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NHAT
HANH

Commentary on the
Nirvana Chapter
of the Chinese
Dharmapada

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Enjoying the Ultimate

Commentary on the Nirvana Chapter of the Chinese Dharmapada

Thich Nhat Hanh



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*Nirvāṇa can be realized
right here and right now
in this very life.*

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Translator's Preface

In this book we have the first English translation of Chapter Thirty-Six of the Chinese Dharmapada. This Chapter is called “The Chapter on Nirvāṇa.” The Pali Dhammapada, which is much better known than the Chinese, does not have this chapter. However, some of the verses can be found in the Sanskrit Udānavarga. The translation of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh of the Chinese into Vietnamese makes a very complex and terse Chinese easy to understand. I have done my best to render the Vietnamese into English. Thích Nhất Hạnh’s translation from Chinese is not a literal word for word translation, and expands the very terse Chinese so as to make it comprehensible and accessible to the modern reader. This is also the purpose of the commentary, which was taught to an audience of lay and monastic practitioners, including Dharma teachers and some novices in the practice.

The title “Enjoying the Ultimate” was suggested by Thích Nhất Hạnh. He was inspired by a lay Vietnamese Zen master of the thirteenth century, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ, who having realized nirvāṇa, wrote a poem about enjoying roaming freely in the ultimate dimension. This means that Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ had experienced in this very life the liberation that is associated with nirvāṇa.

Thích Nhất Hạnh reminds each of us again and again of our ability to experience nirvāṇa for ourselves. He shows us that the Buddha has taught this also, and evidence can be found in the early sūtras: the Udāna, Itivutthaka, and Sutta Nipāta in particular. The value of these teachings is that they help us apply the Buddhist way of understanding and love in our daily lives. On a broader scope, Thích Nhất Hạnh helps us to see that the teachings on nirvāṇa can and have been applied by practitioners of the theistic religions.

Introduction: Cooling the Flames

Many people think that nirvāṇa is a place of happiness where people who are enlightened go when they die. No idea could be more misleading. The Buddha taught many times about the nirvāṇa that can be realized right here and now, in this very life (*dr̥ṣṭadharmā-nirvāṇa*). Nirvāṇa means liberation and freedom. If we are able to free ourselves from our afflictions such as attachment, hatred, and jealousy, and we can free ourselves from wrong views like our ideas about birth and death, being and nonbeing, coming and going, and so on, we can be in touch with nirvāṇa in the present moment.¹

¹“Affliction” is a translation of the Sanskrit word *kleśa*, which refers to the unskillful actions of body, speech, and mind that cause suffering.

If we step on a thorn, as long as the thorn is still under our skin, we’ll feel very uncomfortable. When the thorn is removed, we’ll feel relieved and at ease. That feeling of being at ease is a kind of liberation and freedom; we do not have to die to feel liberation and freedom. Our afflictions of attachment and hatred, the misunderstandings and fears which we presently have, make us feel very uncomfortable; we suffer and feel oppressed. Afflictions and wrong views are like the thorns we haven’t yet been able to remove. For each thorn that we remove, we’ll have an additional feeling of ease, and that feeling of ease is nirvāṇa.

Two Obstacles: The Afflictions and the Knowable

There are two barriers that stop us from being in touch with nirvāṇa. They are the obstacle of the afflictions and the obstacle of the knowable. The obstacle of the afflictions is made of craving, hatred, and jealousy. They are like flames that burn us. The obstacle of the knowable is made of discriminative, dogmatic, and dualistic habits of thinking and of wrong views like the belief in a separate self and that things exist outside of each other.² Very often we take our wrong view to be the truth, but in reality it

tends to cover up and veil the truth of things. When we can transcend wrong views, we feel immense space around us and within us. The flames that were burning us have been put out. Nirvāṇa means the extinction of the flames of the afflictions and extinction of the obstacle of the knowable. It is a state of calm, coolness, security, and freedom. It is the daily abode of the people we call sages or holy ones. In the Nirvāṇa Chapter, there is the verse:

² *Jñeyāvaraṇa* (Sanskrit)—this means we are obstructed by what we think we know.

*The deer take refuge in the countryside,
The birds in the sky...
The holy ones spend their time in nirvāṇa.*

The Path to Nirvāṇa

There is a path of practice, a noble way of living called the Noble Eightfold Path, which begins with Right View.³ Right View is the view that transcends all prejudice and dogmatism, all dualistic ways of thinking, all ideas of being and nonbeing, birth and death. Based on Right View, there is Right Thinking, Right Speech, and Right Action. These practices help us gradually to remove the obstacle of the afflictions and the obstacle of the knowable. To the extent that we practice them, we have nirvāṇa.

³ The Noble Eightfold Path: Right View, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

We do not have to remove one hundred percent of the obstacle of the afflictions and the obstacle of the knowable to have nirvāṇa. If we can transform ten percent of the afflictions and the obstacle of the knowable, we shall have ten percent nirvāṇa. If we can transform ninety percent, we shall have ninety percent nirvāṇa. The afflictions and the obstacle of the knowable that remain are called the residue. The kind of nirvāṇa that is not one hundred percent is called nirvāṇa with residue. When the remaining afflictions and obstacle of the knowable have been transformed, the practitioner realizes the ultimate nirvāṇa, called nirvāṇa without residue. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas, while they are living on the earth, are able

to abide in this nirvāṇa without residue. That is the teaching found in Source Buddhism.⁴

⁴ Source Buddhism here refers to the earliest teachings of the Buddha, for example in the Sutta Nipāta and some verses of the Dharmapada and other sūtras in the Pali Nikāyas and Chinese and Sanskrit Āgamas.

Later, there were shortcomings in the transmission of the teachings. People had the wrong idea that the *residue* being talked about referred to the five *skandhas*.⁵ For that reason, they presumed that ultimate nirvāṇa could only be possible when there were no more skandhas. This is the harmful view that leads people to think, quite wrongly, that nirvāṇa with residue is a temporary state of happiness lasting for the remaining years of the practitioner's life after they have realized the path, and that on the dissolution of their five skandhas it will be continued by eternal death (nirvāṇa without residue).

⁵ The five skandhas—body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness—were understood to be a substratum (*upādi-*), making our life possible.

Being on the Path Is to Experience Nirvāṇa

In the teachings of the Four Noble Truths,⁶ the Third Truth is equivalent to nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is the calming and the extinction of the afflictions and the obstacle of the knowable. This is why nirvāṇa is sometimes called the truth of extinction or cessation (*nirodha*). Extinction here is the absence or calming of suffering; it is peace and freedom. The Fourth Truth is the Path, or the Eightfold Path (*aṣṭāṅgika mārga*), the path that is the end of suffering.

⁶ Ill-being; the causes of ill-being; the end of ill-being (well-being); the path to the end of ill-being.

If we understand the Four Noble Truths in a nondualistic way, the Path and the extinction of suffering are not two separate things. When you are on the Path (the Fourth Noble Truth), you are also experiencing the cessation of suffering (the Third Noble Truth), which means you are experiencing nirvāṇa. This is the nirvāṇa with residue (*upādiśeṣa*). This means that as soon as you begin to practice the Fourth Noble Truth, the Path, you begin to

taste the flavor of nirvāṇa. Monks, nuns, and lay practitioners all have the capacity to be in close touch with nirvāṇa at the very time they are practicing the Fourth Noble Truth. This is why we can say: “There is no way to nirvāṇa; nirvāṇa is the way.” This is the nondualistic way of understanding the Four Noble Truths.

The Space Outside of Space

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ, the author of *The Records of the Eminent Master*, was a Vietnamese Zen master of the thirteenth century. He was the elder brother of Hưng Đạo Vương Trần Quốc Tuấn.² He described nirvāṇa as the space outside of space. The space outside of space is more immense than the space within space. In our life as a human being, we are limited by time and space, birth and death, duration and cessation, being and nonbeing. That is because our perceptions are obscured by wrong views and afflictions. If we are able to overcome wrong views and afflictions, we reach the space outside of space, which is much more spacious and much happier. The space outside of space is nirvāṇa. It is not a utopian dream. If we rely on the Fourth Noble Truth to direct our practice, the space outside of space becomes real immediately. In his poem “Walking in Freedom” (“Phóng Cuồng”), Tuệ Trung wrote: “Holding his staff, he wanders freely in the space outside of space.” If our spiritual ancestors have been able to do this, what is to stop us, their descendants, from doing the same?

² The general who led the Đại Việt army that defeated the Mongolian forces trying to invade Vietnam in the thirteenth century.

THE TEXT

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1

Introducing the Nirvāṇa Chapter

We can effectively study and understand the Dharmapada according to the following method.

The Composite Nature of the Sūtra

When the ancestral teachers were compiling the Dharmapada, they collated verses and put them under different subject headings.¹ They also arranged them differently from the way they were arranged in the original sūtras. The “Nirvāṇa Chapter,” which I have called “Enjoying the Ultimate,” is one of those subject headings. There are other subject headings like “Impermanence” and “Loving Kindness.” The ancestral teachers collected verse teachings of the Buddha about nirvāṇa from many different sūtras in the Buddhist canon and made them into a chapter on nirvāṇa.

¹ The Dharmapada was said to have been collated by the Venerable Dharmatrāta, a famous commentator of the Sarvāstivāda School.

Maybe the Buddha spoke a certain verse under specific circumstances, and another verse somewhere else in quite different circumstances. The Buddha did not necessarily teach these two verses consecutively, and the position of the verses is according to the arrangement of the ancestral teachers, not according to the order in which the Buddha taught. As we read the Dharmapada we remember that this is not one of the sūtras that the Buddha gave on one occasion from beginning to end.

Sūtras of Conventional Meaning and Sūtras of Deep Meaning

There are two kinds of sūtras, the sūtras of deep meaning and the sūtras of conventional meaning. The sūtras of deep meaning refer to the ultimate

truth (*paramārtha-satya*). The sūtras of conventional meaning refer to the relative truth (*saṃvṛṭi-satya*).

There are sūtras that say we have to leave the world of birth and death in order to enter the world of nirvāṇa. This implies that there is such a thing as birth and death, and nirvāṇa is something different from birth and death. There are other sūtras, like the Heart Sutra, which say that birth and death are just ideas and, in fact, are not real. The Heart Sutra is a sūtra of deep meaning. There are sūtras that talk about the Four Noble Truths and we know that they are the basic teaching of Buddhism. In the Heart Sutra it says the Four Noble Truths do not exist, which means that by looking deeply, you can see that none of the Four Truths can exist as a separate entity. How can there be suffering if there is not happiness? How can there be happiness if there is not suffering? Suffering, its cause, its end, and the Path are Four Truths, but each one of these Truths can be found in the other three. You could not find one of the Truths outside the other three. Suffering, its cause, its end, and the Path are not separate entities.

It looks as if the teaching of the Four Noble Truths as separate self-entities, and the teaching that they do not exist as separate self-entities, are two opposing Buddhist teachings. In fact, they are not. It is just that one teaching belongs to the deep teachings, and the other to the conventional teachings.

When the ancestral teachers put a number of verses together in the sūtra, they put verses of deep meaning alongside verses of conventional meaning. When we understand that there are two kinds of truth, we shall not ask why one verse does not seem to be in accord with another.

The sūtra *Enjoying the Ultimate* has thirty-six verses. As a Buddhist scholar we should be able to see which verses belong to the deep meaning, and which to the conventional meaning. The sūtras of deep meaning are very interesting and useful but so are the sūtras of conventional meaning. Each kind of sūtra has its function. We should probably begin with the sūtras of conventional meaning and then gradually study the sūtras of deep meaning. We have to acknowledge the Four Noble Truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the Path that leads to the end of suffering. Only when we have understood them well can we go beyond

them. If we started by saying: “No ill-being, no cause of ill-being, no end of ill-being, and no Path,” it would be very difficult for us to understand.

Because not all verses of the sūtra are talking about the same level of truth, we could say that there are inconsistencies in the sūtra. As a Buddhist scholar we know that we cannot compare the verses of deep meaning with the verses of conventional meaning. When we recognize a verse of conventional meaning, we can also recognize that it is there to help us go gradually into the deep meaning. A practitioner of Buddhism should also be a scholar, an intelligent researcher who studies in a scientific way. She is not someone who believes unconditionally in everything she reads.

In this chapter, there are verses that refer to the ultimate dimension, where there are no notions of pure and impure. In nirvāṇa there are no ideas of pure and impure, inside and outside, coming and going, happiness and suffering. In the same chapter, there are verses that say that the body is impure; why go looking for happiness in a place that is impure? According to the sūtras of deep meaning, there is no pure and no impure. So there are two approaches to the truth. First of all, we must read the whole chapter from beginning to end, recognizing which verses are of deep meaning and which are of conventional meaning, and recognizing also that the verses of conventional meaning are there to lead us into the deep meaning.

About the Translation

The sūtra we have called *Enjoying the Ultimate* is a translation of the Nirvāṇa Chapter in the Chinese Dharmapada. The Chinese Dharmapada has thirty-nine chapters, whereas the Pali version (Dhammapada) only has twenty-six chapters. In the Pali Dhammapada this chapter on Nirvāṇa is not found. It can only be found in the Chinese. The Dhammapada that is currently most circulated in the West as well as in Vietnam is the Pali version that does not have the Nirvāṇa Chapter.

The Chinese Dharmapada³ was translated from Sanskrit in the middle of the third century CE in the capital of the Wu kingdom Jian Ye (建業), now known as Nanjing. In those days there was only one temple in the capital, called Jian Chu (建初) or the First Temple, founded by a Vietnamese Zen master called Tǎng Hôi (康僧會) with the support of Sun Quan (孫權), the

king of Wu at that time. The translation was made by Wei Qi Nan (維祈難) and the preface written by Zhi Qian (支謙). The Dharmapada was very possibly translated in the First Temple, where Tǎng Hội was the abbot.⁴

³ Taisho 210.

⁴ Master Tǎng Hội was born in the first decade of the third century, and it's recorded that he died in 280 CE. For more about this Zen master, see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Master Tǎng Hội*, Parallax Press, 2005.

The sūtra *Enjoying the Ultimate* has been translated from Chinese into Vietnamese by Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh and from Vietnamese into English by Bhikshuni True Virtue, who also translated the commentary from Vietnamese to English. The translation of the whole of the Chinese Dharmapada by the author has been published in Vietnamese under the title of *A Garland of Flowers (Kết Một Tràng Hoa)*.

2

The Nirvāṇa Chapter Chapter Thirty-Six of the Chinese Dharmapada

Enjoying the Ultimate

1

Patience is the best way to protect oneself.

Nirvāṇa is what the Buddha has praised as the highest and the best.

*When śramaṇas leave the worldly life and keep the precepts,
they do not do harm to anyone.*

2

Good health is the greatest profit.

Satisfaction is the greatest of riches.

Loyalty is your best friend.

Nirvāṇa is the greatest delight.

3

Hunger is the affliction most difficult to bear.

The formations are what bring about the greatest suffering.

*Keep looking into the truth in order to have the understanding
that nirvāṇa is the greatest happiness.*

4

In the world, few people are on the wholesome path.

Those on the unwholesome path are many.

*Look into the truth in order to understand
how nirvāṇa is the most secure abode.*

5

Birth in the heavenly realms is due to creating wholesome causes.

Falling into unwholesome destinies is due to unwholesome causes.

*Nirvāṇa is due to causes,
it also needs conditions.*

6

The deer take refuge in the countryside,

the birds in the sky.

The manifestation of phenomena depends on a discrimination.

The true person depends on nirvāṇa to live in freedom.

7

*When there is insight into no beginning and no non-beginning,
no being and no nonbeing,*

that is nonattainment,

and the inconceivable.

8

The mind is difficult to see, but habit energies can be recognized.

*The one who can recognize their mind of desire will be able to see
everything clearly.*

*When there is no object of desire, it is possible to avoid all kinds of
suffering.*

Infatuation always makes suffering increase.

9

A clear, untainted, and pure mind can master desire.

*At that point, you no longer have to come in touch with a world of
suffering,*

even though your eyes still see, your ears still hear,

your memory still remembers, and your consciousness still discriminates.

10

*Having realized nonattachment and nondiscrimination,
once you let go of all ideas, you can enter this realm.*

You will transcend the perception of the self,

master all mental formations that cause suffering,

and wholly eliminate the habit of discriminatory perception,

so there will be no more suffering.

11

In a disruptive environment, when you can keep your mind silent, you will remain still.

When the mind is disturbed, you cannot be close to nirvāṇa, you cannot have peace and joy.

When ideas about suffering and happiness have been transcended, then there is the true silence.

When ideas about the true silence have been transcended, there is no more need for coming and going.

12

When there is no more coming and going, birth and death end also.

With the ending of birth and death, how can there be discrimination between this and that?

The idea of this as well as the idea of that have ended.

The absolute silence that is nirvāṇa is the release from a world of suffering.

13

O monks, in the world there is birth, being, made, and conditioned.

But there is also no birth, no being, the not-made, and the not-conditioned;

for these are the way out of birth, being, made, and conditioned.

14

Only the person who has attained non-ideation can arrive at nirvāṇa.

Once there is no birth, there is no more being.

There is no place for the made, and no place for the conditioned.

15

Someone who perceives birth, being, made, and conditioned has not yet arrived at the essence.

*If you can understand the nature of no-birth,
you will not perceive being, made, and conditioned.*

16

*Because there is being, there has to be birth.
And because there is birth, being continues.
When there is the made and the conditioned, there is death and birth.
This is the opening of the door of birth and death, leading to the arising
of all phenomena.*

17

*Everything subsists because of food.
Even happiness and sadness need food to survive.
If the essential nourishment is not there,
there is no more trace of formations for you to discern.*

18

*When suffering ends and the formations are quietened,
happiness will be there silently, and there will be peace.
O bhikshus, I have realized this,
and so I do not seek to enter any particular realm anymore.*

19

*There is no realm of infinite space.
There is not a place that we need to enter.
There is no going to the realm of neither perception nor non-perception.
There is no this life or the next life.*

20

*There are no ideas about the presence of the sun and the moon.
There is no going and no staying behind.
There is no separate self that can go and come back.
So there is no going and coming back.*

21

*In the place where nothing is lost and nothing continues to be reborn,
in that place there is nirvāṇa.*

*Then, the question of whether there is an object of perception or not,
and the question of the nature of suffering and happiness, are thoroughly
understood.*

22

What we see no longer makes us afraid.

We have no more doubt about things that can or cannot be expressed.

Once the arrow has been shot, it fells the ideas of being and nonbeing.

*On encountering someone who does not understand, you do not feel you
have to explain.*

23

That is the foremost kind of bliss.

There is nothing higher than the path of the silence of nirvāṇa.

*At this point, we have the capacity of inclusiveness, our mind is like the
earth,*

and the practice of inclusiveness is like a citadel.

24

As pure as clean water,

when birth is no more, there is no bondage to inherit.

Winning and profit are no longer criteria to follow,

because victory and profit are always accompanied by suffering.

25

*You should only look for the kind of victory and profit that come from the
practice of the Dharma.*

*Once there is the victory of the Dharma, there is not the basis for the
cycle of birth and death.*

Once there is no more basis, there is no more bringing about (the ropes that bind).

If you want to put an end to the cycle of birth and death, do not lead an unchaste life.

26

Once a seed has been burnt, it cannot sprout anymore.

Once the wrong thinking has stopped, it is like the fire has been put out.

The sexual organ is a sea of impurity.

Why look for pleasure in a place like that?

27

*Although there are the wholesome realms above,
they have nothing to compare with nirvāṇa.*

When you have the understanding of all things, you end all afflictions.

You are no longer attached to the world.

28

*To let go of everything and cross to the shore of nirvāṇa
is the most beautiful of all paths.*

For our sake the Buddha has taught the Noble Truths.

Someone who is wise and brave can receive and practice this teaching.

29

*Living the holy life of chastity without any blemish,
one knows oneself, transcends time and space, realizes peace.*

*When embarking on the path of practice, the first thing is to leave sexual
desire behind.*

*Without delay, one should adorn oneself with the practice of the precepts
taught by the Buddha.*

30

Ending the afflictions, leaving the world of bondage behind,

*as easily as a bird spreads its wings and flies up into the sky.
If you understand the teachings of the Dharmapada,
you should put your whole heart into going forward on the path of
practice.*

31

*This is the path that goes to the shore of no-birth and no-death,
leading to the end of suffering and calamity.
On the spiritual path, there is no longer the discrimination between
friend and enemy.
You do not need to know who has worldly power or who has not.*

32

*Most important is not to be caught in perceptions.
When the being bound and being unbound are both pure,
the person of high understanding is no longer attached to this body,
subject to disintegration,
and sees that it is something without a firm ground in reality.*

33

*This body brings much suffering and very little peace and joy.
Among all the nine orifices, there is none that is clean.
The wise person knows how to turn a dangerous situation into a peaceful
one,
puts an end to boasting, and so escapes misfortunes.*

34

*Once this body has disintegrated, it will turn into dust.
Someone who is wise knows how to let go and not be attached to it.
Looking deeply to see that this body is an instrument that brings with it
many fetters,
birth, old age, sickness, and death will no longer cause you to suffer.*

35

*Letting go of the impure and traveling on the path of purity,
you have the chance to arrive at great peace.*

*Relying on understanding, laying aside wrong views,
and not taking them up again, the taints come to an end.*

36

*Living the holy life, transcending time and space,
you are revered by both men and gods.*

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THE COMMENTARY

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3

Introducing the Commentary

(TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: The commentary is composed of a series of Dharma Talks given by Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh in the Spring and the Winter Retreats of 2010 in Plum Village, France, on the Nirvāṇa Chapter of the Chinese Dharmapada. He concluded the teachings on this sūtra in December of that year.¹ The talks were given in Vietnamese, and there were seventeen talks in all.)

¹ The Vietnamese text and commentary have been made into a book published in Vietnamese as *Rong Chơi Trời Phương Ngoại*.

The sūtra that we have titled *Enjoying the Ultimate* is a chapter of the Dharmapada in the Chinese canon called the Nirvāṇa Chapter. In the English translation, we use the word “ultimate” to translate the Vietnamese expression “space outside of space.” This means the space that goes beyond our concepts of time and space. Although the space around us, the space in which we live, is immense, we still feel cramped, because in this kind of space, time and space are relative. Our space is the space of birth and death, continuation and cessation, above and below, before and after. In this space we do not feel truly at ease.

Outside of Space and Time

Buddhism teaches that the space and time in which we live are not necessarily objective realities outside of our mind but are creations of our consciousness. The space outside of space is different and transcends the space created by our mind. In that space, there is no birth and no death, no coming and no going, no continuing and no cessation. In that place we feel

much more at ease. When we let go of the concept of space, we have another kind of space, which we call the space outside of space. “Enjoying the ultimate” means that we can enjoy being in that space outside of space. In that place, there is no “us” and no “them,” no discrimination against others. This space is infinitely vast, and it is also called nirvāṇa.

Outside of Words and Concepts

Nirvāṇa cannot be described in words and concepts. There is nothing we can say or conceive about nirvāṇa because it lies outside our terms and concepts. Talking about nirvāṇa is like playing with words because nirvāṇa cannot be described by language and notions. In spite of this, the Buddha and the ancestral teachers have talked about nirvāṇa. They have done something that cannot be done. Out of compassion, they have done their utmost to say a little about it. They know very well as they speak that they have to use the greatest care, so the hearers do not grasp onto and become caught in the words and concepts. Someone who teaches about nirvāṇa must be able to speak skillfully, so people will not be caught in what they hear. The ancestral teachers have done their best to speak about nirvāṇa skillfully, and we as students have to do our best to listen skillfully, so we’re not caught in what they say. Both sides have to do their best. As you study these verses about nirvāṇa, it is important to remember this.

In English we can say: “Enjoy yourself; enjoy your time in the ultimate,” or: “Enjoy the space of the ultimate.” You can enjoy the space of the ultimate in a very deep way, because in the ultimate, there is no birth and no death, no worry, no grief, no being, and no nonbeing. “Enjoy yourself” here means that there is nothing you have to do, nowhere you have to go, you just enjoy your walking. The only trouble with the English word “enjoy” is that it does not imply the idea of spaciousness. In French there is the word *flâner*, which means to enjoy going somewhere without any aim. The sūtra uses the images of birds flying freely in the sky and deer that feel at ease roaming about the wild countryside. Nirvāṇa means taking the time to enjoy where you are.

Resting in the Ultimate Dimension

In Christian theology, people have debated a great deal about God. God cannot be described in words and cannot be conceived of in the mind by means of notions and concepts. Everything we say or think about God misses the point, because God is absolutely beyond thought and speech. If we study Christianity with an open mind, we shall see that Christianity also has its nirvāṇa, which is called God. God is not so much the creator who created everything that is, but is a ground that makes all phenomena possible, the ontological ground. In Christianity, people use the expression “Resting in God,” which means going back to God and taking refuge in God. If we wanted to translate this sūtra into Christian terminology, we would call it The Sutra on Resting in God. God is the equivalent of the Buddhist ultimate dimension. We come back to the ultimate dimension and rest there.

The Role of Faith and the Scientific Method

We can study this sūtra as a scientist or a Buddhist. A scientist would say if we study the sūtras as a religious believer, we’ll never be objective enough to discover the truth, because we have to believe unquestioningly in everything Buddha or Jesus says. This goes against the spirit of science. So at first glance, to study as a believer or a disciple seems not to be rigorous enough. But if we look again, we see that to study as a believer also has its strong points. First, we have confidence in our teacher. When we have confidence in our teacher, it means that we do not promptly reject something that we have not understood. If we always measure, doubt, and question, a good relationship with our teacher may be difficult, and when we hear a teaching, we do not absorb very much of it. A teacher-disciple relationship can be very beneficial. Understanding is not just an intellectual matter. There are times when we have to understand with our heart. Our mind is more than our brain. It also includes our heart. Often our heart has its own insight and its own reasoning.

Buddhism talks about the capacity to investigate and compare one thing with another, called *anumāna*, which includes deduction and induction. As scientists, we also use induction and deduction. For example, we say: “All living beings die. Humans are living beings. Therefore, humans die.” That is deductive reasoning. Apart from this, we have another capacity that does

not use reasoning, called *pratyakṣa pramāṇa*, direct perception. This is a very special capacity. At times we suddenly see the truth without a need for analysis, thought, or reason. For there to be enlightenment, direct perception is very important. Since direct perception does not need reasoning, it is a kind of intuition.

In Buddhism, people also talk about the noble teachers' reasoning. The buddhas and enlightened ones have had experiences, have seen into the truth, and try to find means to show us what they have seen. We can rely on their teachings in order to arrive at insight quickly, without the need to grope around in the dark on our own. This is what is meant by reliance on the reasoning of the noble teachers. Sūtras are this kind of reasoning. They are what enlightened ones have experienced and realized and tried to show us. If we are skillful enough, we can rely on these teachings in order to have our own realizations. The enlightened ones do not realize the truth for us. They just direct us, and we have to go on the path, and realize for ourselves. Say that you have never eaten a kiwi. Someone who has eaten a kiwi will say to us that a kiwi is not like an orange or a mandarin. It is about the size of a goose egg, it has a hairy skin, it has a sweet-sour flavor. A person could spend the whole day trying to describe the taste of a kiwi to us and we still would not have any idea of its taste. Nevertheless, we know quite well what a kiwi is not. When we do come into contact with a kiwi, we do not have to use our reasoning anymore. We take a knife, peel it, eat it, and we have a direct experience of it.

In science, there is also the reasoning of the noble teachers. Scientists of the past have made discoveries. Succeeding generations of students only need to reenact the experiments to witness the truth. They don't have to research all over again. This kind of reasoning is very necessary. Science does not need to discriminate against spiritual teachings.

Discerning What the Buddha Taught from What Was Added Later

As a student of Buddhism, we can benefit from the reasoning of the noble teachers; at the same time, we can make use of the methods of science. Science can be very helpful for the Buddhist practitioner. For example,

when we study the sūtra *Enjoying the Ultimate* in a scientific way, we can discover what was said by the Buddha and what was added by the ancestral teachers later. The Buddha gave the teachings orally. Later, the ancestral teachers wrote down what they understood the Buddha to have said. So the written teachings reflect the understanding of the ancestors more than the insight of the Buddha. If we use scientific methodology, we can remove the idea of the ancestral teachers in order to arrive at the idea of the Buddha. In addition, there can also be misunderstandings and mistakes in the transmission. For instance, once someone was talking about my book *Old Path White Clouds*, and the other person heard it as “Old Path White Clothes.”

Thanks to the scientific method, we are able to remove the mistakes in transmission and rediscover the original meaning of the Buddha. In our own time, archaeological and philological research can help us greatly in this. It is clear that when we study the sūtras, we have to do so not only as a disciple of the Buddha, but also as a scientist. Sometimes we read a sūtra and it does not seem to be compatible with the Buddha’s teachings elsewhere. Lack of compatibility in the teachings does not mean that the teachings are self-contradictory.

Relative Truth and Absolute Truth Are Not in Opposition

In Buddhism, there are two kinds of truth: the absolute truth, *paramārtha-satya*, and the conventional truth, *saṃvṛṭi-satya*. As we have seen, the sūtras that describe the absolute truth are called “sūtras of deep meaning.” The sūtras that Buddha taught to those who had only just begun their studies and practice and which describe the relative truth are called the “sūtras of conventional meaning.” They are easier for beginners to understand and are the basis on which students can go deeper until they arrive at the ultimate truth. As far as the word is concerned, these two kinds of sūtras are not compatible with each other. As far as the spirit is concerned, the two kinds of sūtras complement each other.

As we read *Enjoying the Ultimate*, we should not see the two kinds of truth as opposing each other, but one kind of truth as leading into the other.

This is the recommendation of the ancestral teachers. As students of Buddhism, we need to take good care to apply it in our studies and practice.

The Four Reliances

In Buddhism, there are four principles of reliance we can use when studying the sūtras. They are our methodology. Once we have mastered this methodology, our studies can take us far and to deep insight. As a novice, I was taught these Reliances.

1. Reliance on the Sūtras of Deep Meaning Rather than Reliance on the Sūtras of Conventional Meaning.

Here we are told we need only to rely on the sūtras of deep meaning and we need not rely on the sūtras of conventional meaning. Of course, we can use the sūtras of conventional meaning. We just should not think that they are teachings on the ultimate truth.

2. Reliance on the Dharma Rather than Reliance on the Person Who Teaches It.

Sometimes there is someone who may already be a Dharma teacher, but her practice does not show that she has completely absorbed into her life what she teaches. Someone might give very good teachings on the fine manners for monks and nuns, but their practice of the fine manners might not be very good. Even when a person is not easy to be with, if they have been able to grasp the teachings, we should be patient and take the trouble to learn from what they are teaching us. If we cannot accept the teacher, we shall lose the opportunity of learning the Dharma. The ancestral teachers have used the following example when teaching reliance on the Dharma and not on the person. In a rubbish bin, there is a precious jewel. If we want to retrieve the jewel, we have to plunge our hands into all the rubbish in order to extract it.

3. Reliance on the Spirit and Not on the Word.

We should not be caught in words but should hear and understand the spirit of the teaching that is hidden in the words.

4. Reliance on Wisdom Rather than on Discriminating Consciousness.

Our consciousness can be obscured by ignorance, and so it is not perfectly clear. When we have removed anger, ignorance, and jealousy, we have wisdom and much more clarity. If we study the sūtra with a mind that is infatuated or angry, we shall not realize the meaning of what we are studying. So when we study, we should use wisdom more than we use our consciousness, which has a strong tendency to discriminate. Wisdom here means the intuition that can quickly lead to enlightenment.

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4

Commentary on the Nirvāṇa Chapter

Verse 1

Patience is the best way to protect oneself.

Nirvāṇa is what the Buddha has praised as the highest and the best.

*When śramaṇas leave the worldly life and keep the precepts,
they do not do harm to anyone.*

忍為最自守

泥洹佛稱上

捨家不犯戒

息心無所害

Patience is the best way to protect oneself.

We have the mental formation of fear in our mind. We are afraid of accidents and evil conspiracies coming from outside. Living in fear, we cannot be happy. In the very first line, Buddha is teaching us to live in such a way that with the practice of patience, we can protect ourselves from fear and feel secure. That is the first step into nirvāṇa, because nirvāṇa is above all security.

Patience means to be able to accept. Once we can accept, we have the strength to go forward and overcome. We may be surprised that the first verse begins with the word “patience.” We might ask ourselves why a teaching on nirvāṇa should begin with *kṣānti pāramitā*—the practice of patience that takes us to the shore of liberation. *Kṣānti* also has the meaning of being able to embrace, being tolerant, able to agree and accept without very much difficulty. We have the strength to embrace and to hold.

If you have a box that is able to hold fifteen packets of noodles, then that is the capacity of the box. Our heart also has its capacity. If our heart is small, it cannot embrace very much. If it is large, it can embrace a great deal. Sometimes people translate kṣānti as “endurance.” When people hear “endurance,” they can hear it in a negative sense, that we have to force ourselves to bear something and we suffer in the process. The word kṣānti means embracing without having to force ourselves. The Vietnamese word means “to accept and to hold.” If I have patience, I can hold you and put you wholly in my heart without any problem.

Kṣānti is one of the six practices, the six pāramitās, that can take us to the shore of liberation. In the sūtras, the Buddha gave a very helpful metaphor to describe the meaning of this practice.¹ He took a fistful of salt, dropped it into a bowl of water, stirred it, and said: “I have dropped a fistful of salt into this bowl of water. Because it is so salty, it is undrinkable. But if you were to throw the same amount of salt into the river, it would not make the river salty.” The river can accept and hold the fistful of salt without any problem because it is so vast. In the sūtra, it says: “Water has the capacity to accept and so do the earth, fire, and air.” Buddha once taught his son Rāhula: “You should practice to be like the earth, like the air, like water, like fire.”² Teaching like that, Buddha expressed his meaning without using the words patience or tolerance.

¹ Aṅguttara Nikāya 1.249-250.

² Majjhima Nikāya 62.

When our heart is great, even though difficulties come to us, we are able to accept them, and they don’t make us suffer. If our heart is small like a peanut, any little thing can trouble us. Patience is the capacity to widen our heart a little more every day. The greater our heart is, the greater our capacity to tolerate, and the smaller our suffering becomes. The Buddha’s heart is a heart without boundaries, a limitless heart. When our heart is as great as the Buddha’s, there is nothing that can irritate us or make us suffer; we can embrace anyone. That is what is meant by transcendent patience, one of the doors that open the way to nirvāṇa.

As a student and friend of the Buddha, we should look into our own heart to find out how great is its capacity. Has it grown great, or is it still very

small? The greater it is, the more peace and happiness we have.

Nirvāṇa is what the Buddha has praised as the highest and the best.

In the first two lines of this verse, superlative adjectives are used. The Buddha praises patience as the greatest protection and nirvāṇa as what is most beautiful. We leave behind the worldly life. We practice chastity.³ We do not transgress the precepts. We know how to calm our mind. Once we can do that, we are much more secure, and we begin to taste the security of nirvāṇa.

³ Laypeople practice the The Five or The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings.

In the world, people want to make themselves rich, and merchants use advertisements to compete with each other: “This sports car will make you the happiest person in the world,” or “Our computer is the ultimate. You can find paradise in it. It will make real whatever you wish.”

Nirvana isn’t merchandise for sale. Any religion can sell a paradise, a pure land, or nirvāṇa. But is nirvāṇa a product that the Buddha and ancestral teachers want to sell us? Is it a promised land or paradise up in the sky, which people try to sell us saying: “If you follow our religion, if you become a member of our congregation, then after you die you will have nirvāṇa or the Kingdom of Heaven”? We can see clearly that it is not.

According to the Nirvāṇa Chapter, nirvāṇa is something that is always there. We do not need to buy it. I am not trying to sell you anything, because nirvāṇa is available everywhere. If you know how to be in touch with it, you will automatically experience it. It is like the refreshing air of the early morning. It is simply there. You just need to open your window or step outside and you can enjoy it. The Buddha and the ancestral teachers just try and find a way to help us to see it. If we practice mindfulness skillfully, we can step outside and enjoy the ultimate.

The Kingdom of Heaven or the paradise that is above the earth belongs to the future. We have to pay for it now, and only in the future will the merchandise be delivered. Nirvāṇa is not like that. We can have it straight

away. We do not have to wait for it to come in the future and we do not have to advertise it.

Nirvāṇa is the highest aim for us to follow. It is the highest and most beautiful thing that we can realize. We need to have a desire for nirvāṇa, not a small desire but a desire that goes very deep. Imagine it is only four in the morning. The stars and the moon are shining brightly in the sky, the trees have woken up to the sighing of the wind. The fragrance of the night is there in abundance. If we want, all we need to do is fold our bedding, put on our robe, and go outside to enjoy the pure fragrance of the night. Nirvāṇa is like that. It is something very pleasant. The happiness that comes with nirvāṇa is very great. If we want to enjoy nirvāṇa, we have to abandon all the things that bind us in our everyday life, and quite automatically, nirvāṇa is there. It is the same as when we abandon our warm blankets and our idleness, open the door, and step outside. Immediately the cool breeze, the moon, and the stars are there for us. Do not wish for anything less than this. When you desire something, it has to be the most beautiful, the greatest thing, and that is nirvāṇa.

The first verse of the sūtra is already very beautiful. Freedom is the highest and most beautiful object for us to follow. Nirvāṇa is nothing less than freedom.

When śramaṇas leave the worldly life and keep the precepts, they do not do harm to anyone.

Once you have left the home and become a monk or a nun, you make the vow to accept and keep the precepts. Practicing the precepts is the basis for a life of non-harming.

In the last line, we have the word 息心 (xi xin), which is used in classical Chinese to translate the Sanskrit word śramaṇa. 息 (xi) means to calm down, to stop. It is a synonym of the word śamatha, which means dwelling peacefully or stopping. 心 (xin) means the mind. Our mind could be running after what we are infatuated with, or what we hate. Our mind could be anxious or afraid. If at that time we can calm it down, that is what is meant by 息心.

Meditation consists of *śamatha* (stopping and calming) and *vipaśyanā* (looking deeply). Before we can do anything else as a meditator, we have to stop and calm down; then bit by bit we see things clearly and realize the truth. In the Sutra On the Full Awareness of Breathing, the Buddha teaches many ways to help us stop and calm our mind. This is the way to keep ourselves safe from outer harm. The last line has the words 無所害 (*wu suo hai*), which means not making others suffer or doing any harm. That is *ahiṃsā* in Sanskrit, which is translated into English as non-injury or nonviolence.

In the sixth century BCE, in the valley of the Ganges, two spiritual traditions came into being and both held to the principle of non-injury. The first was Jainism. The Jains were also known as the Nirgranthas (which means “without possessions”). Jain is from the Sanskrit root *jin* meaning *victorious*. This school was headed by Mahāvīra, also known as Jina, the Victorious One. The second tradition was the Buddhist one, founded by Siddhārtha Gotama. Jainism is still practiced today, above all in India. Thanks to the teachings of non-injury in Buddhism, many Buddhist nations have been able to diminish violence, such as certain kingdoms of ancient India, and in historical times Vietnam, China, Tibet, and Korea.

Verse 2

Good health is the greatest profit.

Satisfaction is the greatest of riches.

Loyalty is your best friend.

Nirvāṇa is the greatest delight.

無病最利

知足最富

厚為最友

泥洹最快

Good health is the greatest profit.

This is to cure the thinking of businesspeople who are always worried about profit. The Buddha said these words not only for businesspeople, but also for anyone who likes to have a little bit more money coming in. It is very simple—health is the greatest profit. Do not do anything that will jeopardize your health, and learn ways to preserve it.

Satisfaction is the greatest of riches.

Who is the richest person? It is not the person who has many stocks and shares. When their value on the stock market goes down, that person will become poor. Especially in times of economic crisis, you can be rich today, and tomorrow you are no longer rich. In the eyes of the awakened ones, satisfaction with little is the greatest of riches. Contentment with what you have (*saṃtuṣṭa*) is also an element of nirvāṇa. We know that if what we have is enough for us, we already have quite enough conditions for happiness, and we do not need anything more. Automatically we become the richest person on earth. A monk or a nun considers: “I have three robes and a bowl. I have the foot of a tree and a hammock. I am so rich!” What the sūtra teaches is very down-to-earth. It does not teach us to believe in a future paradise.

Loyalty is your best friend.

In classical Chinese, the character for loyalty, 厚 (*hou*), means “thick.” A person who has this quality has a love and a loyalty that are deep and steadfast. The person who is loyal is dependable. The best kind of friend is not someone who is powerful, but someone to whom we can turn in difficult times. When we meet misfortune, the powerful person will not dare to raise their voice to support us, because they are afraid of losing power. We do not make someone our closest friend because they are powerful or rich. The best kind of friend is someone who is loyal. This is a very practical teaching.

Nirvāṇa is the greatest delight.

The classical Chinese word 快 (*kuai*) can be translated into English as “delight” or “happiness.” This line is spoken from direct experience. The

Buddha who said, “Nirvāṇa is the greatest delight,” is someone who has enjoyed it. Just as the preceding lines refer to a true experience, so does this one.

Verse 3

*Hunger is the affliction most difficult to bear.
The formations are what bring about the greatest suffering.
Keep looking into the truth in order to have the understanding
that nirvāṇa is the greatest happiness.*

飢為大病
行為最苦
已諦知此
泥洹最樂

Hunger is the affliction most difficult to bear.

This line isn't referring to the hunger you experience when you haven't eaten all day or when you fast for ten or fifteen days in order to detoxify. To be really hungry is to go for months with little or no food. Only then would you deeply feel the suffering of hunger.

The formations are what bring about the greatest suffering.

In Sanskrit the word for formation is *saṃskāra*. *Saṃskāra* means phenomena that are conditioned or composite, like mountains, rivers, plants, minerals, human beings, and animals. All phenomena that rely on other phenomena in order to manifest are called formations. All formations are impermanent and without a separate self. Conditioned phenomena are the opposite of nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is unconditioned. Conditioned phenomena are born and die, come and go, abide and disappear, and bring about a great deal of suffering. However, when we are deeply in touch with conditioned phenomena, we also touch nirvāṇa—the unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*). When

we are in touch with nirvāṇa, we have no more ups and downs, no more being born and dying.

A wave is a conditioned phenomenon that goes up and down, comes to be and ceases to be. When the wave knows how to come back and discover that its nature is water, it knows that it is an unconditioned phenomenon and is no longer afraid. It enjoys going down as much as it enjoys going up. In truth, conditioned phenomena are not the cause of suffering. The main cause of suffering is the wrong perceptions we have about conditioned phenomena. They are impermanent and without a separate self, but we think that they are permanent and have a separate self, and that makes us suffer. If we look deeply into them and see their true unconditioned nature, their nirvāṇa nature, they will no longer make us suffer. We come into touch with nirvāṇa by coming deeply into touch with conditioned phenomena, just as we come into touch with water by coming into touch with the wave.

Keep looking into the truth in order to have the understanding that nirvāṇa is the greatest happiness.

(TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: As we shall see in the commentary on the next verse, the word "truth" here refers to the Four Noble Truths. When, with the practice of meditation and mindfulness, we are able to realize the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, we shall see for ourselves that nirvāṇa is the greatest happiness.)

When I read the chapter on Enjoying the Ultimate I feel that I am reading a poem. When I had finished translating it from Chinese, I felt very grateful to our spiritual ancestors who read all the sūtras, extrapolated from them all that the Buddha had said about nirvāṇa in different places and on different occasions, and put these teachings together in a single chapter.

(TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: At the end of this Dharma talk, Thích Nhất Hạnh instructed his disciples on how to practice during the upcoming retreat. It is clear that enjoying the ultimate dimension is not separate from the practicalities of offering retreats. Many lay friends also offer retreats. It is how we apply Buddhism in our daily lives in order to bring joy to many people.)

In eight days' time, we will open our doors to receive practitioners from all over the world. It is possible that four thousand people in all will visit us in the course of four weeks. Let us prepare ourselves so that in our hearts there is the immense space that all those people who come and practice with us will need. Our part is to offer them joy and happiness. If we want to do this, we need to know how to make ourselves happy first. As brothers and sisters of the same spiritual family, we have to take refuge in each other and hold hands in brotherhood and sisterhood. By doing this, we will make many people very happy for the month of the Summer Opening.⁴

⁴ The annual four-week-long retreat held in July/August in Plum Village.

The elder brothers and sisters can tell their younger siblings, who may never have experienced the Summer Opening before, all about their experience: their joys, the work, and the ways to bring happiness to the friends who come to practice with us. When there is harmony, brotherhood and sisterhood, and happiness and joy in the sangha, it is very easy to make people happy.

Verse 4

*In the world, few people are on the wholesome path.
Those on the unwholesome path are many.
Look into the truth in order to understand
how nirvāṇa is the most secure abode.*

少往善道
趣惡道多
如諦知此
泥洹最安

*In the world, few people are on the wholesome path.
Those on the unwholesome path are many.*

This verse is about the Four Noble Truths. In the first and the second lines, there is the Chinese word 道 (*dao*), meaning “path,” in Sanskrit, *mārga*. In the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, the Fourth Noble Truth is the path of the eight right practices, referred to here as the wholesome path.

The First Noble Truth is *duḥkha*, ill-being. The Second Noble Truth is *samudaya*, the making of ill-being; it is the unwholesome path as opposed to the wholesome path. So the Second Noble Truth is also a path, only it is a path of the eight wrong practices. The Third Noble Truth is *nirodha*, the cessation of ill-being. The Fourth Noble Truth is *mārga*, the path that leads to the cessation of all ill-being, in other words the Noble Eightfold Path.

Samudaya, the second truth, refers to the root of ill-being, the cause of the ill-being, the path that leads to ill-being. Few people go on the Noble Eightfold Path, but many go on the ignoble eightfold path.

*Look into the truth in order to understand
how nirvāṇa is the most secure abode.*

The Chinese word 諦 (*di*) in the third line is a translation of the Sanskrit *satya*, “truth.” Truth here means the Four Noble Truths. Looking deeply into the Four Noble Truths we’ll see the Noble Eightfold Path, and the ignoble eightfold path. The Noble Eightfold Path leads to the extinction of

suffering, to nirvāṇa, to happiness. The ignoble path leads to suffering and the cycle of birth and death. The third line clearly means that we look into the truth in the light of the Four Noble Truths. When we look at the truth from the point of view of the Four Noble Truths, we see clearly that, firstly, those who are on the Noble Eightfold Path are few; secondly, those who are on the ignoble path are many; and thirdly, nirvāṇa is the greatest security. Security or safety means a state of mind where there is nothing to fear or to worry about. If we are looking for real security, then we need to find nirvāṇa.

The last line of Verse Four can be better understood in light of the last lines of Verses Two and Three, in which we learned that nirvāṇa is the greatest delight and the greatest happiness.

Verse 5

*Birth in the heavenly realms is due to creating wholesome causes.
Falling into unwholesome destinies is due to unwholesome causes.
Nirvāṇa is due to causes.
It also needs conditions.*

從因生善
從因墮惡
由因泥洹
所緣亦然

Birth in the heavenly realms is due to creating wholesome causes.

Thanks to having practiced what is wholesome, we are born in places that are wholesome. We are not born in a wholesome realm by chance. It is because of causes and conditions laid down in the past that now we come to a wholesome realm. Right here on earth, there are wholesome realms, and if we are born there, it is because of wholesome actions in the past.⁵ Plum Village, for example, is a wholesome environment. It is sure that we are

born in Plum Village because we have done something good in the past. Heaven is not necessarily above the clouds. Wherever there is enough true happiness, there is heaven.

⁵ “Born” does not mean rebirth after death. It means that we come to be at any moment of time. In the Sutra in Forty-Two Chapters, the Buddha says we are born with every new breath. —Trans.

Falling into unwholesome destinies is due to unwholesome causes.

If we are in a wholesome place and we do not practice, we’ll fall down into an unwholesome environment. Falling down into a realm of bondage and attachment is a result of causes and conditions. Perhaps we are in a heavenly environment, but we do not recognize our good fortune and all the causes and conditions that we have for happiness. We take our environment for granted. We do not practice the mindfulness trainings. We go outside the monastery without a second body.⁶ For these reasons we shall fall into an unwholesome environment. The first two lines point out that nothing happens by chance.

⁶ This is referring to the monastic practice of the second body. Our second body is our fellow practitioner who accompanies us when we leave the monastery so that we do not forget our practice of mindfulness. When we forget our practice, misfortune can befall us. —Trans.

*Nirvāṇa is due to causes.
It also needs conditions.*

Nirvāṇa is not something that we experience by chance. According to the teaching of conditioned arising, just as there have to be good reasons for being born in wholesome realms or falling into unwholesome realms, so there are causes and conditions that make it possible to enter nirvāṇa. When we read the last two lines of this verse, the main thing we have to understand is that nirvāṇa is not something that is created. This is because it is an unconditioned phenomenon (*asaṃskṛta*); it is not a formation (*saṃskāra*), or a conditioned phenomenon (*saṃskṛtadharma*).

Nirvāṇa is not created by a number of conditions coming together. Nirvāṇa is already there, so the word “conditions” means that nirvāṇa can

be experienced as a result of the practice. Nirvāṇa does not exist because of the practice. It is already available and, if we practice, we benefit from its availability. The Chinese word 因 (*yin*), “cause,” does not mean the conditions that come together to make nirvāṇa manifest, as in the case of the flower manifesting where there has to be sunshine, cloud, and so on. “Cause” here means that due to our practice, we benefit from nirvāṇa.

Around four or five o’clock in the morning in the Upper Hamlet, it can be very beautiful.⁷ The sky can be very clear; the fragrance of the night is refreshing and pure. We may want to snuggle up in our bed and refuse to rise at the sound of the bell. The sacred, mystical, and wonderful early morning represents nirvāṇa. If we are attached to our warm bed, we shall not be able to experience nirvāṇa. When the bell invites us and our brother calls us, we put aside the blanket, rise, and wash our face. That is the cause, namely our practice of rising early. That cause is not what creates nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is already there under the open sky. We only need to put on our jacket, open the door, and step outside in order to be in touch with the wonderful moments before dawn in the Upper Hamlet. Our doing this does not create nirvāṇa but makes it possible for us to enjoy nirvāṇa, which is already there.

⁷ The Upper Hamlet is where the Plum Village monks live.

Nirvāṇa is an unconditioned dharma. However, the unconditioned dharma that we call nirvāṇa cannot be found separate from conditioned dharmas. To be exact, nirvāṇa is not one of the One Hundred Dharmas that are taught in the Dharmalakṣaṇa school of Buddhism. Nirvāṇa is the ontological base, the place of refuge, and the way out for all conditioned dharmas. If we remove conditioned dharmas, there will be no nirvāṇa and vice versa. Just as water cannot exist outside the wave and vice versa.

There are some Buddhist schools that have maintained that there are several unconditioned dharmas, and there are schools that maintain there is only one unconditioned dharma, which is nirvāṇa. In Plum Village we also maintain: “All dharmas are conditioned. There is only one unconditioned dharma and that is nirvāṇa.” The sentence “Nirvāṇa is also due to a cause” could be misunderstood to mean that nirvāṇa exists because of a cause, but nirvāṇa neither exists nor does not exist. It is beyond concepts of being and

nonbeing. In other words, nirvāṇa is unconditioned. Nirvāṇa is available in the here and now. The wonderful early morning of the Upper Hamlet is there. It only needs you to go outside and enjoy it. If you do not go outside, how can you possibly enjoy this wonderful morning? It is already available. It depends on whether we want it or not, and whether we have the capacity to enjoy it or not. Happiness is something that is really there, available. The important thing is: do we have the capacity to enjoy it or not? That capacity is the cause. The cause is our ability to free ourself from our warm blanket in order to enjoy the wonderful early morning. Nirvāṇa is available now or never. In the same way when we talk about the Kingdom of God with our Christian friends, we say that the Kingdom is available now or never.

Verse 6

Now we come to the sixth verse, one of the most beautiful in the sūtra.

*The deer take refuge in the countryside,
the birds in the sky.*

*The manifestation of phenomena depends on a discrimination.
The true person depends on nirvāṇa to live in freedom.*

麋鹿依野
鳥依虛空
法歸分別
真人歸滅

*The deer take refuge in the countryside,
the birds in the sky.*

The sūtra is as beautiful as a poem. The deer cannot be happy without the countryside. If we enclose deer in a zoo or a cage, how can they be happy? Deer can only be happy when they are free to roam as they please. In the Samyutta Nikāya there is a very short sūtra, which uses the example of the deer.

At one time, there were many monks spending the Rains' Retreat in a forest in the countryside of Kosala. After the three months of the retreat were over, the monks left the forest to go on tour.⁸ A deva who lived in the forest, seeing that the monks had left, lamented in the following verse:

⁸ In the time of the Buddha, monks and nuns would only stay in one place during the three-month monsoon. For the rest of the year, they were wandering mendicants. —Trans.

*Today in my heart is a feeling of emptiness,
making me so sad.
Yesterday where there were monks sitting,
today no one sits.
Those monks gave such good talks.
Now where have those disciples of the World-Honored One gone?*

The god sat down and wept. Another deva who was there heard the verse and spoke a verse in reply:

*Yes, where have they gone?
They have gone to Magadha,
they have gone to Kosala,
and some have gone to Vajja.
Just like deer who avoid the traps,
skip and run wherever they like,
the life of a monk or a nun is as free and easy as that.⁹*

⁹Samyutta Nikāya 9.4.

The deer do not want to be confined. They want to roam about freely, thus they need the countryside. The birds find refuge in the sky. Without the sky how can the birds be happy? When you see a bird fly up into the sky, you feel the bird is happy. The deer and the birds each have their own kind of happiness.

The manifestation of phenomena depends on a discrimination.

The third line of this verse presents a problem. In the version that we have been using, it says that the manifestation of phenomena depends on retribution.¹⁰ But in an older version of the Taisho, based on the Korean canon (CE 1239), the word “discrimination” is used instead of “retribution.”

¹⁰ Taisho 210.

The first version is: “The manifestation of phenomena depends on retribution.” The second version is: “The manifestation of phenomena depends on a discrimination.” Also in the Nirvāṇa Chapter of the Sūtra of Verses on the Essential Dharma, there is the line: “The meaning depends on the discriminating mind.”¹¹ Maybe the copyist of the Dharmapada who wrote “retribution” did so because he did not understand the meaning of “discrimination” in this context. It reminds me of when people were preparing a new edition of *The Tale of Kiêu*. They didn’t understand something the poet was trying to express, so they wrongly amended the original text. When Kiêu is staying in the Quan Âm hermitage, there is a verse that should read:

¹¹ 法集要頌經 Taisho Tripitaka Vol. T04, No. 213.

*In the early and late morning,
(she read) palm-leaf (scriptures).
By the light of the lamp and the moon,
(she invited) the cloud bell.*

It is quite clear that the poet wrote “cloud bell,” but the editor didn’t know what was meant by this term, which indicates a piece of metal in the shape of a cloud, so he changed the word to “banner.” As a monk or nun in the early and late morning, you read the sūtras, and at night you invite the bell. In temples, there is a cloud-shaped piece of bronze that is used as a bell.

It is easy enough to understand the sentence: “Phenomena depend on retribution.” It means that phenomena are there as a result of retribution. Wholesome actions lead to wholesome retribution. Unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome retribution. What the copyist wrote is not wrong according to the teachings. Everything has its cause, its result, its karma, and its retribution. Nonetheless, this sentence does not make sense in the current context. So we have chosen the verse that is found in another version of the sūtra: “The manifestation of phenomena depends on a discrimination,” that is, on the discriminating mind. “Discriminating” is the Sanskrit word *vikalpa*. Sometimes *vikalpa* is translated as “mental construction.”

In the Thirty Verses of Vasubandhu there is a line, which should be translated as follows:

When consciousness evolves, it becomes discrimination and the object of discrimination.

*(Sanskrit: vijñānapariṇāma 'yam vikalpo yadvikalpyate.)*¹²

¹²“The development of consciousness is the discriminator and the thing discriminated. These two are not real existences. They are just manifestations.” Verse 17 of the Thirty Verses of Vasubandhu in the translation of Xuanzang 是諸識轉變 分別所分別.

However, when Master Xuanzang translated this line into Chinese, he put the word “evolution” on one line, and the word “discrimination” on the next:

“There is the evolution of the consciousnesses.

There is discrimination and the object of discrimination.”

This translation could lead to a misunderstanding. What Vasubandhu meant was that consciousness evolves as a discrimination.

There are two aspects of discrimination: the discrimination itself, and the object discriminated, in other words, subject and object. Normally we think of subject and object as separate from each other.

In a recent Dharma talk at the European Institute of Applied Buddhism, I used a two-euro coin to demonstrate the evolution of consciousness as a

discrimination between subject and object. The coin has an obverse and reverse, but both faces of the coin are made of the bronze that is the substance of the coin. Consciousness is like the metal, which, when it is molded into the coin, has two faces, subject and object. That is discrimination.

This sentence of the sūtra is profound and difficult to comprehend. We do not know the true nature of phenomena, and all we can recognize with our mind is an object that has been differentiated from the subject. Trees, the light of the sun, the table—all are manifestations of consciousness. Consciousness grasps them in a certain way, but how can we be sure they are like that? They are the object of a mental construction, a discrimination. We look at another person and think that we can apprehend who they are. In fact, all we can apprehend is our perception of the other person. The image we have of the other person is just our perception. We think we know what the sun is, but in fact the sun we perceive is just a construction of our mind.

Quantum physicists also try to find a way to apprehend the true nature of a particle or a quantum. Is it possible to apprehend the true nature (*svabhāva*) of an electron? Buddhism says it is not possible. Using our discriminatory brain, we see our mind more than the reality of the object of our observation. The objects we observe around us manifest as this or that, dependent on our consciousness. A particle sometimes manifests as a wave and sometimes as a particle. Depending on our mind, the same thing will appear as a wave when we ask a certain kind of question, and as a particle when we ask a different kind of question. That is what is meant by saying that phenomena manifest dependent on the discriminating consciousness. The teaching that phenomena manifest dependent on the mind is deep. Some scientists now are looking into this teaching, from which science can benefit a great deal.

The fundamental error is the idea that the world outside is one thing, and that consciousness is something else, and that these two can exist independently of each other. The sentence: “Phenomena depend on discrimination,” is very deep. The domain of all phenomena is the mind. The home of the deer is the countryside, the home of the birds is the sky, the home of all phenomena is the mind; the mind contains everything that is.

The true person depends on nirvāṇa to live in freedom.

And where is the home of the practitioner? The true person's home is nirvāṇa. A true person is someone who lives authentically, who lives the truth. "True person" is a Taoist and Confucian term. The translators, layman Zhi Qian and monk Tǎng Hòu, were brave in their translations (the earliest made from Sanskrit into Chinese) of the Buddhist sūtras. They used terms borrowed from Taoist and Confucian teachings to translate Sanskrit Buddhist terms. Zen Master Linji also used the expression "true person" in his teachings on "the true person of no position" (無位真人). The true practitioner is someone who wants to be honest with himself, without pretense, without wearing a mask. The true person is a holy person. Their home is nirvāṇa. If the place where the deer like to be is in the countryside, and the place where the birds like to be is in the sky, then the place where the practitioner likes to be is in nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is already there. We are in nirvāṇa. The only problem is that we are not able to return to it.

In Plum Village, we use the simple example of the wave and the water. In our life as a wave, we struggle and we have fear, because we have to go up and down, to be born and die, to exist and not to exist. We can see clearly that to live the life of the wave is something very difficult. But when the wave discovers it is water, then it begins to practice living as water. A wave is and is not, is up and down, is high and low, but water is utterly free. The question is: Does the wave have the ability to live its true nature as water, or must it just live as a wave? A wave can practice living its life as water. It does not need to look for water, because it already is water. This is an easily understandable metaphor to help us see what nirvāṇa is. If a wave can dwell peacefully in its water nature, it has no fear and is perfectly safe. It feels safe going up and safe going down. The ideas of continuing and ceasing, being and nonbeing, no longer make it afraid.

We are waves, but at the same time we are water. Most of us can only live the life of a wave; we cannot live the life of the water. If we apply this to the Christian expression: "Resting in God," God is the water. If the wave knows how to take refuge in the water, it feels very well. All fear of being, of not being, of continuation, and of loss has gone. The word 滅 (*mie*, Sanskrit: *nirodha* or *nirvāṇa*) in the last line of the verse implies the cessation of all fear and grief.

Once the wave knows it is water and knows how to live the life of water, it has no more fear. It is happy as it rises and happy as it goes down, happy when it is high and happy when it is low, because it has transcended being and nonbeing, high and low. Nirvāṇa is like that. It is the opposite of conditioned formations. We have added the words “to live in freedom” when translating the last line of the verse: “The true person depends on nirvāṇa to live in freedom.” I have taken this liberty because I feel the idea of freedom is implicit throughout the verse: in the countryside, the deer are free, just as the birds are free when they fly up in the sky. And true people are free when they dwell in nirvāṇa.

We do not have to go in search of nirvāṇa because we are already in nirvāṇa. The wave does not need to go looking for water because the wave is already water. We can choose whether to be water or not. As water, we can remain a wave; we do not need to destroy the wave. We can continue to live in the world of conditioned phenomena. However, because we live deeply, we touch the unconditioned, and then conditioned things no longer make us suffer very much.

Now let us return to the second line of Verse 3: “The formations are what bring about the greatest suffering.” “Formations” is *saṃskṛtadharmā* in Sanskrit. I was inclined to add the word “mental” to formations when translating from Chinese. The field of formations is very great. It includes physiological, mental, and physical formations like mountains, rivers, and plants. Mental formations are just one-third of all the formations. The reason for adding the word “mental” would be to obviate the danger of people thinking that formations are separate from the mind, and that the nature of formations is to bring about suffering.

In Buddhism, many people think that formations are something separate from the mind and bring about suffering. The truth is that we suffer because we think formations should be permanent when in fact they are impermanent, and because we think formations should have a separate self when in fact they do not. The suffering is because of us, and not because of the formations. To say that the formations are the suffering is to do them a great injustice. Formations are impermanent and without a separate self, but we cannot make them guilty of causing suffering. We suffer because we think they should be permanent and have a separate self. Formations are marked by the characteristics of impermanence and no-self, but they are not

marked by the characteristic of suffering. The characteristic of suffering belongs to us, because we have a wrong perception of what formations are. To say that formations are suffering is incorrect. When we translate “Formations are what bring about the greatest suffering,” we could cause people to misunderstand.

In the Ratnakūṭa Sūtra, there is a metaphor to help us understand the nature of formations. A man throws a stone at a dog; it hits the dog and causes the dog pain. The dog runs to the stone and barks at it. It thinks that the stone is the cause of its pain, when in fact the cause of its pain is the man who threw it. Instead of barking at the man who threw the stone, it barks at the stone. It is the same in the case of the formations. They do not make us suffer; we suffer because we have a wrong perception about them. The root of our suffering is our mind and not the formations. That is why I feel inclined to translate “the mental formations” rather than “the formations.” The mental formations that make us suffer include greed, anger, and ignorance (our lack of understanding). Because our perceptions are incorrect, formations are able to make us suffer. If we were an awakened person with deep understanding, the formations would not be able to make us suffer.

Mental formations are conditioned phenomena, but they are only one part of conditioned phenomena; there are also physical and physiological formations. Although we call them mental formations, their object can be physiological or physical formations. So mental formations include all the other formations, which is why, when we translated this line, we could have used the words “mental formations.” We need to be skillful as translators, and not be overly literal. When we read the third line of Verse 6: “The manifestation of phenomena depends on discrimination,” we see clearly that the word “discrimination” is referring to perception, which is one of the mental formations.

The sixth verse should be put to music to help us in the practice.

Verse 7

There are two versions of the seventh verse; one is from the Taisho¹³ and the other from the Shōgozō collection. The version in the Taisho has some

copyist errors.¹⁴ The following is from the Shōgozō collection:

¹³ Revised version of the Chinese Buddhist canon made in Japan.

¹⁴ In the first line of this verse in the Taisho, the word 始 (*shi*) has been wrongly written as 如 (*ru*). In the second line, the word 如 (*ru*) has been wrongly written as 始 (*shi*).

*When there is insight into no beginning and no non-beginning,
no being and no nonbeing,
that is nonattainment
and the inconceivable.*

始無始否
如不如無
是為無得
亦無有思

*When there is insight into no beginning and no non-
beginning, no being and no nonbeing,*

This is a piece of music that has been played for us by our spiritual ancestors. The melody is already there in the words of the Buddha, and the spiritual ancestors play it for us to hear, so that we can penetrate the meaning and enjoy nirvāṇa. The gāthā is not easy to understand, and that is why there are copyist mistakes in the Taisho. The no beginning and no non-beginning can also be translated as “no before and no after.”

If you are an astronomer who believes in the Big Bang Theory, you might like to read this verse. People may think that according to the Big Bang Theory, there was a beginning, and before the Big Bang there was nothing; time and space only manifested after the Big Bang. Now there are people who ask: “Before the Big Bang, was there anything and, if so, what was there?” The concepts of beginning and non-beginning oppose each other. The idea: “There is a beginning,” could be wrong, and the idea: “There is no beginning,” could also be wrong, because both of them are just ideas.

In the monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there is the idea of the creation of heaven and earth. In the beginning there was nothing, and God created heaven and earth. There is the idea of a time when the world was created. But was there anything before this time? Is it possible for nonbeing suddenly to become being, and is it possible that before being manifested, there was nonbeing? That is an important question.

As far as nirvāṇa is concerned, we cannot think in terms of being and nonbeing. It is wrong to say: “Nirvāṇa is,” and it is also wrong to say: “Nirvāṇa is not,” because nirvāṇa is the absence of all ideas. If we go deeply into theology, the same is true of God. It is an error to say: “God is,” and it is also an error to say: “God is not.” “Is” and “is not” are ideas that come from our mind, and cannot be applied to the wonderful, absolute truth.

This is the practice of the wave returning to the water. When the wave returns to the water, it is very happy and very secure. This is something true people, practitioners, and we ourselves can do.

The first line could be translated into English: “To begin or not to begin, that is not the question.” The second line could be translated: “To be or not to be, that is not the question.” Nirvāṇa transcends the idea of beginning and non-beginning, the idea of being and nonbeing.

that is nonattainment

The Sanskrit term for nonattainment is *apṛapti*, and there is also the word *anupalabdha*, which means unobtainable or unascertained. Do we think that we can grasp hold of the season of spring and hold on to it forever? Can we squeeze the spring breeze into a box and force it to stay with us forever? We think we can grasp hold of our beloved, but our beloved is ungraspable. Scientists try to grasp particles with their brains, but they do not know that particles are ungraspable. Everything is like that: its nature cannot be grasped by ideas. If we use mental categories to grasp nirvāṇa or God, we shall never succeed, because nirvāṇa and God are ungraspable.

“Nonattainment” is one of the special qualities of nirvāṇa. All we can do is sing about it. The sūtra *Enjoying the Ultimate* is a piece of music that offers us many opportunities to be in touch with nirvāṇa. The fact that something

cannot be attained does not mean that it is not there. The spring breeze and the early morning sunshine are there but we cannot grasp hold of them. We can take hold of our finger, but how can we take hold of the spring breeze?

and the inconceivable.

This line means that you cannot conceive of nirvāṇa with your mental categories, nor can you express it in words. You cannot use your mind to grasp it. The Sanskrit word is *acintya*.

The Sōtō school of meditation has the saying: “You cannot conceive the inconceivable. Not trying to conceive what is inconceivable is the essence of meditation.”

We should look at the sūtra as a song or a poem, and not be caught in words and especially not be caught in ideas. If we are lucky, thanks to the song or the poem, we will be in close contact with nirvāṇa, which is already there in our heart.

Verse 8

The mind is difficult to see, but habit energies can be recognized.

The one who can recognize their mind of desire will be able to see everything clearly.

When there is no object of desire, it is possible to avoid all kinds of suffering.

Infatuation always makes suffering increase.

心難見習可觀

覺欲者乃具見

無所樂為苦際

在愛欲為增痛

The mind is difficult to see but habit energies can be recognized.

Since mind has no form and no image, it is difficult to recognize and to grasp. “Habit energies” is a technical term of Buddhist psychology, which is *vāsanā* in Sanskrit. All of us have habit energies that push us to think, speak, and act. Often it is not something we want to say, but the habit energy pushes us to say it. It is not something we want to do, but the habit energy pushes us to do it. It is not something we want to think about, but the habit energy pushes us to think about it. A habit energy could have been transmitted to us by our parents or our ancestors. It could have begun in our childhood or have been transmitted by our society or education. A horse will always want to follow the path it is familiar with.

It is true we cannot see our mind, but our habit energies are something we can recognize. We recognize them by means of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the capacity to know what is happening, and it is mindfulness that recognizes that we are being coerced or pushed by our habit energy.

The Two Kinds of Habit Energy

1. The habit energy produced by karma or action (karmavāsanā).

There are three kinds of action: thought, speech, and deed. We have habit energies of thinking, of speaking, and of acting. The habits produced by action can be wholesome or unwholesome. When we do something as a result of a wholesome habit energy, we recognize that the habit energy is wholesome. For example, on hearing the bell, we stop thinking and talking and begin to breathe gently. When we hear the bell, we do not need someone else to remind us or force us to stop; we stop quite automatically. That is a wholesome habit energy.

We can develop a habit of walking meditation such that whenever we walk, we have freedom, and we enjoy a feeling of ease in every step. Walking like that becomes a habit. Every early morning and every evening we practice sitting meditation, and we feel well doing that. If there is a day when we cannot sit in meditation, we feel something is missing. Sitting meditation has become a wholesome habit energy.

There are also unwholesome habits. When they show up, we recognize them immediately by means of mindfulness, whether they are habits of thinking, speaking, or behaving.

There was a young American who came to the Upper Hamlet to practice for a month. He practiced well, doing everything in a leisurely and careful way. The brothers in the Upper Hamlet had instructed him thus. Everyone around him was doing the same, so he was encompassed by the energy of ease and gentleness. This is how he practiced during the first three weeks of his stay. During the fourth week there was a Thanksgiving ceremony. He was elected by his North American group to go shopping and buy ingredients for a North American dish the group wanted to make for the ceremony. This was the first time since he had come to Plum Village that he had left the Village and was not surrounded by the sangha. While he was shopping, an old habit energy of being in a hurry returned to him. He started to rush, wanting to finish the job as soon as possible and go back to Plum Village. Because he had been practicing for the past three weeks, he was able to recognize this. He saw that he was rushing, agitated, and eager to finish shopping as quickly as possible. He saw that this was a habit energy and suddenly realized that it had been handed down to him by his mother. His mother was always in a hurry, and he had received that unwholesome habit energy from her. Seeing that, he smiled and said quietly to himself: "Hello, Mom! I know you are there." By recognizing this, he was able to come back to mindfulness, and to again move gently and be at ease while shopping. As he took refuge in his breathing, the habit energy no longer carried him away.

Recognition is a wonderful practice. We do not repress, we do not blame, we just recognize. This practice is called "mere recognition." We do not need to blame ourselves or repress our habit energy. When we recognize the habit energy, it does not affect us and we remain free. All of us have habit energies like this young man. If we go in the direction that our habit energies pull us, we can do harm to ourselves and others. We do not wish to do harm by

our words and deeds, but the habit energy pushes us. That is why a practitioner must make a habit of recognizing habit energies.

As far as the habit energy of thinking is concerned, we may have the habit of negative thinking and suspicion concerning others. If we do not want to be pulled along by it, we must recognize it.

2. *The habit of double grasping*

This habit energy maintains that subject and object are separate and independent of each other. We are caught in and grasp to a separate subject and object. Double grasping is *dvāgraha* in Sanskrit. It means that, at the same time, we are caught in two things: the perceiver and the perceived.

Some scientists of our time have seen beyond double grasping; some are still caught in it, thinking that our consciousness and the reality we are researching are separate from each other. We always think that our consciousness is an entity that can exist independently of its object. Double grasping is a very deep kind of habit energy in human beings. It is the reason why we cannot realize enlightenment.

It is possible to learn to recognize both kinds of habit energy and bit by bit transform them.

The one who can recognize their mind of desire will be able to see everything clearly.

We have desires and there are things we run after and want to possess. That is the mind of desire. We think we are not happy, so we are running after, waiting for, and longing for something. That is also a habit energy that stops us from living happily in the present moment. You have more than enough conditions to be happy right now, but you do not have the capacity to be happy. That is because of your mind of desire. You are running after something. There is something you want to have. You believe that if you cannot obtain the object of your desire, you cannot be happy.

When there is no object of desire, it is possible to avoid all kinds of suffering.

You are wonderful just as you are. You do not need to become someone else in order to be happy. So be yourself; you don't need to become someone else. How is it possible not to desire anything anymore? Because right now, the conditions for you to be happy are more than enough. You have lungs to breathe the clean air, and that is already happiness. You have a heart that is beating normally, and eyes that can see the beauties of spring, so you have many conditions for being happy. You do not need to run after anything else. Having no object of desire is *aimlessness*, the third door of liberation.¹⁵

¹⁵ The other two are emptiness and signlessness.

Infatuation always makes suffering increase.

When we are no longer running after anything, we escape from the prison of suffering.

The last line of this verse reminds us that sensual desire, infatuation, and seeking always bring us more suffering. Non-infatuation and not-seeking are the foundation of happiness.

Verse 9

*A clear, untainted, and pure mind can master desire.
At that point, you no longer have to come in touch with a world of suffering,
even though your eyes still see, your ears still hear,
your memory still remembers, and your consciousness still discriminates.*

明不染淨能御
無所近為苦際
見有見聞有聞
念有念識有識

A clear, untainted, and pure mind can master desire.

A clear understanding stops the mind from being tainted. Once the mind has been purified, it is able to restrain all thoughts of desire.

At that point, you no longer have to come in touch with a world of suffering,

Although you no longer need to be in touch with the world of suffering, you are not cut off from life. This is made clear by the next line, which says:

even though your eyes still see, your ears still hear, your memory still remembers, and your consciousness still discriminates.

For as long as we are present in life, we continue to see visible things, to hear sounds, to have memories, and discriminate what we need to discriminate. The difference is that we are not caught in these objects; we are not caught up by them and we remain free people. We are still a human being who sees, hears, knows, and remembers, but all the objects of our perceiving and knowing are not able to bind us and deprive us of our freedom.

Verse 10

*Having realized nonattachment and nondiscrimination,
once you let go of all ideas, you can enter this realm.
You will transcend the perception of the self,
master all mental formations that cause suffering,
and wholly eliminate the habit of discriminatory perception,
so there will be no more suffering.*

觀無著亦無識
一切捨為得際
除身想滅痛行
識已盡為苦竟

*Having realized nonattachment and nondiscrimination, once
you let go of all ideas,
you can enter this realm.*

This verse gives us detailed guidelines to follow. We are able to see and realize a state of not being caught in or attached to anything. Whatever we see, hear, remember, or discriminate with our mind is not something for us to be attached to or to take sides with or against.

This means that we can enter the space, or world, of nonattachment and nondiscrimination when we let go of all ideas. You will transcend the perception of the self, master all mental formations that cause suffering, and wholly eliminate the habit of discriminatory perception, so there will be no more suffering.

The third line is about letting go of our perception of a separate self. All of us have the habit of looking at our body and our mind as our self, a self that is permanent, unchanging, and will either continue or be wholly annihilated when the body disintegrates. That is what is meant by 身想 (*shen xiang*), “the perception of the self.” We practice to let go of the idea: there is a separate self.

We put an end to the mental formations which are painful, like fear, infatuation, jealousy, and anger. When we wholly end the habit of perceiving things in a dualistic way, we put an end to all suffering.

Verse 11

In a disruptive environment, when you can keep your mind silent, you will remain still.

When the mind is disturbed, you cannot be close to nirvāṇa, you cannot have peace and joy.

When ideas about suffering and happiness have been transcended, then there is the true silence.

When ideas about the true silence have been transcended, there is no more need for coming and going.

猗則動虛則靜
動非近非有樂
樂無近為得寂
寂已寂無往來

In a disruptive environment, when you can keep your mind silent, you will remain still.

When the mind is disturbed, you cannot be close to nirvāṇa, you cannot have peace and joy.

The word 虛 (*xu*) in the first line means empty, free, and silent. When you can keep your mind empty, free, and silent, you can be calm in a disturbed environment. When your mind is agitated, you are not able to be in touch with the calm and purity of nirvāṇa, and you cannot have peace and joy.

When ideas about suffering and happiness have been transcended, then there is the true silence.

Only when we have gone beyond the idea that happiness and suffering are two separate entities can we enter the silence that is nirvāṇa. There is relative suffering and relative happiness, and we have to transcend the relative suffering and happiness in order to realize the ultimate happiness, which is nirvāṇa.

*When ideas about the true silence have been transcended,
there is no more need for coming and going.*

We have to transcend our idea of true silence in order to be free from coming and going. In the beginning, we think that nirvāṇa is a place where we wish to go. It is because we want to enter nirvāṇa that the ideas of coming and going arise. 往來 (*wang lai*) means entering and leaving, arriving and departing. We have ideas about suffering and happiness, still and in motion, the silence of nirvāṇa and the absence of the silence of nirvāṇa. They are all just concepts. When we have gone beyond all these ideas, including the idea that nirvāṇa is the place that we want to enter, then we have no more need to come or to go. It is no longer a matter of entering nirvāṇa from the outside or going out of nirvāṇa. We are already right in nirvāṇa.

It is like a wave that is trying to find water and thinks: “It would be wonderful to be water. As a wave I have to suffer a great deal. I have to go up and then go down. I have to exist for a time and then stop existing. Sometimes I have to be high and sometimes low. I really want to stop being a wave and to be water instead.” So the wave tries to find a way to enter water. In truth the wave does not need to enter water, because it is already water.

Verse 12

*When there is no more coming and going, birth and death end also.
With the ending of birth and death, how can there be discrimination
between this and that?*

The idea of this as well as the idea of that have ended.

*The absolute silence that is nirvāṇa is the release from a world of
suffering.*

往來絕無生死
生死斷無此彼
此彼斷為兩滅
滅無餘為苦除

*When there is no more coming and going, birth and death
end also.*

Birth and death can be seen as a kind of coming and going: we are born and we come into life, we die and we go out of life. Then we are born again, and we come into life again, and so on. Once the ideas of coming and going are ended, the ideas of birth and death are also ended.

*With the ending of birth and death, how can there be
discrimination between this and that?*

Once the ideas of birth and death are ended, there are no more ideas of “this” and “that.” “This” and “that” are a discrimination: “This is I, and that is you.” This is the subject, and that is the object. This is the body, and that is the mind. All these kinds of discrimination have come to an end.

The idea of this as well as the idea of that have ended.

When “this” ends, “that” also ends. The two ideas end together. The word 兩 (*liang*) means dualistic, which here refers to dualistic thinking or dualistic view, which are the result of double grasping. Once the idea of the subject is ended, the idea of the object also ends. When birth and death end, when this and that end, then the dualistic way of perceiving also ends.

The absolute silence that is nirvāṇa is the release from a world of suffering.

The absolute silence is the silencing of all ideas, and this ends all suffering. Silence means ending our ideas of happiness and suffering, still or in motion, coming and going. In nirvāṇa there is no more discrimination between happiness and suffering. We know how to handle suffering, and we know how to handle happiness. We know that happiness and suffering inter-are. We no longer choose to run after happiness and away from suffering. The mind of discrimination is no longer there. In the world of birth and death, the world of saṃsāra, there is suffering. But behind that suffering, deep in the heart of the world of suffering, there is the world of no-birth and no-death, no-coming and no-going.

Verse 13

*O monks, in the world there is birth, being, made, and conditioned.
But there is also no birth, no being, the not-made, and the not-
conditioned;
for these are the way out of birth, being, made, and conditioned.*

比丘有世生
有有有作行
有無生無有
無作無所行

This gāthā is the most difficult to unravel in this sūtra, but it is also the most inspiring.

O monks, in the world there is birth, being, made, and conditioned.

The word *bhava* means becoming, being, existence. In this context we shall translate it as “being.” The word *saṃskṛta* means formed, compounded, or conditioned. Here we translate it as “conditioned.” On the phenomenal

plane, we see birth followed by death; existence followed by nonexistence; the made followed by the destroyed; the formed followed by dissolution. The historical, or phenomenal, dimension has birth and death, existence and nonexistence, made and destroyed, formed and dissolution.

The Sanskrit word *saṃskāra* is translated into English as “formation.” All phenomena are formations, and all formations are impermanent. They are compounded of many elements coming together. Whatever is a formation has taken form. We see it as if it has been made. We see the table, the earth, mountains, and rivers as made. Being is existence, but being also means brought into being, brought into existence. In Buddhism, we often use the word “becoming” to translate Sanskrit *bhava*. “Becoming” is a better translation than “being.” In the word “becoming,” you have the idea of change: we are not yet there, we are becoming, because in another moment we shall no longer be the person we were before. When referring to formations, we can also translate *bhava* as “being” or “existence,” though “becoming” might be better, because formations do not have a lasting, authentic identity in time.

In the historical dimension, we see that things are born, things are present, things are made, and things are formed.

But there is also no birth, no being, the not-made, and the not-conditioned; for these are the way out of birth, being, made, and conditioned.

When we look carefully and deeply at birth, being, made, and conditioned, we see no birth, no being, not made, and the not conditioned. That is nirvāṇa.

No being does not mean not being. No being is not being nor is it nonbeing. It transcends being and nonbeing. Take a cloud, for example. When we see a cloud, we say it is existing. Before we see it, we say it is nonexisting. That is incorrect, because before it is the cloud, it is water vapor, although we do not see the water vapor. In this room, there is a huge amount of water vapor. We breathe out a great deal of it, but because we do not see it, we say that cloud does not exist in the room. It is wrong to say that cloud does not exist, but it is also wrong to say that the cloud exists in

the room. The existing and not existing are not just what we see or do not see. The truth goes beyond existing and not existing. What we say does not exist, is actually there, and what we say exists, may not actually be there.

In the ultimate dimension, there is the unborn, which also means the undying. There is no being, which also means there is no nonbeing. There is the not made, but there is also the no not-made. There is no conditioned, but there is also the no not-conditioned. This verse is the linchpin that we can also find in Pali at Udāna 8.3. It was thanks to having seen this verse in Pali that I was able to unravel the Chinese. The Pali Text Society translation into English reads as follows:

Bhikkhus, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Bhikkhus, if that not-born, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there could be apparent no escape from this here, that is born, become, made, compounded.

We could interpret the Pali as follows:

Monks, on the phenomenal plane, we see birth, death, being, nonbeing, the made, and the conditioned.

However, on a deeper ontological level, there is no birth, no death, no being, no nonbeing, no made, and no conditioned.

That is nirvāṇa.

If there was not this nirvāṇa, there would be no way out for what is born, exists, is made, and is conditioned.

A wave suffers, struggles, and despairs because of being high or low, being born or dying. However, if it knows it is water, it will see a way out. Once it knows it is already water, it transcends birth and death, going up or down, being high or low. Only then can it be truly happy. When it has not seen that it is water, it can only be happy when it is high. When it starts to go down, it is anxious and afraid. Nirvāṇa is not something we need to go a long way to find. It is there within us.

In this line in Chinese, there is the word 無作 (*wu zuo*), “not made.” Here, “not made” means there is no doer to be found outside the action. The

doer is the subject of the verb. 作 (*zuo*) is the action, what is done or what is made. For example, you say: “The rain is falling.” “Rain” is the subject and “falling” is the action. If you look at this carefully, you will see that apart from the action of “falling,” there can be no rain. Rain that does not fall is no longer rain. It is a cloud. To say: “The cloud is falling” sounds very strange. It is quite enough just to say: “Rain.” You do not need to add the verb “is falling.” The same goes for: “The wind is blowing.” Wind that does not blow is no longer wind. So both in the case of rain and of wind, a subject and a verb are not necessary. “Doer” and “action” are two ideas. They are not two separate realities. You cannot take the doer out of the action, and you cannot take the action out of the doer. The doer and the action cannot stand separately on their own. They do not have a separate substance, a separate self-nature.

In the Paramārtha Gāthās of Asanga¹⁶ there is the verse:

¹⁶ Volume 16 of the Yogācārabhūmiśāstra, Verse 5.

All formations undergo change at every instant.

Their abiding is not something real, much less their function.

The arising of formations

is their function and their agent.

The not-made is what is referred to here. There are no action and no doer lying outside of each other. There is not the subject that does and the object that is done as two separate realities. The insight into the not-made helps us remove our view of a separate self and realize the wisdom of equality (*samatājñāna*).

The not-conditioned means that phenomena (*saṃskṛta*, conditioned things) do not have a real substance, a self-nature. They are just compounds existing for an instant, not real. Conditioned things are born and die at every instant. They do not have a self-nature or a self—they are empty, without a real existence.

The Chinese word 行 (*xin*) has two meanings—conditioned (something that has been formed by conditions), and conditioning (something that is a condition for the formation of something else). Formations rely on each

other in order to come about, just as the left relies on the right, above relies on below, and the subject relies on the object in order to manifest. When we say that formations are conditioned things, it means we have to accept there are unconditioned things, like nirvāṇa and space. Conditioned and unconditioned are a pair of opposites, a pair that wait for each other, like birth and death, existence and nonexistence, action and doer. The fact is that unconditioned things cannot stand without conditioned things, just as the left cannot be there without the right. Therefore, to imagine a nirvāṇa existing on its own without *saṃsāra* (the cycle of birth and death) is a wrong view. Nirvāṇa, like a cloud or any other phenomenon, according to Right View, lies outside the two concepts: “exist” and “does not exist.”¹⁷ Hence the expression: “Nirvāṇa and saṃsāra are like illusory spots in front of your eyes.” This means that nirvāṇa and saṃsāra as two separate self-entities are just ideas, like spots you see in front of your eyes sometimes. They are not real. The conditioner and the conditioned are also not two separate self-entities.

¹⁷ For more on Right View, see the “Discourse on the Middle Way,” in *Chanting from the Heart*, Parallax Press, 2006, and Thich Nhat Hanh *Beyond the Self*, Parallax Press, 2009.

With the realization of not-conditioned, we are able to transcend the ideas of unconditioned and conditioned, nirvāṇa and saṃsāra.

(TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: The four technical terms found in Verses 13, 14, 15, 16: 生 (*shen*), 有 (*you*), 作 (*zuo*), 行 (*xing*) equivalent to the Pali: *jātam*, *bhūtam*, *katam*, *saṅkhatam* (Sanskrit: *jātam*, *bhūtam*, *kṛtam*, *saṃskṛtam*) found at *Udāna* 8.13, we have translated as “birth,” “being,” “made,” and “conditioned.” These translations are far from perfect. In the commentaries, Thích Nhất Hạnh explains all the implications of each term. It is enough for the reader to understand that “made” and “conditioned” have much wider connotations than the words imply.)

Verse 14

*Only the person who has attained non-ideation
can arrive at nirvāṇa.*

Once there is no birth, there is no more being.

There is no place for the made and no place for the conditioned.

夫唯無念者

為能得自致

無生無復有

無作無行處

*Only the person who has attained non-ideation
can arrive at nirvāṇa.*

Those who have gone beyond ideation are those who have gone beyond the conceptualization of birth and death, being and nonbeing, this and that. Non-ideation is a very deep and wonderful teaching. If we want to realize the insight and the understanding of reality, we have to let go of all concepts of birth and death, being and nonbeing, still there and no longer there. That insight and understanding is something that we realize for ourselves. It comes out of our own experience and is not a knowledge that we learn from others. If we follow a Christian, Jewish, or Muslim path, then we use the word God rather than nirvāṇa, but both words point to the same reality.

Once there is no birth, there is no more being.

The word birth 生 (*shen*) is the Sanskrit word *jāti*. It means birth or arising. Behind birth there lie many other ideas, like death, because birth always goes along with death, like the unborn and the undying. It also includes our ideas about being and nonbeing, coming and going, being the same and being different. These are all ideas, pairs of opposites, that we need to overcome in order to realize non-ideation. No birth here is representing all the other “no”s. It is nirvāṇa, because nirvāṇa is the nature that is no birth, no death, no coming, no going, no being, no nonbeing, no same, no different. To realize no birth is to realize nirvāṇa.

When being is not there, nonbeing is also not there, because being and nonbeing are a pair of opposites. Some people are afraid of death because they are afraid of becoming nothing. There are also people who are afraid of life; afraid that after this life, they will have to be born again and have another life. Many of us would like to discover an elixir of immortality so that we can live forever without dying. In both Western and Eastern literature there are references to people who are in search of an elixir of immortality.

On the other hand, there are the people who are very afraid of having to live forever. If a judge were to condemn you to eternal life, would you be happy? There are those who crave *bhava* (being), and there are those who crave *abhāva* (nonbeing), like people who commit suicide for example. *Bhava* and *abhāva* are both ideas. *Nirvāṇa* goes beyond being and nonbeing. Once we are in touch with *nirvāṇa*, we abandon being and nonbeing.

There is no place for the made, and no place for the conditioned.

In Plum Village, we have a poem to use when we practice breathing, walking, and sitting meditation. The poem begins with a dualistic notion that there is Buddha and there is I.

Let the Buddha breathe.

Let the Buddha walk.

I don't need to breathe.

I don't need to walk.

We need these lines because we all have a lazy streak and can feel the practice is a little difficult. So we let the Buddha do it for us. As a student, or descendent, of the Buddha, we have heard the teachings of the Buddha and have put them into practice, which means that we have understood that the Buddha is in every cell of our body. Buddha is within, not outside of ourselves. We are lazy, so we let the Buddha breathe, we let the Buddha walk, and we do not need to breathe or walk. Buddha is very diligent, so when invited to breathe or to walk, he does so straight away. I have

practiced with the following poem for many years and continue to see that it is effective.

Let the Buddha breathe.

Let the Buddha sit.

I don't need to breathe.

I don't need to sit.

Let the Buddha breathe.

Let the Buddha walk.

I don't need to breathe.

I don't need to walk.

Let the Buddha breathe.

Let the Buddha rest.

I don't need to breathe,

I don't need to rest.

It is rest time, but we cannot rest. We have lain down on our bed, but we cannot relax. So when the Buddha breathes and rests, we have a chance to breathe and rest.

The poem continues:

The Buddha is breathing.

The Buddha is walking.

I enjoy the breathing.

I enjoy the walking.

The Buddha is breathing.

The Buddha is sitting.

I enjoy the breathing.

I enjoy the sitting.

The Buddha is breathing.

The Buddha is resting.

I enjoy the breathing.

I enjoy the resting.

This is the easiest part of the poem, and it can bring us much happiness. Whenever I have practiced these lines I have always succeeded. The poem continues:

Buddha is the breathing.

Buddha is the walking.

I am the breathing.

I am the walking.

With these lines, we begin to have the insight of no self. In the beginning, we think that Buddha and the breathing are separate entities. There is someone called “Buddha” and an action called “breathing.” There is someone called “I” and a “practice” I am doing. Now we see very clearly that when the Buddha breathes, the breathing is of a high quality; it is mindful and at ease. We see that Buddha is present in that kind of breathing, and we do not need to look for Buddha outside of that breathing. There is no breather, there is only the breathing. When we allow the Buddha to breathe, he breathes very well, and in the high quality of this breathing, we recognize the Buddha. Outside of this breathing, there is no Buddha. To say that there is someone who breathes and that there is the breath, is not

correct. Who is Buddha? Buddha is the walking, the breathing, the sitting. We have to recognize Buddha in that breathing and in that sitting posture, because if it were someone else breathing and sitting, they would not breathe and sit in that way. Only Buddha breathes and sits in that way. Outside that breathing and that sitting posture, there is no separate Buddha as subject. At this point, we see there is no need for a subject who breathes, walks, and sits in order to have the action of breathing, walking, and sitting.

We say: “The rain is falling. The wind is blowing.” But as we have seen, something that does not fall cannot be called rain. Something that does not blow cannot be called wind. We do not have to invent a subject that is raining. When we look at a puppet show, we see the puppets moving, and that is because of the hand of the artist behind the scene. In the case of the rain, there is no one behind the scene making the rain fall or making the wind blow. The wind is the blowing. No one is throwing the rain down. The rain is the falling.

As we practice this poem, we are in touch with the truth that there is only breathing, there is only walking, and the quality of our breathing and walking is very high. We shall not find the Buddha anywhere else except in that breathing and walking. When we begin the practice, we and Buddha are two separate entities. But when we come to the verse: “Buddha is the breathing, Buddha is the walking. I am the breathing, I am the walking,” Buddha and we have become one. There is only the action; there is no doer. This is called the not-made.

There is only the breathing.

There is only the walking.

There is no one breathing.

There is no one walking.

When we see we no longer need a subject that stands outside the action, we see no-self. The realization of no-self is the realization of nirvāṇa. Although this practice is very simple, it brings us much happiness, and helps us be in touch with the unborn.

In the monastic retreat that we organized in Plum Village Thailand, there were a number of Theravadin monks participating. They did not practice

Pure Land Buddhism as do most Vietnamese Buddhists. If we had said: “With every step, we can touch the Pure Land,” they would not have understood. So we changed to: “With every step, we touch the unborn.” The unborn and nirvāṇa are the same thing.

The going is happening, but there is no one going. The one who goes cannot be separate from the going. Outside of the breathing and the walking, there is no one breathing and walking. The Sarvāstivāda school maintains that there is no self, there are only phenomena. In other words, there is no breather, but there is the breathing. There is no walker, but there is the walking. There is no sitter, but there is the sitting. There is no one enjoying the walk, but there is enjoying the walk. When you realize this insight, there is no more made and no more conditioned, no more being and no more nonbeing.

There is only the gentle breathing.

There is only enjoying the walk.

*There is no one gently breathing
and no one enjoying the walk.*

We do not need a subject apart from the verb. There is the action but it does not need a doer. The breathing, the walking are happening, but there is no self hiding behind the action and making it possible. There is thinking; thinking is taking place, but there is no one hiding behind the thinking.

Peace while gently breathing.

Happiness while taking a stroll.

Peace is the gentle breathing.

Happiness is taking a stroll.

Peace and happiness are realities. There can be peace, happiness, gentle breathing, and taking a stroll. None of them needs a subject hiding behind them like the puppeteer’s hands making the puppet move.

This gāthā is very simple but also very deep. When you realize the unborn, there is no more being (which implies no more nonbeing), no doer and no doing, no action and no creation.

Verse 15

Someone who perceives birth, being, made, and conditioned has not yet arrived at the essence.

If you can understand the nature of no-birth, you will not perceive being, made, and conditioned.

生有作行者
是為不得要
若已解不生
不有不作行

Someone who perceives birth, being, made, and conditioned has not yet arrived at the essence.

This means that as long as someone sees there is birth, being, a doer, and a practitioner, they have not realized the essence; that is, they have not yet realized the deepest insight.

If you can understand the nature of no-birth, you will not perceive being, made, and conditioned.

This means that when someone understands there are no birth and no death, they will realize there are no longer being and nonbeing, made and conditioned. The word 作 (*zuo*), “made,” means acting and making. 行 (*xing*), “conditioned,” means the psychological and physical phenomena that we consider to be true and lasting substances and independent entities that lie outside of each other. They are images created by consciousness, and not the real nature of the formations. The real nature of formations is conditioned arising, interbeing, relying on what is other (*paratantra*), and the fulfilled nature.

Verse 16

*Because there is being, there has to be birth.
And because there is birth, being continues.
When there is the made and the conditioned, there is death and birth.
This is the opening of the door of birth and death, leading to the arising
of all phenomena.*

則生有得要
從生有已起
作行致死生
為開為法果

*Because there is being, there has to be birth.
And because there is birth, being continues.*

This means that because there is birth, being has a leg to stand on. When someone has an idea of birth and death, they have an idea of being and nonbeing. The ideas of doing something (made), or conditioning something (conditioned), also lead to the idea of a cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). The made means action, and the conditioned means the formation of conditioned phenomena (*saṃskṛtadharmā*).

*When there is the made and the conditioned, there is death
and birth.
This is the opening of the door of birth and death, leading to
the arising of all phenomena.*

This means that because of the ideas of being and nonbeing, we cannot help but have the ideas of birth and death, and because we have ideas of birth and death, ideas of being and nonbeing arise. Phenomena arise from our discriminating mind. Because we discriminate a separate self, separate phenomena, separate actions and formations, the fruit of this is suffering.

Verse 17

*Everything subsists because of food.
Even happiness and sadness need food to survive.
If the essential nourishment is not there,
there is no more trace of formations for you to discern.*

從食因緣有
從食致憂樂
而此要滅者
無復念行迹

*Everything subsists because of food.
Even happiness and sadness need food to survive.*

Everything, including our ideas of being, bhava, and nonbeing, abhāva, are caused and conditioned by one of the the four nutriments, the four kinds of food: edible food, sense-impressions, volition, and consciousness.¹⁸ Nothing can survive without food, and as a result of one or another of these kinds of food, anxiety or happiness can arise. The food that nourishes being and nonbeing is a special kind of ignorance arising in our consciousness, which leads us to think that formations are separate self-entities: that there is a self separate from phenomena.

¹⁸ For more on the four kinds of food, see Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Parallax Press, 1998; paperback edition, Broadway Books, 1999, Harmony Books, 2015, 38ff.

*If the essential nourishment is not there,
there is no more trace of formations for you to discern.*

If suffering continues, it is because we are feeding it. To maintain our happiness, we need to nourish it. Anxiety or happiness are dependent on different kinds of food. If we have depression, that is not by chance. It is because we have consumed the kinds of food that lead to depression. When we look deeply into the four kinds of food, we can discover which kind of food is at the root of our depression. By our determination not to ingest it anymore, we can remove the depression so that it leaves no trace.¹⁹

¹⁹ If the depression is severe, this work can be done with the help of a skilled psychotherapist. It takes strong determination and time, but there are people who have done it. —Trans.

There is no more trace of formations for us to recognize. We have a wrong idea about formations, seeing our self and phenomena as separate entities, and this is what binds us. If we can see that the nature of formations is conditioned arising, no-self, interbeing, then there is liberation, and we can see nirvāṇa.

Although the subject of this sūtra is nirvāṇa, it does not go into metaphysical speculation. It has very practical teachings that we can experience for ourselves.

Verse 18

*When suffering ends and the formations are quietened,
happiness will be there silently, and there will be peace.
O bhikshus, I have realized this,
and so I do not seek to enter any particular realm anymore.*

諸苦法已盡
行滅湛然安
比丘吾已知
無復諸入地

*When suffering ends and the formations are quietened,
happiness will be there silently, and there will be peace.*

This means that the phenomena that bring about suffering, like ignorance, anger, infatuation, worry, grief, and fear, have come to an end, and so the suffering has ended. The formations have all become silent. The word 滅 (*mie*) should be understood as silent, quietened, still. It does not mean cessation here. 滅 refers to the silent, calm, cool, secure qualities of nirvāṇa.

Formations (*saṃskāra*) are phenomena like mountains, rivers, the moon, the sun, human beings, the birds, the plants, our body, the earth, and the rocks. A flower is a formation because it is formed out of many elements like the earth, the water, the fire, the air, the heat, and the gardener. The table, the mountain, the stars are also formations, called physical formations. Our body is a formation called a physiological formation. Our anger, sadness, and joy are called mental formations. All formations can cause suffering if we are attached to them or have a wrong perception about them.

We do not understand what is the nature of formations. They are impermanent but we think that they are permanent. They have no separate self but we think they have a separate self. It is this wrong perception that leads to suffering, and not the formations that make us suffer. Our body makes us suffer because we have a wrong perception about our body. The object of our infatuation which we are chasing after does not make us suffer. It is because we have a wrong perception of it that we become attached to it. We have a wrong perception about the object of our infatuation and so, we have a desiring mind. It is the desiring or infatuated mind that makes us suffer, not the object of our desire. Fame and profit do not make us suffer, but the way we perceive fame and profit does.

The metaphor of the man throwing a stone at the dog is a good one. The stone is not at fault for hurting the dog, but the responsibility for the dog's suffering lies with the man who throws the stone. Out of ignorance, the dog thinks that the stone is its enemy. When we suffer, we think that this world, our body, our five skandhas are to blame. In truth, it is only because we have a wrong perception about the world and our five skandhas that we suffer.

When the sūtra says that the formations are quietened, it means that our wrong perceptions concerning the formations are no longer there. The formations are still there, but they no longer make us suffer. We continue to see, hear, and think; but our seeing, hearing, and thinking are no longer erroneous, and we have no more suffering. When the wrong perceptions are no longer there, peace, purity, and silence arise. That is nirvāṇa.

O bhikshus, I have realized this,

The Buddha has realized his true nature. We do not know who we are. In the Zen school people ask the question: “Who are you?” as a *kōan*. Another much used *kōan* in China is: “Who is the one that invokes the Buddha’s name”? This *kōan* is in the form of a question. You are invoking the Buddha’s name, but do you know who you are? We practice in order to look deeply and know who we are. However, in this *kōan* there is something missing, and many people cannot resolve the *kōan* because they do not know how to put in what is missing. The problem is that we ask, “Who is invoking the Buddha?” but we do not ask, “Who is the Buddha whose name we are invoking?” The *kōan* assumes that we already know who the Buddha is but that we do not know who we are. There is the Buddha, and there is the person invoking his name. The truth is, we do not know who Buddha is. I would like to suggest that we add a second *kōan*: “Who is the Buddha?”

When we know who we are, we also know who the Buddha is, and when we know who the Buddha is, we also know who we are. These two questions: “Who is invoking?” and “Who is the Buddha?” are in fact one question.

We have already learned how to meditate according to the exercise:

Buddha is the breathing.

Buddha is the walking.

I am the breathing.

I am the walking.

Outside of the walking and the breathing, is there someone walking and breathing? We always think that in order for there to be an action, there has to be a subject who does the action. According to the insight of nonself, there is the practice without there having to be a practitioner, and there are actions without there having to be a doer. When we say: “The wind is blowing” we think that there is wind and someone who is doing the blowing, but in fact there is only the wind and there is no one blowing. You cannot have a wind that does not blow. So all we need to say is “There is wind.” We do not need a subject that is blowing the wind.

In the same way there can be invoking the Buddha's name without a subject who is invoking the Buddha's name. There is only recollection of the Buddha's name that is taking place. Recollection is a mental formation. Included in the mental formation are the recollecter and the recollected. Recollection is always recollection of something, like recollection of the breath, or of the steps, or of the Buddha. There is the subject who recollects and the object that is recollected, but both are included in the recollection, because it is impossible for there to be a subject without an object. The Buddha has taught that wherever there is a subject, there is an object, and wherever there is an object, there is a subject. Subject and object always go together. There cannot be a subject standing on its own, which we then bring to the object of recollection in the same way that we bring a ruler to measure a table. Our mind contains the subject and the object. If you say that the mind is just the subject, that is a basic mistake that even some scientists of today make. According to some schools of science, there is a mind inside of us and when it chooses, it goes outside and takes hold of the objective world outside of itself. This is the dualistic view that the mind exists independently of the object of mind. There are some scientists who are already overcoming this dualism between subject and object.

If we ask, "Who is invoking the Buddha's name?" it means that we look upon the one invoking, and the one whose name is invoked, as two separate realities. To see ourselves and the Buddha as two separate realities is a wrong view. Recollection is a mental formation and each mental formation contains both subject and object. When recollecting the Buddha takes place, the one recollecting and the one recollected are both present in the recollection. We do not need someone standing outside the recollection to do the work of recollecting, just as in the case of wind we do not need someone to stand outside the wind to do the blowing. This is deep psychology.

Our practice of the gāthā "Let the Buddha breathe" is very helpful. In the beginning, we see ourselves and the Buddha as two separate realities:

The Buddha is breathing.

The Buddha is walking.

I enjoy the breathing.

I enjoy the walking.

but later on we discover:

Buddha is the breathing.

Buddha is the walking.

I am the breathing.

I am the walking.

Outside the breathing and the walking, there is no Buddha and there is no I. Both the Buddha and I are to be found within the walking and the breathing. When the Buddha breathes, the breathing is of high quality, and because the breathing is of high quality we know there is the Buddha in the breathing.

and so I do not seek to enter any particular realm anymore.

According to this line of the verse, when we know who we are, we do not need to have a particular realm to enter, even nirvāṇa. We think that when we die, we shall enter a realm, like going down to hell or up into heaven, entering the realm of one kind of god, or another kind of god, or going to the Pure Land. This is a dualistic view: that there is a person, and that person will go to this or that realm. When we understand no-self, we do not need to come or go. We do not have to worry about where we will go, because there is no one who comes or goes.

In this verse, nirvāṇa is something very concrete. Once one knows who one is, there is no need to be concerned about where one will go, whether it be the Pure Land, paradise, or Sukhāvātī (the Land of Great Happiness).

Verse 19

There is no realm of infinite space.

There is not a place that we need to enter.

There is no going to the realm of neither perception nor non-perception.

There is no this life or the next life.

無有虛空入

無諸入用入

無想不想入

無今世後世

There is no realm of infinite space.

There is not a place that we need to enter.

There is no going to the realm of neither perception nor non-perception.

During meditative concentration, it is possible to enter a formless realm that is called infinite space (*ākāśa-anantya*). This realm is a state of meditative concentration. The realms of infinite space, of infinite consciousness, of nothingness, and of neither perception nor non-perception are the four objects of formless (*arūpa*) concentration. There is nothing called infinite space for one to enter because there is no person to enter it. The entering contains the subject who enters and the object that is entered. As long as we see a subject entering and an object entered as two things separate from each other, we have not yet seen the truth. When we know who we are, we are able to transcend the idea of a separate subject and object. If there is no “I” that enters, there is no need to worry about the realm that “I” am about to enter.

There is no this life or the next life.

There is no this life or the next life, there is no more distinction between the present and the future, because we have transcended the concept of time and space. Nirvāṇa is the freedom that is not limited by time and space. There are scientific theories about the beginning of the universe and the

beginning of time such as the Big Bang. Whether there was a Big Bang or not is not important.

There is no beginning and no end, there is no this place or that place. In our time, there are theories of the universe expanding and contracting. In nirvāṇa there is no contraction and expansion, no future and no past.

This sūtra on the subject of nirvāṇa is not a metaphysical treatise. It is linked to our daily life in a very practical way. This is the spirit in which we should study the Nirvāṇa Chapter, because Buddhism should always be applied Buddhism. The meaning of nirvāṇa is first of all “coolness,” the absence of heat and burning. Infatuation, fear, and hatred burn and, for as long as they are burning, there cannot be nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is the extinguishing of these flames.

Buddhist psychology speaks of the mental formations of craving and hatred. When craving and hatred are burning, there is heat. However, in Buddhist psychology there are also the mental formations of non-craving and non-hatred. There are moments when we are not burnt by the fires of craving and hatred. Nirvāṇa is there when the mental formations of non-craving and non-hatred are manifesting. Nirvāṇa is not completely remote, is not an abstraction in a metaphysical world. It is not a subject of philosophy. It is the object of our daily practice. When there is craving and hatred, nirvāṇa is not. When there is non-craving and non-hatred, nirvāṇa is there.

In our daily life, there are times when nirvāṇa is present and times when nirvāṇa is not present. It depends on what our mind chooses. The birds would not choose to stay in their cage when they can fly back to the sky, nor would the deer choose to enter the zoo when they can roam in the wilds of the countryside. It is up to us whether we choose the spaciousness of coolness and freedom, or not.

The first definition of nirvāṇa is to extinguish the fire of the afflictions and to cool down. There is a bodhisattva whose name is Refreshing the Earth or Cooling the Earth.²⁰ We need this bodhisattva so much and should call on her to come to us without delay in this time of global warming. If we make Cooling the Earth Bodhisattva present at every moment of our daily life, then we have nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is not something remote that we have to

wait ten or twenty years for. Nirvāṇa is the absence of the heated flames of craving, hatred, and suspicion.

[20](#) The bodhisattva is a manifestation of the human consciousness. There are human beings who manifest as Cooling the Earth Bodhisattva. We need more people to manifest like this and we can call on that bodhisattva to manifest in our own heart. —Trans.

The second definition of nirvāṇa is the absence of wrong perceptions, or dualistic grasping. Dualistic grasping is to see the mind outside of its object, to see inside independent of outside, us independent of them, subject independent of object. Dualistic view causes suffering and wrong perceptions. Nirvāṇa is the absence of the obstacle of the afflictions (*kleśa-āvaraṇa*) and the obstacle of the knowable (being caught in our perceptions) (*jñeya-āvaraṇa*). The afflictions are craving, hatred, ignorance, complexes, and doubt. The obstacle of the knowable is to be caught in your perceptions. The wrong perceptions or views are: the personality view, extreme views, wrong views, grasping to our own views, and grasping to rites and rituals. Realizing nonself, that is, overcoming the personality view, we realize nirvāṇa.

When we realize the nondual nature of the present and the future, we realize the timeless; we no longer have the tendency to take sides and discriminate. At that point, questions about the origin of the universe, who created the universe, what will be left when the universe comes to an end, as well as opposing concepts like being and nonbeing, remaining and disappearing, coming and going no longer are. We have no more anxiety (*aśoka*) and the enjoyment of our time in the ultimate is one hundred percent.

Verse 20

*There are no ideas about the presence of the sun and the moon.
There is no going and no staying behind.
There is no separate self that can go and come back.
So there is no going and coming back.*

亦無日月想
無往無所懸
我已無往反
不去而不來

There are no ideas about the presence of the sun and the moon.

This line is for the astrophysicists. We imagine there are galaxies, worlds, and stars thousands or millions of light years away, somewhere out there in space, quite separate from our consciousness. When we realize the insight of nonduality or nirvāṇa, we are no longer caught in our perceptions of the sun and the moon as realities outside our consciousness.

*There is no going and no staying behind.
There is no separate self that can go and come back.
So there is no going and coming back.*

When there is no self, how can there be going and returning? The Buddha is called the Tathāgata, which means not coming from anywhere and not going anywhere. It is not only the Buddha whose nature is not to come and not to go; our nature is the same.

Verse 21

*In the place where nothing is lost and nothing continues to be reborn,
in that place there is nirvāṇa.*

*Then, the question of whether there is an object of perception or not,
and the question of the nature of suffering and happiness are thoroughly
understood.*

不沒不復生
是際為泥洹
如是像無像
苦樂為以解

*In the place where nothing is lost and nothing continues to be
reborn,
in that place there is nirvāṇa.*

Nothing is lost means that something cannot become nothing, because being and nonbeing are just ideas. Here we go beyond being and nonbeing. *Nothing continues to be reborn* means we are not reborn, because there is no birth and no death.

The domain of nirvāṇa is the world of no-being and no-nonbeing, no-birth and no-death. Nirvāṇa is there for us. Whether we want it or not is up to us. The sky and the clouds are always there for the birds; the countryside is always there for the deer. It is up to us to choose.

*Then, the question of whether there is an object of
perception or not,
and the question of the nature of suffering and happiness are
thoroughly understood.*

Here the *object of perception* could be the sun, the moon, or a person. Some practitioners see the object of perception as something very real outside of themselves. Others say that it is wholly a figment of our imagination. When ideas of “there is an object” or “there is no object” have been removed, the space of nirvāṇa manifests.

The next line means that suffering and happiness are based on our ideas, for example, our ideas of what is and what is not, someone being born or dying. When we understand deeply the nature of suffering and happiness, how they come from our ideas, we are no longer swept away, limited, or bound by them.

(TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: After teaching this verse, Thích Nhất Hạnh gave instructions to his students concerning the Rains' Retreat as follows.)

It is a great good fortune to be able to spend the three months of the winter retreat together. To practice sitting and walking meditation, studying the sūtras, and Dharma sharing²¹ together is a great happiness. Please prepare for tomorrow's ceremony to take refuge for the duration of the Rains' Retreat. Define the boundaries strictly, and do not go outside them for three months unless the sangha assigns you to go out for a special service. This is a very good and rare opportunity. There are many people out in the world who would give anything to be able to join the three-month retreat. In Europe and North America, there are even monks and nuns who are not able to take part in the three-month Rains' Retreat. We can feel very grateful to the Buddha and the ancestral teachers that we have this opportunity. If the Buddha had not begun the tradition of the three-month annual retreat, many other Dharma teachers and I would have to spend that time touring the world to teach the Dharma. Thanks to the three-month retreat, my students and I are able to stay together for all this time. I am very happy. Happiness is there. Nirvāṇa is there. Since nirvāṇa means extinguishing, we have to learn from our elder brothers and sisters how to put out the fire. If we have wrong perceptions that are making us sad, lonely, sorry for ourselves, we should ask our elder brother or sister to help us remove our wrong perception. When we remove it, we shall experience nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is our daily business.

²¹ Coming together to share our experience of the practice.

Verse 22

What we see no longer makes us afraid.

We have no more doubt about things that can or cannot be expressed.

Once the arrow has been shot, it fells the ideas of being and nonbeing.

On encountering someone who does not understand, you do not feel you have to explain.

所見不復恐

無言言無疑

斷有之射箭

遭愚無所猜

What we see no longer makes us afraid.

We have no more doubt about things that can or cannot be expressed.

Do you remember the verse:

The deer take refuge in the countryside,

The birds in the clouds of the sky....

Those who practice the truth depend on nirvāṇa to live in freedom.

Nirvāṇa is the place of freedom. It is here in the present moment. It is up to us whether we choose always to be busy, anxious, and afraid, or whether we choose the freedom of nirvāṇa by the way we practice. There are two ways of practicing to be in touch with nirvāṇa. The first is the practice of transforming attachment, hatred, suspicion, and doubt, which are the flames that burn us. When they are transformed, we feel fresh and cool, which is nirvāṇa.

The second way of practice is to remove the discrimination that comes from dualistic thinking, that separates inside from outside; ourselves from others; the subject from the object; the spiritual from the material. With no more dualistic discrimination, we have an immense freedom that is nirvāṇa.

When we have the dualistic thinking that separates ourselves from others, or you from me, we are always comparing ourselves with others. We feel that we are worse than, better than, or just as good as the other person. These are three kinds of complex, which all are based on the discrimination between you and me.²² When we see clearly that we and the other person inter-are, that we are in them and they are in us, we no longer have any of the three complexes. With the removal of these complexes, we have a great deal of space and freedom. Nirvāṇa is available in the present moment. We do not have to wait for it to come from a far-off country in the future.

²² The superiority complex, the inferiority complex, and the equality complex. Even the equality complex is based on dualistic thinking and comparing oneself with others.

The wave suffers because it compares itself with other waves and has complexes. When it knows that it is water, it knows that its own nature is the nature of all other waves, so it no longer suffers from being big or small, high or low. The wave does not have to look for water outside of itself because it already is water. If we think of nirvāṇa as a reality outside of us that we have to find elsewhere, we are still caught in dualism. It is not yet nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa does not have outside and inside, this and that.

It should not be difficult for Christians to see God in the way that Buddhists see nirvāṇa. Many Christian mystics talk of God as the absence of burning and discrimination. They do not see God as something external to themselves. They no longer look for God outside of themselves, but recognize God as the freedom and happiness that is available within their own consciousness. When the flames of desire and hatred no longer burn, and the sword of discrimination no longer divides, that is God.

In 2012, during a retreat at Nottingham University, I told a number of journalists: “If in the West you are able to put God back into the right place, then everything else will also find its right place.” We put God in the wrong place because we treat God as a reality we have to be in touch with outside of ourselves. This kind of dualism has brought the world to the spiritual crisis it faces at this time.

Once the arrow has been shot, it fells the ideas of being and nonbeing.

The third line compares the practitioner to a bowman who puts one arrow in the bow and shoots. When “being” is felled, “nonbeing” is felled at the same time, because together they make a pair of opposites.

The theologian Paul Tillich has said that God is the ground of being. In the Buddhist way of looking, being is only possible when there is nonbeing. Tillich has the tendency to put God on the side of being, but we must ask: “If God is the ground of being, who or what is the ground of nonbeing?” According to the absolute truth, there is no idea of either being or nonbeing. It would be wrong to say that God is being, and also wrong to say that God is nonbeing. God is the ultimate dimension that goes beyond being and nonbeing, because being and nonbeing still belong to dualistic thinking. If we say God is being, we put God in the wrong place. It is wrong to say that God is not, but it is also wrong to say that God is. God transcends the ideas of being and nonbeing. Nirvāṇa is the absence of the flames of the afflictions, and it is the absence of the ideas that oppose each other. The aim of the meditation practitioner is not to find nonbeing, but to transcend both being and nonbeing. The aim of the practitioner is to realize no-birth. No-birth does not mean death. There is no reason why a practitioner should be looking for death, because when we place our arrow on the bowstring and shoot it to fell birth, we fell death at the same time. That is called “deathlessness.” One arrow is able to fell two illusions.

In 1962 I wanted to publish a collection of poems in Saigon. It was called *Praying for the Dove of Peace to Appear*. The poems all expressed the longing for the war to end and peace to be possible. This kind of poetry was called anti-war, but it is not anti-war. When the poems went to the censorship board, they censored all except two or three poems. One of the censored poems was “One Arrow Fells Two Illusions.” The meaning of the poem was that with one arrow of insight we can put an end to the dualisms of being and nonbeing, and birth and death, at the same time. But the politicians could not understand. They thought the poem was about opposing nationalism and communism and maintaining neutrality. Being neutral was banned in Vietnam at that time on the grounds that it was collaborating with the enemy. The people working on the censorship board in the information bureau were quite incapable of understanding the meaning of this poem: they thought I was making a plea for neutrality.

With the force of mindfulness and concentration, we can fell two ideas at the same time. When the arrow fells being, nonbeing is also felled. Then we have the wisdom of nondiscrimination (*nirvikalpajñāna*). When birth and death are felled, there is a wide-open space with a great deal of freedom and happiness.

On encountering someone who does not understand, you do not feel you have to explain.

As far as people who have deep-seated prejudices are concerned, it is not possible to explain this. We have no desire to argue with them, since they cannot possibly understand. Once you know what God is, you no longer need to be a theologian. Others are arguing about whether God exists or not. We just sit, smile, and breathe, because we know that arguing about the existence of God or nirvāṇa is a waste of time.

Verse 23

That is the foremost kind of bliss.

There is nothing higher than the path of the silence of nirvāṇa.

At this point, we have the capacity of inclusiveness, our mind is like the earth,

and the practice of inclusiveness is like a citadel.

是為第一快

此道寂無上

受辱心如地

行忍如門闕

That is the foremost kind of bliss.

There is nothing higher than the path of the silence of nirvāṇa.

This means that there is nothing higher than the path that leads to the silence of nirvāṇa. Silence does not mean there is no sound, but that there are no ideas of being and nonbeing, birth and death. The poet Bùì Giáng wrote in a poem: “We step across words that have fallen twice.” “We step across” means we step across the threshold of dualism. Thanks to looking deeply, ideas like being, nonbeing, birth, and death fall away and reality appears.

The ultimate reality cannot be described in terms of being and nonbeing, birth and death. In the Itivuttaka, the Buddha teaches: “There is the not-born, the not-become, the not-made, and the not-conditioned. If there were not the not-born, the not-become, the not-made, and the not-conditioned, there would be no escape from the born, the become, the made, and the conditioned.”²³ We can interpret this as meaning: there is the not-born and the not-dying; the no-coming and the no-going; the not-this and the not-that; the no-being and the no-nonbeing. If there were not the not-born and the not-dying, the no-coming and the no-going, the not-this and the not-that, the no-being and the no-nonbeing, there would be no escape from birth and death, coming and going, this and that, being and nonbeing.

²³ Itivuttaka: The Buddha’s Sayings, The Section of the Twos; 43 Ajātasutta.

Silence is the absence of the noise of the concepts of being and nonbeing, you and me, outside and inside, subject and object. When these noisy ideas are no longer there, there is the noble and powerful silence.

At this point, we have the capacity of inclusiveness, our mind is like the earth,

This means that when we are able to taste the great happiness that comes about when we enter the space of the absence of ideas, our mind is like the great earth, which is able to include all.

As we saw in verse one, the Buddha taught Rāhula: “My child, you should practice so that your mind is like the earth. Whether people put on the earth fragrant oils, good-tasting food, excrement, or urine, the earth receives them all without discrimination.” The earth has a wonderful ability to receive and transform. Of course it accepts the fragrant and appetizing

things, but it also accepts what is rotten and fetid without suffering or discrimination.

and the practice of inclusiveness is like a citadel.

Once we have tasted the happiness of nirvāṇa, our mind is very open, and we can easily accept what before we could never accept. Our mind has become like the earth. Our practice of the inclusiveness that takes us to the other shore (*kṣānti-pāramitā*) becomes as solid as the walls around the citadel.

Verse 24

*As pure as clean water,
when birth is no more, there is no bondage to inherit.
Winning and profit are no longer criteria to follow,
because victory and profit are always accompanied by suffering.*

淨如水無垢
生盡無彼受
利勝不足恃
雖勝猶復苦

As pure as clean water,

The twenty-third verse uses the image of the earth and the twenty-fourth uses the image of water. The Buddha also taught Rāhula: “My child, you should practice for your mind to be like water. When people put fragrant oils or milk into the water, it does not rejoice, and when people put excrement, mud, or urine into the water, the water is not angry, because the water has a tremendous capacity of acceptance and transformation. Water can purify everything.”

when birth is no more, there is no bondage to inherit.

The Chinese word “birth” (生 *sheng*) in the second line of the verse is used in the sense of the substratum whose function is to maintain the cycle of birth and death. This is the Sanskrit word *upādi-*. It is the root that makes us attached to the world of bondage. *Upādi-* is the foundation of suffering, the substance of bondage and *saṃsāra*. The cycle of birth and death is coming and going, rising and falling in the world of bondage. Why do we have to come and go, rise and fall in a cycle of bondage? It is because there is the substance of the afflictions, and the causes laid down by our actions. We create the root of craving and hatred. That is why we have to keep coming back to the world of bondage.

When we practice, we are able to cut all the roots, and we no longer need to enter a world of bondage. “Birth” in line two also refers to the Sanskrit word *upādiśeṣa*, “with the substratum remaining.” This refers to grasping, the taints,²⁴ and the latent tendencies²⁵ of views and afflictions that lie untransformed in the depths of our consciousness. The substratum is made of these and not of the five skandhas. The “nirvāṇa with substratum remaining” is the nirvāṇa where the traces of afflictions have not been totally transformed. The “nirvāṇa without substratum remaining” (Sanskrit *anupādiśeṣa-nirvāṇa*) is the ultimate nirvāṇa without any traces of afflictions. We do not need to rid ourselves of the five skandhas in order to realize nirvāṇa without substratum remaining. This is what the Buddha and the arhats have done.

²⁴ Sanskrit *āsrava* (views, ignorance, being, and desire).

²⁵ Sanskrit *anuśaya*.

When the roots of bondage are no more, we no longer receive the retribution of that bondage, and we are liberated. We have the freedom of a bodhisattva who is enjoying her time without being bound by any fetters.

Our world is a place where the holy and profane dwell together. This means that in one and the same world we find holy and profane people living together. On the one hand, there are the profane who are in bondage, going up and down, and suffering; on the other, there are the holy ones who have freedom to enjoy their time in the very same world.

Winning and profit are no longer criteria to follow,

Worldly people think that happiness is possible when one makes a large profit. Profit is seen in terms of money, and not in terms of the benefits that come from the practice. “Winning” means to climb high and to trample on those below you. When we practice, our life is not directed by the criteria of winning and losing, profit and loss. Criteria like these no longer have power over us.

because victory and profit are always accompanied by suffering.

This means that even if we are the winner and we are the one who makes the profit, we still suffer. Losing is suffering, but winning is also suffering, because when we win we have to keep struggling and competing in order to maintain our position. When people make a loss, of course they suffer, but when they make a profit, they also suffer. Winning and losing, profit and loss are relative criteria; they follow one another in a cycle and cannot liberate us from suffering. A desire for a high income and a distinguished position cannot bind the practitioner to the cycle of bondage, because she has seen that people with these things still suffer.

Verse 25

You should only look for the kind of victory and profit that come from the practice of the Dharma.

Once there is the victory of the Dharma, there is not the basis for the cycle of birth and death.

Once there is no more basis, there is no more bringing about (the ropes that bind).

If you want to put an end to the cycle of birth and death, do not lead an unchaste life.

當自求去勝
已勝無所生
畢故不造新
厭胎無姪行

You should only look for the kind of victory and profit that come from the practice of the Dharma.

The victory that we are looking for is the victory of the Dharma. We have to give rise to the mind that seeks the victory of the right Dharma rather than looking for victory and profit in terms of wealth, fame, and position. Every day there should be some progress in our practice.

Once there is the victory of the Dharma, there is not the basis for the cycle of birth and death.

This means that when we are successful in our practice, we are victorious over the afflictions of attachment, jealousy, and hatred, and we do not need to be born into the world of bondage anymore.

Once there is no more basis, there is no more bringing about (the ropes that bind).

This means that there is no more basis for birth. Once there is no more basis for birth, there is no more creation of any new substratum for the cycle of birth and death; we no longer create ropes of attachment to the world. Once

there is no more substratum for birth, we no longer receive the retribution of that substratum. We continue the cycle of suffering because we continue birth. According to the commentaries of the ancestral teachers, the substratum for birth includes the five skandhas, desire, afflictions, and karma. However, here we should understand the basis for birth as the remainder of the afflictions that have not yet been transformed. The continuation of the substratum for birth means continuing to go around in a cycle of suffering. When the residue substratum, that is the foundation for the cycle of birth and death, no longer is, then being no longer is. When the substratum for birth no longer is, and being (*bhava*) no longer is, nonbeing no longer is, which means that there is no being and no nonbeing. It does not mean that when there is no being we go into nonbeing.

There is a song of Pham Duy entitled “Forever” or “Emptiness,” which he composed in California:

*You are the breeze, I am the clouds.
Going over there, coming back here.
Then returning
to the place of no more back and forth.*

If you want to put an end to the cycle of birth and death, do not lead an unchaste life.

Here it talks about someone who is weary of going around and around in the world of bondage. If we are weary of going around in a cycle of suffering, we have to give up our habit energy of giving in to lust.

Here the sūtra is referring to the holy life of a practitioner. The holy life (*brahmacārya*) is the practice of chastity. As a practitioner, you can create holiness. Holiness cannot be bestowed on us by someone else. It is not because the pope says that we are a saint that we become a saint. We are a saint when we can produce holiness. Holiness manifests, thanks to the practice of the precepts, mindfulness, concentration, and insight. Wherever there are these things, there is holiness. With mindfulness, concentration, and insight, we do not fall into suffering and bondage. Because we are mindful, we practice the precepts, the mindfulness trainings, and we do not kill, lie, commit sexual misconduct, or do anything else that will bring

about suffering. We live according to the mindfulness trainings. If we are a monk or a nun, we live according to the Pratimokṣa (the monastic code of discipline). We lead the holy life because we keep the precepts and do not go in the direction of unchaste conduct.

A monk or a nun is someone who has dedicated themselves to practicing the holy life, and holiness comes from their daily practice of the precepts and is not given to them by someone else. “Putting an end to the basis for birth” could be understood as not being born again into the world of bondage, or it could mean that the afflictions, the bondage, and the going astray have been transformed and do not arise again.

Verse 26

Once a seed has been burnt, it cannot sprout anymore.

Once the wrong thinking has stopped, it is like the fire has been put out.

The sexual organ is a sea of impurity.

Why look for pleasure in a place like that?

種 焦 不 復 生

意 盡 如 火 滅

胞 胎 為 穢 海

何 為 樂 姪 行

Once a seed has been burnt, it cannot sprout anymore.

If we are able to burn up the seeds of grief, sexual desire, and hatred, they will not sprout again.

Once the wrong thinking has stopped, it is like the fire has been put out.

This means that our wrong way of perceiving and thinking gives rise to karma. This wrong perception is like a fire that can be put out. Putting out the fire is the way that the Buddha often describes nirvāṇa.

People often ask, “Once they are dead, whither do they go. What happens to you when you die?” People think that they are made up of a physical body and a soul, and that at death, the physical body disintegrates, and what is left is the soul. Though they cannot see the soul, it can wander around in a state of instability until it finds a new physical body to enter into. That is the popular view of reincarnation. People ask, “Where can I find my loved one who has died? What happens after we die?” The reply of the Buddha to these questions is that body and spirit depend on one another in order to manifest concurrently. Just like left and right, we cannot separate them from each other; so when one is no longer there, the other is also no longer there. Without left, you cannot have right, and without right, you cannot have left. Body and mind or spirit depend on each other. The idea that there can just be mind or spirit without a body, and that only the soul survives while the body is no longer there, is a mistaken, although universal, idea.

While the person was manifesting, body and spirit brought about actions of body, speech, and mind. We may not be able to see these actions anymore, but that does not mean to say that they are not there. Any thought that we produce is *karma*, which means that every thought produces energy. The thought has no visible form but it can be harmful and destructive, or constructive and healing. Any thought we produce has an effect on ourselves and on the environment, and its energy continues. The words we say and the letters we write immediately set off on their course, and fifteen horses cannot catch up with them and pull them back. Words of hatred will bring about destruction, and words of love will be constructive. Even though we can no longer hear the words we have spoken, their karmic energy is still there. The actions we have done with our body, although we may no longer see them, have entered reality and are evolving. That is what is meant by karma.

Body and mind are interdependent. They do not come from nothing; they only become manifest after being unmanifest. In the room where you are sitting, there is water vapor in the air that has come from your breathing, though you cannot see it. If the temperature in the room is raised, and it is cold outside, the vapor will condense into droplets on the windowpane, and you will be able to see it in the form of mist. When we do not see the window steamed up, we think there is no water vapor; when we see the window steamed up, we think there is water vapor. In truth, we cannot say

there is no cloud in this room, because there is cloud in us and all around us. We just cannot see it. When we see it, it is manifest, and when we do not see it, it is unmanifest.

We are familiar with our form as it manifests now, and we ask: “What will we be like when we die?” If we are caught in the form of our present manifestation, we’ll be unable to recognize the ways that manifestation may arise after our death.

Ask yourself: When the flame goes out, where will it go? If we look for the flame in the form of a flame, we shall never find it. The flame, however, never dies. While it is manifesting, it produces light, smoke, and heat. When it is no longer manifesting, the light, the smoke, and the heat continue. It would be very naïve to look for the continuation of the flame in the form of a flame.

When the thinking is no longer manifesting, it is like the flame that is no longer manifesting. If we say it is the same as it was in the past, that is not correct. To say it does not exist is also not correct. The words: “like a flame that has gone out” are very commonly found in the Buddhist teachings. The Buddha used these words to describe nirvāṇa. Do not look for something as the image you already have of it. If the flame has gone out, how can you hope to see it? After manifesting, it has become unmanifest.

Once the afflictions of craving, anger, and ignorance have been burnt up, saṃsāra cannot continue. We cannot find the old forms anymore, because the cycle of afflictions, suffering, and bondage has ended.

*The sexual organ is a sea of impurity.
Why look for pleasure in a place like that?*

These lines concern the monastic practice of celibacy (*brahmacārya*). As far as a monk or a nun is concerned, chastity means abstaining from sexual relations. As far as a lay disciple is concerned, chastity means practicing the third of the five mindfulness trainings—not to commit sexual misconduct.

As a monk or a nun we do not want to look for feelings of pleasure in sex. This verse is about the brahmacārya practice of monks and nuns, and the practice of contemplating impurity.

Verse 27

*Although there are the wholesome realms above,
they have nothing to compare with nirvāṇa.
When you have the understanding of all things, you end all afflictions.
You are no longer attached to the world.*

雖上有善處
皆莫如泥洹
悉知一切斷
不復著世間

*Although there are the wholesome realms above,
they have nothing to compare with nirvāṇa.*

There are wholesome realms like the form and the formless realms;²⁶ but neither of them offers the security and happiness that nirvāṇa offers.

²⁶ These are states of meditative concentration. See verse 19.

When you have the understanding of all things, you end all afflictions.

“Understanding of all things” in Sanskrit is *sarvajñāna*. When we are able to remove all the afflictions and the ideas of being and nonbeing, coming and going, continuation and loss, them and us, we realize understanding of all things, and with this understanding, all the afflictions and these ideas are ended.

You are no longer attached to the world.

Although we are in the world of bondage, we are not bound by it. We are in the world where the holy and the profane live together. There are those who have freedom and those who do not. Those who are not free are called profane; those who are free are called holy.

Verse 28

*To let go of everything and cross to the shore of nirvāṇa
is the most beautiful of all paths.*

For our sake the Buddha has taught the Noble Truths.

Someone who is wise and brave can receive and practice this teaching.

都棄如滅度

眾道中斯勝

佛以現諦法

智勇能奉持

*To let go of everything and cross to the shore of nirvāṇa
is the most beautiful of all paths.*

Nirvāṇa is the most beautiful path. We let go of everything in order to be able to cross to the other shore, the place where every affliction has come to an end.

For our sake the Buddha has taught the Noble Truths.

*Someone who is wise and brave can receive and practice
this teaching.*

The practice of the Four Noble Truths can open up for us the way of nirvāṇa. Buddha has given us that teaching, and as wise and courageous students, we should receive it and put it into practice.

Verse 29

*Living the holy life of chastity without any blemish,
one knows oneself, transcends time and space, realizes peace.*

*When embarking on the path of practice, the first thing is to leave sexual
desire behind.*

*Without delay, one should adorn oneself with the practice of the precepts
taught by the Buddha.*

行淨無瑕穢

自知度世安

道務先遠欲

早服佛教戒

Living the holy life of chastity without any blemish,

Holiness is something we can recognize. When there is mindfulness, concentration, and insight, there is holiness. We can either say “mindfulness, concentration, and insight,” or we can say “precepts (mindfulness trainings), concentration, and insight.” Mindfulness is also keeping the precepts, and now we call the five precepts the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

Laypeople who practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings have holiness. There is a sūtra called The Holy Disciple where it is stated that the monk who keeps the 250 precepts of the monastic code and the layperson who practices the five mindfulness trainings are holy disciples who have holiness within. This holiness comes from the practice.

*one knows oneself, transcends time and space, realizes
peace.*

It is not easy to know oneself. Often we may think we know who we are, but in fact we have no idea. We are like an ambassador. We are representing our family, our nation, a history. We have ancestors, a country of origin, a culture, a family and we are not an individual separate from all these things. We must see ourselves in that light before expecting others to see us in that

light, and then they will bow in respect to greet the ambassador. Knowing oneself is only possible with mindfulness, concentration, and insight.

It is possible to be in touch with a time that transcends time, and a space that transcends space. The meditation hall of Plum Village in Thailand is called “Space Outside of Space.” The space we are normally in touch with and the time that we count in terms of years and months is not spacious enough for us. We need another space and time, and that is a space that lies outside of space. The time that is made of hours, months, and years is too narrow for us. We need to transcend that time to dwell in the time outside of time.

When embarking on the path of practice, the first thing is to leave sexual desire behind.

Above all, we need to practice to realize the immense space and time of nirvāṇa, which means being free from the cycle of attachment. As long as there is attachment, we are a prisoner of space and time.

Without delay one should adorn oneself with the practice of the precepts taught by the Buddha.

A layperson should practice the Five or the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings; a monk or a nun should practice the Ten Precepts for novices, the 250 Precepts for fully-ordained monks, the 348 Precepts for fully-ordained nuns, and the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings.²⁷ Without the practice of the precepts, or mindfulness trainings, there can be no mindfulness, concentration, and insight. Without mindfulness, concentration, and insight, we cannot be in touch with freedom and nirvāṇa. Precepts and mindfulness trainings are the basis of freedom. Some people say that following the precepts means we lose our freedom, but the opposite is true. For example, when we drink alcohol or use drugs, we lose our freedom. If we keep the precept of abstaining from alcohol, we have freedom straight away. Someone who has fallen into the net of alcohol or drugs does not have an ounce of freedom. If we keep the precept to respect life, we have freedom of a different kind. Pratimokṣa means freedom at every step, that is, there are many different aspects of liberation, and every precept is a ground for liberation. If we truly want to be on the path of practice, we have to leave

behind desire and adorn ourself with the mindfulness trainings taught by the Buddha.

²⁷ In Plum Village, the equivalent to the bodhisattva precepts in traditional Buddhist monasteries.

Verse 30

*Ending the afflictions, leaving the world of bondage behind
as easily as a bird spreads its wings and flies up into the sky.
If you understand the teachings of the Dharmapada,
You will put your whole heart into going forward on the path of practice.*

滅惡極惡際
易如鳥逝空
若已解法句
至心體道行

Ending the afflictions, leaving the world of bondage behind

“Ending the afflictions” means transforming the afflictions. Here, the afflictions refer to wrongdoing that arises from not observing the precepts. They are actions of body, speech, and mind that cause suffering. It is not difficult to leave the world of wrongdoing when we are able to let go of attachment, hatred, and wrong perceptions.

Verse 31

*This is the path that goes to the shore of no-birth and no-death,
leading to the end of suffering and calamity.*

*On the spiritual path, there is no longer the discrimination between
friend and enemy.*

You do not need to know who has worldly power or who has not.

是度生死岸

苦盡而無患

道法無親疎

正不問羸強

*This is the path that goes to the shore of no-birth and no-
death,
leading to the end of suffering and calamity.*

Much unnecessary suffering and calamity is brought about when we go on
the path of seeking fame, profit, and power.

*On the spiritual path, there is no longer the discrimination
between friend and enemy.*

When we practice the spiritual path, we no longer distinguish between
friend and enemy. You are not caught in a clique or a political party.
Everyone is your brother or sister, whether they are poor or rich, powerful
or powerless. You do not take the side of the rich in oppressing the poor;
nor do you take the side of the poor to fight against the rich, because you
see that both sides suffer in their own way. Practicing the Way, you have
equality, you love people who are not your fellow countrymen as you love
your fellow countrymen. You love people who do not belong to your
spiritual tradition as you love those who do. That is the practice of
equanimity (*upekṣā*).

*You do not need to know who has worldly power or who has
not.*

You do not need to know who is the victor and who the defeated. You do not take the side of the strong or the weak. You love the victor and the defeated equally. Of course, you love the monks and nuns from Prajñā Monastery, but you also love the people who raided Prajñā Monastery.²⁸ You love the weak who are robbed and oppressed, but you also love those who use violence to oppress and to steal. Everyone suffers in their own way, and you want to relieve the suffering of all those who suffer. That is the practice of the Dharma.

²⁸ In 2009, the Prajñā Monastery in Vietnam was raided by those who were afraid of its presence. Eventually all the monks and nuns had to leave.

Verse 32

*Most important is not to be caught in perceptions.
When the being bound and being unbound are both pure,
the person of high understanding is no longer attached to this body,
subject to disintegration,
and sees that it is something without a firm ground in reality.*

要在無識想
結解為清淨
上智鑿腐身
危脆非實真

Most important is not to be caught in perceptions.

It is our wrong perceptions, such as our notions of birth and death, being and nonbeing, self and other, friend and foe, that divide and bring about discrimination, hatred, and fear. It is the most important thing to overcome these perceptions.

When the being bound and being unbound are both pure,

The second line means bound and unbound do not oppose each other, and there is no more discrimination between being bound and unbound. That is the purity of bound and unbound. It is like our hand: we can close our fist or open it up, but it is always our hand. We have to see the hand. We do not want to destroy it just because it is clenched. The other person can be good or evil, but they are still a person. We have to help them become good and not destroy them. That is the Buddha's way of looking. Man is not our enemy. The things we need to transform are fanaticism, rivalry, discrimination, fear, and attachment. We transcend the ideas of clenched and open, knowing that whether clenched or open, it is still a hand. With that insight, we feel very well. We no longer hate or suffer.

the person of high understanding is no longer attached to this body, subject to disintegration, and sees that it is something without a firm ground in reality.

Those who are liberated are not caught in this mortal body. They do not see their body as their self. According to the verse we recite for the deceased,

This body is not me.

I am not caught in this body.

I am life without limit.

I have never been born and never died.

We have a body, thoughts, and speech. The actions of body, speech, and mind that we produce at every moment of our life are already on their way, continuing, and having an effect. We are not only in this body. We are also outside this body. We are in our parents, our children, and in the world. This body will disintegrate. It is a wrong view to see ourselves as only this body here. Our thoughts, words, and bodily actions are taking us forward. Someone with deep understanding sees that they are not their body, they are much greater than their body. At some point in the future, this body will decay, but we will continue, and we have to continue in a beautiful way. If we want to continue beautifully, our actions of body, speech, and mind must be in the direction of understanding and love, and the practice of mindfulness trainings, concentration, and insight.

Verse 33

*This body brings much suffering and very little peace and joy.
Among all the nine orifices, there is none that is clean.
The wise person knows how to turn a dangerous situation into a peaceful one,
puts an end to boasting, and so escapes misfortunes.*

苦多而樂少
九孔無一淨
慧以危賀安
棄猗脫眾難

This body brings much suffering and very little peace and joy.

Although the original Chinese does not have the word “body” in the first line of this verse, we understand from the ensuing line that the Buddha is referring to the body. Our body is subject to a great deal of pain and discomfort.

Among all the nine orifices, there is none that is clean.

The nine orifices are the two ears, two eyes, two nostrils, the mouth and the two lower orifices. They exude unclean and foul-smelling substances. This is the contemplation on the impurity of the body.

*The wise person knows how to turn a dangerous situation into a peaceful one,
puts an end to boasting, and so escapes misfortunes.*

Someone who is discerning will be able to remove danger and make peace. In the world there is much empty boasting that serves no purpose, and by ceasing to boast you will avoid much misfortune.

Verse 34

*Once this body has disintegrated, it will turn into dust.
Someone who is wise knows how to let go and not be attached to it.
Looking deeply to see that this body is an instrument that brings with it
many fetters,
birth, old age, sickness, and death will no longer cause you to suffer.*

形腐銷為沫
慧見捨不貪
觀身為苦器
生老病無痛

Once this body has disintegrated, it will turn into dust.

Our body cannot escape decay, rotting away, and turning to dust. In the Bible it is stated that this body has come from dust and to dust it will return. There is a poem of Walt Whitman that has the two lines:

*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.*²⁹

²⁹ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1973).

Someone who is wise knows how to let go and not be attached to it.

Since wise people see that this is so, they are not attached to the body and do not regret that it will decay. Seeing just how this body is, we are no longer attached to it.

Looking deeply to see that this body is an instrument that brings with it many fetters,

birth, old age, sickness, and death will no longer cause you to suffer.

Birth, old age, sickness, and death are no longer a cause of anxiety and fear. We fear birth, old age, sickness, and death because we are still too attached to our body. If we can see that we are not just this body, there will be no more fear and anxiety.

Verse 35

*Letting go of the impure and traveling on the path of purity,
you have the chance to arrive at great peace.*

*Relying on understanding, laying aside wrong views,
and not taking them up again, the taints come to an end.*

棄垢行清淨
可以獲大安
依慧以却邪
不受漏得盡

*Letting go of the impure and traveling on the path of purity,
you have the chance to arrive at great peace.*

We are able to eliminate impure actions. The pure life is the life led according to the mindfulness trainings. In this way, we can arrive at a state of great security.

Relying on understanding, laying aside wrong views,

The word “understanding” here can be understood as those who have great understanding, such as the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. We should not associate with those who lack morality and understanding, but take refuge in the wise ones who can help us give up wrong views.

and not taking them up again, the taints come to an end.

Putting an end to the taints is one of the special knowledges or supernormal powers (*abhijña*). All the taints from the past have been ended and no new ones are taken up. The taints are *āsrava* in Sanskrit. The word originally means “discharge,” “leaks.” They are what keep us in the cycle of *saṃsāra*. There are no more afflictions when you do not take up what is negative.

Verse 36

*Living the holy life, transcending time and space,
You are revered by both men and gods.*

行淨致度世
天人莫不禮

*Living the holy life, transcending time and space,
You are revered by both men and gods.*

The holy life is the life of pure conduct. Living a life of pure conduct leads to transcendence of the normal concepts of time and space, so that these concepts are no longer a prison for us.

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5

Conclusion: Nirvāṇa in Daily Life

Nirvāṇa is there. It is not something that belongs to the future. Nirvāṇa in the common vernacular in the Buddha's time means coolness, a state of not burning. The afflictions of attachment, anger, and hatred burn us. When their fire is put out, we have the feeling of coolness, nirvāṇa. The first definition of nirvāṇa is extinction of the fire of afflictions. The fuel that keeps the fire going is our ignorance or wrong perceptions. We see birth and death, inside and outside, us and them. This dualistic way of looking has to be removed in order to put out the flames.

The second definition of nirvāṇa is the extinction of wrong perceptions. Ideas of I and you as two separate realities, or of body and mind as two completely different things, of subject and object as separate from each other, of birth and death, being and nonbeing as opposites. All these ways of thinking are the fuel for the fire to burn. We have to put out the fire of all this thinking.

The first four verses are in praise of nirvāṇa. The first verse says that nirvāṇa is the highest and the best. The second says that nirvāṇa is bliss, the greatest delight. The third verse uses the expression “the greatest happiness” to describe nirvāṇa. The fourth verse says that nirvāṇa is the most secure abode. The aim of these four verses is to maintain that nirvāṇa is of the highest importance. The fifth verse implies that although nirvāṇa is there, we have to find a way to be in touch with it. This is true—nirvāṇa, love, and happiness are there, but people who are always busy or preoccupied cannot experience them. We have to find a way to penetrate them, and that is why we need the practice.

Nirvāṇa Is Here and Now

The sixth verse, with its poetic metaphors of deer and birds, is for me, as a poet, the most beautiful in the sūtra. The sixth verse shows us that nirvāṇa is there for us and is not something we need to look for in the future, in a

different place. Just as the wave is already water and does not need to look for water somewhere else, so we are nirvāṇa and we do not need to seek it outside ourselves. The wave suffers and is afraid when it has to go up or down, when it has to begin or end because it does not realize it is water. When it knows it is water, it is happy to go up and happy to go down, happy to exist and happy not to exist, happy to be high and happy to be low. Nirvāṇa is already there; we only need to be in touch with it. The wave is so busy that it cannot be in touch with its essence, which is water, and so it has to suffer.

The two definitions of nirvāṇa (the extinction of the afflictions and of wrong perceptions) are repeated many times in many of the verses. The idea that we are a separate self and the other person is a separate self leads to comparison and complexes of being better, worse, or just as good as the other, which bring about suffering. Among the verses of deep meaning, there are those that talk of the absence of the afflictions, and those that talk of the absence of notions. We should read the sūtra again and discover which verses are talking of the absence of the afflictions and which are talking of the absence of notions.

There are many practical suggestions in this sūtra as to how we can penetrate nirvāṇa, how we can recognize it and return to it in our daily lives, just as a bird flies up into the air, a fish returns to the river, and a deer returns to the forest. We have to find nirvāṇa in our daily life, but how do we find it? There are verses that tell us the way to return to nirvāṇa is to live the holy life of chastity, observe the precepts, and meditate on impurity and the four nutriments.

We really need Father Christmas because he is a symbol of generosity and goodness in our lives. When children grow up, they discover that there is no such thing as Father Christmas. When they are small, they are very happy to believe that in the morning when they wake up, they will see the gifts that Father Christmas has left in the stocking at the foot of the bed, and that while they were sleeping he had slipped into the house by the chimney. The parents also enjoy the pretense, in the knowledge that it will make the children happy: “Go to sleep, my children. If you do not sleep, Father Christmas will not come.” When the children grow up, they know that what their parents told them was a fiction, and as parents themselves they tell

their children the same fiction. Father Christmas is a long-standing deception handed down from one generation to the next.

Buddhist children go to the temple to pay respect to the Buddha, and their mother may tell them the Buddha can be found in the temple. They bring incense, candles, bananas, oranges to offer to the Buddha. As children, we go to the temple to find the Buddha, and when we grow up, we see that in the temple there is only a statue of the Buddha, and we discover that the Buddha is in our heart. Those who practice will sooner or later discover that Buddha is not in the temple. The ancestral teachers have said that Buddha is our mind, which means the Buddha is in our mind, and the Buddha on the altar is a kind of fiction, like the fiction of Father Christmas.

When people say that at death, you go to the western paradise and meet the Buddha there, or you go to heaven and sit at the feet of God, that is like the fiction of Father Christmas. If you practice correctly, you know that Buddha is in your heart, here and now. In Buddhism, there are people who practice and realize this truth. There are Christian and Jewish mystics who have discovered that the Lord God is not up in the sky but is in us and that the Kingdom of God is present here and now.

In Plum Village we always remind ourselves and each other that the Pure Land is here and now. Amitābha Buddha is our own true nature. The ancestral teachers have said that the true nature is Amitābha, and the Pure Land is the mind. The idea that the Land of Great Happiness (*sukhāvātī*) is to the west and that when you die you can go there, can be seen as a fiction which has been devised for beginners in the practice. If we practice well, we do not have to die in order to go to the Pure Land; it is real in the here and now. Nirvāṇa is not a far-off land; it is our own true nature. We have to put nirvāṇa back into the here and now. In the Āgamas we find the expression “nirvāṇa in the here and now” (*dr̥ṣṭadharmā-nirvāṇa*). We do not want to be like a child believing in Father Christmas, we want to take a step further and see that nirvāṇa is now. Just as the sky is there for the birds, the forest for the deer, and the stream for the fish, nirvāṇa is there for us and we need to know how to return to nirvāṇa in our daily life.

When we breathe or walk in mindfulness, the energy of mindfulness, concentration, and insight opens the door for us to step into the world of no-birth and no-death, where there are no more afflictions. Birth and death are

just our ideas. God can be seen as the nature of no-birth and no-death, which is cool, free of the flames of the afflictions, and present for us here and now. When as Christians we pray, we could say “Our Father, who are in us,” rather than “Our Father, who are in heaven.” “Our Father” is an idea, just as the names Amitāyus (limitless life) and Amitābha (limitless light) given to the Buddha are just names; Allah or God are just names. The important thing is not the name but the substance, the no-birth, no-death nature, the coolness, and the freedom from afflictions.

People have lost faith in God and the Kingdom of God because they have put God in the wrong place. If they put God in the right place, in their own heart, the spiritual crisis will come to an end. This is a spiritual and a cultural matter. In the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions there are people who have discovered that God does not belong to the future or to another place.

This sūtra is called Enjoying the Ultimate. When we are being burned by the flames of the afflictions, or made frightened, anxious, and troubled by our wrong perceptions and discriminating thoughts, the ultimate dimension is not available, there is no nirvāṇa. The path to nirvāṇa is the path of abandoning these afflictions and discriminations. Human beings have to take another step and not cling to fictions like that of Father Christmas. God cannot be described in terms of being and nonbeing, inside and outside, us and them. No idea or notion can describe God, just as no notion can describe nirvāṇa, because nirvāṇa is the extinguishing of all notions. It is very strange to say, “God is” or “God is not.” God and nirvāṇa transcend all notions of being and nonbeing.

In the present day, especially in Europe and North America, there is the phenomenon of double belonging. It describes someone who follows two spiritual paths, for example both Christianity and Buddhism, without seeing any conflict or constriction. There are even priests who live and practice in this way, including the Elder Pháp Đệ¹ and Paul F. Knitter, the author of the book *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. For them, each tradition shines light on the other and makes it brighter. We can be proud of our double belonging. Please take the opportunity to look deeply into this. It is a matter of culture. If you do take this path of double belonging, you will put an end to discrimination and division, and will bring unity and peace into the world.

[1](#) 1935–2016, A Catholic priest who became a monk in the Plum Village tradition.

ALSO BY THICH NHAT HANH

Anger

The Art of Living

Awakening of the Heart

Breathe, You Are Alive!

Call Me By My True Names

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Fear

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Going Home

The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

Inside the Now

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No Mud, No Lotus

Old Path White Clouds

The Other Shore

Our Appointment with Life

Peaceful Action, Open Heart

Silence

The Sun My Heart

Transformation and Healing

Understanding Our Mind

THICH NHAT HAHN is a revered spiritual leader, poet, and peace activist known for his teachings on global ethics and Engaged Buddhism. Born in Vietnam in 1926, he has been a Zen Buddhist monk since the age of sixteen. He was active in the movement to reform Buddhism in Vietnam, making it responsive to the needs of ordinary people and showing a nonviolent way forward for society. He founded Van Hanh Buddhist University, has studied at Princeton and Columbia Universities, and has taught at Columbia and the Sorbonne. Since his exile from Vietnam in 1966, he has been a pioneer in bringing Buddhism to the West, establishing monasteries, practice centers, and local mindfulness communities, and training thousands of monastic and lay students worldwide.

BHIKSHUNI TRUE VIRTUE (CHAN DUC), ANNABEL LAITY, studied Classics, Sanskrit, and comparative philology at London University. For three years she lived and practiced with a community of Tibetan nuns in India. Since 1986 she has lived in Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village community, ordaining in 1988 as a nun in his Vietnamese Zen tradition.



Monastics and visitors practice the art of mindful living in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh at our mindfulness practice centers around the world. To reach any of these communities, or for information about how individuals, couples, and families can join in a retreat, please contact:

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