

Plum Village 40 Tenets

Class 18 Summary Notes: Free Will Is Possible Thanks to the Three Trainings

Introduction

In this teaching from the Plum Village 40 Tenets series, the speaker, Brother Pháp Lưu, explores the bold statement that free will is possible. Drawing from monastic life, personal stories, neuroscience, and core Buddhist psychology, the talk explains how freedom becomes real through the Three Trainings: mindfulness, concentration and insight. The central question is how we stop living like automata driven by habit energy and instead establish sovereignty within ourselves.

1. Immersion in the Dharma

- Continuous exposure to the Dharma nourishes understanding naturally
- Like dew gathering on a robe, steady practice accumulates quietly
- The world urgently needs Dharma teachers
- Transmission happens through deep listening and embodiment, not intellectual effort alone
- Monastic life is a conscious choice to live entirely within the Sangha environment

2. Consumption and Habit Energy

- Even in the monastery, distractions exist; internet, comfort, preferences
- Practice requires examining how we spend time and what we consume mentally and physically
- Renunciation of material life does not automatically remove subtle attachment or habits
- Accumulation can continue in refined forms; objects, music, identity, views, behaviour
- The environment supports *letting go*; food, shelter and care are provided

3. Simplicity and Alms Round

- Root tradition: living simply and receiving food through alms
- Bhikshu means beggar; dependence fosters humility and trust
- Story of Ajahn Pasanno receiving white rice and boiled frog daily
- Simplicity exposes attachment and habit
- Freedom includes the capacity to live with very little

4. Automata and Habitual Living

- Automata were early machines imitating human movement
- Modern equivalents include artificial intelligence and robot monks
- Without mindfulness, humans behave like programmed machines
- Habit energy runs automatically; thinking, reacting, planning
- Free will is impossible if awareness is absent

5. The Three Trainings

Mindfulness

- Stopping when hearing the bell
- Becoming aware of body, speech and mind
- Recognising what is happening in the present moment
- Eating and living with awareness rather than conceptual knowledge

Concentration

- Sustained attention on a single object
- Unification of body and mind
- Protecting attention as a precious resource
- Reducing unnecessary consumption of news and stimulation

Insight

- Seeing clearly the nature of experience
- Recognising universal mental factors; contact, feeling, perception, volition
- Understanding how reactions arise
- Seeing suffering and happiness as interconnected

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6. The Two Obstacles

Obstacle of Afflictions

- Anger, despair, fear cloud perception
- Emotional states obscure parts of the mind
- Even praise cannot penetrate despair
- Mindfulness trainings reduce affliction and open compassion

Obstacle of Knowledge

- Attachment to views, even Buddhist ones
- Clinging to form rather than freedom
- Buddhism is made of non-Buddhist elements
- The raft metaphor; teachings are means, not possessions

7. Perception and Suffering

- We suffer from our perception, not reality itself
- Attachment is often to internal images, not external objects
- Cognitive dissonance generates affliction
- Seeing perception clearly loosens grasping

8. Samsara as Reactive Cycle

- Samsara described as repeated reaction
- Thoughts arise and pass repeatedly
- Living automatically equals imprisonment
- Freedom requires interruption of reactive cycles

9. Beginning Anew Practice

- Watering flowers; acknowledging strengths
- Expressing regret without excuse
- Sharing hurt from personal perception, not absolute claim
- Writing a letter can free the writer before it is received
- Harmony is prioritised over detailed re-litigation of past events
- Letting go prevents further suffering

10. Climate Crisis and Collective Karma

- Present crisis shaped by generations
- Some ancestors lived simply; others extracted violently
- Addiction to 'ancient sunlight' refers to fossil fuels
- Practice invites return to present-moment energy; wind, sun
- Community living as a model of simplicity
- Responsibility without despair

11. Attention as Freedom

- Attention is neurologically dynamic; competing neural patterns
- The mind constantly selects objects
- Feeling tone accompanies every moment of attention
- We habitually move toward pleasant and away from painful
- Practice includes allowing painful feeling without reaction
- Understanding feeling interrupts automatic behaviour

12. Volition and Free Will

- Volition is the mental factor behind action; the mental factor that initiates and directs intention, shaping our actions of body, speech and mind
- Reactions are rapid and conditioned
- Story of friend squeezing hand in meetings
- World Bank story; squeezing the hand interrupts anger
- Spiritual friendship supports freedom

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- Free will is the moment of choosing mindful breathing over reaction

13. Establishing Sovereignty

- Freedom is not automatic; it requires training
- Trauma and fear narrow the mind
- Meditation reopens space of non-fear
- Sovereignty means not being driven by affliction
- Freedom is possible in each moment

Core Thesis

Free will is not abstract philosophy. It is the lived capacity to interrupt habit energy through mindfulness, stabilise attention through concentration, and see clearly through insight. In that pause between stimulus and reaction lies the possibility of freedom.