

**00:00:01**

Dear respected Thầy, dear sisters, dear brothers, welcome to our Wednesday night class. This has been a series on the core Plum Village teachings since the spring, and many people are following online as well, so we try to be consistent. Tomorrow we have the Vietnamese retreat starting here at Deer Park, and some of our friends have come early, so welcome.

**00:00:40**

The practice is a joy. One simple way to know when your practice is a little off is when you are no longer experiencing joy. When we take everything too seriously — organising things for the sangha, organising retreats, arranging so that people can learn the Dharma — we forget the joy. I know in my own ancestors there is a seed of wanting to work, work, work, and to show the world that I'm working hard. If I express joy, I feel as though I'm being lazy or not working hard enough. That attitude is a big problem. It is causing a great deal of the suffering we experience today. People work and work and don't know when their work ends, and then they suffer inside. Because they're not experiencing joy, they harm themselves, their family members, and the Earth.

**00:01:57**

Many people believe that by working endlessly they will eventually create joy one day, but the path is to experience joy here and now. As brothers and sisters in the monastery, we remind one another of this all the time. I am always reminded by my brothers when I become too serious.

**00:02:20**

In the last class we learned how to practise mindfulness of suffering in order to recognise the conditions of happiness. One of the great misunderstandings in Buddhism is the phrase "life is suffering". People hear that and believe everything is suffering, and that they must put on a grim face and bear it until they die. That is a very wrong understanding. The Buddha taught us to be mindful of suffering so that we can touch the conditions of happiness already present, and so that we do not water the seeds of anger, despair, and fear. Understanding suffering is in service of happiness.

**00:04:32**

We can talk about tables and monks and monasteries and Walmart and flowers, but we know these are only words that have tenuous cultural associations with particular objects. I can say the word "orchid", and here is an orchid, but we do not mistake the word "orchid" for the living reality of the orchid. Everything arises due to causes and conditions, so we cannot talk about anything being ultimately real in itself, separated from everything else. Everything is connected.

**00:05:19**

The flower on the table is a process that is ongoing. It is not a permanent entity. Watching it is like watching a river of life. If we observe a plant opening in time-lapse photography, we see clearly that it behaves like a living creature — moving, changing, growing. It is not mere rhetoric to say that the flower is a process; it is like a stream, like fire, perhaps slower, but if we look deeply, we see its impermanent nature. Any

attempt to categorise or classify it, even with the simple name “flower” or “orchid”, is not sufficient.

**00:06:13**

This teaching on the historical and the ultimate dimensions helps us avoid being caught in conventions such as the word “flower” or “orchid”. These names are part of a constantly evolving, constantly shifting body of language that only has meaning because it is used publicly and within a community.

**00:06:49**

Even in Plum Village we have our own words and concepts that we use to describe particular phenomena we observe in the sangha. Many times, when a brother or sister is very upset about something, or repeats an unhelpful pattern, we say simply, “Suffering.” This does not mean we judge or criticise. It means we can already see that the person’s actions are creating suffering, and that there is suffering within them that has not yet been transformed. Saying “suffering” is a way of touching our compassion. As practitioners, we cannot see anyone as evil or bad; we see only misunderstanding and ignorance, and we want to help remove ignorance.

**00:07:56**

In India, teachers traditionally would not say, “I will teach you mathematics,” but rather, “I will remove your ignorance about mathematics.” This is the spirit of Buddhism. Mindfulness removes our ignorance about how we create suffering. The point is not to stuff our heads with Dharma knowledge so that we can give polished talks; it is to understand how not to create further suffering for ourselves and others.

**00:08:40**

Understanding the ultimate dimension helps us avoid being trapped by the conventional dimension. But we must not make the ultimate into a “thing”. Concepts such as “the unconditioned”, “God”, or “Allah” easily become mental objects, and we cling to the qualities we project onto them. That very projection becomes an obstacle to touching the unconditioned.

**00:09:31**

The flavour of the unconditioned is no flavour. It is peace, calm, and freedom from any stain or quality. Much of the suffering in the world is caused by mistaking something in the historical dimension for the ultimate. This is why religious customs arise that people then use to judge one another as good or evil, sacred or profane.

**00:10:48**

Teachings on the historical and the ultimate dimensions are skilful means. They help us notice when we are caught in an idea about another person or a thing, and they remind us to touch the unconditioned nature of the present moment. When we look for happiness in possessing something — whether the thing itself or the concept of the thing — we lose touch with the unconditioned nature that is already here.

**00:12:12**

The sixteenth tenet is connected to the second tenet. It states that the Four Noble

Truths are all conditioned, and the Four Noble Truths are all unconditioned. Both statements are true. The teaching invites us not to be trapped in categories, and helps free us from rigid ideas.

**00:13:07**

In early Buddhism, when monks and teachers tried to understand and transmit the Noble Truths more clearly, they began to categorise them. They said the first noble truth, suffering, is conditioned; the second, the making of suffering, is conditioned; the third, the cessation of suffering, is unconditioned; and the fourth, the path, is conditioned.

**00:13:59**

Other schools categorised them differently — for example, saying the last two are unconditioned. Still others made further distinctions. But Thày teaches that these attempts at categorisation are misunderstandings of the purpose of the Dharma.

**00:14:27**

The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths in the Deer Park at Sarnath, and the first disciples became enlightened. Later commentaries attempted to categorise and dissect the teaching, but this was not its original intention. The Four Noble Truths include the Noble Eightfold Path, and the point is to help us understand and transform suffering, not to create philosophical systems about them.

**00:15:05**

The first noble truth is suffering, or ill-being. The second is the making of suffering — the cause of suffering. The third noble truth is the cessation of suffering. If we understand the cause, then we can bring about the cessation. It is not very complicated: if someone is being pricked by a pin, you remove the pin and the suffering stops.

**00:16:19**

This is simple on the surface, but it turns out not to be easy. It is not easy for us to understand, at a deeper level, what causes our mental anguish and despair. We often do not understand why what we think, say, or do brings about the suffering we experience in the present moment. That is why it is not as simple as removing a pin from our arm.

**00:17:03**

The Buddha discovered, by sitting and looking deeply into his own mind, that if he could be still and truly look into the present moment, he would see that his experience — whether of happiness or of suffering — was the product of his actions in the past and in the present moment.

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In every moment there are possibilities for what can happen. As practitioners, we learn how to choose a path of less harm, so we do not continue creating suffering for ourselves or others. We soon learn that our suffering is connected to the suffering of others. Suffering is not an individual matter.

**00:18:03**

With the insight of non-self, we let go of the idea that individual suffering is cut off from collective suffering. We see a continuity between them. The Four Noble Truths can be practised right here and now in our own body and mind, but as we do so, we are also transforming collective consciousness at the same time.

**00:18:33**

We look into how this painful cause — this metaphorical pin — can be removed from our own mind and also from the collective, because what makes me suffer is also what makes others suffer.

**00:18:59**

The fourth truth is the path — the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

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Sometimes the third truth has been misunderstood. When people hear the word “cessation”, they think it means we must bring an end to life itself. They begin to think of the five skandhas — body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness — as the source of all suffering. Some monks in the Buddha’s time became so disgusted with their bodies that they believed if they simply got rid of the body, they would be free from suffering.

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This misunderstanding led to tragic outcomes. Some monks wanted to commit suicide, or even asked other monks to kill them. This is a horrible distortion of the teaching.

**00:20:00**

We must therefore be careful in how we speak about the cessation of suffering. The essence is true, but the language must be skilful. For me, it is helpful to see cessation as the extinguishing of a fire.

**00:20:17**

I often use the image of a fire: there are many pieces of wood feeding the flame. When I was young I liked going into the forest to build a small fire — I learned this in the Boy Scouts. Luckily, where I lived it was very wet and there was not much danger of forest fire. I enjoyed building a little fire and sitting near it. It brought me joy.

**00:20:44**

Only once did the fire begin to get out of control. I accidentally burned some brush I had not intended to burn, and I felt nervous, afraid I might start a forest fire. Fortunately I put it out. Through this I learned about fuel — about how to start a fire and how to stop a fire.

**00:21:11**

I learned that sometimes it is not a good idea to smother a fire, because the heat can continue underneath whatever you use to cover it, and then it might flare up again. Usually the best thing to do is to take away the fuel, to separate the burning logs, so the

flame dies down because the heat can no longer sustain itself.

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This image helps me understand cessation. We remove the fuel — the objects of craving, anger, despair — and the flame of suffering weakens on its own. We put some distance between ourselves and the things that water the seeds of our suffering.

**00:22:00**

When we are in the midst of stress, worry, or anxiety, it is very easy for our mind to become unstable, both in our family and in our work. That is why we have the monastery. We can come here to take refuge.

**00:22:21**

In the monastery we learn that we can simply sit. It is very nourishing if we can take half an hour in the morning just to sit on the cushion and follow our breathing. At that time, nobody expects anything of us. That time is entirely for us, for sitting and breathing.

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This is precious. I never tire of sitting meditation. I have no difficulty showing up in the morning because I know that for those forty-five minutes, nobody will ask me to do anything. I am in the most protected space on the planet. No matter how many tasks await — teaching, serving the sangha — in those forty-five minutes no one has the right to interrupt my breathing.

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These practices all help remove the concentrated fuel at the point of the flame so it can die down. The heat reduces simply because we stop feeding it.

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Learning to touch the unconditioned is a way of cooling the flame. We do not continue feeding the thinking or the sense-pleasures that water our seeds of desire, anger, or despair. We create some distance. This is what Sister D. referred to earlier: putting things at a distance, creating a little space so the mind can become stable again.

**00:24:30**

The monastery helps us to recognise when our mind becomes unstable due to stress or anxiety. Coming back to sitting, coming back to breathing, allows us to cool the inner flame and restore clarity. When we do not feed our craving or fear, we reduce the fuel that keeps suffering burning.

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This is why the sitting practice is so precious. When we remove the fuel, the mind becomes cool. That is cessation.

**00:25:43**

We can listen to the bell.

**00:26:18**

Because the third noble truth concerns the cessation of suffering, later Buddhist traditions categorised it as unconditioned. They said the first noble truth, suffering, is conditioned; the second, the cause of suffering, is conditioned; the path is conditioned because it involves practice — right mindfulness, right concentration, right thinking. But the third truth, cessation, they labelled as unconditioned.

**00:27:03**

Some schools of Buddhism categorised the truths in this way. Other schools taught that since the path leads to the unconditioned, the path itself should also be considered unconditioned. So they said the first two truths are conditioned and the last two are unconditioned.

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Thầy's response is that this kind of categorisation comes from a misunderstanding. Buddhism is not for describing reality. It is for overcoming suffering.

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The Buddha's teaching is not meant to provide a map of ultimate truth. It is a practical path to reduce suffering. When practitioners try to use Buddhism to explain everything, they forget that the teachings exist to help us transform suffering, not to construct an abstract philosophy.

**00:28:20**

Knowledge is never neutral; it always has intention. The Buddha taught only what was necessary to help beings wake up — like the leaves in his hand compared with the leaves in the forest.

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As practitioners, we often fall into the trap of wanting to use the Buddhist teachings as a way to explain everything. We lose sight of the point: the teachings are tools for liberation.

**00:29:15**

The Four Noble Truths describe suffering, its causes, the possibility of cessation, and the path. They are not rigid metaphysical categories. They are living practices.

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We practise the Four Noble Truths in our body and mind, and as we do so, we transform our understanding, our suffering, and our actions. This is the true purpose of the teaching.

**00:30:02**

Through the practice of science we can gain insights that are helpful, but we can also use those insights to dominate natural resources in ways that create enormous harm — the climate crisis, nuclear warfare, and so on. We have to be careful, because everything has a use, an intention behind it. People can claim they are simply

describing reality, but if we look deeply, there is always some intentionality present, even if the person themselves does not see it. As humans we have always looked at a stone and seen how to sharpen it, how to make it into a tool. This impulse is not only human; ravens, crows, macaques, and other animals also know how to use found objects as tools. It is part of life's capacity. But knowledge has often been tied to power.

**00:31:09**

For example, in 15th-century Spain, ordinary people could not simply go to a library and look at a map of Africa. Maps were hidden under royal control and only the powerful had access to them. Because knowledge is power, it cannot be viewed as entirely neutral or objective. There is always an intention or a use embedded in it, even if subtle. Nowadays we think of Wikipedia or online information as purely factual — “cold hard facts” — but if we look carefully, information always strikes us in a particular way because of its underlying intentionality.

**00:32:10**

The Buddha's teaching is for the purpose of helping us wake up and transform our suffering. The Buddha was very clear about this. He used the example of the Simsapa leaves: the leaves in his hand represented the teachings he offered, and the leaves in the forest represented everything he knew but did not teach. What he taught was only what was helpful for liberation, for the well-being of all beings.

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Today we live with a 24-hour news cycle. We can know so much about the suffering of the world and what is happening everywhere. We can continually scroll and check and consume news. I read the news too, but I recognise the need to moderate it, because the information we consume leads the mind in a particular direction. As practitioners, we want to choose what we consume and understand the effects of those sense-objects on us. This is the nature of the second noble truth — the causes of suffering. If I look at a certain thing, and later I find myself thinking about it again, wanting to return to it, then I am already aware of the seed of desire or the seed of habit energy being watered.

**00:33:42**

This is not about blaming ourselves; it is about recognising conditioning. Even subtle addiction — the impulse to check something again, to revisit a stimulus — shows that the mind is no longer touching the unconditioned. These are small conditions that arise in the mind, shaping our consciousness. Learning to see this and to cool it down is part of the practice.

**00:34:11**

I often like to rewrite the four noble truths in another form. The first noble truth is suffering, or ill-being. The second is the ignoble path, or the path of suffering — the actions, thoughts, and habits that create suffering. The third noble truth is happiness — because the cessation of suffering is the presence of happiness. The cessation of darkness is light; the cessation of ill-being is well-being. They cannot be separated.

**00:34:58**

This is why Thầy liked to use the terms ill-being and well-being. They help us see that the absence of ill-being is already well-being. They are not two separate things like two plates on a table; the absence of one is the presence of the other. So if we want to touch happiness, we learn to understand our ill-being and to remove its causes. The third noble truth tells us that happiness is possible.

**00:35:36**

The fourth noble truth is the noble path — the path of happiness. And within each of these truths there is both the conditioned and the unconditioned. That is what Thầy wants us to see: both are true at the same time.

**00:35:57**

Earlier in this series we learned that space is a conditioned dharma. Traditionally, early practitioners considered space an unconditioned dharma, because how could “space” be conditioned? Air might be conditioned, but not space. However, through science we now understand that space and time are the same fabric — the space-time continuum — and that space can bend, and therefore it is conditioned. But Thầy also says that space is unconditioned. All dharmas are conditioned, and all dharmas are unconditioned. This teaching helps us avoid running away from the conditioned world in order to find the unconditioned.

**00:36:55**

Our habit is always to run from suffering in order to find happiness somewhere else. From childhood we learn that if something unpleasant happens, we run away from it and reach for something pleasant — like an ice-cream. The moment the child starts eating the ice-cream, they forget their suffering. This becomes our lifelong strategy: get away from suffering and go toward something pleasant, and then we believe happiness will come from somewhere else.

**00:37:39**

This tenet teaches us that the unconditioned is already in the conditioned. Nirvana is not outside samsara. Samsara is the term for the impermanent nature of life, the cycle of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth — often pictured as a wheel that keeps turning. In the Buddha’s time this was not exclusively a Buddhist teaching; many spiritual traditions of the period understood life as cycling through rebirth wherever one’s karma led.

**00:38:31**

People wanted to escape this cycle, because unwholesome behaviour could lead to being reborn as an animal in unfortunate circumstances — perhaps as prey, perhaps as predator. There was a sense of cosmic retribution built into the understanding of karma. This concept was widespread at the time. But people struggled to understand it because, although they saw continuity, the idea of a narrow individual “self” was not yet as solid as it is in modern society.

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Today we are conditioned by strong individualism. But in ancient times, people tended to view personalities and behaviours as continuations of ancestors; patterns repeated across generations. Stories passed down in families would describe certain behaviours, and when a new child displayed similar habits, people thought this was a continuation — a rebirth. Today we dismiss that because we imagine each person as completely separate. But if we look deeply, we still see the same patterns repeating in the collective consciousness. Personalities emerge again and again in slightly different forms. When we see beyond the superficial layer — passports, identity documents, appearances — we see repeating patterns, just as the ancient people did.

**00:40:12**

This is a modern way to understand samsara: patterns of behaviour repeating in the collective consciousness. If we do not transform suffering deeply — in ourselves and in the collective — then the cycle continues. For example, people believed that after the Civil War in the United States, slavery had ended and everyone was free. Then, a hundred years later, the civil rights movement arose because suffering and discrimination continued. Even today, Black men and others are discriminated against, targeted by police, and treated with cruelty. The pattern repeats. Samsara continues at the collective level when suffering is not deeply transformed.

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This is why we need penetrating insight, not just surface change. We cannot simply reshuffle things on the outside and assume transformation has happened. We must look more deeply at the roots of suffering, both individually and collectively.

**00:41:51**

Seeing the unconditioned in all phenomena is the way out of samsara. The way out is not somewhere else. It is within the very things we are experiencing. Thầy often said we need to come back to the conditioned, not run away from it. True liberation is not escape; it is insight within our actual lived experience.

**00:42:20**

This is deep engaged Buddhism. We do not run away from our suffering — either inside us or outside us. Many people try to run from their own suffering by doing good deeds for others. Others want to completely heal themselves before doing anything kind for anyone else. Both extremes are unbalanced. The middle way is to practise understanding and transforming suffering while also engaging in non-harm, kindness, and generosity. We do both at the same time.

**00:43:00**

The monastery is a model for this. We practise together like potatoes in a pot: when dirty potatoes are shaken together in water, they bump into one another and clean each other. We could spend all day scrubbing each potato individually, but the collective rubbing cleans them more efficiently. Living in community is the same. Everyone around us is a mirror, helping us see our attachments, fears, and anxieties.

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Community life is endlessly interesting — more interesting than television or podcasts. Living with others reveals our habit energies and illuminates our blind spots. It is not through going on a solitary retreat that I transform the most; it is through living with my brothers and sisters, who shine light on my practice and help me see myself more clearly. Transformation happens through relationship, not isolation.

**00:44:27**

The Four Noble Truths are not an individual matter. When we practise them in our own body and mind, we are also transforming the collective. We learn how to go into our own suffering and touch the unconditioned. This is not something abstract. It is psychological, physiological, and very concrete: we learn to calm the hormonal system, the nervous system, the patterns firing in the brain. These processes happen very quickly, and without awareness we do not understand them. That is why we practise sitting, breathing, and returning to the body.

**00:44:59**

We learn not to give attention to unhelpful thinking, because thoughts are like images on a cinema screen, constantly appearing, shaped by fragments of perception, memory, sound, colour, smell. The mind generates these images again and again. Most of us believe whatever appears on this internal cinema screen. We cannot understand when others see the world differently because our own mental movie feels so compelling. This is where much of our suffering arises: we are trapped inside the film created by our consciousness.

**00:45:03**

So seeing the unconditioned in all phenomena is the teaching here. This is the way out of samsara. The way out is in the very conditions themselves. As Thầy often said, we need to learn to come back to the conditioned, not try to run away from it.

**00:45:20**

This is deep engaged Buddhism. We don't run away from our suffering, whether inside us or outside us. Many of us try to run away from our own suffering by doing good things for others. But in reality, we haven't transformed our own suffering. Others of us want to completely transform our inner suffering before doing anything kind for anyone else. Both of these are extremes.

**00:45:54**

So we try to find a middle way. We know we are on the path; we are practitioners. We are all trying to find how to transform our suffering and learn more deeply what the causes and conditions are. But it does not mean we have to wait until we are completely transformed before we act with kindness or reduce harm to others.

**00:46:20**

That is deep engaged Buddhism: doing the work of looking into ourselves to understand suffering, while simultaneously practising generosity, kindness, and non-harming. We know that until we transform our suffering at a deeper level, even with

good intentions we may cause harm to others.

**00:46:43**

This is the model of the monastery. We are like potatoes in a pot: a bunch of dirty potatoes placed together with water. You shake the pot, and the potatoes bump into one another and clean each other. You could spend all day scrubbing each potato individually, but putting them in the pot together cleans them much more efficiently. That is the spirit of practising together.

**00:47:12**

Living together reveals our habit energies. It shows us our attachments, our fears, and our anxieties. Everyone around us reflects something back to us. This makes community life extremely interesting — more interesting than the news, more interesting than television.

**00:47:38**

We learn much more about ourselves by living with others than by living alone. I know this from experience: it is not through solitary retreats that I experience the most transformation, but through living with the brothers.

**00:47:58**

The Four Noble Truths are not an individual matter. When we practise in our body and mind, we are also transforming the collective consciousness. When we go into our suffering and learn to touch the unconditioned, it affects the whole.

**00:48:20**

This is not something abstract. It is very concrete. It is psychological and physiological. When we learn to cool the flame of suffering, we calm the nervous system, the hormones, and the brain's firing patterns. These processes happen extremely fast, often without our awareness, and without the practice we cannot understand them.

**00:48:51**

We learn not to feed unhelpful thinking. Thoughts are like images on a cinema screen — sound, colour, smell, memory, habit — and the mind projects them constantly. The problem is that we often believe the screen entirely. We cannot understand why others experience the moment differently, which becomes the root of conflict and suffering.

**00:49:25**

Most of our suffering comes from our wrong perceptions — from the little movie constantly playing in our minds. We forget that what appears on the screen is not the same as reality.

**00:49:50**

What we truly have is the experience of life. This is what the Four Noble Truths are pointing to. Our experience — what we are experiencing right now — is everything. All those people with wealth, power, or pleasures still have a hole inside themselves that they are trying to fill. Do not be fooled by appearances.

**00:50:18**

The Buddha is saying: you want to be happy? Then you must go into your suffering. Only by touching suffering can you touch the unconditioned.

**00:50:40**

That is the insight Thầy wants to transmit to us with this teaching, which can seem paradoxical. The unconditioned is touched through the conditioned — through our own suffering, through our lived experience, through this body and mind.

**00:51:05**

Thank you for listening. I hope you enjoy the retreat starting tomorrow. We feel very fortunate to be able to open Deer Park to in-person retreats again. It is not only your joy — it is also our joy.

**00:51:40–End**

[Music continues until the end.]