

Connecting to Our Root Teacher: A Letter from Thay, 27 Sept 2014



Thay wrote this letter to all of his students last autumn, as his health was beginning to weaken. Although Thay did not have enough strength to give Dharma Talks, he was able to dictate and edit this letter.

It has been translated from the Vietnamese, so that everyone enjoy his rich, deep and heartfelt teaching on how “devotional practice” and the figure of “the Buddha” can be understood in the Plum Village tradition.

Thay teaches us how to keep our practice authentic and alive, and how to see the Buddha not as a God, but as our very own “root teacher”, our soul-mate.

*Fragrant Creek Hermitage
27th September, 2014*

My Dear Children,

At the time when Thầy first entered the temple at the age of sixteen, it was customary to refer to Shakyamuni Buddha as our “root teacher”. But the Buddha Thầy met when upon entering was not so much a teacher, but a legendary figure: a worker of miracles, with immense spiritual powers, very different from other human beings. We met neither the Buddha of Source Buddhism, nor the Buddha of Theravada. The Buddha of Source Buddhism is a teacher who lived a very simple life, someone who would spread his sitting mat to sit on the earth for a Dharma sharing, ate with the other monks and gave Dharma talks. But that was not the image we encountered in the temple. We called the Buddha “our teacher”, but in fact there was a great distance between ourselves and Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni was a holy, miraculous figure. Only several decades later did Thầy discover the true image of a Root Teacher, a real Root Teacher. Just as we speak of having a Root Temple, or our Root Nature, so too do we each have a Root Teacher.

And so, when several decades later Thầy discovered who the Buddha really was, he dreamed of writing a book that could allow people to see the Buddha not as a miraculous divinity, but truly as a teacher. With all his heart, Thầy began writing *Old Path White Clouds*, to free the Buddha of the halos and mysteries, so he could appear clearly as a person, a Teacher to whom we could all feel close. For Thầy, writing the book *Old Path White Clouds* is a work of great merit. It has helped portray the image of a teacher who lived simply, and who resolved the challenges he faced not with miraculous powers, but with insight and compassion.

The Buddha that Thầy met when he was sixteen years old was the Buddha of the Tantra School. In Vietnamese temples at that time there would be two chanting sessions. The morning chanting was wholly Tantrayana. We used to chant *dhāraṇīs* like the *Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī* and *Mahā Karuṇā Dhāraṇī* and another ten mantras. The evening chanting was from the Pure Land liturgy, dedicated to Buddha Amitābha. When we practice Amitābha Buddhism, the image of Buddha Shakyamuni fades away. Standing before the image of Amitābha in the Pure Land teachings, Thầy had no opportunity to encounter his Root Teacher. Yet at that time Thầy was so intent on practising, and had such a powerful Bodhicitta, such a strong deep desire, that he was still determined to practice and to

transform. So even though the Buddha Thày encountered was very distant, Thày could accept it. What's more, the scripture that introduces the *Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī*, which our spiritual ancestors had chosen for us to chant every morning, was deeply moving. Every novice monk and novice nun who read that sutra felt genuinely moved. The sutra recounts Venerable Ānanda's vow of aspiration to become a Buddha in order that all beings may be liberated. A deep feeling was aroused every time we would recite it, and that was what pulled Thày along. Thày could not yet see the contradictions and indoctrination in his education.

There were very moving passages of the sutra, such as:

*As soon as possible may I realise the fruits of the practice, and so become a Buddha,
In order to go out into the world to help transform and liberate beings
as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges.
I vow, with all the depth and breadth of my heart, to serve every realm,
And so be worthy enough to repay for now the deep gratitude I owe to the Buddha.*

When a young monk or nun reads this passage, he or she feels very moved. The Venerable Ānanda at that time was also a young monk. In the past, Thày only knew how to recite and listen to passages such as this, and he could not see the contradictions in them. Also in the four lines:

*World Honored One,
I vow to be one of the first people to go out
into the world full of suffering, evil, violence, and the five sensual pleasures,
in order to help liberate beings.
May you be my witness as I vow that
so long as there is a living being who is not yet a Buddha,
I will not allow myself to realise nirvāṇa.*

It took Thày several decades to look into that last sentence, and see that it was incorrect. This sentence is saying that once we realise nirvāṇa, we're in a place where we don't need to do anything at all, just resting and enjoying. Therefore it's not right to realise nirvāṇa, because we won't be able to do the work of liberating beings; once we've realised nirvāṇa, all we'll need do is enjoy ourselves. This is a very incorrect view of nirvāṇa. In principle, when we realise deep insight, we're able to be in touch with the nature of no birth no death, no coming no going, no being no non-being, and that is the world of peace, of cooling, of happiness: that is nirvāṇa. If we're not able to enjoy these things, then how can we possibly have enough strength to continue to work to liberate beings? Therefore, to say "I'll not realise nirvāṇa because I need to remain in the world, undergoing all the hardships of the world in order to liberate living beings," is something completely incorrect. But Thày couldn't see that because Thày was still a young monk.

This kind of misconception arose because of the very many misunderstandings about nirvāṇa. For example, there is the idea of *nirvāṇa with residue* and *nirvāṇa without residue*. *Nirvāṇa without residue* is nirvāṇa in which there are no five skandhas. But if in nirvāṇa there are not the five skandhas, how can someone experience the peace, calm and joy of nirvāṇa? *Nirvāṇa with residue* is when we have realised the path and realised nirvāṇa, yet we still have our body and the five skandhas. We think that when we still have a body with the five skandhas we can still have head-aches or stomach-aches. Our legs can be tired, our arms can be aching, and so it is said that it's not nirvāṇa without residue. That's a very wrong way of seeing things. This way of looking implies that happiness and suffering are two wholly separate things which do not need each other: that happiness can exist by itself and does not need suffering; or that suffering can exist without happiness. That is a

dualistic way of looking that is not correct according to the spirit of interbeing in Buddhism.

In Buddhism there is a differentiation between the five skandhas, and the five skandhas of grasping. In fact, the five skandhas are something very wonderful, but if with our mind we grasp the five skandhas, and say that the five skandas are us, or that they belong to us, then the five skandhas become the five skandhas of grasping. *Upādāna* means grasping and the object of grasping. Nirvāṇa is not a place where there are no five skandhas, but where the five skandhas are not the five skandhas of grasping. The five skandhas are something very wonderful, just like the five skandhas of the Buddha.

Young people who have just become monks and nuns would encounter the following image of Buddha Shakyamuni according to the Tantrayana, in the Introductory Verses to the *Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī*:

“From the mound on the top of his head, the Tathagatha radiates beams of light containing one hundred precious jewels. Within those beams of light the Tathagatha radiates, a lotus of one thousand petals appears, and seated in that lotus there is a transformation body of a Buddha. And on the top of the head of the transformation Buddha, there also radiates ten halos, and each of these halos contains one hundred precious jewels. In each of these halos there appears many Dharma Protectors in number as great as the grains of sands in the Ganges. Each Dharma Protector holds in one hand a mountain, and in the other a diamond sceptre, and their presence is felt across the whole of space. The whole congregation, beholding this, feels great fear, awe and love. Beholding the World Honored One, everyone sincerely prays to the World Honored One for his compassion and protection, and is eager to listen to him. Radiating a halo from the top of his head, the World Honored One thus commences to proclaim the Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī...”

In Source Buddhism and in Theravada Buddhism, there could never be this kind of visualisation. The Buddha is not a miraculous, haloed divinity so distant from human beings. In the Tantric tradition, these Dharma Protectors are yakṣa divinities who follow the Buddha and vow to defend the Buddhadharmā. The image of a Dharma Protector Divinity is of someone holding a diamond sceptre, a sceptre with the power to destroy anyone who dares harm the Buddhadharmā. Envisioning the Buddha’s radiant halo, and all the Dharma Protector Divinities brandishing their diamond sceptres, across the whole of space, the community is very afraid and yet also filled with great respect and love. That is why everyone listens deeply to the Buddha as he begins to recite the *Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī*. This is Tantric Buddhism.

Although in Vietnam we call our temples Zen Buddhist Temples, in fact most temples practice Tantric Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism. In the morning, they recite the *dhāraṇīs* and in the evening they recollect Amitābha. The image of a seated Buddha radiating a halo of light, manifesting a vast assembly of Dharma protector deities across the whole of space, reciting a sacred *dhāraṇī* for twenty minutes – that image is no longer something that the young generation or intellectuals of our time can believe in. Just as the image of a creator God as an old man with a beard sitting up in the clouds, deciding the fate of everyone in the world, is not something the young people of today can believe in either. And yet every morning we still recite this text and visualise the image of a divinity like that. How can a Buddhism like that possibly be still appropriate for our time?

In the preface which contains the vow of Venerable Ānanda, and opens the sutra reciting the *Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī*, there is a line praising the *Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī* as follows:

This Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī is exceptionally precious

*It has the capacity to destroy my wrong perceptions,
The capacity to break through fetters
accumulated over countless thousands of lifetimes
Allowing me to realise the dharmakāya
without going through many, many kalpas (lifetimes).*

‘Wrong perceptions’ are perceptions that are ‘upside down’. For example, when we say that something black is in fact white, or suffering is happiness, or when things are impermanent we think that they are permanent, or when something has no-self we think it does have a self. These are ‘wrong perceptions’ or ‘upside-down perceptions’. The phrase ‘wrong perceptions’ also appears in the Heart Sutra, when it is said that the Bodhisattva destroyed all wrong perceptions.

The Four Wrong Perceptions as they are commonly known are:

*Something that is impure, we call pure
Something that is painful, we call pleasurable
Something that is impermanent, we call permanent
Something that is no-self, we say it has a self*

These are the four ‘upside down perceptions’ that the monks of the past taught us in a very dogmatic way. In the Four Establishments of Mindfulness – the Establishments of Body, Feeling, Mind and Objects of Mind – we contemplate the body in the body, the feelings in the feelings, the mind in the mind, the dharmas in the dharmas, and we are taught to see the body as impure, bringing only suffering. We are told that the body cannot possibly be pure; feelings are only suffering; the mind can only be impermanent; and the objects of mind can only be no-self. We learn it by rote, and we’re indoctrinated into believing it. “The body is impure, feelings are painful, the mind is impermanent, the objects of mind are no-self.” It is presented as a kind of immortal truth that cannot be questioned. In the Twelve Links of Conditioned Genesis feelings are suffering. But if feelings are only suffering, then how can they lead to craving? There must be pleasant feelings for people to give rise to a desire for them or an attachment to them.

When the Buddha was alive on this earth there was already the term dharmakāya. One day, the Buddha came to visit Vakkhali, who was dying and asked him,

“Vakkhali, do you have anything to regret?”

“World Honored One, I do not regret anything. There’s just one thing – and that is that I’m too sick to come and see you and enjoy your presence when you give Dharma Talks on the Vulture Peak.”

It is well-known that Vakkhali had been attached to the Buddha – so much so that the Buddha did not allow him to be his attendant.

So the Buddha said,

“Vakkhali, this fleshly body is impermanent. It is of the nature to disintegrate one day. If you have the dharmakāya of the Buddha, then you will not lack anything, and will have nothing more to regret.”

These words show that in the time of the Buddha there was already the term *dharmakāya*, Dharma Body. We usually understand Dharma Body to mean the Teachings, including the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, and the ways of practice that have the capacity to transform our suffering, nourish ourselves and others, so that we shall be liberated, freed from our bondage, transform our afflictions, and really be able to help others and the world. At that time, there was not yet the expression

Sangha Body. We had to wait twenty more centuries for the expression Sangha Body to arise in Plum Village. Among the three terms: Buddha Body, Dharma Body and Sangha Body, the Sangha Body is extremely important. As a monk or a nun, if you do not have a Sangha Body, you will never be able to realise your aspiration. That is why after Shakyamuni was enlightened the first thing that did was find friends to form a sangha of six people. The Buddha saw very clearly that without a Sangha Body, the career of the Buddha can never be realized.

Young monks and nuns, when they first ordain, have a very powerful bodhicitta, a very solid bodhicitta. They vow to practice to become a good monk or nun, who is able to liberate themselves and help others do the same. They vow to be a monk or a nun who can bring peace, joy and liberation to his or her community of practice. We need to build the monastic sangha body in such a way that we are able to organise the practice so that we can also help lay practitioners to heal, transform and be liberated from their suffering. Venerable Ānanda's vow in the preface to the *Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī* is very moving. That was his dream, and it is also the dream of everyone who wants to become a good monk or nun.

The "My Aspiration" chant written by Zen Master Di Son expresses the very same dream. Reading this chant we see the dream of a young monk or nun who wants to become a great Dharma Teacher in order to help the world in every way. In the first years many of us nourish ourselves with these deep aspirations, but unless we have a chance to learn how to handle our feelings and our painful emotions; to learn how to generate joy and happiness to nourish ourselves; to learn how to use methods of deep listening and loving speech to re-establish communication with our brothers and sisters – unless we learn how to do all of these things we will not be able to build the monastic sangha. We will not have the essential means to realize the deep vow of a monk or a nun. Although many of us have the opportunity to study in Buddhist Institutes, whether in Elementary, Intermediate, or Higher Buddhist Studies, the Dharma Teachers don't teach the basic practices, but just teach religious doctrines for us to learn by heart and pass on to future generations. This is our very rhetorical way of learning, and we have to change it. Dharma Teachers must teach ways of breathing, walking and sitting, how to handle our mental formations such as anger, sadness, hatred and jealousy; how to handle our pain and suffering, and calm our feelings and strong emotions. Once we know how to do these things, we'll be able to help our brothers and sisters do the same, and we will be able to teach our own students.

When we know how to use loving speech and deep listening to bring about reconciliation and re-establish communication, only then can we really build a Sangha Body. A Sangha Body is the basic means to be able to realise our deepest desire and our career as a monk or a nun. It is a real shortcoming that we do not learn these things in the Buddhist Institutes, and even most elder monks and Dharma Teachers do not know how to practice them. For this reason, even if there are only three or four brothers living together, they cannot live in harmony with one another: each one harbours their own different dream. And in our daily life of a monastic, we just respond to our temple's needs for devotional rituals, seeking material and affectionate comforts. A monk or a nun who is very capable of meeting these needs has an easier life than others, especially if they can chant well or perform good offering ceremonies, and other monastics become envious of those with these capacities.

In the end the majority of monks and nuns only wish to become the abbot of a temple, with a steady financial turnover, to take care of the temple, and to train a couple of novices to help continue the work of responding to the needs of offering ceremonies and funeral

ceremonies. Living like this we will never realise our dream; it will remain just a dream. Every early morning we chant the preface of Venerable Ānanda's deep vow, we chant Master Di Son's "My Aspiration" chant, and yet we will never realise our dream. This is the case for 95% of monks and nuns, who in the end just become ceremony monks. Many monks have been caught in important positions and special titles in the Buddhist hierarchy.

There are only a small number of monks, less than 1%, who become scholars. Although a scholar is a very valuable asset, he is not able to build sangha and help the people to be liberated from their suffering. In recent times in Vietnamese history there have been a number of high monks who have had the capacity to build sangha and help people be liberated from their suffering. They include Zen Master Phước Huệ of the Thập Tháp Temple in Bình Định, Zen Master Trí Thủ Abbot of the Ba La Mật Temple in Huế, Zen Master Thiện Hòa Director of the Institute of Buddhist Studies of South Vietnam at the Ấn Quang Temple on Sư Vạn Hạnh Street, Saigon, Zen Master Thiện Hoa Abbot of the Phước Hậu Temple in Trà Ôn, and Zen Master Trí Tịnh of the Liên Hải Institute of Buddhist Studies, The Venerable Nun Hải Triều Âm and Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ, who is still alive.

Please see the situation of Vietnamese Buddhism today clearly in order to help you wake up. The aim of a monk or a nun is not to look for material and emotional comforts, but to become a good monk or a nun who can build a sangha, help the world, and realise the true career of a monk or a nun which is to nourish and realise the strong bodhicitta that we had in the beginning.

The first way of understanding *dharmakāya* as it appears in Source Buddhism means 'the essential teachings of the Buddha and the methods of practice to handle suffering, generate happiness and joy, and liberate ourselves for the sake of all beings'. In Source Buddhism *Dharmakāya* simply means that, and it will last only if we know how to pass it on to future generations.

But when we come to the Yogācāra School of the 5th and 6th Century CE, there begins to be the idea of the *Pure Dharmakāya of Vairocana Tathāgata*. *Dharmakāya* here no longer means the methods of practice, but in fact the Cosmic Body, the Dharma Realm Body. The Buddha is no longer simply understanding and action, but the very cosmos itself. If we listen deeply to the music of the wind or the song of the birds; if we contemplate every flower, plant or bird, we can see that every one of these phenomena is teaching the Dharma. If we know how to listen deeply, we shall hear the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Five Powers, and the Seven Factors of Awakening. The Buddha is still there. The Buddha has never died, and he continues to give Dharma Talks through the cosmos. In this sense the Buddha is the cosmos, and the Buddha is also the creator who creates the cosmos. This leads to an idea of the *dharmakāya* which is very close to the idea of God in the theistic religions. This has its good points, because it has given rise to an important source of inspiration in Mahayana Buddhism. The purple bamboo, the yellow flower, the rounded moon, and the white clouds, are all concrete manifestations of the Dharma Body, and each one of these wonderful phenomena are giving a Dharma Talk. This is the poetic spirit of Mahayana Buddhism.

Then there is also the way of understanding the *sambhogakāya* – the Retribution Body. In the Yogācāra School, the Buddha is seen as someone of great action and has accounted countless merits. It seems impossible that this retribution body is such a small physical body of the Buddha, a mere 1.8 meters high, and so we imagine a Retribution Body of the Buddha one hundred feet tall. But only people who have divine eyes are able to see the Retribution Body of the Buddha. The thirty-two beautiful marks and the eighty-two good

marks are all so wonderful, and the Buddha is up there in the heavens. That is the real Buddha. And this tiny living being, not even two meters tall, sitting in the lotus position on a mat in the forest, is nothing but a transformation body of the Buddha – it is not really the Buddha. We can see this influence in the Lotus Sutra, where it says: “The Buddha is not just Shakyamuni Buddha sitting there giving a Dharma Talk on the Vulture Peak. He has countless Transformation Bodies that are present everywhere in the world. When necessary the Buddha can summon his millions of Transformation Bodies across the whole world, and this small body of the Buddha is not seen as important. People get swept away by these ideas and this way of looking at the Dharma Body and the Retribution Body, and they look down upon the Buddha’s human body.

In his long poem April, Thầy wrote the line “The little flower has never ceased to sing.” The flower deep in the forest is also the Dharma Body of the Buddha, and the flower has never stopped giving a Dharma Talk, it has never stopped singing. This line was also influenced by the idea of the Buddha’s Dharma Body.

The Buddha is the cosmos; the cosmos is a body, the Dharma Realm Body is called the Cosmic Body. This is also correct. All the clouds, and all the waves have the body of the great ocean in them. A cloud is not just a cloud; a wave is not just a wave. The cloud and the river are also the great ocean, they have their ocean body. This is the truth. That is why when a young monk or nun enters the temple, he or she does not encounter the Buddha as a human being, he or she encounters the Buddha as the *Pure Dharmakāya of Vairocana or Locanā*, a fully perfected retribution body called *Locanā*. In the offering chant before a formal meal, we all make the mudrā of auspiciousness and then chant the Offering to the Pure *Dharmakāya* of Vairocana Buddha and the Retribution Body of Locanā Buddha, and the 1,100 trillion *nirmāṇakāya* (transformation bodies) of Shakyamuni Buddha.

Thầy remembers one time in the Ân Quang Temple (in Saigon) when a number of university students, including Miss Chi, Miss Nhiên, Miss Bích, Miss Phượng, and elder brothers Bá Dương, Huệ Dương, Chiêu, Khá, Cương, all came to visit the Venerable Thanh Từ. Thầy Thanh Từ at that time was still very young, and had not yet begun to study Zen. Thầy Nhất Hạnh had written down a number of Zen gathas from the ancestral Zen teachers of Vietnam in the Ly and the Tran dynasties, and offered them to Thầy Thanh Từ. Venerable Thanh Từ at that time was still a very young Dharma Teacher. He really liked these gathas, and from that time he began to be interested in the study of Zen.

That day Thầy was sitting listening to Thầy Thanh Từ and his disciples talking. Miss Phượng (Sister Chân Không) asked, “Thầy you teach that this body is impure. It contains puss, excrement, blood and sweat, and we should not be attached to it. When I look deeply I see that in Thầy there is also puss, excrement, blood and saliva. So why do we still feel such respect and love?” Thầy Thanh Từ smiled, but he did not say anything to this university student. The question shows that meditating on impurity is not always effective. Although our mouth may parrot time and time again: the body is impure, the body is impure, our mind remains unchanged and is still attached to the body. The same is true when we repeat other phrases such as “feelings are suffering”. It’s like eating hot chilli. We know the chilli is really hot and yet we still eat it.

Thầy remembers one time when Miss Phượng, Miss Nhiên, Miss Chi, Miss Bích, Miss Nga and many others came to visit Thầy Thanh Từ in the Grall hospital, and they saw that Thầy had a box of biscuits. The young women said to each other. “Thầy does not know that in the biscuits there are eggs and butter. But if we let Thầy to eat them, that’s our fault. So let’s all finish the biscuits so Thầy will not eat them and it won’t be our fault.” So they

opened the box and ate them. The dozen biscuits that were left they took them home in order that Thầy would not eat them. Once, when Thầy Nhất Hạnh was at Princeton University, one day he left his room with the window wide open. While he was out, a squirrel leaped from the Maple tree into his room, opened a box of biscuits, and ate nearly all of them. When Thầy returned, there weren't many biscuits left. Perhaps, like Miss Phương and the others, the squirrel was afraid of Thầy eating the biscuits and violating some kind of precept.

In the beginning, the teachings on impurity were an antidote to the idea of purity. And then we believe that impurity is an ultimate truth, and forget that it was only an antidote. When we say "feelings are suffering" it means that the feelings of happiness you have are not truly feelings of happiness, they are also suffering. What you are feeling may seem joyful, but in fact like all feeling, joy has a deep connection to suffering. We have become dogmatic about the teaching "feelings are suffering". And yet we know very well that Buddhism teaches that there are at least three kinds of feelings: painful feelings, pleasant feelings, and neutral feelings. So why do we brainwash ourselves like that? We don't seem to realise that suffering and happiness are related to each other. If there is not the one, there cannot be the other. For example, if we don't feel cold, we wouldn't experience the happiness of putting on a warm coat. Without the experience of suffering we cannot experience happiness. Without a background of suffering we cannot experience joy. The two inter-are. This is something very important in Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism has rediscovered many precious jewels that were buried in Source Buddhism, and which Theravada Buddhism did not see.

For so long, our studies and training in the temple have been in this kind of spirit of indoctrination. But Buddhism is a very open tradition which says that when we study we should use our insight to discern what we are studying. We shouldn't study like a parrot, or get caught in dogma, even when we are studying the teachings on impurity, suffering, impermanence or no-self.

In the past as a young Dharma Teacher, thanks to a critical and open mind, Thầy saw many things that he was uncomfortable with in the sutras, not to mention in the commentaries. There was a very strong element of indoctrination. Someone with a very respectful mind towards our ancestral teachers should not dare say anything. But in history, from time to time, there have been Zen Masters, such as Master Lin-Chi, who have dared to speak out: "You fools! You want to get out of the three worlds? But once you get out of the three worlds, where will you go?" The Buddhist tradition has not been without intelligent scholars and revolutionaries. Because of Thầy's respect and piety, when he saw errors in the sutras and the commentaries, he found a way to justify them, rather than to correct them, because he didn't dare to change anything; he did not dare to say that the ancestors were wrong. But in recent decades Thầy has become no longer afraid. Thầy is already advanced in age. Thầy has to say out loud what he has seen. That is why in the last five or six Winter Retreats, Thầy has spoken candidly about the errors Thầy has seen, even in the most fundamental sutras, such as the Heart Sutra. Thầy did this especially after discovering passages as precious as gold and as valuable as jade in the treasury of Source Buddhism, for example in the *Itivuttaka* and the *Udāna*, as well as in the *Chinese Dhammapada*:

O monks, in the world there is birth and death, but there is also the unborn and the undying. In the world there is being and non-being, but there is also no-being and the no non-being. In the world there is the creator and the created, but there is also that which does not create and is not created. In the world

there is the conditioned and the unconditioned, but there is also that which is neither conditioned nor unconditioned.

Passages of the sutras like that are very precious. There are also other passages such as the *Kaccāyana Sutra*, where the Buddha said very clearly that “Most people in the world are caught in the ideas of being and non-being”. It is thanks to even such short sentences as these, that we can correct the mistakes in other sutras.

Are we a good friend, a soul-mate of the Buddha? Or do we follow the Buddha blindly, saying that whatever we hear is right? If we want to be a soul-mate of the Buddha, we need to have a discriminating, critical mind. We cannot just believe what anyone says, even if that person is an ancestral teacher. A book such as *Soul Mate of the Buddha* (written by Thầy in Vietnamese in 2014) is not really a Buddhist textbook. You could call it a Buddhist textbook, but it is actually more advanced, because it does not just explain the meaning of the teaching, but offers a critical analysis demonstrating which parts of the sutra are correct, and which are wrongly recorded; which parts reflect the ultimate truth and which parts are only conventional truth. We need to learn how to use this book in order to revive the critical spirit that is clearly present in Buddhism.

The *Kālāma Sutra* recounts how a group of young people came to ask the Buddha a question. “Every religious teacher who passes through our village says that their teachings are the best and the most correct, but who should we believe?” The Buddha replied, “Friends, do not believe anything, even if it is recorded in the sutras or is taught by a famous teacher. Whatever you hear, you should use your intelligent and critical mind to examine it carefully, and then put it into practice for yourself. If you apply it and you see that you are liberated from your suffering and your difficulties, you will see clearly that it is indeed the truth, and then you can believe in it.” Sutras like the *Kālāma Sutra* make it clear that Buddhism is a very open, intelligent and critical tradition. If we turn Buddhism into a dogmatic religion, that would be a great shame for the Buddha. We will have lost the purity of the Buddha’s teachings and can no longer call ourselves his soul-mate.

Thầy
Nhất Hạnh