

SUMMARY NOTES CLASS 9, TENET 9: The Three Dharma Seals Are Impermanence, Non-Self and Nirvana

<https://www.youtube.com/live/o3myWgdiAll?si=VJ54VhR0tDt4UNGr>

The Three Doors of Liberation: Are Impermanence, Non-Self and Nirvana

Emptiness: Concentration, Not Belief: “Emptiness is only useful as a concentration, not as a belief.” (00:19:31)

Emptiness is not a metaphysical belief but a method of training the mind. It helps us recognize that everything, including the body and feelings, is made of non-self elements—therefore, not graspable as “me” or “mine.”

Dependent Origination and Interbeing: “The flower is made only of non-flower elements.” (00:21:17)

Understanding dependent origination helps us transcend the illusion of a separate self. We are a continuation of conditions—parents, food, education, etc.

Grasping at Identity and the Five Skandhas: “I’m not a racist, I’m not a sexist” — yet actions cause suffering. (00:23:52) Despite self-image, unexamined behavior may perpetuate harm. The teaching invites letting go of the illusion of permanence and inherent self in the five skandhas (body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness).

Breaking Free from Extreme Views

Timestamps: 00:32:44 – 00:43:42

Middle Way: Beyond Being and Non-Being: “To be or not to be — that is not the question.” (00:35:30). We are cautioned against attaching to fixed views like “I am a good person” or “I am a failure.” These extremes distort the truth of impermanence and interdependence.

Emptiness in the Everyday

Timestamps: 00:43:42 – 01:01:00

Sacred in the Mundane: “Even the coyote poop is sacred.” (00:53:26) Nothing is outside the reach of emptiness. By recognizing this, we let go of dualistic thinking between sacred and profane, and understand that transformation happens in the mud, not away from it.

Touching the Unconditioned: “With mindfulness, happiness comes to be.” (00:44:34) True freedom and happiness arise not from escaping life but from embracing it deeply and mindfully.

Signlessness and the Practice of Letting Go

01:01:00 Beyond Appearances: “Our joyfulness is steady when we’re in touch with the unconditioned nature.” (01:01:00). Through concentration on signlessness, we free ourselves from chasing outward signs of happiness and instead touch the depth of the present moment.

Creating Space for Transformation: “I look carefully for spaces in between the feeling of anger manifesting.” (01:11:40)

By practicing mindfulness, we create moments of neutrality that can grow and eventually dissolve painful emotions.

Aimlessness: No Need to Chase Happiness

01:15:01 – 01:20:51 Happiness Is Not a Destination: “Every step is joy, every step is freedom.” (01:19:01). Aimlessness teaches us to stop projecting happiness into the future and recognize the possibility of contentment in the now.

The Ninth Tenet: The Three Dharma Seals

Timestamps: 01:20:51 – 01:35:13

1. Impermanence: “Any teaching that is true dharma always has the teaching of impermanence.” (01:25:10) Everything changes. Holding onto permanence causes suffering, not impermanence itself.

2. No-Self: “No self here means no separate self.” (01:28:29). No entity exists independently. Things are composed only of non-self elements, which we can observe through mindful concentration.

3. Nirvana: “If there were no unconditioned, there would be no freedom.” (01:29:31). Nirvana represents the unconditioned. Touching it is essential for liberation and is considered the heart of Plum Village teaching.

“We need the insight of nirvana, or we risk falling into materialism or nihilism.” (01:30:26)

Additional Reflections and Closing

01:33:31 – 01:36:01 Suffering Is Not the Whole Story: “There is suffering, but not only suffering.” (01:33:31) While suffering is acknowledged, nirvana—peace and freedom—is emphasized as central to the Dharma. Without it, the teaching lacks its liberating potential. “If you just realize that [the dharma gives sufficient conditions to manifest as a Buddha], then you become the wealthiest person on earth.” (01:06:44)

Understanding the Dharma Through Its Seal: “How can we tell that a teaching is the Dharma? We can tell by the seal, by the quality, the sign.” (01:24:15) Just like an emperor’s seal authenticates a message, the Dharma bears its own distinguishing marks. These signs — impermanence, no-self, and nirvana — allow us to recognize a true teaching of the Buddha.

1. Impermanence: The Core of Dharma

“Any teaching that is a true Dharma always has the teaching of impermanence.” (01:25:10) Clinging to the idea of permanence is an extreme view. All things, from protons to perceptions, change. “Everything—the grasping, the grasper, and the thing we grasp—are empty and impermanent.” (01:26:41). Our suffering arises not from change itself, but from resisting it.

2. No-Self: Emptiness of Inherent Identity

“No self here means no separate self. Things are only made of non-it elements.” (01:28:29). This seal reiterates the insight from the concentration on emptiness: that no thing exists independently. The self is not a fixed essence but a constellation of conditions. “The three doors of liberation help us to see the Dharma in things.” (01:27:30)

3. Nirvana: Touching the Unconditioned: “If there were no unconditioned, there would be no freedom.” (01:29:31). Nirvana is not an escape but the realization of the unconditioned nature of things. It is not outside of life but in the depth of present awareness.

“Touching the unconditioned nature of nirvana... we cannot remove that — that is Thầy’s insight.” (01:30:26). While other traditions may list suffering as a Dharma seal, the Plum Village teaching asserts that without Nirvana, the teaching lacks completeness.

The Role of Suffering: “Yes, there is suffering — but not only suffering. There is the possibility of happiness and freedom.” (01:33:31). Suffering is essential for transformation. It is not excluded, but it must not eclipse the insight of nirvana.

“Without the mud, there’s no lotus.” (01:33:31). The suffering body is not merely suffering—it is also the doorway to awakening. Misunderstanding this can lead to nihilism, as seen in the story of monks who believed death would free them from suffering.

Plum Village's Contribution to the Dharma: “We cannot have the three Dharma seals without Nirvana — that is the insight of Plum Village.” (01:33:31). The integration of Nirvana into the Dharma seals marks a distinctive offering of Thầy’s transmission. His commitment to early texts (e.g., the Channa Sutta) supports this perspective. “Thầy dedicated a lot of his energy to translating early Buddhist texts... you’ll find the three Dharma seals of impermanence, no-self, and nirvana as peace.” (01:35:13)

Closing Announcements and Practice Reminder: The bell sounds three times to close the session, inviting mindfulness.
