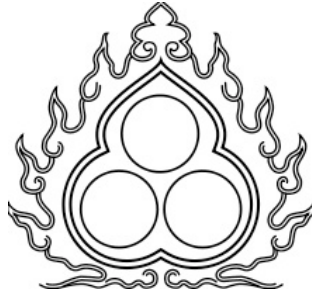


The Three Dharma Seals

Nirvana

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

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 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

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.*

"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 (question-statement), "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 no death, 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 no death, 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*"²

In the Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters, the Buddha says, "My practice is non-action, non-practice, and non-realization."³ 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 experience – your successes and your failures. The Buddha's teachings are jewels, but we have to dig deep in order to touch them fully.

² From Thich Nhat Hanh, "Butterflies over the Golden Mustard Fields," in *Call Me By My True Names*, p. 75.

³ *Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters*. Taisho 789.