

# *The Three Doors of Liberation*

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*The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings*

Broadway Books 1998

## *Signlessness*

The Second Door of Liberation is signlessness, animitta":

"Sign" here means an appearance or the object of our perception. When we see something, a sign or image appears to us, and that is what is meant by "lakshana." If water, for example, is in a square container, its sign is "squareness." If in a round container, its sign is "roundness." When we open the freezer and take out some ice, the sign of that water is solid. Chemists call water "H<sub>2</sub>O." The snow on the mountain and the steam rising from the kettle are also H<sub>2</sub>O. Whether H<sub>2</sub>O is round or square, liquid, gaseous, or solid depends on circumstances. Signs are instruments for our use, but they are not absolute truth, and they can mislead us. The *Diamond Sutra* says, "Wherever there is a sign, there is deception, illusion." Perceptions often tell us as much about the perceiver as the object of perception. Appearances can deceive.

Practicing the Concentration on Signlessness is necessary for us to free ourselves. Until we can break through the signs, we cannot touch reality. As long as we are caught by signs round, square, solid, liquid, gas - we will suffer. Nothing can be described in terms of just one sign. But without signs, we feel anxious. Our fear and attachment come from our being caught in signs. Until we touch the signless nature of things, we will continue to be afraid and to suffer. Before we can touch H<sub>2</sub>O, we have to let go of signs like squareness, roundness, hardness, heaviness, lightness, up, and down. Water is, in itself, neither square nor round nor solid. When we free ourselves from signs, we can enter the heart of reality. But until we can see the ocean in the sky, we are still caught by signs. The greatest relief is when we break through the barriers of sign and touch the world of signlessness, nirvana. Where should we look to find the world of no signs? Right here in the world of signs. If we throw away the water, there is no way for us to touch the suchness of water. We touch the water when we break through the signs of the water and see its true nature of interbeing. There are three phases - water, not water, true water. True water is the suchness of water. Its ground of being is free from birth and death. When we can touch that, we will not be afraid of anything. "If you see the signlessness of signs, you see the Tathagata." This is a sentence from the *Diamond Sutra*. Tathagata means "the wondrous nature of reality."

To see the wondrous nature of water, you need to look beyond the sign (appearance) of the water, and see that it is made of non-water elements. If you think that water is only water, that it cannot be the sun, the earth, or the flower, you are not correct. When you can see that the water is the sun, the earth, and the flower, that just by looking at the sun or the earth you can see the water, this is "the signlessness of signs." An organic gardener who looks at a banana peel, dead leaves or rotting branches can see flowers, fruit, and vegetables in them. She is able to see the nonself nature of flowers, fruit, and garbage. When she can apply this insight to all other spheres, she will realize complete awakening. Politicians, economists, and educators need to practice signlessness. We put many young men in jail. But if we meditate on signlessness, we will discover where their violence comes from. What is our society like? How are our families organized? What is taught at our schools? Why should we lay all the blame at the feet of the young people? Why can't we acknowledge our own co-responsibility? Young people harm themselves and others because life has no meaning for them. If we continue to live the way we do and organize society the way we do, we will continue to produce so many thousands of young people who will need to be imprisoned. Signlessness is not just an idea. When we look deeply into our children, we see all the elements that have produced them. They are the way they are

because our culture, economy, society, and we ourselves are the way we are. We can't simply blame our children when things go wrong. Many causes and conditions have contributed. When we know how to transform ourselves and our society, our children will transform also. Our children learn reading, writing, math, science, and other subjects in school that can help them earn a living. But very few school programs teach young people how to live - how to deal with anger, how to reconcile conflicts, how to breathe, smile, and transform internal formations. There needs to be a revolution in education. We must encourage schools to train our students in the art of living in peace anharmony. It isn't easy to learn to read, write, or solve math problems, but children manage to do it. Learning how to breathe, smile, and transform anger can also be difficult, but I have seen many young people succeed. If we teach children properly, by the time they are around twelve, they will know how to live harmoniously with others. When we go beyond signs, we enter the world of no-fear and no-blame. We can see the flower, the water, and our child beyond time and space. We know that our ancestors are present in us, right here and right now. We see that the Buddha, Jesus, and all of our other spiritual ancestors have not died. The Buddha cannot be confined to 2,600 years ago. The flower cannot be limited to its brief manifestation. Everything manifests by means of signs. If we get caught by the signs, we become afraid of losing that particular manifestation. When an eight-year-old boy who had lived at Plum Village suddenly died, I asked his father to be fully aware of the presence of his son in the air he was breathing and in the blades of grass beneath his feet, and he was able to do this. When a well-known Vietnamese meditation teacher passed away, his disciple wrote this poem:

*Dharma brothers, do not be attached to the sign.*

*The mountains and rivers around us are our teacher.<sup>1</sup>*

The *Diamond Sutra* enumerates four signs - self, person, living being, and life span. We get caught in the sign "self," because we think there are things that are not self. But when we look deeply, we see that there is no separate, independent self, and we become free of the sign of self. We see that to protect ourselves, we have to protect everything that is not ourselves. We get caught in the sign "person." We separate humans from animals, trees, and rocks, and feel that non-humans the fish, the cows, the vegetation, the earth, the air, and the seas - are there for our exploitation. Other species also hunt for food, but not in such an exploitative way. When we look deeply at our own species, we can see the non-human elements in it, and when we look deeply at the animal, vegetal and mineral realms, we see the human element in them. When we practice the Concentration on Signlessness, we live in harmony with all other species.

"The third sign is "living being." We think that sentient beings are different from insentient beings. But living or sentient beings are made of non-living or non-sentient species. When we pollute the so-called non-living species, like the air or the rivers, we pollute living beings as well. If we look deeply into the interbeing of living and non-living beings, we will stop acting this way.

The fourth sign is "life span," the period of time between our birth and our death. We think we are alive for a specific period of time that has a beginning and an end. But when we look deeply, we see that we have never been born and we will never die, and our fear dissolves. With mindfulness, concentration, and the Three Dharma Seals, we can unlock the Door of Liberation called signlessness and obtain the greatest relief.

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<sup>1</sup> The disciple was a court official in the Ly Era (1010-1225). His name was Doart Van Kham.