

# Summary of Video Lecture #6: Nirvana Is Not a Phenomenon, but the True Nature of All Phenomena

## Introduction and Context:

[https://youtu.be/-YP\\_gR9zxPk?si=e7BAO9gfovTjneVX](https://youtu.be/-YP_gR9zxPk?si=e7BAO9gfovTjneVX)

**Brother Phap Luu** shares about the sixth tenet: "*Nirvāṇa is not a phenomenon, but the true nature of all phenomena.*" He begins by setting a tranquil scene at Deer Park, reflecting on mist on the mountain and his walk to clear a new path to a waterfall. This experience serves as a practical entry point to explore the teachings from the "40 Tenets" class series, specifically the sixth tenet. The practice of deep looking, or mindful observation, is introduced through the natural phenomenon of mist and clouds, which becomes a recurring metaphor throughout the teaching.

**He highlights how detailed observation (deep looking)** of natural phenomena serves as a living metaphor for Buddhist teachings on the nature of reality, the pitfalls of conceptual grasping, and the path to liberation through the separate investigation of signs and their true nature. It integrates practical mindfulness, philosophical subtlety, and ethical caution to offer guidance to practitioners on the path.

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## 1. Observing Mist and the Water Cycle: Horizontal Relationships of Phenomena

**Thay Phap Luu** talks about how his clothing got wet from mist during his walk, and how he thought about the water cycle—a basic scientific concept taught since grade school. The mist is explained as a manifestation of water in different forms, namely vapor, cloud, rain, and ocean water—transformations governed by conditions like sunlight and humidity. This is an example of what is called the "horizontal relationship," explained as "this is because that is," meaning one phenomenon arises due to another. (We can imagine Thay's metaphor of waves and the water- the waves are horizontal dimension, but you can look deeply into the waves to see the constant water below. Nirvana is always there below the waves.

**Brother Phap Luu emphasizes** how this observation and practice of *deep looking* can deepen through the practice of "concentration on emptiness" or "interbeing." *Emptiness* here means that phenomena are not independent or isolated but composed of multiple interrelated conditions. For example, a flower is not just a flower; it contains sun, rain, earth, and air as elements of its existence. Likewise, the cloud is not a singular isolated entity; it depends on the ocean and sunlight to manifest. Concentration on Emptiness doesn't mean the *absence* of something or *negating* something – it means acknowledging the elements or conditions of a thing beyond what it seen. Most conditions are already there for mist to manifest, the last condition manifests the mist, or the rain... so it can touch my skin and clothing.

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## 2. Emotions and Mental Formations: The Interbeing of Psychological Phenomena

**Transitioning from physical phenomena** to psychological ones, Brother Phap Luu highlights the interconnectedness of emotions with conditions and experiences. He explains how emotions like anger and happiness arise in response to a complex series of conditions reflected metaphorically by *vāsanā*, or "perfume," which refers to how past experiences color present emotions.

**The manifestation of anger or joy** is not triggered by a single event but rather by many aggregated conditions stored as "seeds" in the subconscious mind (store consciousness). These seeds respond to present stimuli, allowing emotions to emerge uniquely in each person. They are latent tendencies. "Trigger" is an oversimplistic word as it reduces our experience to one singular cause. There are many conditions caused by "perfuming" from all our experiences.

**Fear, anger etc are not simply hardwired into our brains.** For instance, a person raised in a harsh or abusive household may manifest anger very differently from someone nurtured in a compassionate environment. This

understanding broadens the traditional view of emotions as hardwired responses, acknowledging the complexity of individual conditioning.

**Brother Phap Luu suggests viewing strong emotions** as a beautiful “cinematographic experience,” appreciating their raw presence without judgment or aversion, which aligns with Buddhist teachings on mindfulness and non-attachment. We can observe a raw emotion before we start to judge it. We can watch it like watching a cloud turning into rain. We understand that there is a relationship between a sign or Lakshana in Sanscript (phenomenon) and its Nature (noumena). Lakshana is the root of the word to Look. “Cloud” is a sign – we agree what it means as a sign and signifier. We try and understand the nature of the cloud. We cannot master what the Nature is- as soon as we think we know the Nature, we are slipping back into the sign.

**So we are taught to investigate separately** sign and nature as a part of our practice. A separate investigation of phenomena (that manifests in historical dimension) and noumena (something that cannot be described with qualities). 20:39. It is impossible to describe the True Nature because it is beyond words- it is one of wonder, indescribable beauty and is a “suchness” rooted in experience of present moment. Dharma isn’t the practice of defining an ontological truth- it is a tool for training our practice.

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### 3. Horizontal vs. Vertical Investigation: Phenomena and Their True Nature

**The core teaching of the sixth tenet** is introduced here: *Nirvana Is Not a Phenomenon, but the True Nature of All Phenomena*. (21: 38)

**They distinguished between horizontal and vertical perspectives** in understanding existence. The horizontal mode involves observing relationships between phenomena—how one thing becomes or relates to another (e.g., cloud to rain). Or the waves.

**The vertical mode** is deeper and involves exploring the relationship between the “sign” (or phenomenon) and its “nature.” How the wave relates to the water. The Sanskrit term for sign is *lakshana*, which encompasses qualities, characteristics, and the conventional naming of things. Brother Phap Luu explains that when we recognize a cloud, we’re identifying a sign based on qualities like whiteness or shape. However, the “nature” of the cloud—the underlying truth—is not a phenomenon with describable qualities but what the Buddha refers to as the “noumenon,” a concept meaning that which cannot be fully described or conceptualized.

**A key insight is that “nature” or “true nature”** cannot be captured by signs or concepts; once labeled, it becomes a phenomenon. This crucial distinction invites practitioners to investigate sign and nature separately, understanding that true nature (nirvana) transcends phenomena.

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### 4. Nirvana as the Non-Phenomenon and Its Indescribability

Brother Phap Luu highlights the profound Buddhist teaching that *nirvana is not a phenomenon*—it is the true nature of all phenomena but cannot itself be described or circumscribed by qualities or signs.

He illustrates the difference with an analogy from childhood about taking apart a toy car to understand its mechanics (phenomena). While understanding the mechanics is a form of investigating phenomena, understanding “true nature” cannot be approached in the same way because it is beyond conceptualization.

The Buddha’s experiences and teachings emphasize that true nature (nirvana/tathātā or “suchness”) can only be realized directly through lived experience, beyond intellectualization. Brother Phap Luu stresses that this experience arises in the present moment, often accessed through mindfulness and practices that calm mind and body and allow one to see emotions and sensations without attachment.

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## 5. Human Struggling with Grasping and Craving Versus Natural Phenomena

**A contrast is drawn between human beings and natural phenomena.** Unlike trees or waves, humans struggle constantly with questions of identity and existence because of craving and a desire for control, power, or more of what one likes. This craving fuels suffering. Humans try to understand nature mechanistically to obtain things, rather than to realize their inherent freedom (nirvana already present).

**Brother Phap Luu cautions against** “putting nature in a box,” confusing words and concepts (signs) with the true nature of things, which must be experienced directly without attachment to concepts. He uses the metaphor of a wave in the ocean to show that the wave’s true nature is water, which it does not struggle to be. Humans, in contrast, often experience suffering due to their identification and grasping. We don’t have to struggle to intellectually understand it. Does a cloud struggle to understand it is water? It’s out human nature to grasp onto meaning. All practice is a “play” and invitation to see how our minds function.

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## 6. The Danger of Confusing Phenomena and Noumena: Examples from Teaching and Practice

**A cautionary note** is presented through examples of spiritual misunderstanding and imbalance. Brother Phap Luu recalls stories such as monks initially reluctant to teach because of fear and lack of confidence, and a humorous but serious incident with a man who had a psychotic episode convinced he had become a Buddha, culminating in dangerous behavior. This illustrates the risk of grasping too tightly to ideas of enlightenment—confusing phenomena and noumena.

**He underscores the pitfall of identifying too strongly** with the sign (concept/idea) of nirvana, mistaking it for the real experience. True practitioners are humble, aware of their continuing challenges and free of ego-driven claims to enlightenment, unlike those caught in delusion or arrogance. Jorge Luis Borges wrote a story about men who wanted to make a 1:1 map the size of the planet. How arrogant!

**The teaching isn’t there to create a philosophy,** its there for us to *free ourselves from concepts* and that can only be tasted through lived experience. We already are our true nature, we have just lost touch with it through a clouding of the mind.

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## 7. The Role of Sangha and Teachers in the Path

**Brother Phap Luu stresses the importance** of studying with teachers and practicing within a community (sangha) to avoid pitfalls of misunderstanding and ego attachment. Alone, one may get stuck in mistaken concepts, such as raising phenomena to the level of noumena and become fixated on ideas rather than direct experience. Soaking up Dharma rain – being around those who practice is Living dharma.

**He recommends using the Dharma as a tool,** a kind of “brain washing” or purification of the mind to nurture wholesome seeds in the mind, not simply to accumulate intellectual knowledge.

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## 8. The Metaphor of the Sugar Cane and Skillful Means

**The teaching concludes** with a metaphor from Thich Nhat Hanh: the Dharma is like sugar cane—chew on it to extract sweetness (direct experience), but spit out the fibers (concepts, signs). The Dharma is not for accumulating concepts but for liberation from concepts.

**Practitioners are invited** to develop intelligence in looking at phenomena clearly without getting caught, balancing understanding of phenomena with recognition of true nature beyond signs.

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## 9. Broader Implications: Religious Misunderstandings and Inter-Religious Conflict

**Brother Phap Luu connects this Buddhist insight** to wider religious traditions, noting that many faiths hold a similar separation between the sacred (noumenon) and profane (phenomena). Misunderstandings arise when people treat phenomena as noumena—conflating words, images, or symbols with ultimate reality. This often causes conflict, dogmatism, and division.

**He stresses that the teaching** of separate investigation of sign and nature can help avoid these pitfalls and lead to liberation and peace.

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## 10. Closing Reflections and Q&A Invitation

**The video ends** with an encouragement to ask questions and engage further with these teachings. Brother Phap Luu emphasizes integrating study, practice, and community support to deepen understanding and avoid common errors on the spiritual path.

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### Key Concepts and Terms

- **Horizontal Relationship:** The waves. The cause-effect relationship between phenomena (e.g., cloud becomes rain) in the historical dimension.
  - **Vertical Relationship:** Relationship between phenomena (signs) and their true nature (noumena). Indescribable Nirvana is already there in all phenomena, like water in a wave. Stop the struggle to see the wonder.
  - **Sign (*Laksana*):** Qualities, characteristics, or names used to describe phenomena.
  - **Nature (Noumenon):** The true, indescribable essence that transcends signs and exists in everything.
  - **Interbeing / Emptiness:** The idea that things are not independent but arise due to conditions.
  - **Nirvana:** True nature, the unconditioned, inside all phenomena and beyond description. The extinction of all concepts and notions as experienced in the present moment.
  - **Vāsanā (Perfume):** Latent tendencies in the mind shaped by past experiences.
  - **Five Skandhas:** Components of human existence; identification with them causes suffering.
  - **Tathātā (Suchness):** The Buddha's term for the ultimate nature of reality, "just like that." Or "Suchness"
  - **Sugar Cane Metaphor:** Using teachings to extract the sweetness of experiential insight, not to choke on the fibres by grasping too tightly onto concepts.
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