

# *The Three Dharma Seals*

## **Nonself**

*Thich Nhat Hanh*

*The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings*

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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.<sup>1</sup>

**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.

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<sup>1</sup> *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.*

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.

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<sup>2</sup> See *Thich Nhat Hanh, The Heart of Understanding*.