. I think it's because this sutra is that Thay himself printed himself with his own editing establishment in Paris.

You know, after the end of the war in 1975 and everything else that happened afterwards, Thay understood that he could no longer return to Vietnam. He really made France his home. He bought a printer, a really big printer that's still at Lower Hamlet.

We're talking about a printing press here. The technician showed him how to use it, and he learned how to use this huge printing machine. Sister Chang Kong brought him to buy paper and the ink, everything that you needed, so that he could print his own books.

That's how La Boye Editing House started in Paris. When he discovered the Sutra of the Mindfulness of Breathing, he printed it himself and he brought it. In those same years, he also printed the Sutra of the One Who Knows a Better Way to Live Alone and his commentaries.

He did researches in the Chinese sutras and also the Pali sutra. The sutra we have in this chanting book is the translation of the Pali Canon from the Baddhi Kadha Sutra in the Pali Canon in the Majjhi Manikarna. There are three volumes, and it's about this thick, where many sutras are assembled.

In the same book, there are four sutras that speak of the same subject. It's a subject that the Buddha taught often to his students, to his monastic and lay students. When I looked at the Chinese version, in the first teachings, I told you how Buddhism went from India to the north and also towards the south.

The Pali Canon is the schools of the south. Then it went towards the north, the north of India. It went into China, into Japan, Korea, and in those Asian countries where Mahayana was developed.

Those schools have the canon in Chinese. He compared the Pali Canon from the south and the Chinese canon from the north, and he found the same sutras. When he found the same

in different schools, he was very happy because it confirmed that it was coming directly from the Buddha.

When Buddhism teachings went in different schools in different directions, the communication between those two schools was very little. Transportation wasn't fluid between those two areas. Between these two traditions, there was little communication.

They were speaking in different languages. Two thousand years later, to find the same teachings is wonderful. It confirms that these are truly what the Buddha taught.

These aren't just teachings that a few masters added later. We will read together, Discourse on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone. I heard these words of the Buddha one time when the Lord was staying at the monastery in the Jeddak Grove in the town of Savatthi.

He called all the monks to him and instructed him, and the bhikkhus replied, we are here. The Blessed One taught, I will teach you what is meant by knowing the better way to live alone. That day, he taught this sutra because in his community, there was a monk, and this monk, he did everything himself alone.

When he was walking, he would walk alone. When he meditated, he meditated alone. He did everything alone, and everything he did, he did alone.

The other monks found that there was something that wasn't right, and so they went to the Buddha to ask if it was okay to practice in this way, to practice alone, to be always alone. Is that okay? Does this monk practice in the right way? Is he on the right path? And so the monks asked the Buddha this question, and so the Buddha taught this teaching. I will teach you what is meant by knowing the better way to live alone.

In the book Chanting from the Heart, Thay shortened this sutra. The complete sutra, there are a lot of repetitions, just like in the sutra of mindfulness of breathing, and it was very repetitive, so he decided to shorten this sutra so that we could chant this in a chanting session. And so the complete sutra, when the monks asked this question in front of this Theravada monk, and the Buddha said, I will show you the better way of living alone.

I will show you, I will teach you the art of the one who can live alone, and so I will give you, I will give you an outline, and then I will give you a detailed explanation. And so the Buddha read this poem, a poem that summarizes everything that, what it means, the better way to live alone. And you know that the teachings that the Buddha taught in the past contain a lot of poems.

So these are teachings in a poetic form, because it's easier to remember, to memorize. And we know during hundreds of years there was no writing, and so the transmission of the sutras was oral. In the beginning I said mainly, but now I remove mainly.

So the main way of transmitting teachings was orally. And when there are poems with rhymes, it's a lot easier to remember, to memorize. And that's why the teachings, the original teachings in the various canons are in the form of verses of poems.

And so the Bhikkhus responded, we are listening. And the Buddha taught, do not pursue the past. Do not lose yourself in the future.

The past is no longer, no longer is. The future has not yet come. Looking deeply at life as it is, in the very here and now, the practitioner dwells in stability and freedom.

We must be diligent today to wait till tomorrow is too late. Death comes unexpectedly. How can we bargain with it? The sage calls of a person who dwells in mindfulness, night and day, the one who knows the better way to live alone.

And so for our Chinese friends, maybe you're reading the sutra in Chinese. That's right. You don't need to read the translation.

You don't need to read Thay's translation. That's right. Okay.

I will continue. I remember when I was a novice, I taught this sutra so often, so regularly. And there was a brother that translated this sutra into music in English.

And he brought it into, into music in Vietnamese as well. And today, in the, in the 80s and the 90s, I would regularly teach the sutra. Do not pursue the past.

Do not lose yourself in the future. The past is not, no longer is. The future has not yet come.

So living alone means, means living with oneself. And we don't pursue the past and we don't lose ourselves in the future. Because a lot of people live in the past.

Why? They either regret the past because it was wonderful. It was beautiful. When we were young, when we were all together, when we were still beautiful, this good old days, a lot of times we regret these good old days.

It's like, it's like my mother, she always talks about the good old days. And another extreme, when we were, if we were traumatized in the past, then we are prisoner of the past and we can't, we cannot live happily today because the wounds are so, so deep and we're unable to live in the present moment because the past is always there. And that's what it, that's what it's like when we're haunted by the past.

We can't be separated from the past. And that's, that's when, that's what the Buddha means with living with the past. But if we can live truly in the present moment without being controlled and dictated by the past, well, it's the same also with the future.

A lot of people are afraid of the future. You know, today in the West, the population is aging very rapidly. Around, around the, at Plum Village, if we want to have an appointment with, with a doctor, we have to wait a long time because the population has aged rapidly.

And so the older people are very afraid to go into retiring, retirement homes. And in conversations, I spoke to some people and I hear in conversations, a thousand and one things. And very often they come back on the topic.

They come back on the topic of the future, of their future. They're so afraid of going into homes. Here it's about the fear of the future.

Or there are people that are completely caught up in their projects about the future when they're working. So for business people, businessmen, businesswomen, those that work a lot. So they're caught up in the projects of the future.

And that's another example of losing ourselves in the future. And of not being able to live, live alone in the present moment. And when we can't live alone, without the past and without the future, we're not free.

We're not, we're not free. There's, we can't be ourselves. And so the exercise here of contemplation after today's session is that every, every one of us ask ourselves, do I live alone? Or do I live, do I always live in the past or in the future? So we'll continue the poem.

When, when we can live in the present moment, we have the freedom because we are ourselves. And we have solidity because we're not controlled by the past or the future. Be diligent today, tomorrow will be too late.

Life, death comes unexpectedly. How can we bargain with it? The sage calls a person who dwells in mindfulness night and day, the one who knows the better way to live alone. Here the Buddha is reminding us that life is in the present moment.

If we don't live in the present moment, we are like in a dream and life and death comes unexpectedly. And then we might regret, oh, I didn't, I didn't really live. And the Buddha reminds us of impermanence.

When we, when we remember impermanence, we know how to appreciate the present moment, what we have in this moment. Now let's look at the explanations. Because what do we mean by pursuing the past? When someone considers the way her body was in the past, their feelings, their perceptions, their mental formations and their conscience in the past, when they think about it, their mind is burdened or attached to these things.

Well, that person is pursuing the past. To simplify this passage, we can say that when someone thinks, thinks of what they were, who they were in the past, when they think of how they were and they are attached to it, then this person is pursuing the past. A person is made of the five aggregates.

And this passage speaks of the five aggregates separately. Body, sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. So this helps us see the details of how we are made of the five aggregates.

So it's one way of explaining it. Another way of explaining a person is that we are made of body and spirit. So that's very simple.

A person is made of body and mind or a person is made of the five aggregates body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. It's just another way of explaining it. I remember once I told you when I was aspirant, I was at a retreat and someone asked Thay, in Buddhism, do you believe in a soul? And so I was very interested by this question.

I had that question too. So I waited for the answer from Thay. Do we all have a soul? And Thay explained very simply, in Buddhism, a person is made of the five aggregates.

A body, sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. And he explained each of the five aggregates. So it's a way of explaining that the five aggregates inter-are.

So in your body there is also consciousness and there is also sensations in the body. And there are perceptions and mental formations within the body, within the form. So in Plum Village, spring is here.

It's starting. And I love these seasons that we have in the Occident. There are these four seasons that are very distinct.

We have a cold, cold winter. It's dark, very short days. And then suddenly, after Tet, after the New Year, suddenly it's warmer, the days get longer.

It's sunny. And suddenly all the buds on the trees and the flower buds are growing everywhere. On the ground and the trees.

When I was outside, I breathed the air. And when I see all of this, I really feel sensations that I had in the first years that I was here at Plum Village. The wonder.

All these emotions that come back when Thay was still with us, when such and such a nun was still with us. And I could feel with my whole being. And then I really understood how our body contains everything.

Every cell of our body remembers things that I experienced 30 years ago. So I saw things, I felt things in my mind and in my body. And now I just have to have a small trigger in the same conditions.

And I can, all those things come back. So not only in my mind, but in my body as well. So as we've heard before in Thay's teachings, that in each one of our cells, everything is there.

One single cell contains everything. A single cell can contain our consciousness, our perceptions, our consciousness. And I've lived in Plum Village only 33 years.

And I've experienced and felt this reality. So when we live an entire life, there's even more things that are stored deeply in our body and in our mind. And that's why it's very easy for us to go back into the past and to feel attached to the past.

And if I think, oh, my body at that time, I was in great shape. I was healthy. I was young.

Oh, I'm sad. Then I am pursuing the past. I suffer because of the change.

I suffer because I pursue the past. But if I think of those things, I think of the past, I think of how things were in the past, but I am not attached to those things. So then I am not pursuing the past.

So it's an attitude. If we are attached to what's the perceptions, the feelings of the past, if I'm attached to them, then I am pursuing the past. And I cannot live alone by myself.

I can't be myself in the freedom. And when I have this freedom, I am solid. I am myself.

I don't get directed and controlled by the past. When I felt that, I didn't mourn the past. Oh, I wish, oh, wait, there's the sound of the bell.

So I was not regretting the past. I was just really feeling, remembering the sensations, and remembering what Thay taught me, how a cell can contain everything. And to understand the interbeing of the five aggregates between the body and the mind.

And I continue to savor and appreciate the pure air, the sunshine, the spring. And I just appreciate. And another sister, Hin Tam, who just came back from Asia, from India, oh, she felt, she was so happy to come back to France and breathe the clean air.

And immediately I understood what she meant, because I felt the same thing. Yes, yes, exactly. Yeah, to feel the cool air is very special.

And we were both so joyful. We understood each other. We understood how each other felt.

And, you know, I saw the lay practitioners again, like Lizzie, Peggy, our friends, spend all their lives with their husbands, their partners, like Tone and Larry. And last year, Dharma teachers of long, students of long date of Thay, and these friends were inseparable. They loved each other.

And when one passed, the rest remained, like Peggy and Lizzie. And last year I was in Switzerland in December with Lizzie. And I was really impressed, very grateful for the Buddhist teaching, because without the practice, we can suffer a lot.

We can suffer a lot when somebody passes before ourselves. And when I saw Peggy and Lizzie, of course, they were very sad. And they thought of Tone and Larry.

But I could see at the same time that they could touch, they could touch something very deep. And that was the presence of the other, the presence of the other in themselves. And sadness was still there, but they could touch something very deep, very profound.

And that is the nature of no birth and no death. And when Thay passed, everybody was worried for Sister Kim Tram. But because of the Buddhist teaching, our sister is very calm and very calm.

And she smiles a lot. And she's always laughing. And of course, there were moments when she was sad, but they were momentary.

And with her way of looking at things, Sister Tram was able to go through these moments of sadness very quickly. And so in this passage, the Buddha has, we must be diligent today to wait till tomorrow is too late. Death comes unexpectedly.

How can we bargain with it? The sage calls a person who dwells in mindfulness night and day, the one who knows the better way of living alone. And when we can live alone, we can go quite far. Death comes, we cannot avoid it.

But with practice, we can smile to death. Because we know that death is only a continuation, a transformation. And you know, there are people that have had cancer and they came to Plum Village.

And their doctors told them, you only have six months to live or eight months or a year. But when we live fully, this present moment and these six months, the quality of life and the duration of the six months is a lot greater than, can be a lot greater than an entire life. And we've seen a lot of people, when they can live fully in the present moment, and the person and that freedom and solidity, then that person.

And that's why, that's probably why the Buddha spoke about death. He spoke about death with the capacity to live fully in the present moment, to look attentively and to live fully in the present moment. First, because life is the present moment.

And if we don't live in the present moment, we don't really live. And when death arrives, we have no solidity to face death. And then we panic and we're filled with anxiety.

And then another, the flip side of the medal is that if we can live fully in the present moment, then we're not afraid of death. And we touch the ultimate dimension, because in the present moment, there is a, there is the past, there is the present, the future. We touch the nature of interbeing, of the three times, past, present and future.

When we live fully in the moment, in the present moment, we live a life for ourselves in the future, but also for the future generations, for our lineage. And after speaking of the past, he spoke of the future. Because what is meant of losing yourself in the future? When you consider the way your body will be in the future, the way your feelings will be in the future, the way your perceptions will be in the future, the way your mental formations will be in the future.

The way the consciousness will be in the future. When you consider these things, your mind is burdened by daydreaming about these things, which belong in the future. So, for example, elderly people or people who fall, become ill.

If we have an illness, we can lose ourselves in the future. And so our illness can get worse. We can lose ourselves in the future.

There are people that don't think of the body, of the sensations, of the perception, but they think of their career or their bank account. That's going to be full of money or completely empty. And sometimes we don't think about ourselves, but of our career, our household, money.

And we can lose ourselves in this way in the future. And I remember in retreats, there were people who asked questions like, yes, but in my work, in my school, I have to think about the future. I have to plan things.

And am I allowed to do that? And the answer of the Buddha is very clear. If somebody thinks about what I will be in the future, the body, sensation, perception, formation, mental formations, consciousness. And when he thinks about these things without clinging to these

things that belong to the future, then we can say that this person is not losing themselves in the future.

We are allowed to think about the past, about the future. But the question is, do I cling to the past? Do I cling to the future? Because very often time would bring us to think about the past, for instance. Time would say that happiness needs, so we can, I'm sorry, I'm not hearing anything.

So with suffering, we're able to feel happiness and joy. When we're never hungry, then we can never feel the joy of tasting really good food. Certainly that has.

Has it ever happened to you to find yourself in front of really lovely food, really beautiful food, at somebody's house as a guest? And you really regret it. And you just ate, but you can't eat it because you're full. And so you really can't appreciate it because you're not hungry.

And so you regret that you have to be hungry to really appreciate good food. You have to suffer a little to really appreciate joy and happiness. We need to go through war to really appreciate peace.

And that's why They would say, remember the past when you suffered, so that today you can appreciate the wonderful conditions you are living in. So be joyful, be happy. We need to remember the suffering of the past to really appreciate what we have today in a different situation.

So that's why the past is something that is very useful. So when somebody asks, are we allowed to think about the past or plan the future, the Buddha gave us a very clear answer in the sutra that yes, we need the past. We need past suffering to live, to appreciate the present moment and to be happy.

And when we experience the present moment deeply, we already see the consequences. We already see the fruit, the fruit in the future of today. So we already see the future when we live and experience the present moment deeply.

And so the third part that the Buddha taught is really extraordinary. The Buddha speaks about the present moment. If we are attached to the words of the Buddha, we could misunderstand him.

As long as I'm in the present moment, everything is fine. No, that's not it. We can also become attached to the present moment because what is meant by being swept away by the present? When someone does not study or learn anything about the awakened one, or the teachings of love and understanding, or the community that lives in harmony, when that person knows nothing about noble teachers and their teachers, and does not practice these teachings, he might think that this body is myself.

I am this body. These feelings are myself. I am these feelings.

This perception is myself. I am this perception. This mental formation is myself.

I am this mental formation. This consciousness is myself. I am this consciousness.

Then that person is being swept away by the present. So just like the past and the future, the Buddha demonstrates the opposite of what is not being swept away by the present. If we know that this body is not me, I am not limited by this body, I'm living in the present moment, but I'm not swept away by this present moment, then I know the art of living alone.

You know, today there are lots of, even in the past, there are lots of people that say, yeah, I don't worry about the future, I live fully in the present moment, and this person is very joyful, enjoys wealth and material comforts and good food. At first, we have the impression that yes, this person really is following the Buddha's teachings. They are living in the present moment.

They're not worrying about the future, and they never speak of the past. They're just joyful in the present moment. And we see people live like this.

But there's something that isn't quite right. These people, even though they're living fully in the present moment, there's something that isn't quite right according to the Buddha's teachings. And this is what we see.

What's wrong is that this person thinks that their body is themselves. They don't see the nature of interbeing. They can only enjoy life for themselves, and what happens to other people does not matter.

They don't see interbeing between themselves and others. This person does not see the interbeing nature of the present, the past, and the future. And when we don't see this interbeing, we can cause a lot of suffering to others.

And we can cause a lot of pain to future generations. And that's why when we read this passage, we see that the first step is the art of living alone, is to stop our habit of being swept away by the past, the future, of being attached to the past or the future. That's already a lot of work.

So it's important to have a new habit of living in the present moment, body and mind, together with our five aggregates in the present moment. And as well, the next step is that when we are in the present moment, we need to recognize our habit energies in our way of thinking, our habits of action, the way we act in our body, the way we speak, the way we think. And in all these habit energies, am I attached to false perceptions, to false ideas? Am I attached to myself, mine? So this sutra is so complete.

And I remember we read this sutra a lot in retreats. And for friends who are coming for the first time to the village, the first teaching that They would teach in the retreat would be this one. Also, he would speak about this practice, about how to live fully in the present moment.

It's really the foundation. And in the beginning, I heard I would accept and welcome, and as years went by, I understood when I would see people who were completely traumatized by the past, who just can't manage to get out of the past. And They would teach them always how to let go of the past and experience the present moment.

And in listening to Thay and listening to how Thay taught them, I understood little by little. And when I learned Thay's life story, Thay himself was able to let go of all those years of suffering during his exile to the day where we started knowing him as a really solid Zen Master. Thay really practiced this sutra for years during his exile.

He was far from his country, from his community, from his students, from his Master. And do you know, this sutra was translated. We see collections of the Canon.

These sutras were translated into Vietnamese, into English, into French, but amongst all those sutras, hundreds and thousands of sutras, Thay recognized this sutra and shone a light on it. Really, Thay saw how deep this teaching was and how this sutra could help him in his own practice. So he recognized it, printed it, taught it, because the sutra saved him during his years of exile.

And because Thay was able to, yes, his family, his Master, he missed them a lot. All the traditions, the food, the language. I remember in the 1990s, when I became a novice, most of the people in our community, amongst the Vietnamese, we were mostly from the south of Vietnam.

And I remember that the first nun, who became a nun, Sister Binh Nghiem, who spoke Vietnamese with a little accent from the center of Vietnam, and Thay was so happy to hear her accent. He was so happy to hear that little inflection, that little accent that he loved, that he was missing. And he could follow the sutras, that he could live fully in the present moment, to live solid and have a deep understanding and insight of the practice, so that he could transmit that to others.

And for those people who could not get out of their past, and Thay was able to show them, because he himself had practiced and was able to get out of it. He wasn't just teaching theory here, he was teaching from a place of experience. So in living the better way to live alone, living deeply in the present moment, we can be ourselves, and we can find freedom and solidity.

So that's why the art of living alone, and living alone doesn't mean to be far from everyone physically, even when we are in a crowd, when we are many people, we can live alone. And that's why it is said that the most difficult part of the practice is to practice walking. In the market, because in the market there's so many people, so much noise, and nobody's practicing, and so much noise.

And it's a place where it's really the most difficult to practice. And in the sutra there's also the picture of someone, a person that is really free, is a person who's walking in the market, with the arms really relaxed, and this person is really free, that person can be herself, really free, even in the middle of the crowd, without being carried away by the crowd. And we hear that sentence often in the sutras, like the Discourse on Love, without being carried away by the majority.

When we are free, when we have a solidity, a freedom, we are not carried away by the majority, because we are ourselves. Because we know the better way to live alone, without being carried away by someone else, or by the past, or the future, or by the present moment itself. Okay, so we have 10 minutes left, for some questions, burning questions.

Can you hear me now? So our friend said that many times, we are simply ourselves. This relates to interbeing. It got modified.

This relates to... Okay, many times we are simply ourselves. This relates to interbeing. How? Sister Dinam said several times, that we are ourselves.

Does that mean interbeing? And how? Yes, when I say, be oneself, be ourselves, what I mean is that I am not controlled by the past, or the future, or by other things, or by my suffering, or by my worries, but I am myself. When I say I am myself, it means that what I mean... I will give you an example. For example, when I say something mean, right away I regret.

Oh, I didn't mean that. Why did I say this in the moment, and it hurts you? That also hurts me, and that's not what I wanted to say. In a calm and quiet state, I have another sentence that I would have liked to say, but why when I have a strong emotion, I say sentences, I say something that I will regret.

A strong emotion is something that is really small, in my whole being. Earlier in the sutra, it's always said that my self is body, feelings, perception, mental formation and consciousness, the five aggregates, and my consciousness is so vast, and these five aggregates are really vast, very vast, but when I have a strong emotion, the strong emotion pushes me to say a sentence, to say something that I will regret very much after, and the strong emotion is really small compared to these five aggregates, and that's why when I'm pushed by this emotion, by this strong emotion, to say something mean, I'm not myself. I am much more than this strong emotion.

My consciousness and in my consciousness, I have love, I have compassion, I have understanding, I have much more. I am not myself when I am control dominated by something small, a small thing in myself, but myself, I am much more vast, and I am made of my ancestors, of everyone. I hope my answer was clear.

Do you agree with my answer? It's just to check. It's a very good question. I heard Xie Xie, he said thank you.

I see that Pascal Chabrol raised his hand, so I'm waiting for the translation, the written translation of the question. Thank you, sister. I had a question, a simple question, before reading the sutra, I saw the title, the discourse on the better way to live, I thought it meant like a sutra to better live or solitude, so with everything that was shared, why this title that has been a source of confusion for me? Okay, we have... Go ahead.

So before I answer the question of Pascal, I will first read what our friend added at the end. Not only do I agree, but I feel you've elevated the concept. The self and interbeing are intertwined.

The five aggregates are not just limited to the present moment. They are the continuous threads connecting us to both the past and the future. Thank you, dear friend.

So now, let's go back to the title. Yes, it can bring some confusion. And this title is that way because the Buddha answered to a question, to the question of the monk that's always living by himself, a monk called Theravada, and he was always living by himself.

He was doing everything by himself. And the other monks asked, asked the Buddha, is this correct to practice this way? And the Buddha, from that example, the Buddha said, yes, I will show you the better way to live alone. The better way to live alone.

This is it. To live alone compared to the future or the past and the present. And the one who knows how to live alone in relation to the past, present and future, he can awaken.

A person can set free and have solidity and can live happily. So if you don't know the context, the question, why the Buddha gave this teaching, of course, right away, you can understand it in a way how to live alone physically. But once you understand the context, and everything that happened before, why the Buddha gave the teachings, then you understand why it shows the sentence, the way to live alone, to address to this monk who still lives alone.

So is that clear for you now? Yes, thank you so much. Thank you, everyone. We will stop now.

I know that our friends in Asia, it's quite late, so I will respect the time, and I will stop now. Thank you a lot for being here, for listening, for studying together this sutra. It's really like the foundation, the foundation of the practice, the foundation of our tradition.

And today, it also becomes a therapy. They said that it's the first document that's teaching us how to live in the present moment, because before Buddhism in India, there were many spiritual traditions, and all the spiritual traditions in these spiritual traditions, people were always thinking about the future after death, I will be in heaven, I will be reborn in a happy place, and all the spiritual traditions before Buddha, before Buddhism, all the practices had the goal to have happiness in the future, and the Buddha was the first person who taught us how to live fully in the present moment. It's the first document, this is the first document in history, but I think it's the history that we know.

It's teaching us how to live fully in the present moment. Satsang with Mooji