Study Notes:
Part 3, Chapter Seventeen: The Two Truths

Core Concept: Relative vs Absolute Truth

The chapter introduces the Buddhist framework of two kinds of truth:

- **Relative or worldly truth (*samvriti satya*):** The realm of everyday experience where we distinguish between happiness and suffering. This is the "door" through which we enter practice. We start here by recognising pain and joy and moving towards increased well-being.
- **Absolute truth (*paramartha satya*):** The ultimate reality where the distinction between suffering and happiness dissolves ("not two"). It is characterised by no-birth, no-death, and the extinction of concepts.

Key Principle: You cannot skip relative truth to reach absolute truth. One must walk the path of daily experience (relative) to eventually realise the non-duality of existence (absolute). Trying to "transcend" joy and suffering theoretically without living through them is incorrect.

Key Metaphors & Illustrations:

1. The Wave and the Water

- Wave = Relative Self: Defined by signs (high/low, beginning/end, beautiful/ugly). The wave suffers from fear of death and complexes of superiority/inferiority because it believes it is a separate entity with a limited lifespan.
- Water = Absolute Nature (True Self): No birth, no death, no distinct identity. A wave *is* water.
- Insight: When the wave recognises it is made of water, its fears vanish. Liberation is the ability to move from the world of signs (wave) to the world of true nature (water). We need the relative life of the wave, but we must touch the water within to find peace.

2. The Cow and the Yogurt

- Thich Nhat Hanh's breakfast anecdote illustrates Interbeing. The cow eats grass to make yogurt; he eats the yogurt to give a Dharma talk.
- This demonstrates that there is no isolated self. We are continuations of previous generations (ancestors/nature) and future ones (students/descendants). Seeing this prevents us from being caught in our "small self" and removes the fear of dying, as we continue through others.

3. The Hens About to be Slaughtered

- One hen compares rice to corn (Relative Joy).
- She fails to see the greater joy of simply being alive and not yet slaughtered (Absolute Joy).
- Practice allows us to taste both levels: transforming immediate suffering into relative relief, and ultimately resting in the absolute joy of existence beyond concepts.

The Four Noble Truths Revisited

The chapter reconciles apparent contradictions between different sutras:

- Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma: Teaches the Four Noble Truths (Suffering, Cause, Cessation, Path) as Relative Truth to help beginners enter practice.
- Heart Sutra (Avalokiteshvara): States there is *no* suffering, cause, cessation, or path. This is Absolute Truth.
    - *Explanation:* Suffering is "empty" because it is made entirely of non-suffering elements. Whether something causes suffering depends on perception and conditions (e.g., cold air hurts if you're naked, but feels fresh if you're dressed). Suffering is not an objective, fixed object.

Reconciliation: With the eyes of interbeing, the Two Truths are compatible. Relative truth is the tool; absolute truth is the destination.

The Five Remembrances

Daily recitations to confront impermanence and reduce fear:

1. I am of the nature to grow old.
2. I am of the nature to have ill-health.
3. I am of the nature to die.
4. All that is dear to me will change/be separated from me.
5. My actions are my only true belongings; I cannot escape their consequences.

Purpose: These use relative truth to make friends with our fears. By acknowledging aging, sickness, and death as inevitable parts of the relative process, we stop resisting them, which allows us to appreciate the present moment more deeply. In absolute terms, however, there is no birth or death.

Non-Self and Interbeing

- Human Beings as Non-Human Elements: A human is composed entirely of non-human elements (air, water, forests, animals, minerals). To protect humans, we must protect the environment (echoing deep ecology and the Diamond Sutra).
- Living vs Inanimate: The line between living beings and inanimate objects is a concept to be removed. Paper, roses, and clouds are "formations" (*samskara*) just like anger or love.
- Removing Notions: We suffer because we hold four main notions:
    1. Self
    2. Person
    3. Living Being
    4. Life Span Removing these notions allows us to touch the dimension of no-birth and no-death (Nirvana/God/Ultimate Reality).

Nirvana and Concepts

- Definition: Nirvana means "extinction"—specifically, the extinction of all concepts and notions.
- Concepts vs Reality: Our mental images (concepts) of things (Paris, a partner, ourselves) never fully coincide with reality itself. Meditation helps close this gap.
- The Rose Example: "A rose is not a rose. That is why it is an authentic rose." A true flower contains sunshine, clouds, time, space, etc. If we cling to the *concept* of a rose, we miss the *real* rose.
- Diamond Sutra Logic: "A is not A. That is why it is truly A." This dialectic encourages transcending rigid definitions to touch the dynamic, interconnected reality.

Practical Application

- Embrace Suffering: Do not run from pain. Acknowledge it, understand its causes, and look deeply into it. The way out of suffering lies within a deep investigation of suffering itself (First Noble Truth).
- Simultaneous Listening: Listen to the bell with your ears (relative) and with the ears of your ancestors/children (absolute). Live in both dimensions at once.
- No Need to Die to Enter Nirvana: You do not have to die to enter the Kingdom of God/Nirvana. You only need to dwell deeply in the present moment.
- Avatamsaka Sutra Principle: All dharmas enter one dharma; one dharma enters all dharmas. Deep practice of any single teaching reveals all others.

Summary Quote:

"We shouldn't allow relative truth to imprison us and keep us from touching absolute truth. Looking deeply into relative truth, we penetrate the absolute. Relative and absolute truths inter-embrace."

Part 3, Chapter Eighteen: The Three Dharma Seals

Introduction

The **Three Dharma Seals** (*Dharma mudra*) are impermanence (*anitya*), non-self (*anatman*), and nirvana. Any teaching that does not bear these three seals cannot be said to be a teaching of the Buddha. They function as a test of authenticity: they help us recognise whether a teaching genuinely reflects the Buddha's insight.

Note on terminology: In the Southern Transmission, the three seals are often given as impermanence, suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self. However, in the *Samyukta Agama*, the Buddha taught impermanence, non-self, and nirvana. This chapter follows the latter formulation, treating nirvana rather than dukkha as the third seal.

Tháy sees Suffering as a feeling that arises from conditions, e.g. when we cling to what is impermanent and selfless, rather than as a basic element of existence.

Key Concepts

1. The First Dharma Seal: Impermanence

Everything is impermanent — flowers, tables, mountains, political regimes, bodies, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Nothing can be found that is permanent.

Impermanence as practice, not philosophy

- Knowing that flowers decompose does not prevent us from loving them; indeed, we love them more precisely because we know how to treasure them while they are still alive.
- If we learn to look at a flower in a way that reveals its impermanence, we will not suffer so deeply when it dies. Impermanence is therefore not merely an idea but a practice that helps us touch reality.
- When studying impermanence (or other teachings), we should always ask: *"Is there anything in this teaching that has to do with my daily life, my daily difficulties, my suffering?"* If we treat impermanence as mere philosophy, it ceases to be the Buddha's teaching. We must nourish our insight into impermanence all day long.

Time and space

- Looking deeply into impermanence, we see that things change because their causes and conditions change. From the point of view of time we speak of "impermanence"; from the point of view of space we speak of "non-self."
- Things cannot remain themselves for two consecutive moments, so nothing can be called a permanent "self." Before you entered this room, you were different physically and mentally. Looking deeply at impermanence, we see non-self; looking deeply at non-self, we see impermanence. They are the same, and we cannot accept one while rejecting the other.

Impermanence gives confidence, peace, and joy

- Impermanence does not have to lead to suffering. Without impermanence, life could not be: without it, a daughter could not grow up, and oppressive political regimes would never change.
- The Buddha gave the example of a dog struck by a stone that grew angry at the stone. It is not impermanence that makes us suffer; it is wanting things to be permanent when they are not.
- Appreciating impermanence teaches us to respect and value every moment and all the precious things around and within us. Practising mindfulness of impermanence makes us fresher and more loving.

Transformation

- Impermanence is what makes transformation possible. We should learn to say, *"Long live impermanence,"* for thanks to impermanence we can change suffering into joy.
- If we practise the art of mindful living, then when things change we will have no regrets; we can smile, knowing we did our best to enjoy each moment and to make others happy.
- When we get into an argument with someone we love, the teaching invites us to close our eyes and imagine ourselves three hundred years from now; when we open our eyes, we will only want to embrace one another and acknowledge how precious each of us is.

Touching the ground of being

- Living deeply, we touch the foundation of reality, nirvana, the world of no-birth and no-death.
- Touching impermanence deeply, we touch the world beyond permanence and impermanence, and see that "being" and "non-being" are merely notions.
- Nothing is ever lost; nothing is ever gained.

2. The Second Dharma Seal: Non-Self

Nothing has a separate existence or a separate self. Everything has to **inter-be** with everything else.

The cookie story

- At Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, tasting peanut butter cookies for the first time, Thay imagined that the moment each cookie left the bowl of dough and was placed on the tray, it began to think of itself as separate. The baker knows better and feels compassion for them: originally they are all one, and even now the happiness of each cookie is the happiness of all the others. Yet the cookies develop "discriminative perception" (*vikalpa*) and set up barriers between themselves. In the oven they bicker! "Get out of my way," "I am brown and beautiful, and you are ugly!" We tend to behave in exactly this way, and it causes much suffering. If we know how to touch our non-discriminating mind, our happiness and the happiness of others increase manifold.

Seeing interbeing

- We all have the capacity to live with non-discriminating wisdom, but we must train ourselves to see in this way, that the flower is us, the mountain is us, our parents and children are all us.
- When we see that everyone and everything belongs to the same stream of life, our suffering vanishes. Non-self is not a doctrine or philosophy but an insight that helps us live more deeply, suffer less, and enjoy life more.

Tolstoy's story of A and B

- A suffered greatly because of B, and his only motive in life was to eradicate B. Visiting a sage, he was offered water, washed, and then told, *"Now you are B."* Astonished, A protested, but the sage brought a mirror: in it, A saw B. Every movement A made, B in the mirror repeated; A's voice became B's voice, and A felt B's feelings. He tried to return to himself but could not.
- The lesson: we should practise until we can see Muslims as Hindus and Hindus as Muslims, Israelis as Palestinians and Palestinians as Israelis, until we see that each person is us and that we are not separate from others. Like the cookies, we think we are separate and oppose one another, when in fact we are all of the same reality. We are what we perceive. This is the teaching of non-self, of interbeing.

Emptiness of the five aggregates

- When Avalokiteshvara declared that eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind are empty, he meant that they cannot exist by themselves alone; they must inter-be with everything else.
- Our eyes would not be possible without non-eye elements, which is why they have no separate existence. Understanding this requires training.

Made of elements that are not you

- During any single hour, different elements enter you and others fly out. Your happiness and your very existence comes from things that are not you.
- Your mother is happy because you are happy, and you are happy because she is happy; happiness is not an individual matter.
- A daughter cannot find happiness by simply running away from home, because she carries her family within her. There is nothing she can leave behind or get rid of, even if she runs away and tells no one where she is going. Her store consciousness carries all the seeds, and she cannot shed a single one.

Keys to unlock reality

- The teachings of *impermanence* and *non-self* were offered as <u>keys to unlock the door of reality.</u>
- We must train ourselves to look in such a way that, when we touch one thing, we touch everything, that the one is in the all and the all is in the one.
- We touch not only the phenomenal aspects of reality but the ground of being. Things are impermanent and without self, and undergo birth and death; yet if we touch them very deeply, we touch the ground of being that is free from birth and death, free from permanence and impermanence, self and non-self.

3. The Third Dharma Seal: Nirvana

Nirvana is the ground of being, the substance of all that is. A wave does not have to die in order to become water; water is the substance of the wave, and the wave is already water. We are the same: we carry within us the ground of interbeing, nirvana, the world of no-birth and no-death, no permanence and no impermanence, no self and no non-self.

Nirvana is the complete <u>silencing of concepts</u>. The notions of impermanence and non-self were offered as instruments of practice, not as doctrines to worship, fight, or die for.

The raft metaphor

- *"My dear friends,"* the Buddha said, *"the Dharma I offer you is only a raft to help you cross over to the other shore."*
- The raft is not to be held onto as an object of worship; it is a tool or instrument for crossing to the shore of well-being.
- If you are caught in the Dharma, it is no longer the Dharma. Impermanence and non-self belong to the world of phenomena, like waves; nirvana is the ground of all that is.
- Waves do not exist outside the water, and if we know how to touch the waves, we touch the water at the same time.
- Nirvana does not exist separately from impermanence and non-self; using those tools to touch reality, we touch nirvana in the here and now.

Extinction of notions

- Nirvana is the extinction of all notions: birth is a notion, death is a notion, being is a notion, non-being is a notion.

- In daily life we deal with these relative realities, but if we touch life more deeply, reality reveals itself differently. We think that being born means going from nothing to something, from non-being to being, and that dying means the reverse. But the Buddha said, *"There is no birth and no death, no being and no non-being,"* offering us impermanence, non-self, interbeing, and emptiness to discover the true nature of reality.
- In the Heart Sutra we repeatedly affirm that there is no birth and no death, but reciting is not enough, the sutra is an instrument for investigating the true nature of ourselves and the world.

The sheet of paper

- When we look deeply at a sheet of paper, we think see came into existence at a moment in a factory, but before it was recognisable as paper, it was something else: a tree, a branch, sunshine, clouds, the earth. Asked to tell its adventures, it would say, *"Talk to a flower, a tree, or a cloud, and listen to their stories."*
- Our own story is much the same. Before we were born, we were already present in our mother, our father, and our ancestors. The koan *"What was your face before your parents were born?"* is an invitation to look deeply and identify ourselves in time and space. We were already here in many forms; the day of our birth was only a day of continuation. Instead of singing "Happy Birthday" we might sing "Happy Continuation."
- The French scientist Lavoisier, who was not a Buddhist and did not know the Heart Sutra, stated, *"Nothing is born, nothing dies."*
- If we burn a sheet of paper, it is not reduced to non-being; it transforms into smoke, heat, and ash. Put that "continuation" in the garden, and later, during walking meditation, we may see a little flower and recognise it as the rebirth of the paper. The smoke becomes part of a cloud in the sky, continuing the adventure; tomorrow a little rain may fall on our head, and we will recognise the paper saying, *"Hello."* The heat touches our body and is part of the cosmos. The paper clearly continues even after burning- which is only a moment of continuation.

The cloud becoming rain.

- When a cloud is about to become rain, she is not afraid, she may even be excited. Being a cloud floating in the blue sky is wonderful, but being rain falling on fields, ocean, or mountains is also wonderful; as she falls, the cloud sings.
- Looking deeply, we see that birth is just a notion and death is a notion. Nothing can be born from nothing. When we touch the sheet of paper, the cloud, or our grandmother deeply, we touch the nature of no-birth and no-death, and we are free from sorrow.
- We already recognise them in many other forms. This is the insight that helped the Buddha become serene, peaceful, and fearless, the teaching that liberates us from fear and sorrow.

Extinction of ideas

- Nirvana means extinction, above all the extinction of ideas, the ideas of birth and death, existence and non-existence, coming and going, self and other, one and many.
- All these ideas cause us to suffer. We fear death because ignorance gives us an illusory idea of what death is; we are disturbed by ideas of existence and non-existence because we have not understood the true nature of impermanence and non-self.
- We worry about our own future but fail to worry about the future of the other, because we fail to see the interbeing of our happiness with others'. This idea of Self and other gives rise to immeasurable suffering.
- To extinguish these ideas we must practise. Nirvana is a fan that helps us extinguish the fire of all our ideas, including the ideas of permanence and self; that fan is our daily practice of looking deeply.

The Eight Concepts and the Eight No's of the Middle Way

- Buddhism speaks of the Eight Concepts: birth, death, permanence, dissolution, coming, going, one, and many. The practice of ending attachment to these eight ideas is called the Eight No's of the Middle Way: no birth and no death, no permanence and no dissolution, no coming and no going, no one and no many.
- In thirteenth-century Vietnam, after a Dharma talk, someone asked Master Tuệ Trung a question, and he replied, *"Having offered complete release from the Eighth Concepts, what further explanation could I possibly give?"*
- Once these eight ideas are destroyed, we touch nirvana, release from the Eight Concepts and also from their opposites: impermanence, non-self, Interdependent Co-Arising, emptiness, and the Middle Way. If we hold onto the Three Seals as fixed ideas, those ideas too must be destroyed. The best way is to put these teachings into practice in daily life; experience always goes beyond ideas.

Right here in the world of birth and death

- The tenth-century Vietnamese master Thiên Hôi told his students, *"Be diligent in order to attain the state of no-birth and no-death."*
- When a student asked where they could touch the world of no-birth and no-death, he answered, *"Right here in the world of birth and death."*

- To touch the water, we must touch the waves; if we touch birth and death deeply, we touch the world of no-birth and no-death.

Nirvana in this very life

- Impermanence, non-self, Interdependent Co-Arising, and the Middle Way are all keys to open the door of reality; there is no point leaving them in our pockets. When we understand impermanence and non-self, we are already free of much suffering and in touch with nirvana.
- Nirvana is not something to look for in the future; as a Dharma Seal it is present in every one of the Buddha's teachings. The nirvana-nature of the candle, the table, and the flower is revealed in the teachings, just as their impermanent and non-self natures are.
- Consider a meeting where everyone states their own opinions and disagrees with everyone else's. Afterwards, exhausted by all the words and anger, we step out into the garden, where the air is fresh, birds are singing, and the wind whistles in the trees. Life out here is quite different. There are still sounds and images, but they are refreshing and healing.
- Nirvana is not the absence of life. *Drishtadharma nirvana* means "nirvana in this very life." Nirvana means pacifying, silencing, or extinguishing the fire of suffering. It teaches that we already are what we want to become; we do not have to run after anything anymore. We only need to return to ourselves and touch our true nature, and when we do, we have real peace and joy.

"This morning, I wake up and discover that I've been using the sutras as my pillow. I hear the excited buzzing of the diligent bees preparing to rebuild the universe. Dear ones, the work of rebuilding may take thousands of lifetimes, but it has already been completed just that long ago."
— Thich Nhat Hanh, "Butterflies Over the Golden Mustard Fields," in *Call Me By My True Names*

In the *Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters*, the Buddha says, *"My practice is non-action, non-practice, and non-realisation."* What we seek does not lie outside of ourselves.

Criteria for Recognising Authentic Teachings

- Any teaching that does not bear the mark of the Three Dharma Seals, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path is not authentically Buddhist.
- Sometimes only two seals are taught (suffering and nirvana); sometimes four (impermanence, non-self, nirvana, and suffering). But suffering is not a basic element of existence, it is a result of conditions, a feeling; When we insist that something impermanent and without self be permanent and have a self, we suffer.
- The Buddha taught that when suffering is present, we must identify it and take the necessary steps to transform it; he did not teach that suffering is always present. In Mahayana Buddhism there is also the teaching of One Dharma Seal: the seal of the True Mark. The teachings of one, two, and four Dharma Seals were all introduced after the Buddha passed away.
- We practise the Three Dharma Seals to realise liberation. Memorising a 5,000-page book on the Three Dharma Seals is of no use if we do not *apply the teachings in daily life*. Only by using our intelligence and putting the teachings into practice can they bring us happiness. We should base our practice on our own lives and experiences, our successes and our failures. The Buddha's teachings are jewels, but we must dig deep to touch them fully.
- Several further criteria help us navigate the sutras and determine whether a teaching represents a correct understanding of the Dharma: the **Two Relevances**, the **Four Standards of Truth**, and the **Four Reliances**.

The Two Relevances

1. **Relevance to the Essence.** The essence is the Three Dharma Seals. Whatever a teacher says must be in accord with the Buddha's teachings on impermanence, non-self, and nirvana. When we understand the Three Seals deeply, we bring them into every situation of daily life.
2. **Relevance to the Circumstance.** What a teacher shares must fit the situation and mentality of those addressed, so that the teaching is appropriate. If it is not appropriate, it is not the true Dharma, even if it sounds like the Dharma. A teacher must not merely repeat the Buddha's words like a tape player popping in a cassette. She must ask: *To whom am I speaking? On what stage is their life set? What are their beliefs, concerns, and aspirations?* Looking deeply this way brings love and compassion into whatever she says. One cannot offer the right medicine without knowing the patient's illness.

In a Dharma discussion, each word we say should be relevant to both the Essence and the Circumstance: speak in accord with the teachings of impermanence, non-self, and nirvana, and speak directly to those present, taking into account their experience, knowledge, and insight. There may be things we consider important but cannot say to a particular group. The Two Relevances require us to speak with skillfulness, tolerance, and care.

The Four Standards of Truth (siddhanta)

Another guide for understanding the Buddha's teachings.

- **The worldly.** The teaching is offered in the language of the world so that those in the world can understand. We must take into account contemporary cosmologies, arts, philosophies, and metaphysics. For example, we call the days Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and divide time into days, months, and years to express truth relatively, for convenience. When the Buddha says he was born in Lumbini, it accords with the First Standard.
- **The person.** As we read the Buddha's discourses, we remember that his words varied according to the needs and aspirations of his listeners. When he taught, he was deeply aware of the particular assembly, and what he said was specifically addressed to them.
- **Healing.** When the Buddha spoke, it was always to cure the particular illness of those he addressed. Everyone has some illness that needs healing. When we speak to express healing, what we say will always be helpful.
- **The absolute.** The Buddha expressed absolute truth directly and unequivocally. He said there is no self even when people did not believe or agree, because he knew it was true. Fifteenth-century explorers said the world was round even when the community threatened to imprison them for saying so.

We can use these Four Standards to understand the sutras as we read them.

The Four Reliances

A list formulated by later teachers, not by the Buddha.

- **Rely on the teaching, not the person.** We can learn even from a teacher who does not practise everything he teaches. The author's fifth-grade teacher, Miss Lien, often wore high-heeled shoes; one day she wrote on the blackboard, *"Never wear high-heeled shoes. You might twist your ankle."* Another teacher, a heavy smoker, taught the health hazards of smoking even sixty years ago; when the class laughed, he replied, *"Do as I say, not as I do."* At the Institute of Buddhist Studies, the teaching was that if a precious jewel is in a garbage can, we must dirty our hands to retrieve it — recalling the monk who had memorised all the sutras: not an easy person or a good practitioner, yet the other monks endured him and encouraged him to recite the sutras so they could be written down. *(The author adds that, personally, the relationship between teacher and student rests on the trust that the teacher practises what he teaches — teaching by example, by the way we live. Perhaps the ancestral teachers thought it so rare to find such a person that waiting for one might mean missing the chance to benefit from the teachings available now.)*
- **Rely on discourses of absolute truth, not relative truth.** The author feels uneasy about this standard, because it does not show how discourses explaining absolute truth relate to those explaining relative truth. In fact, sutras teaching absolute truth can be better understood in the light of sutras teaching relative truth. We should not think that practical discourses such as the Five Mindfulness Trainings are unworthy of attention, and that we should study only the Avatamsaka and Lotus Sutras. We need to know how to move from down-to-earth sutras to less down-to-earth ones; training in the most basic discourses enables us to grasp the more esoteric ones more easily.
- **Rely on the meaning, not the words.** With an overall view of how the Buddha teaches, and an understanding of the context and circumstances of a particular teaching, we will not extrapolate inappropriately or use his words out of context. Then, when an error arises through inaccurate transmission, we can rectify it ourselves.
- **Rely on the insight of looking deeply (*jñāna*), not on differentiation and discrimination (*vijñāna*).*** Nevertheless, it is important to be able to discriminate when reading the sutras, so we know according to which of the Four Standards of Truth the Buddha is teaching. We can rely on discriminative as well as non-discriminative wisdom.

Themes for Reflection

- **Practice over philosophy:** Each seal is a way of looking, not a belief to be memorised. The constant question is whether the teaching touches our daily life and suffering.
- **Interdependence:** Self and other, one and all, are inseparable. Happiness is shared, not individual.
- **Continuation over birth and death:** Nothing is created from nothing or lost into nothing; everything continues in new forms.
- **Nirvana here and now:** Liberation is not a future destination but the ground of being accessible in this very life, in the garden, in the breath.
- **Appropriateness in sharing:** Speaking the Dharma rightly means matching the teaching to both its essence and the audience.
- **Using the keys:** The seals and standards are tools to be used, not objects to be clung to.

Discussion Questions

1. Impermanence is "more than an idea, it is a practice." Can you think of a recent moment when noticing impermanence changed how you related to something (a person, a season, a situation)? What shifted?
2. Why did Thay include nirvana rather than Suffering (Dukka) as the third seal? How does treating suffering as a *feeling* rather than a basic element of existence change the way we approach difficult emotions?
3. Reflect on the cookie story. Where in your own life do you notice "discriminative perception" (*vikalpa*) setting up barriers, in yourself or in groups? What would touching a non-discriminating mind feel like in that situation?
4. Tolstoy's story ends with A unable to come back to himself once he sees B in the mirror. How does this image illuminate conflicts we perceive as "me versus them"? Is there a conflict in your life where seeing the other as yourself might change the dynamic?
5. The sheet-of-paper passage asks us to see our birth as "a day of continuation." How does reframing birthdays as "Happy Continuation" alter your sense of identity and belonging?
6. Master Thiên Hôi said the world of no-birth and no-death can be touched "right here in the world of birth and death." How might this reframe the way you understand meditation or spiritual practice, as escape, or as deeper engagement?
7. The Two Relevances ask a speaker to consider both the Essence and the Circumstance. In a Dharma discussion, how do you balance staying faithful to the core teachings with meeting a particular group where they are? What is lost if either relevance is neglected?
8. Of the Four Reliances, which resonates most with your own experience of learning — relying on the teaching rather than the person, or relying on meaning rather than words? Have you ever learned something valuable from a source that did not model what it taught?
9. The chapter warns that even the Three Seals must eventually be let go if held as fixed ideas. What does it mean to use a teaching as a raft and then set it down? How can we hold insights firmly enough to benefit from them, loosely enough not to be trapped by them?
10. How might understanding the Four Standards of Truth change the way you read a sutra or a teacher's words — noticing when a statement is worldly, personal, healing, or absolute?

Practice Suggestions

- **Mindful appreciation of impermanence.** Choose one ordinary object (a flower, a cup, a photograph) and spend a few minutes gazing at it with the intention of revealing its impermanence. Notice how this awareness deepens, rather than diminishes, your affection for it.
- **Conscious breathing with impermanence.** Use the breath to stay in contact with the changing nature of things — each inhale and exhale arising and passing. Let this keep you from concluding that, because everything is impermanent, life is not worth living.
- **The three-hundred-years visualisation.** When tension rises in a close relationship, close your eyes and imagine the situation three hundred years from now. Return to the present and notice what remains essential.
- **Looking for the all in the one.** Pick one thing — a leaf, a meal, a sound — and trace the causes and conditions that make it possible. Practise seeing that touching one thing is touching everything.
- **Cloud-to-rain contemplation.** Sit with the image of a cloud becoming rain, unafraid and even excited. Allow this to soften any fear of endings or transitions in your own life.
- **Silencing the fire of ideas.** Bring attention to a recurring anxious thought (about death, the future, or separation). Rather than arguing with it, watch it arise and pass, letting the practice of looking deeply cool its intensity — the fan of nirvana.
- **Practising the Two Relevances in speech.** In your next small-group conversation, consciously check each contribution: Does it honour the essence of the teaching, and does it meet this group where they are? Adjust accordingly.
- **Reading a sutra through the Four Standards.** Take a short passage and note which standard(s) of truth seem operative — worldly, personal, healing, or absolute. Observe how the reading deepens when you name the register.
- **Teaching by example.** Consider how your conduct communicates teachings as much as your words do.

Part 3, Chapter Nineteen ….to follow