

Winter Retreat 2018: Cultivating the Five Super Powers of Avalokiteshvara
Dharma Post #3-A: Look of Purity

Dear Thay,¹ dear brother Jerry, dear friends on the path,

The Land of Great Happiness

In the Plum Village chanting book, “Chanting from the Heart,” there is a Mahayana sutra called *Discourse on the Land of Great Happiness (Sukhavati in Sanskrit)*.² Thay dedicated an entire book of commentaries to this sutra, **Finding Our True Home: Living in the Pure Land Here and Now**.³ This sutra and the Buddha of this land, Amitabha Buddha, are the foundation of the Pure Land schools of Buddhism—the most popular schools of Buddhism practiced in China, Viet Nam and Japan. Amitabha Buddha is the Buddha of Limitless Light. The phrase “Pure Land” is a later term for *Sukhavati* coined in China.⁴

According to Sister Annabel, the popular belief in Pure Land Buddhism is that there is a land to the West that is countless Buddha lands away and far from our every day experience on this earth. According to the Pure Land schools, someone who practices mindful recollection of this place and the Buddha who presides over it can be reborn there after death. Once reborn, the person cannot regress on the spiritual path, only going forward to greater and greater freedom. *Sukhavati*, the Pure Land, is the land of happiness that provides the ideal conditions for the spiritual practice.

Of course, as Sister Annabel says, **the deeper practice is to experience that the Buddha of Limitless Light is your own nature and the Land of Happiness is your own heart and mind.**” She says, “The Pure Land practice at Plum Village consists of dwelling in the present moment and appreciating the wonderful and delightful things which life has to offer right now.”

The Five Impurities and The Five Purities

In the *Expedient Means* chapter of the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha mentions the five impurities. In the chapter *The Path of Purification*, of Thay’s book **Finding Our True Home: Living in the Pure Land Here and Now**, Thay speaks in detail about the five impurities based on the following verse:

Shariputra, while I am praising the unimaginable qualities of the Buddhas, the Buddhas are also praising my unimaginably great qualities, saying: “Buddha Shakyamuni is very rare. In the saha world, which is full of the five impurities—the impurity of time, the impurity of wrong views, the impurity of unwholesome mental states, the impurity of living beings and the impurity of life span—he is able to realize the fruit of the highest awakening and is able to communicate to living beings Dharma doors which, when people without preparation first hear them, find hard to believe.”

The five impurities also have been described as defilements, pollutions or cloudiness—literally **turbidity**, as when a pool of water is churned up and not clear. Recently I went for a retreat on the McKenzie River in Oregon. My spouse told me he visited that river once, and remembered it as being clear and emerald green deep into its depths. However, on my trip the river was swollen and raging from winter rainstorms—the waters were muddy and dark, not “emerald green” at all. This is what is meant by purity and impurity. **While impurities are turbulent, purity has the nature of being calm and clear.**

The five impurities of time, wrong views, unwholesome mental states, living beings, and life span are the impurities of the saha or phenomenal world. The five corresponding purities of the ultimate dimension are: security, right views, wholesome mental states, oneness of self and others, and limitless life span.

First Pair: Time and Security

Time means a limited period of time—maybe fifty, seventy, or one hundred years. Time is a conception we use in the phenomenal world. According to Thay, the reason time is referred to as “cloudy” is because it is far too short, it is marked by impermanence, and it is not reliable or stable. This makes happiness difficult. We live in this phenomenal world and our life is impermanent, shifting, precarious, and without any security. Accidents happen and the political situation is not secure. There are all kinds of calamities, diseases, and poverty. In our busy lives we have so many choices to make, and so many things we worry about. Jobs come and jobs go. No matter how much material comfort we have, we don’t know what will happen tomorrow, next week or next year. At some level we are afraid that we may lose it all.

“In the Pure Land people overcome the pollution of time and can establish security in their daily lives.” How can we do this? Thay said that it depends on how we live our lives and how we respond to our environment. We see that our security is not rooted in time—past, present or future. We practice living in the present moment so that we do not get caught up in regrets about the past or fear and worry about the future. We can realize **security** through our practice of mindfulness and meditation. When we come back to our breath, to our mindful steps, to the present moment, we can realize the security of the Pure Land right here and now. If we respond to the insecurities of our human life with mindfulness, calm, peace, and compassion, we do not suffer so much from the cloudiness of time and we can share this security with others.

Second Pair: Wrong and Right Views

The second kind of impurity is the pollution of views. Views are our wrong perceptions. According to Thay, “wrong views” means to see things as the opposite of what they really are, and he describes five basic wrong views taught by the Buddha.

The first wrong perception is **“this body is myself”** (*satkaya-drishti*). We identify ourselves with our physical body, which causes us great fear when we are near death thinking that we will be separated from the body we identify as our self. We fear that we will become nothing. This view of ourselves as our physical body is an illusion produced by our ignorance of true reality—the way things are. Our life is not limited by our physical body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. All of these things are composed of elements that have the nature of impermanence and change. As the Five Remembrances teach, we cannot avoid change. “When we can see that we continue in so many forms, in all our descendants, in all those we have touched and loved, in all the actions of body, speech and mind which have penetrated the cosmos, we will not suffer.”

If we are fortunate enough to be awake and aware in the moments before our physical death, perhaps we can look out of a window and see the beauty and vastness of the sky, the earth, the breezes, the trees. “Oh, dear trees, I love you so much. You have been such dear friends to me.” Our breath, however stable or unstable, puts us in touch with the frailty of our body, but also wholeness and connection beyond our view of this physical body—a Buddha field far beyond time and space. In that moment our love knows no bounds, and at the moment of our death we don’t suffer.

“My body is not me. I am not limited by this body. I am life without boundaries. I have never been born, and I have never died.” This is a poem Thay wrote which can be used to help someone who is sick and dying. But we don’t have to wait until our body is near death to realize the reality of these words. Living deeply rooted in the present moment, we can experience this teaching over and over again.

The second wrong perception is **“extreme view”** (*antagraha-drishti*). This means we are caught in one of a pair of opposites: existence or nonexistence, eternity or annihilation, one or many, coming or going. To believe that there is existence is one extreme. To believe in nonexistence is another extreme. Thay gives the example of a piece of wood drifting on the waves. If it is washed up on the shore, it would not be able to drift out into the ocean. In the same way, if we are caught in this or that shore of beliefs, we do not have the freedom from views that is as vast as the ocean.

The third wrong perception is **“wrong view”** (*mithya-drishti*). We see things in a distorted or upside-down way. “There is suffering and we call it happiness. There is bondage and we believe that it is freedom. It is harmful but we say it is wholesome.”

When I was a child living on a small farm in central Oregon, we raised cows, chickens, rabbits, and pigs. When I was seven years old we bought a young calf and raised him as a steer. I loved that cow—his eyes, the way he walked, chewing his cud. I even loved the smell of his cow dung! I considered him my friend. But I also knew that we bought him so that we could raise him to be our food one day. I really did not want to think about that day, but the day did come and it broke my heart. Even during the time he was alive I suffered because I could not face his death. I have come to see ignorance, at its base, as the practice of ignoring. We ignore that

which is painful, or overwhelming beyond our ability to cope or respond. It is like “turning a blind eye” or creating dead spots inside of ourselves to protect us from reality. But there it is nevertheless. What humans are doing to our Mother Earth. How brown peoples suffer from the individual and collective actions of society that support white peoples but leave brown peoples vulnerable to oppression. How the ways we separate ourselves from each other cause suffering, whether we recognize it or not. How many times does our ignoring cause us to create excuses for why upside-down is really right-side up? For young children especially, it may be necessary to ignore or forget in order to protect and keep themselves safe in an unhealthy environment. But if we are lucky enough to find practices that help us realize safety within and without, and be supported in developing those practices, we may find we are able to turn into seeing suffering **and** happiness more and more—no matter what our age.

Perhaps one reason some of the Buddha’s teachings are hard to believe is that we would rather ignore and turn away from suffering, holding tightly to our distorted, upside-down views. To be diligent in the practice is to continue to turn gently and courageously toward both the relative and absolute truths of suffering and well-being—even when it feels difficult. In the past year I have been consciously practicing to bring the Five Contemplations alive in my life. To challenge my ignoring and to help me remember these truths, I recite one phrase in this way: May I eat with mindfulness and gratitude so that I can see clearly into the suffering and sacrifice that brings this food to my plate today.” I must eat to live, but with every bite I take I also try to remember the suffering.

The fourth wrong perception is **“the view that is caught in view”** (*dristi-paramarsa-drishti*). This means being stuck in any set idea or point of view. When we have a perception, we have the tendency to make that perception into the absolute truth. If we are caught in it and we can’t let it go then it is called a view that is caught in a view. Any view can only ever be partially accurate. When we are caught in a view, we may cause ourselves and others to suffer.

The fifth wrong perception is **“the view caught in rites and prohibitions”** (*silavrata-paramarsa*). This refers to taboos, prohibitions, the formal side of ceremonies, and beliefs we are caught in. They said that every land and every people have beliefs which arise out of imagination and fear. Bad luck from black cats crossing our paths, and on Friday the 13th are a few from my culture. Ceremonies are performed with the aim of protecting us or touching the mystery of our spiritual tradition, but then we can become slaves of the ceremonies. “When we are caught in rites and prohibitions it means we are caught in forms of ceremony, religious rites, and other beliefs which are not consistent with reality and are not beneficial for the practice of transformation.”

So what is the purity of right views? A right view has the nature of non-duality and is also called freedom from views or Right View. When we have a right view of our body we don’t think that our body is our self, that we are our body. When we have a right view about our beloved, we don’t think they are permanent and not subject to

change. “We can find joy and happiness understanding the reality of life as it is. We don’t need to suffer. **This is the fruit of right view.**”

Third Pair: Unwholesome and Wholesome Mental Formations

The pollution of unwholesome mental formations is also called the pollution of afflictions. Afflictions include craving, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and pride (and there are many more!). Right Effort or Right Diligence, part of the Noble Eightfold Path, shows us how to practice with the pollution of unwholesome mental formations. In his first dharma talk the Buddha said that Right Diligence is encouraging the non-arising of unwholesome states, abandoning unwholesome states that have arisen, encouraging wholesome states to arise, and supporting the continuation of arisen wholesome states.

As we practice mindfulness of our mental formations when they arise, we have a chance of not getting caught in our reactions or stories. Over time, the afflictions that cloud our mind arise less frequently. Practicing Right Effort or Right Diligence we have the opportunity to cultivate wholesome mental formations such as generosity, equanimity, understanding, humility and compassion (yes, there are many more of these as well ☺). These wholesome mental formations create the Pure Land within us. “Establishing our Pure Land right away in our heart and mind will protect us from the afflictions.”

Fourth Pair: Living Beings and Oneness of Self & Others

The fourth pollution is the pollution of living beings. Thay said this refers to the mistaken conduct of living beings, like disloyalty, not observing the mindfulness trainings, jealousy of each other, unjust behavior, and division into social classes to oppress and compete with each other. In societies, people divide themselves into many social classes and one social class can oppress the other. We suffer from the complexes of superiority, inferiority and equality—always comparing and contrasting, judging and evaluating.

As Thay has said, the opposite of the pollution of living beings is not the absence of living beings. It isn’t living beings themselves who are polluted but the activities of body, speech and mind. “When we practice to be free from our jealousy, our habit to divide ourselves into social classes, and our tendency to betray each other, we can no longer find the impurity of living beings.”

According to the *Sutra on the Eight Realizations of the Great Beings*, the human mind is always searching for possessions and never feels fulfilled. This causes impure actions to ever increase. Bodhisattvas however, always remember the principle of having few desires. They live a simple life in peace in order to practice the Way, and consider the realization of perfect understanding as their only career. Practicing in this way we can realize the oneness of self and others more easily.

When we practice as a sangha and can see ourselves and each other as parts of one sangha body, we can explore ways to overcome the impurities of living beings within our sangha. Thay said that we can avoid conflict when each member is nourished by the practice and together the community is able to go together on the path of happiness and emancipation. May we find skillful means to help our sanghas go in this direction.

Fifth Pair: Life Span and Limitless Life Span

The fifth kind of pollution is the pollution of life span. Thay said that life span in this sense means going in a circle and drowning in the cycle of birth and death. If we are living only in the dimension of the phenomenal world, it is difficult to go in the direction of what Thay called the upward path, the direction that helps us realize the fruit of the highest awakening. Without any other aim apart from the six sensual desires (profit, fame, excessive food, and too much sleep), we are born and die and born only to be caught in the whirl of these desires—“this is the real pollution of the saha world.”

Caught in the whirl of the six sensual desires is like falling into a raging river—we are pushed along, dragged under, flailing around, afraid that we will drown. The mindfulness trainings are like a stable boat that helps us navigate the raging waters. We practice living simply, seeing that we have more than enough conditions to be happy in the present moment, consuming mindfully. And we have the practice and energy of the sangha to support us. These practices take us in a wholesome direction. They help us touch reality as it is; see our interconnection with other people, beings and the environment; realize the interbeing nature of all that is. Practicing in such a way that this realization becomes a reality in our everyday life is practicing the purity of limitless life span.

The Path of Purification

According to Thay, if we wish to be born in the Pure Land we need to practice purification, allowing the turbidity to sink down and clarity to appear. “The turbidity is our restlessness, agitation and confusion. We know that the pollution contains purity within itself, and if we know how, we can turn pollution into purity.” The five purities lie within the five pollutions and the Pure Land lies right in the saha world. The saha world is the Pure Land. We don’t run away from the impurities, but practice calming them down so that clarity may arise. In the contemplation of purification, Thay said, “Like a cloud in the sky, she [Avalokiteshvara] has to purify herself so that when she becomes rain, the rain will be pure for the sake of the world.” And so it is for you and me as well.

The Holy Truth of Well Being

Three years ago my grandson Thomas was born. He was full-term but couldn’t tolerate the stress of labor so was delivered by caesarean section. I’ll never forget the moment his dad came out to the family waiting room, pointed to me and said,

“You, come with me.” In the post-delivery room Thomas lay quietly in a warming bassinet while several doctors checked him out. He had what looked like tiny blue bruises all over his body—the result (we later found out) of losing blood through the placenta probably within the week before he was born. He had been oxygen deprived and was in serious condition. The next week he spent in the neo-natal intensive care unit, and then was moved to the mother/baby floor of the nicu unit where Emily could take care of him while he was closely monitored. His dad and I shared time supporting mom and baby.

While supporting Emily, I had some amazing moments with Thomas that I could not fully articulate until now. Once he was released to the mother/baby unit, I had chances to hold and rock him while Emily rested. I clearly remember looking into eyes, and seeing something deep and serene. Not to say that he didn’t suffer, cry or panic. If we didn’t support his head properly it could flop backwards because he had some low muscle tone. He certainly did not like that.⁵ But still...I realize now that what I touched in him was vast, wordless well-being. Buddha nature. The Light of God. Perhaps babies are designed to help us touch that.

Buddha nature is continuously manifesting. The Light of God is always shining brightly. We only need to remember, and open ourselves up to it. This is the deep teaching of the Pure Land. Human beings are born into this material world with Buddha nature, the Light of God. From even before they are born into the world, infants experience pain and suffering, joy and delight. No being can escape the ever-manifesting and impermanent nature of suffering and joy in this material world. However, as human beings, if we know how to practice, how to look, we can realize more and more clearly the Holy Truth of Wellbeing, which is our inherent Buddha nature. This is the look of purity practiced by Avalokiteshvara. Once we have enough realization, we begin to see Buddha nature, the light of God, in every living being and there is no turning back from where we were before. More and more **we** express ourselves as a living manifestation of Buddha nature within the saha world.

For reflection: It is easier to see Buddha nature in those we love or admire. How about someone we are having difficulty with? Or someone with “absolutely no redeeming qualities”? How can I cultivate this quality of looking in such situations?

¹ “Thay” is the affectionate term Thich Nhat Hanh’s student call him. The term means teacher.

² *Sukhavati* is also translated as the land full of joy, delight or bliss. Thay has translated it as great happiness.

³ We will look into several aspects of this sutra for this dharma post. If you wish to dig more deeply into the sutra and Thay’s commentaries, the book is available in paperback and on Kindle.

⁴ According to Sister Annabel Laity (True Virtue) in her preface to Thay’s book.

⁵ Note: Thomas recovered from his birth issues and is a healthy, active three-year-old.