

Meeting Summary: Class # 3: Nirvana Is the Absence of Ignorance and Afflictions, Not the Absence of the Aggregates

Introduction to Plum Village Teachings

- **The meeting began** with an introduction to Plum Village teachings focusing on the concepts of no birth, no death, no being, and no non-being, emphasizing the importance of both formal and informal Dharma teaching within the community. [07:00]
- **The monastic** who is teaching this first class is a young, white male in his thirties. His name is Thay Phap Luu and he is speaking from Deer Park Monastery in the US. He is wearing brown robes, has a shaved head, and has a gentle disposition and smile.

The Five Skandhas (Aggregates): body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness

- **Thay Phap Luu explained the five skandhas** as different aspects of human experience: body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, highlighting their impermanent and conditioned nature. [12:00]
- **Body** is presented as a manifestation of previous generations and environmental conditions, causing awareness and appreciation of its wonder. [14:00]
- **Feelings** include pleasant, painful, and neutral experiences, all of which are important for mindfulness. [17:00]
- **Perceptions** involve recognizing characteristics and signs, aiding practical interaction with the world. [19:00]
- **Mental formations** describe various emotional and cognitive states, emphasizing variability and the need to look deeply beyond surface perceptions. [22:30]. There are 51 in classical buddhism, but Thay added many more to the list. We should also look deeply and we might see new ones that haven't been discovered by past practitioners.
- **Consciousness** arises from contact between sense organs and sense objects, including six sense organs and their corresponding objects, with awareness of the additional senses beyond the classical six. [28:00]

Sense Organs and Sense Objects: forms, sounds, odors, tastes, tangibles, and thoughts

- **The 12 sense spheres (ayatanas)** involve **six sense organs** (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and their **six sense objects** (forms, sounds, odors, tastes, tangibles, and thoughts), which form the basis of consciousness and experience. Additional senses like proprioception and balance were also discussed as relevant but not explicitly included in classical lists. [29:00]

eye	forms
ear	sounds
nose	smells
tongue	tastes
body	tangibles
mind	objects of mind

This is not meant to be a complete description of reality, but also tools for our practice.

Proprioception, for example, is often called the "sixth sense," is the body's ability to perceive itself in space. It allows you to know where your body parts are, even with your eyes closed, and is crucial for balance, coordination, and smooth movement. Proprioception is mediated by specialized sensory receptors called proprioceptors, located in muscles, tendons, and joint.

There are others as well, but for practice to become free of craving and attachment these 12 are the most relevant.

Even delusion can lead to pleasant feelings.

- **Attachment often arises** from pleasant sensations perceived through the senses, such as craving for beautiful forms, sounds, tastes, odors, or touch. The speaker shared personal anecdotes about attachment to music and food as examples. [32:00]
- **When we understand** how our senses function so we can be free and not caught by perceptions. We can enjoy good food but we are aware of our experience and attachment so that we don't change our behavior because of craving.
- **It is part of the human condition** that we become attached to pleasant experiences, to touch and want to be touched for example, but we can cause trauma and suffering because an attachment to touch.

Attachment, Craving, and Delusion

- **The concept of "stickiness" or grasping (upadana skanda)** describes the tendency to cling to pleasant feelings and repel unpleasant ones, which gives rise to suffering and afflictions. [37:00] This is the earliest Buddhist texts and is found in

every tradition of Buddhism. The skandas of clinging/ grasping. If we smell a dead animal we want to go away. This probably had a function of survival for our ancestors. There is nothing wrong with noses or odours- it's the attachment.

- **How does this teaching relate to Nirvana?** (bell)
Nirvana Is the Absence of Delusion (Avidya) and Afflictions (Klesa), Not the Absence of the Aggregates (Skandha)
- **Delusion obscures** true happiness by making us believe that happiness comes from external pleasant sensations, leading to craving and dissatisfaction. [40:00] Delusion is a kind of affliction. If we use drugs and become addicted, our body loses the ability to generate joy without the drug and we need another "fix". Addiction is built into the Buddhist teaching. When we observe the impermanent nature of those feelings we can let go, and find an aspiration to live another way.
- **The Buddha's path** involves seeing the impermanence of these sensations and reducing attachment to them, thereby lessening suffering. [42:30] At one point the Buddha even practiced giving himself unpleasant feelings by starving himself and holding his breath, to get a root of this feelings and uproot fixed ideas about sensual pleasures being happiness. This is not a belief – it was a practice.

Misunderstandings in Buddhist Practice

- **Buddhism is not about getting rid** of the aggregates (skanda), sense spheres (ayetana) and the domains of existence.
- **Some misinterpretations of doctrine** exist, such as viewing the body as wholly repulsive, leading in some historical cases to tragic outcomes like suicide; the correct approach balances appreciation and understanding of impermanence to reduce attachment. [47:00]
- **Don't make silly assumptions because of terminology: e.g.** The Buddha said the body is repulsive so suicide is the solution- no don't get caught in an idea and be dogmatic. Don't be silly! The whole point is to be free, happy. We don't have to worry if our practice is not perfect. In Modern psychology we need attachment, e.g. the love for a child is for its survival. The love of two people can be a deep and meaningful attachment that happens over a long time.
- **When there is deep love** there is no need to grasp. We can see the beauty and wonder. The dharma helps us get in touch with the wonder of life. We need a deeper understanding of attachment.
- **Clarifications were made** against the view that Nirvana equals annihilation, emphasizing instead that Nirvana is freedom from delusion and afflictions while still having body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. [53:00]

Nirvana and its Nature

- **Nirvana is described** as the absence of delusion and afflictions, not the absence of the aggregates, sense spheres, or domains of existence. It involves freedom from grasping and mental afflictions even as experience continues. [50:00]
- **We practice with our senses to let go of grasping.** As we practice the obstacles become less. Knowledge can also be a kind of obstacle or delusion if we grasp onto things in a dogmatic way. Ideas and concepts can be an obstacle. We breathe without concepts! It's incredible!
- **Nirvana can be touched in moments** and is not necessarily a permanent eternal state; it is associated with clarity, peace, joy, and freedom from conceptual thought. [55:00] We can just breathe and our mind is clear: that is touching Nirvana.
- **The value of renunciation** — the practice of letting go without violently rejecting experience — was presented as a path to gradually weaken attachment and experience freedom. [58:00]

Domains of Existence (Ayatanas and Datu)

- **There are 12 ayatanas (sense spheres)** and 18 realms of existence, including six senses and six consciousness types, all continuing even when Nirvana is realized. [01:00:00]
- **It is important to understand** that Nirvana is not annihilation, but a state of freedom where one still has sensory experience without delusive grasping or affliction. [01:02:00] We see the suffering in others and can see them as part of a continuation even if they do really terrible things. This is the gradual, compassionate path of our practice.

Final Reflections and Practical Application

- **You can observe your own attachments** and cravings in daily life, such as through food preferences or media consumption, to practice mindful renunciation. [01:04:00]
 - **True happiness** arises from recognizing the impermanent, conditioned nature of experiences and embracing the wonder of life without grasping. [01:06:00]
 - **The teachings are skillful means to practice** freedom and that there are no rigid dogmas in Buddhism; questions and exploration are encouraged. [01:10:00]. Everything is practice – not conclusions.
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