

The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching : Transforming suffering into peace, joy & liberation
by Thích Nhất Hạnh

Summary and interpretation by Craig Hannah for a 11/7/2019 presentation to the CT sangha of the DTO

Chapters covered: Part 3. Other basic Buddhist teachings

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Introduction

How to use teachings – The purpose of the teachings are to, directly or indirectly, lead us to a better way to be in our lives. Understanding these gifts from our predecessors is an invaluable part of our practice. There are many tried-and-true recipes available – They are all different, but like Indra’s Net, they all reflect and contain the others.

However, the well advised caution is that all teachings have the potential to hold us back if we let them. They are sounds, forming words, then sentences, thoughts, concepts understood, and ultimately changing us at our base. But it is all too easy to want to hold on to the concept longer than needed. “Where there is perception, there is deception”. Hold these teachings with an open hand.

Many of these teachings have significant variations across the different Buddhist branches. For simplicity and brevity’s sake, the following discussions are from the Chan/Zen perspective.

17. The Two Truths

The Two Truths are relative truth and absolute truth

Relative truth is the truth of our normal world. It deals with those things that arise in the physical world and the ways that we make sense of those things.

Absolute truth is that which lies out of the realm of concepts. This is something that is felt, experienced, or intuited in ways difficult to describe. An understanding of the absolute truth has the ability to take our minds beyond the bounds of conceptual and linguistic conventions.

The only thing that we have direct access to is the relative truth. Our common approach is to experience things that arise and fit them into the stories that we have running in our minds. Oftentimes we don't even need to experience something; we just assume that it occurred. The story is more real to us than the physical world.

A better approach is to see what is really happening. Don't mistake the stories for reality. The stories still have tremendous value for us, but they are simply stories, so don't hold them too tightly. In being as fully mindful as we can be to the present moment, our normal mode cleaving the world into this and that drops away and we can begin to sense the ultimate truths that reveal themselves in the phenomenal world.

In doing this we begin to recognize that this 'world of dust' or saha world, is of the same thing as nirvana and is our path. Thich Nhat Hanh says "Liberation is the ability to go from the world of signs to the world of true nature"

18. The Three Dharma Seals

“Three Dharma seals” are the fundamental characteristics of all conditioned things. This term has the same meaning as the phrases “Three marks of existence”, “Three characteristics of conditioned phenomena”, and “Three universal characteristics”. Any teaching that does not reflect these characteristics cannot be said to be a true teaching of the Buddha. In the Zen tradition these marks are often listed as:

- Impermanence (anitya)
- Non-self (anatman)
- Nirvana

The last item is perhaps more commonly seen as suffering (dukkha). On pages 21 and 22 of this book, TNH explains that while impermanence and non-self are a mark of all things, suffering is not. It may be present if we allow attachment to things, but it is not inherent in those things. Instead, he feels that nirvana, “the joy of completely extinguishing our ideas and concepts” is a universal characteristic and should be considered to be the third seal. Other traditions may have slight differences, such as including emptiness as a fourth characteristic, or subsuming three marks into one mark of nirvana (the seal of the true mark).

Impermanence: Because causes and conditions constantly change, everything is impermanent. Impermanence reminds us to appreciate, without attachment, all that goes on. It is what allows transformation to be possible.

Non-self: Nothing has a separate existence or self. All that is, is made of other things. The insight that we ‘inter-be’ with everything else is a profound realization

The combination of impermanence and non-self shows us that everything is in the one thing, and the one thing is in everything. When we touch these truths deeply, we touch the ground that is beyond the dichotomies of birth and death, permanence and impermanence, self and non-self.

Nirvana: Nirvana is the complete silencing of all concepts. It is the ground of all that is. Just as a wave does not exist outside of the water, impermanence and non-self do not exist outside of nirvana. In touching them, you touch nirvana.

The silencing of concepts includes the ‘Eight Concepts’ of: birth, death, permanence, dissolution, coming, going, one, and many. It also includes the silencing of their opposites. Nirvana is not something to find later – as a Dharma seal, it is present in all the teachings and in all that we experience.

Other means: There are other ways to assist in determining if a teaching represents a true understanding of the Dharma:

- Two Relevances:
 - Relevance to the Essence – The teaching must comport with the Dharma Seals
 - Relevance to the Circumstance –The teaching must be appropriate for the situation and for the person being taught
- Four Standards of Truth
 - The worldly – The teaching must be offered in a language understandable by the recipient
 - The person – The teaching must be targeted to meet the needs and aspirations of the audience
 - Healing – The teaching must be targeted to heal a specific ailment
 - The absolute – Absolute truth can only be spoken of directly and unequivocally

- Four Reliances (These suggestions were created by later teachers, not the Buddha)
 - Rely on the teaching, not the person
 - Rely only on sutras the teach in terms of absolute truth, not the relative truth
 - TNH disagrees with this suggestion, saying that many teachings using relative truth are quite valuable
 - Rely on the meaning, not the words
 - Rely on the insight of looking deeply not on differentiation and discrimination

19. The Three Doors of Liberation

The three doors of liberation are profound truths that can help liberate us from fear and suffering. These doors are also called the Three Concentrations, and are accepted by all schools of Buddhism.

Emptiness (shunyata) – All conditioned things are empty of a separate self. Instead, they are made up of other non-self parts. They ‘inter-be’ with all other conditioned things. Emptiness means interdependent co-arising, impermanence, and non-self.

Signlessness (animatta) – A sign is an appearance, or mark, we associate with an object of our perception. They are useful, but they are not absolute truth and as such, they can mislead us. The Diamond Sutra says ‘Wherever there is a sign, there is deception, illusion.’ It also says “If you see the signlessness of signs, you see the Tathagata.” We need to see beyond the signs, to see the true nature of interbeing of the object.

This paraphrased quote illustrates this idea: ‘Before practicing Zen, mountains were mountains, then I came to see that mountains were not mountains. But now I see the interpenetration of the mountain with all other things, and mountains truly are mountains’

The Diamond Sutra lists four signs to be wary of:

- Self – There is no separate self
- Person – Avoid making the false distinction between people, other animals, plants, and non-living things
- Living being – Living things are made up of non-living things
- Lifespan – We have never been born and will never die

Aimlessness (apranihita) – The Heart Sutra says “there is nothing to attain”. We already have everything we need for happiness. Nirvana is here now.

20. The Three Bodies (trikaya) of Buddha

The Three Bodies of Buddha represent aspects of Buddhahood in a manner that may be more easily understood. These bodies exist in different forms, but all three exist within you right now. Find them and nurture them.

The term *Kaya*, meaning body, is used to describe these forms.

Dharmakaya - This is the embodiment of the Dharma. If you are paying attention, anything can be the voice of the Dharma, and is therefore part of the Dharmakaya. The body of the Buddha that is still alive with us today is the Dharmakaya.

There are a number of terms that have become equivalent to this term: The Ground of Being, the True Buddha, and Vairochana (for Mahayana Buddhists). For some, it has become equivalent to Suchness, Nirvana, and Tathagatagarbha ('the womb of the tathagata')

Sambhogakaya – This is the body of bliss, enjoyment, or reward. When we practice deeply, we will experience Sambhogakaya as one of the fruits of our practice. When we touch something that is in harmony and at peace, we touch the Sambhogakaya.

Nirmanakaya – This is a transformation body, an actual physical thing that embodies the Dharmakaya. Shakyamuni Buddha was one, but with a discerning eye, you can see others around you now.

21. The Three Jewels

The three Jewels are also known as the Three Refuges. A refuge is something that provides shelter. They are: The Buddha, The Dharma, and The Sangha. They support and contain each other; they inter-are.

Our faith in these things is not lightly placed. It is based on our personal experience. As such, it grows as our practice develops. We verify this faith ourselves.

The Buddha – The one who shows the way in this life.

Certainly this refers to the historical Buddha and his awakening, but it also refers to the Buddha nature in us. Buddha means awakened. This is an innate quality in all sentient beings.

The Dharma – The way of understanding and love.

The term Dharma has many meanings, but here it means universal truth. We find these truths in our practice and our life. Stories and writings can point things out to us, but we are the final arbiter of what is true for us. There is a saying that there are 84,000 Dharma gates. To take refuge in the Dharma is to choose those paths that are appropriate for us.

The Sangha – The community that lives in harmony and awareness.

The community of fellow practitioners is like a fertile field, and we are like a seed. If we plant ourselves in such a field, our harvest will be good. A sangha brings out the best in everyone; it is holy and makes you holy as well.

22. The Four Immeasurable Minds (brahmaviharas)

These are also known as the Abodes of Brahma (the Hindu creator god). The Buddha was once asked by a Brahman, what that person could do to ensure that he would be with Brahma after his death. The Buddha, speaking in a manner appropriate for a Brahmin, told him he must practice the Brahma Abodes.

They are called immeasurable because if you practice them they will grow in you until they embrace the world. They are the four aspects of true love and are the very nature of an enlightened person.

Love (maitri/metta) – Also referred to as living-kindness, is the intention and capacity to unconditionally offer joy and happiness. This is a difficult capacity to develop. It requires looking and listening deeply

Compassion (karuna) – The intention and capacity to relieve and transform suffering and lighten sorrows. Compassion is the English word used, but Karuna doesn't have the connotation of sharing the suffering. Instead, the suffering is transformed into non-suffering.

Joy (mudita) – This is something that we enjoy in our minds, in the present moment. Sometimes the phrase sympathetic joy is used, meaning that the joy is directed at others. This is not needed because true joy doesn't distinguish between self and other.

Equanimity (upeksha/upekkha) – This can also be called nonattachment, nondiscrimination, or even-mindedness. It is not indifference; it is impartiality and equality, with no boundaries between self and other.

23. The Five Aggregates (skandhas)

Together, everything in us and our world, belongs to one or more of these categories. They are a useful way for us to view ourselves.

Form (rupa) – Body or "material form" of a being or of anything. Rupa is said to be made up of the four basic elements or forces: earth (solidity), water (cohesion), fire (heat) and wind (motion). [[wp](#)]

Feelings (vedana) – The sensory experience of something. This thing may be from our body, our perceptions, or deep consciousness. The feeling may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Feelings in this sense are not emotions, but are simply the bare affective quality of an experience.

Perceptions (samjna) – The sensory and mental process of noticing, naming, and conceptualizing, as well as the perceiver and the perceived. "...most of our perceptions are erroneous, and ... most of our suffering comes from wrong perceptions." [thotbt, pg 53]

Mental formations (samskara) – Anything made from another element. Perceptions and feelings are mental formations, but due to their importance, they are listed separately. Other examples include: diligence, covetousness, and humility. All mental formations exist as seeds in our store consciousness. Through wise selective watering we can nourish the wholesome seeds and transform the negative.

Consciousness (vijnana) – This can mean: that which discerns, the Storehouse Consciousness, or a series of rapidly changing interconnected discrete acts of cognizance [[wp](#)]. Our Storehouse Consciousness is both individual and collective and, through mindfulness, can be positively transformed.

The aggregates inter-are; each contains the other. When grasped at, they are suffering. But, when impermanence, non-self, and their interdependence are born in mind, they are simply what give rise to life.

24. The Five Powers (balani)

These are also known as the Five Strengths/Faculties/Bases (indriyani). These are qualities that build on each other, leading to awakening. Faith in the dharma creates energy, this makes mindfulness possible. Mindfulness leads to deep concentration, which gives rise to wisdom. They do so by controlling the negative effects of their opposites.

Faith (shraddha) - Faith controls doubt

Energy (virya) - Energy controls laziness

Mindfulness (smriti) - Mindfulness controls heedlessness

Concentration (samadhi) - Concentration controls distraction

Insight/Wisdom (prajna) - Wisdom (or discernment) controls ignorance.

The five powers are one of the seven sets of qualities that are conducive to awakening. The others are:

- The four establishments of mindfulness
- The four right exertions
- The four bases of supernatural power
- The five spiritual faculties
- The seven factors of enlightenment
- The noble eightfold path.

25. The Six Paramitas

Paramita means perfection or perfect realization. The Chinese character used to represent it means 'Crossing over to the other shore'. The other shore is the shore of liberation. By making the practice of the paramitas the practice of our daily lives, we can cross over to that shore.

Giving (dana paramita) – This is the giving of joy, happiness, and love. Other gifts that we give are our true presence, stability, our freedom from afflictions, freshness, peace and lucidity, the space needed, and our understanding.

Mindfulness trainings (shila paramita) — Also known as the five precepts. Their practice protects our body, mind, family, and society. They are to protect life, prevent exploitation, protect against sexual abuse, practice deep listening and loving speech, and to mindfully consume.

Inclusiveness (kshanti paramita) — This is the ability to receive, embrace, and transform. To have this, make your heart infinitely large. If you do, you will have the ability to take, hold, and transform any suffering or injustice

Diligence (virya paramita) — This means to continually monitor our storehouse consciousness and selectively water the seeds there. Practice the Four Right Exertions or Efforts. They are to:

- Refrain from watering the negative seeds in us
- Return already risen negative seeds to store consciousness
- Touch positive seeds in store consciousness -> manifest in mind consciousness
- Maintain the wholesome seeds

Meditation (dhyana paramita) – The perfection of meditation. There are two aspects to this perfection:

- Calm abiding (shamatha) - Where we stop being in the future or the past and simply experience the present moment, just as it is.
- Insight (vipashyana) – This is to look deeply to see the true nature of things.

Understanding (prajna paramita) – This is understanding that is beyond knowledge, concepts, and views. It is the substance of Buddhahood. This is Right View. Perfect understanding is the container in which all the other paramitas reside.

26. The Seven Factors of Awakening (sapta bodhyanga)

These factors are also called the Seven Limbs of Enlightenment. Just as the limbs of a tree arise, grow and support each other, so do these factors. They are the characteristics of awakening and also the path to awakening.

Mindfulness (smriti) – Mindfulness is the awareness of the relationship we have with what’s actually going on. It is the awareness of the consciousness that arises when a sense organ contacts a sensory object.

Investigation of phenomena (dharma-pravicharya) – This is the ability to understand the thing of which we are being mindful. This investigation can be an intellectual scrutiny or a more meditative, non-intellectual one. The choice of what we investigate should be a skillful one – choose wisely.

Energy, effort, diligence, perseverance (virya) – This is to take on what we know we need to take on. The sources of the energy may be from many places, but a fundamental one is that this effort has merit.

Ease (prashabdhih) – A sense of tranquility arises naturally from the other factors

Joy (priti) – Also called rapture. Priti shares many characteristics with happiness (sukha), but priti is a mental formation and is not associated with any object, so it involves no desire. On the other hand, sukha is part of the feeling aggregate. Joy comes from touching things that are refreshing and beautiful both within us and outside of us.

Concentration (samadhi) – This differs from mindfulness in that instead of awareness on body, mind, and a frame of reference, concentration is focusing all one’s mental faculties on mental or physical things.

Equanimity (upeksha) – This is the neutrality that develops from a calm and focused mind. It is not being pulled by aversion and desire.

The Buddha said that the above factors (which are the characteristics and the path of awakening) when combined with The Four Immeasurable Minds (Love, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity, which are the nature of enlightenment) will bring about complete, perfect enlightenment.

27. The Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-arising (pratitya samutpada)

All dharmas ("phenomena") arise in dependence upon other dharmas: "if this exists, that exists; if this ceases to exist, that also ceases to exist". TNH adds that "This is like this, because that is like that". Cause and effect co-arise. All things are a result of multiple causes and conditions. This is illustrated by the analogy that three cut reeds can only stand by leaning on each other. If you take one away, the other two will fall. Causes create effects and those effects, in turn, combine and cause other effects.

- There is no first cause, and there is no last effect.
- Different versions of this teaching use different numbers of links.
- There is not a linear progression through the links. Each link is both a cause and an effect of all the other links. They inter-are.

The twelve interdependent links are:

1. **Ignorance** (avidya, meaning the lack of understanding) — the condition for the arising of mental formations.
2. **Mental Formation** (or Volitional Formations) (samskara, meaning the will to cling to being) — the condition for arising of consciousness. Buddhism emphasizes the need to purify formations rather than eliminate them
3. **Consciousness** (vijñana) — the condition for the arising of name (labels) and form. This includes mind and storehouse consciousness for both an individual and for the collective.
4. **Mind and body** (or Name and Form) (nama-rupa) —the condition for the arising of the six senses (perception).
5. **The Six Senses** (ayatana) — the condition for arising of contact or interactions (the psychological process whereby we interact). These six senses are not separate from mind/body (fourth link). When one comes into contact (sixth link) with a sense object it creates a sense consciousness (third link).
6. **Contact** (or interaction) (sparsha) — the condition for the arising of feeling. It occurs when a sense organ meets a sense object, creating sense consciousness.
7. **Feeling** (vedana) — the condition for arising of craving (wanting). It may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.
8. **Craving** (wanting or desire) (trishna) — the condition for the arising of "grasping"
9. **Grasping** (or attachment) (upadana): the condition for the arising of "becoming". We are caught in the thralls of the object.
10. **Becoming** (or being) (bhava) — the condition for the arising of birth. What we have desired comes to be.
11. **Birth** (jati) — the condition for the arising of aging and death.
12. **Aging and death** (jara-marana) — the condition for arising of ignorance (back to 1)

The normal way of describing the Twelve Links is from the negative point of view. On page 248 TNH suggests that it may be more useful to present the Twelve Links from a positive perspective. Following is a comparison of the Twelve Links from the deluded mind point of view versus the true mind.

Twelve Links: The Two Aspects of Interdependent Co-Arising

WHEN CONDITIONED BY DELUDED MIND	WHEN CONDITIONED BY TRUE MIND
(1) Ignorance (<i>avidya</i>)	Clear Understanding (<i>vidya</i>)
(2) Volitional Actions (<i>samskara</i>)	Great Aspiration (<i>mahapranidhana</i>)
(3) Consciousness (<i>viññana</i>): <i>First Five Consciousnesses</i> <i>Manovijñana</i> <i>Manas</i> <i>Alayaviññana</i>	Four Wisdoms: <i>Wisdom of Wonderful Realization</i> <i>Wonderful Observation Wisdom</i> <i>Wisdom of Equality</i> <i>Great Mirror Wisdom</i>
(4) Mind/Body (<i>nama rupa</i>) (<i>Nirmanakaya</i>)	Transformation Body
(5) Six Sense Organs & Their Objects (<i>ayatana</i> s)	Result Body (<i>Sambhogakaya</i>)
(6) Contact (<i>sparsha</i>)	Mindfulness of Contact
(7) Feeling (<i>vedana</i>)	Mindfulness of Feeling
(8) Craving (<i>trishna</i>)	Four Immeasurable Minds (<i>Brahmaviharas</i>)
(9) Grasping (<i>upadana</i>)	Freedom (<i>apranihita</i>)
(10) Coming to Be (<i>bhava</i>)	Wondrous Being
(11) Birth (<i>jati</i>)	Wisdom of No-Birth
(12) Old Age and Death (<i>jaramarana</i>)	Wisdom of No-Death

Figure Nine

28. Touching the Buddha Within

“There is nothing to stop you from being in touch with the present moment. The question is, Do you have eyes that can see the sunset, feet that can touch the Earth? If the Buddha were to transmit his eyes to you, would you know how to use them?”

“When a wise person suffers, she asks herself, ‘What can I do to be free from this suffering? Who can help me? What have I done to free myself from this suffering?’ But when a foolish person suffers, she asks herself, ‘Who has wronged me? How can I show others that I am a victim of wrongdoing? How can I punish those who have caused my suffering?’”

“Practice the First Noble Truth, identify your suffering; the Second Noble Truth, seeing its sources; and the Third and Fourth Noble Truth, finding ways to transform your suffering and realize peace. The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are not theories. They are ways of action.”

“The heart of the Buddha is in each of us. When we are mindful, the Buddha is there.”

“We need to touch the Buddha within us. We need to enter our own heart, which means to enter the heart of the Buddha. To enter the heart of the Buddha means to be present for ourselves, our suffering, our joys, and for many others. To enter the heart of the Buddha means to touch the world of no-birth and no-death, the world where water and wave are one.”