

The Three Dharma Seals
Thich Nhat Hanh
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The Three Dharma Seals (*Dharma mudra*) are impermanence (*anitya*), nonself (*anatman*), and nirvana. Any teaching that does not bear these Three Seals cannot be said to be a teaching of the Buddha.¹

The First Dharma Seal is impermanence. The Buddha taught that everything is impermanent - flowers, tables, mountains, political regimes, bodies, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. We cannot find anything that is permanent. Flowers decompose, but knowing this does not prevent us from loving flowers. In fact, we are able to love them more because we know how to treasure them while they are still alive. If we learn to look at a flower in a way that impermanence is revealed to us, when it dies, we will not suffer. Impermanence is more than an idea. It is a practice to help us touch reality. When we study impermanence, we have to ask, "Is there anything in this teaching that has to do with my daily life, my daily difficulties, my suffering?" If we see impermanence as merely a philosophy, it is not the Buddha's teaching. Everytime we look or listen, the object of our perception can reveal to us the nature of impermanence. We have to nourish our insight into impermanence all day long. When we look deeply into impermanence, we see that things change because causes and conditions change. When we look deeply into nonself, we see that the existence of every single thing is possible only because of the existence of everything else. We see that everything else is the cause and condition for its existence. We see that everything else is in it. From the point of view of time, we say "impermanence," and from the point of view of space, we say "nonself." Things cannot remain themselves for two consecutive moments, therefore, there is nothing that can be called a permanent "self." Before you entered this room, you were different physically and mentally. Looking deeply at impermanence, you see nonself. Looking deeply at nonself, you see impermanence. We cannot say, "I can accept impermanence, but nonself is too difficult." They are the same. Understanding impermanence can give us confidence, peace, and joy. Impermanence does not necessarily lead to suffering. Without impermanence, life could not be. Without impermanence, your daughter could not grow up into a beautiful young lady. Without impermanence, oppressive political regimes would never change. We think impermanence

¹ *In the Southern Transmission, the Three Dharma Seals are often said to be impermanence, suffering (dukkha), and nonself. But in the Samyukta Agama, the Buddha taught impermanence, nonself, and nirvana as the Three Dharma Seals. See chaps. 4 and 5 for a fuller explication of why the author has chosen to include nirvana rather than dukkha as a Dharma Seal.*

makes us suffer. The Buddha gave the example of a dog that was hit by a stone and got angry at the stone. It is not impermanence that makes us suffer. What makes us suffer is wanting things to be permanent when they are not. We need to learn to appreciate the value of impermanence. If we are in good health and are aware of impermanence, we will take good care of ourselves. When we know that the person we love is impermanent, we will cherish our beloved all the more. Impermanence teaches us to respect and value every moment and all the precious things around us and inside of us. When we practice mindfulness of impermanence, we become fresher and more loving. Looking deeply can become a way of life. We can practice conscious breathing to help us be in touch with things and to look deeply at their impermanent nature. This practice will keep us from complaining that everything is impermanent and therefore not worth living for. Impermanence is what makes transformation possible. We should learn to say, "Long live impermanence." Thanks to impermanence, we can change suffering into joy. If we practice the art of mindful living, when things change, we won't have any regrets. We can smile, because we have done our best to enjoy every moment of our life and to make others happy. When you get into an argument with someone you love, please close your eyes and visualize yourselves three hundred years from now. When you open your eyes, you will only want to take each other in your arms and acknowledge how precious each of you is. The teaching of impermanence helps us appreciate fully what is there, without attachment or forgetfulness. We have to nourish our insight into impermanence every day. If we do, we will live more deeply, suffer less, and enjoy life much more. Living deeply, we will 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. We touch the ground of being and see that which we have called being and nonbeing are just notions. Nothing is ever lost. Nothing is ever gained.

The Second Dharma Seal is nonself. Nothing has a separate existence or a separate self. Everything has to inter-be with everything else." The first time I tasted peanut butter cookies, I was at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in California, and I loved them! I learned that to make peanut butter cookies, you mix the ingredients to prepare the batter, and then you put each cookie onto a cookie sheet using a spoon. I imagined that the moment each cookie leaves the bowl of dough and is placed onto the tray, it begins to think of itself as separate. You, the creator of the cookies, know better, and you have a lot of compassion for them. You know that they are originally all one, and that even now, the happiness of each cookie is still the happiness of all the other cookies. But they have developed "discriminative perception" (*vikalpa*), and suddenly they set up barriers between themselves. When you put them in the oven, they begin to talk to each other: "Get out of my way. I want to be in the middle." "I am brown and beautiful, and you are ugly!" "Can't you please spread a little in that direction?"

We have the tendency to behave this way also, and it causes a lot of suffering. If we know how to touch our nondiscriminating mind, our happiness and the happiness of others will increase manifold. We all have the capacity of living with nondiscriminating wisdom, but we have to train ourselves to see in that way, to see that the flower is us, the mountain is us, our parents and our children are all us. When we see that everyone and everything belongs to the same stream of life, our suffering will vanish. Nonself is not a doctrine or a philosophy. It is an insight that can help us live life more deeply, suffer less, and enjoy life much more. We need to live the insight of nonself.

Tolstoy wrote a story about two enemies. "A" suffered greatly because of "B," and his only motive in life was to eradicate "B." Every time he heard the name of B, every time, he thought

about B's image, he became enraged. Then one day A visited the hut of a sage. After listening to A deeply, the sage offered him a glass of refreshing water, and then he poured the same water onto A's head and washed him. When they sat down for tea, the sage told him, "Now you are B." A was astonished! "That is the last thing I want to be!

I am A, and he is B! There cannot be any connection.

"But you are B, whether you believe it or not," the sage said. Then he brought him a mirror, and sure enough when A looked in it, he saw B! Every time he moved, B in the mirror did exactly the same. The sound of A's voice became the sound of B's. He began to have B's feelings and perceptions. A tried to come back to himself, but he couldn't. What a wonderful story!

We should practice so that we can see Muslims as Hindus and Hindus as Muslims. We should practice so that we can see Israelis as Palestinians and Palestinians as Israelis. We should practice until we can see that each person is us, that we are not separate from others. This will greatly reduce our suffering. We are like the cookies, thinking we are separate and opposing each other, when actually we are all of the same reality. We *are* what we perceive. This is the teaching of nonself, of interbeing.

When Avalokiteshvara declared that eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind are empty, he meant that they cannot be by themselves alone.²

They have to inter-be with everything else. Our eyes would not be possible without non-eye elements. That is why he can say that our eyes have no separate existence. We have to see the nature of interbeing to really understand. It takes some training to look at things this way. Nonself means that you are made of elements which are not you. During the past hour, different elements have entered you and other elements have flown out of you. Your happiness, in fact your 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. The daughter should practice in a way that she can understand her mother better and her mother can understand her better. The daughter cannot find happiness by running away from home, because she carries her family in her. There is nothing she can leave behind. There is nothing she can get rid of, even if she runs away and tells no one where she is going. Her store consciousness carries all the seeds. She cannot get rid of a single one. The teachings of impermanence and nonself were offered by the Buddha as keys to unlock the door of reality. We have to train ourselves to look in a way that we know that when we touch one thing, we touch everything. We have to see 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. They have to undergo birth and death. But 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 nonself.

Nirvana, the Third Dharma Seal, 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. The wave is already water. We are also like that. We carry in us the ground of interbeing, nirvana, the world of no-birth and no-death, no permanence and no impermanence, no self and no nonself. Nirvana is the complete silencing of concepts. The notions of impermanence and nonself were offered by the Buddha as instruments of practice, not as doctrines to worship, fight, or die for. "My dear

² See *Thich Nhat Hanh, The Heart of Understanding*.

friends," the Buddha said. "The Dharma I offer you is only a raft to help you to cross over to the other shore." The raft is not to be held onto as an object of worship. It is an instrument for crossing over to the shore of well-being. If you are caught in the Dharma, it is no longer the Dharma. Impermanence and nonself belong to the world of phenomena, like the waves. Nirvana is the ground of all that is. The waves do not exist outside the water. If you know how to touch the waves, you touch the water at the same time. Nirvana does not exist separate of impermanence and nonself. If you know how to use the tools of impermanence and nonself to touch reality, you touch nirvana in the here and the now. Nirvana is the extinction of all notions. Birth is a notion. Death is a notion. Being is a notion. Nonbeing is a notion. In our daily lives, we have to deal with these relative realities. But if we touch life more deeply, reality will reveal itself in a different way. We think that being born means from nothing we become something, from no one we become someone, from nonbeing we become being. We think that to die means we suddenly go from something to nothing, from someone to no one, from being to nonbeing. But the Buddha said "There is no birth and no death, no being and no nonbeing," and he offered us impermanence, nonself, interbeing, and emptiness to discover the true nature of reality. In the Heart Sutra, we repeat over and over that there is no birth and no death. But reciting is not enough. The Heart Sutra is an instrument to investigate the true nature of ourselves and the world.

When you look at this sheet of paper, you think it belongs to the realm of being. There was a time that it came into existence, a moment in the factory it became a sheet of paper. But before the sheet of paper was born, was it nothing? Can nothing become something? Before it was recognizable as a sheet of paper, it must have been something else - a tree, a branch, sunshine, clouds, the earth. In its former life, the sheet of paper was all these things. If you ask the sheet of paper, "Tell me about all your adventures," she will tell you, "Talk to a flower, a tree, or a cloud and listen to their stories."

The paper's story is much like our own. We, too, have many wonderful things to tell. Before we were born, we were also already 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, to identify ourselves in time and space. We usually think we did not exist before the time of our parents, that we only began to exist at the moment of our birth. But we were already here in many forms. The day of our birth was only a day of continuation. Instead of singing "Happy Birthday" every year, we should sing "Happy Continuation."

"Nothing is born, nothing dies" was a statement made by the French scientist Lavoisier. He was not a Buddhist. He did not know the Heart Sutra. But his words are exactly the same. If I burn this sheet of paper, will I reduce it to nonbeing? No, it will just be transformed into smoke, heat, and ash. If we put the "continuation" of this sheet of paper into the garden, later, while practicing walking meditation, we may see a little flower and recognize it as the rebirth of the sheet of paper. The smoke will become part of a cloud in the sky, also to continue the adventure. After tomorrow, a little rain may fall on your head, and you will recognize the sheet of paper saying, "Hello." The heat produced by the burning will penetrate into your body and the cosmos. With a sophisticated enough instrument, you will be able to measure how much of this energy penetrates you. The sheet of paper clearly continues, even after it is burned. The moment of its so-called dying is actually a moment of continuation. 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 the fields, the ocean, or the mountains is also wonderful. As she falls down as

rain, the cloud will sing. 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 deeply, when we touch the cloud deeply, when we touch our grandmother deeply, we touch the nature of no birth and nodeath, and we are free from sorrow. We already recognize them in many other forms. This is the insight that helped the Buddha become serene, peaceful, and fearless. This teaching of the Buddha can help us touch deeply the nature of our being, the ground of our being, so that we can touch the world of no-birth and no-death. This is the insight that liberates us from fear and sorrow. Nirvana means extinction, above all the extinction of ideas- the ideas of birth and death, existence and nonexistence, coming and going, self and other, one and many. All these cause us to suffer. We are afraid of death because ignorance gives us an illusory idea about what death is. We are disturbed by ideas of existence and nonexistence because we have not understood the true nature of impermanence and nonself. We worry about our own future, but we fail to worry about the future of the other because we think that our happiness has nothing to do with the happiness of the other. This idea of self and other gives rise to immeasurable suffering. In order to extinguish these ideas, we have to practice. Nirvana is a fan that helps us extinguish the fire of all our ideas, including ideas of permanence and self. That fan is our practice of looking deeply every day.

In Buddhism we talk about the Eight Concepts: birth, death, permanence, dissolution, coming, going, one, and many. The practice to end attachment to these eight ideas is called **the Eight No's of the Middle Way** - no birth and nodeath, no permanence and no dissolution, no coming and no going, no one and no many.

In the thirteenth century in Vietnam, someone asked Master Tue Trung a question following a Dharma talk, and he replied, "Having offered complete release from the Eight Concepts, what further explanation could I possibly give?"

Once these eight ideas have been destroyed, we touch nirvana. Nirvana is release from the Eight Concepts, and also from their opposites - impermanence, nonself, Interdependent Co-Arising, emptiness, and the Middle Way. If we hold onto the Three Seals as fixed ideas, these ideas also have to be destroyed. The best way to do this is by putting these teachings into practice in our daily lives. Experience always goes beyond ideas.

Tenth-century Vietnamese master Thiên Hôi told his students, "Be diligent in order to attain the state of no-birth and no-death." One student asked, "Where can we touch the world of no-birth and no-death?" and he responded, "Right here in the world of birth and death." To touch the water, you have to touch the waves.

If you touch birth and death deeply, you touch the world of no birth and no death .

Impermanence, nonself, Interdependent Co-Arising, and the Middle Way are all keys to open the door of reality. There is no point in leaving them in your pocket. You have to use them. When you understand impermanence and nonself, you are already free of much suffering and in touch with nirvana, the Third Dharma Seal. Nirvana is not something to look for in the future. As a Dharma Seal, it is present in everyone of the Buddha's teachings. The nirvana-nature of the candle, the table, and the flower are revealed in the teachings, just as their impermanent and nonself nature are. Imagine a meeting in which everyone is stating his own opinions and disagreeing with everyone else's. After the meeting is over, you are exhausted by all these ideas and discussions. You open the door and go out into the garden, where the air is fresh, the birds are singing, and the wind is whistling in the trees. Life out here is quite different from the meeting with its words and anger. In the garden, there are still sounds and images, but they are

refreshing and healing. Nirvana is not the absence of life. Drishta dharma nirvana means "nirvana in this very life."

Nirvana means pacifying, silencing, or extinguishing the fire of suffering. Nirvana teaches that we already are what we want to become. We don't have to run after anything anymore. We only need to return to ourselves and touch our true nature. 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*³

In the Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters, the Buddha says, "My"practice is non-action, non-practice, and non-realization."⁴ It means that what we seek does not lie outside of ourselves.

Any teaching that does not bear the mark of the Three Dharma Seals, the Four Holy Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path is not authentically Buddhist. But sometimes only two Dharma Seals are taught - suffering and nirvana. Sometimes Four Dharma Seals are taught - impermanence, nonself, nirvana, and suffering. But suffering is not a basic element of existence. It is a feeling. When we insist on something that is impermanent and without selfbeing permanent and having a self, we suffer. The Buddha taught that when suffering is present, we have to 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 introduced after the Buddha passed away.

We practice the Three Dharma Seals to realize liberation. If you memorize a 5,000-page book on the Three Dharma Seals but do not apply the teachings during your daily life, that book is of no use. Only by using your intelligence and putting the teachings into practice can they bring you happiness. Please base your practice on your own life and your own exêrience – your successes and your failures. The Buddha's teachings are jewels, but we have to dig deep in order to touch them fully.

³ From Thich Nhat Hanh, "Butterflies over the Golden Mustard Fields," in *Call Me By My True Names*, p. 75.

⁴ *4 Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters*. Taisho 789.