



European Institute  
of Applied Buddhism

**eiab**

Mindfulness Concentration Insight

## INTERNATIONAL BUDDHIST CONFERENCE ON THE THREE TRAININGS

### Remarks by Ven. Thầy Pháp Ấn\*

Director and Dean of Studies, European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB)

By Zoom, 6 March 2021

### “Wisdom *is* the Path”

Your Holiness; Professor Asanga Tilakaratne; respected Venerables; respected Scholars and Participants.

My teacher *Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh*, in Vietnam, has asked me to convey his love and to express his deep gratitude to you for bringing different Buddhist traditions and schools together for this important conference. It truly embodies the spirit of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* on which he has based his life’s teachings about inter-being and inter-connectedness.

I am honored to join this distinguished international gathering from my base at the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB), in Germany, and to share some thoughts on wisdom (*prajna*), from the perspective of the Plum Village tradition. As some may know, our tradition comes from Vietnam and has roots in both the Pali and Sanskrit traditions.

Anyone coming to a Plum Village practice center is introduced to the practice of mindfulness in daily life. At the end of our retreats, each participant is invited to take the Five Mindfulness Trainings. These are the Buddha’s five precepts rewritten and expanded upon by our teacher. In our tradition, taking and practicing the Five Mindfulness Trainings in daily life is considered a concrete expression of *prajna* (wisdom and insight) as well as a manifestation of *sila* (ethical living) and *samadhi* (concentration).

In Plum Village, we see a strong connection between wisdom and awareness. Each of the Five Mindfulness Trainings starts with “Aware of the suffering caused by...” With mindfulness, we are aware of what is going on in our bodies, our feelings, our minds, and the world, and we avoid doing harm to ourselves and others. Mindfulness protects us, our families, and our society. When we are mindful, we can see that by refraining from doing one thing, we can prevent another thing from happening. We arrive at our own unique insight. It is not something imposed on us by an outside authority. Practicing the mindfulness trainings thus brings us wisdom and insight.

It is entirely possible that no one shall ever be able to experience the wisdom and insight the Buddha experienced 2,500 years ago in his enlightenment, nor truly to understand the depth of his teaching in every aspect. However, it *is* possible to agree that the journey to enlightenment of Siddhartha, the Buddha-to-be, began with *duhkha* - suffering - feelings of dissatisfaction with his privileged life, and a yearning for a holy, noble life worth living.

According to the Buddhist world view, we wander endlessly around cycles of lives of suffering and that is called *samsara*. Understanding *our own dukkha* and finding *our own way* out of *samsara* is therefore the main concern of Buddhists. It is also what distinguishes Buddhism from other intellectual disciplines that attempt to attain knowledge, be it spiritual or secular.

In the Plum Village tradition, *dukkha* begins to arise and to accumulate in us because we are not able to be present for life in the here and now. Throughout our day, we have a tendency to be carried away by strong emotions over what is happening right now, or to dwell on regrets about the past, or to lose ourselves in projections and fears about our future. This inability to be anchored and fully aware in the present leads to confusion and lack of understanding of our own situation and of conditions in the world around us. The energy of ignorance and lack of insight accumulates and becomes our character, our will or volition. It becomes the foundation of our personal *samsara*.

Most of the time, we have all the conditions for happiness around us in the present moment. For example, our eyes are in good condition, our ears are in good condition, and we can smell our food, unlike many unfortunate people infected with Covid-19. But, still, we are not happy; we feel we are lacking something, missing something. We are looking for a happiness that goes beyond our already-good conditions.

The Buddha's breakthrough was to pinpoint where the problem lies, namely that our body and our mind are not united. In its confused state, our body tries to send signals to the mind, and vice versa. But neither is listening to the other. So, we waste energy. We do not have enough energy to take care of our self, each other, our family, or our community. We simply do not have enough energy to wake up to the fact we are missing the wonders of life in the present moment.

When, however, the body and the mind are in a peaceful state, when they are working in harmony with each other, we stop wasting energy. We have a chance to wake up to our life and to the many good conditions around us. This is the foundation of the solution that the Buddha discovered.

From a Plum Village perspective, the purpose of the Three Trainings is to help the body and the mind be in harmony with each other. We practice them so that the body and the mind can be one, unified, and that gradually we may accumulate and collect within us the energy we need to awaken.

With our mindfulness, gradually, we build *samadhi*. Mindfulness and *samadhi*, together, become a torch lighting our path towards a different way of living, one that embodies *sila*. Thanks to the combination of all these elements – mindfulness, *samadhi* and *sila* – we become wise. We wake up from our ignorance, confusion, and lack of understanding, and we are liberated.

This ripening of our practice is experienced as a breakthrough in our perception about our self, and in our perspective of the world around us. Suddenly, we know we shall never be the same again. Wisdom has propelled us beyond our old way of living to a different level of existence. That, for me, is the life-changing implication of *prajna*.

While Buddhists have a common starting point - *dukkha* and *samsara* - Buddhism has developed many ways and styles of living, as illustrated by the various schools and traditions present at this conference. Whatever the schools or traditions, they all are concerned with providing meaningful solutions to the problem of suffering.

For each tradition, the way of life represents its wisdom. As *the Avatamsaka Sutra* says: "All Buddhist teachings penetrate one teaching. One teaching penetrates all Buddhist teachings." The interpenetration of *sila*, *samadhi* and *prajna*, has been central to my mindfulness practice in nearly 30 years as a monk.

We can imagine the Three Trainings as three elements interacting within a spiral. Some of us enter the spiral with a dualistic view, seeing the practice in terms of *samsara* and *nirvana*. At this point, as we strengthen our commitment to leading a holy life, *sila* plays a dominant role. Spiralling mindfully toward the center, we discover that all three trainings - *sila*, *samadhi* and *prajna* – are embedded. At each twist and turn of our spiral, one of these trainings plays a leading role while the other two play supporting roles. The closer we get to the center, the less dualistic our view of the practice becomes. That is because there, at the center, *nirvana* and *samsara* inter-are. At that point, *prajna* takes over to guide our practice.

Different Buddhist schools have come up with their own ways of prioritizing the different elements of the Three Trainings as they practice, and of understanding the nature of the Enlightened One and his enlightenment. Hence, they have different views on *prajna* and the path to *prajna*. As we know, these schools are broadly divided into southern and northern transmissions.

In the southern transmission, which has preserved its ancient form, the path has evolved into one of analyzing the mind at microscopic level. We dissect our object of investigation into smaller units so that we can investigate and understand each one more deeply. We develop a discriminative understanding of these minute experiences and of the mind's microscopic responses. We discover that our mind continuously "moves" because it cannot be satisfied with the present. It begins to crave and that is the origin of suffering.

In the southern transmission's interpretation of the *Abhidharma*, to have wisdom is to have full perception of this dynamic movement of consciousness at the microscopic level, to be able to eliminate craving, and to taste the fruit of an *arhat*. That is the solution: to be released forever from our suffering. It happens in a flash of consciousness that moves us from *samsara* to *nirvana*.

In the *Mahayana* tradition of the northern transmission, the approach is one of synthesis. We do not go into microscopic analysis of the movement of mind and consciousness. Rather, we take a macroscopic look at the patterns of our behavior. We see that these are based on our views, our notions, our ideas. We see that suffering comes from the confusion and negative energy that accumulates because we grasp onto our views and mistake them for reality. Suffering accumulates over time due to our views.

The *Mahayana* synthesizing process has given rise to multiple solutions to the problem of *duhkha* and how to deal with *samsara*.

The *Prajnaparamita Sutra* tells us that all views are one-sided and true reality can not be grasped or perceived by any view, abstract notion, or idea. The solution to our suffering is thus to have emptiness of view and to experience *nirvana* right in the midst of *samsara*; that is, to live a life of no-birth and no-death whilst riding the waves of birth and death. Once we have a good grasp of the mind, we can touch the domain of "suchness", which in the later *Lotus Sutra* is regarded as having two dimensions - the ultimate dimension and the historical dimension.

Vietnamese *Zen Master* Mãn Giác, who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, expressed "suchness" well in a verse announcing he was ill:

*When spring goes, a hundred flowers wither,  
When spring comes, a hundred flowers bloom.  
One occurrence after another, life passes before our eyes,  
Old age descends upon our head.  
Do not be deceived that all flowers wither as spring ends,  
Last night, beyond the veranda ... a plum branch.*

As sentient beings we are by nature empty, according to the northern transmission. But the northern tradition also recognizes that, as conscious humans, we have a deep intuition that our existence

amounts to something *more*. This has given rise to different *Mahayana* sutras and schools exploring the idea of *Buddha Nature* and *Tathagatagarbha* (*Buddha-Embryo*, literally "the womb of the thus-come-one"). The *Lotus Sutra* implicitly speaks of our *Buddha Nature*, and of the possibility of overcoming our spiritual poverty as a prodigal Buddhist son so we may reclaim our sovereignty as a Buddha. There is also the Mind Only manifestation of the *Yogachara* tradition.

In the *Mahayana*, we have *Bodhisattvas* - enlightened beings who return to *samsara* to help all living beings. We have *Ch'an "wanderers"* who, like *Chinese Taoists*, live a life of freedom from fear because they know that all three realms – desire, form, and formlessness – are only manifestations of our mind. We have *Tibetan Siddhas* who, full of extraordinary psychic and spiritual powers, and of wisdom, have realized Buddhahood in their very body.

Again, different Buddhist traditions have different ways of investigating the common problem of *duhkha* and *samsara*. But all the traditions offer solutions. Their practice and path are determined by their choice of how to approach the object of suffering and by how wisdom is cultivated.

Plum Village's solution is derived from multiple elements. They include the Vietnamese *Zen* tradition of engaging actively with society (revitalized by *Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh* as Engaged Buddhism); the teaching of the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (inter-being), and intellectual openness towards current understandings of neuroscience, psychology, and physical sciences.

Applying all such elements and understandings so we may develop wisdom and solve the problem of *duhkha* and *samsara*, has evolved into a way of life at Plum Village practice centers and at EIAB. We contemplate deeply about suffering, we develop a perspective on it, and we transform that perspective into a way of living that is guided and defined by mindfulness.

Over his long and eventful life, my teacher *Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh* has helped countless students by distilling complex Buddhist teachings into succinct phrases, notably: "there is no way to enlightenment; enlightenment *is* the way", and "there is no path to peace; peace *is* the path."

Today, my teacher is 95 years old. He resides peacefully in his root temple in Hue, Central Vietnam, where some 80 years ago he became a novice. His entire life has been to walk and teach the path of wisdom as a way to build a beloved Sangha of peace and compassion. All of us in the Plum Village tradition aspire to follow his core insight that there is no path to wisdom, wisdom *is* the path.

May the fruits of this International Buddhist Conference on the Three Trainings benefit all living beings.

---

*The author wishes to express his deep gratitude to Ms. Sarah Monks for her detailed, creative, and careful editing; and to Sr. Song Nghiê, an EIAB monastic; the Sangha Bàu Trời Xanh, and other Vietnamese Sangha members for their deep listening to the ideas expressed in these remarks, which were based on a Dharma talk delivered on 14 February 2021 to celebrate the Lunar New Year of the Metal Water Buffalo (Tết Tân Sửu).*

\*Bhikshu Thích Chân Pháp Ấn (Dr. Thu Phạm)  
Viện Trưởng Viện Phật Học Ứng Dụng Châu Âu  
Director and Dean of Studies  
European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB)  
Schaumburgweg 3  
51545 Waldbröl, Deutschland  
<http://www.eiab.eu>