

OHMC Sangha Dharma Talk with Guest Brother Chân Pháp Lai and his Younger Brother

Monday sangha - April 20, 2020

Part I

Thank you for inviting me and welcoming me to your sangha and for the themes and the questions and yes, it's... Yeah, I do feel like... A little bit, I've been asked to share about walking on water. There's quite some... Yeah. So I mean, it's great though to have that input and I won't be sharing for so long, so I don't promise to touch everything in the way that it maybe deserves. But I will share that on the first point about how can we grow our presence and stability. And then there was a question about also having a schedule. There's also a question about, if you've lost... Yeah. Losing the connection with the growing presence and stability with losing people to COVID, right?

So I want to share that I have also known of people, a close friend who passed away and it was registered as a COVID related. In his case, he'd actually been in a home, he had some Alzheimer, struggling with Alzheimer for a number of years. And do you know I felt like partly what happened was because three weeks prior to that, there was no visitations allowed and maybe the kind of sudden loss of connection with loved ones, even though he may not recognize his wife and things like this maybe precipitated a kind of choice for him. But nevertheless it was recorded as a COVID related to death. I was aware that it's... Yeah, it was a kind of reminder that there's so many aspects to this. It's also about there's so many people that are in vulnerable situations, whether or not they are sick with COVID that we need to reach out to and not...

So I'm very aware that... For instance, with my mother, she's quite somewhat older, but she's quite capable of enjoying her time on her own. I keep in touch with her, but I know that there's a... So even though I am concerned for her health, I'm not as concerned for her mental health. I see she's doing well for instance. So then there are some people that I know that are not doing so well with the mental side and I really want to reach out to them. So we as sanghas, we have this resource of connecting with each other and we can see how much it benefits us.

So with the stability and the happiness and the compassion that we are able to generate in ourself for ourself and without particular situation. We also want to find ways to reach out to the vulnerable as well. So I was quite happy to learn that there are initiatives in my home country, the UK for doing that, that are starting not just practical health things. But there's a lot of volunteering through the national health service for practical jobs like delivering food, et cetera. But also for this aspect of mental health.

So we can already, even before we come out of this lockdown, stay at home policy, we can also already be getting creative. There's no short time when this period will end in whether we then go into another period because they talk about an encore of the COVID. Even if we suddenly, in two months they say, "Okay, everybody just go back to business as normal." And then there's another kind of outbreak and then they have another period. So I know Plum Village side they don't expect to have retreats or be going out, this year for instance.

Yeah, there's lots of talk about the situation going on for more than just to cut a few months. So, we also can't wait until things go back to normal before we do things. We are in a time where there's a lot of uncertainty and we're not really sure what the next situation will be, what we can expect. We know that there's also going to be a lot of economic repercussions and maybe... Yeah. We know that many people in the world... I think maybe this speaks something about the guilt question of being aware that these situations always hit the most vulnerable and the poorest the hardest. We may even enjoy our period where things have simplified and we get to be on our own. I know my mother was sharing that. She said, "Oh, I don't feel I have to do this, this, and this."

It's actually quite pleasant. But we also know for many people it can be different. It can be a matter of life and death, losing income, losing and not being able to feed families and being in very desperate situations. We also know that families or couples or what made people living together can get claustrophobic and tensions can start to rise. So we know that all of these things. We do have a lot of practices that help us to like in our own household, not get reactive and to learn how to begin a new and keep the calm. So the practice of sitting, walking, listening to the teachings is very important to keep our stability and keep our calm. And then also not to... To also give... This is also the sangha meeting kind of thing, is a very one format where one event where we can also share our concerns and our anxieties, but hopefully in a way where it's constructive.

So I also see that as well as just staying calm. We need a chance to share what is on our heart, what is... Even if it's to ourself to write down what I'm I getting anxious about? Because there is so many things to get anxious about and just put them out there. Okay. It looks like I'm really holding this fear of the future and this one and this one. And then in the present I'm concerned about this, this and this. Just really see, wow, I'm holding a lot of things that are concerning me right now and I have this attitude to this. I feel helpless about this. I feel some despair about that. I feel sadness for this. I feel guilt for that. Now these are all negative things, right? Let's say negative in the sense that unchecked they... Or if they're not held and accepted and recognized in as they can cause us to lose a lot of energy to become quite heavy and become quite anxious and we're practicing to do sitting meditation, et cetera.

It can wake us up in the night with anxiety and things like this. So if we are going to be one of those people and one of those sangha's that is able to maybe have the spare capacity. The compassion capacity to be of help to more vulnerable people than us people in more desperate situations than us. I would say Plum Village Community is not one of those. So don't worry too much about us. But still very grateful for that mention of how to support our health. But if we're to have that spare capacity, then we really need to really look into what is going on for us and really take care of ourselves. We have to start with ourselves knowing that that is then to give ourselves that possibility of being available to offer more outwardly to outreach. To reach out to people. For me as well, I just want to say nobody mentioned it, but it's been mentioned in other cases and I did mention it, this feeling of sometimes helplessness.

Not sure because of the uncertainty because it seems things are going in this way. I think Mary mentioned what can we do after and we don't even really know what the new normal can be. We can dream and we can have visions of how wonderful it would be, if this became a turning point for the whole global community and we can see that. We would want to try and spin the kind of a situation to

go towards that new awareness, that collective awakening that Thay was talks about. We can put some effort into that. And then at the same time, we don't know if that's necessarily going to... If it will go that way. So what would we take refuge in if it's not going that way and we can't do that. So it's not to say, to give up the hope of and to put energy into that.

But always do it from a place of... We can use the word equanimity and I'm using it carefully because I don't mean not caring, but I mean understanding that we were never really in control. We do our best and for me then what I contemplate is the place to take refuge spiritually is in the action of love. For me, I see Thay one action. His name Nhat Hanh means one action was from the Vietnam war, from his time when he was... We have a 5:00 bell. Let me just stop and breathe. Y.

Yeah. So Thay's action has been one pointed in the sense that it's always the compass is compassion. The north star is love and he's brought all of his energy into restoring love and bringing love to where he goes. The mindfulness practice is not a technique. It needs to be understood as love itself. The reason it can be under... The simple way to connect mindfulness and love is to remember that to love is to be there, to not abandon. So when we lose our connection to ourself, lose connection to the present, it's like we abandon ourselves and we're not there for ourself. So when we're... Not to mention for the other person. To become available to what is going on, we do that through mindfulness, but mindfulness itself is this connecting with life.

Through awareness of the breath we connect with life, we connect with what is going on. We come back to ourself and we discover what is going on. I mentioned kind of inventory of our anxieties and our consents not as part of mindfulness to say to recognize these seeds in me. This is what is I am identifying and to say, yes you are there too. You have a right to be there. There's a good reason why you're there. It's okay and I'm here too. Who is I in this case? The mindfulness, the energy, the Buddha energy, the mindfulness energy, the love energy, the capacity to be there and say, "Yes, I'm here too. I'm not running away. I recognize you." And to know also when we say, "Yes, I am here for you my anxiety." But we're also aware that we and the situation and the reality of things is much more than our anxiety.

That there are things that... Yeah. To also bring into our connection with life, connection with something which is bigger than we... A bigger picture. I think this is where the question about how can Thay sit drinking calmly a cup of tea and at the same time hold all the sorrows of the world. How can Thay do that? Because it is true. He has the capacity to do that and it is because he's in touch with a big truth. He's in touch with the wisdom and the insight of no birth and no death within to being. He doesn't disconnect. It's not a practice disconnecting and being just passionate. It's about true connection. But recognizing there's more going on than just this. Yeah. When you've spent your life cultivating compassion and love and wishing. Then you have a lot of energy and you also are in touch with also maybe a sense of... I think there's a lot of peace that comes from of course, just knowing that you are doing absolutely all of what you can do.

It's a simple act of just staying present and not running away. But again, Thay's capacity to sit. I also want to mention, in terms of a schedule and in terms of the practice Thay always emphasized and this is always... He's been through seeing so many unpleasant destructive things through his time, the

importance of nourishing joy. So it was also mentioned about cultivating joy and calm and compassion. So joy also belongs to love, joy being also this capacity to really appreciate the wonders of life and we need to nourish ourselves with joy and we want to have joy to offer. This joy can also come... It's also the spirit then when we have joy, the generosity is naturally there. When we have joy, it's a benefit to other people. It's a joy that goes along with peace and along with compassion. It's not an excited joy and you can call it the joy of meditation. The joy of... It comes from the practice.

It was because of what was mentioned about the cup of tea. I think some of you know the story of Thay when there was a man who came to... As I remember the story and I think there's probably different versions. Sister Chung Kong there and introduced this man to Thay maybe in the hut or as they were having breakfast in Thay's hut in Upper Hamlet. Okay. I may got some of the situation different, but the story goes that Thai said, "Oh this man has been given two weeks to live. He has cancer. What can Thay offer for this man in this situation." The man was sat there and Thai was silent for a while and drank his tea, his cup of tea and then looked to the man and said, with all sincerity, two weeks is a long time. This is a kind of lion's roar coming from Thay. You have two weeks if you live that fully you have a long... You will have a rich connection to life.

There are people that live many years, 70 years and the kind of rather cold expression that it's like they're dragging around their corpse all their life. A bit of a stoic image. But the point being clear that if we can live mindfully and really then we can be in touch with something beyond the normal. Time is very relative and time becomes very rich when we're really present and you know the experience. Because when you do touch the present, there is this feeling of why did I ever leave this place? And then for somehow you did leave it and then a week goes by, a year goes by and you think, I seem to remember I touched the present moment last year. And you've been meditating. So this man took this challenge from Thay because he really did think he had two weeks and Thay said, "So now eat your breakfast in mindfulness." He was there and he said the man tried his best. But actually what happened is this man did more than try his best. He put his whole heart into the practice from that point and he...

Given the order at 2:00 PM order of [inaudible 00:23:49] being named true life. He lived for 15 years. There's the miracle, maybe there's the walking on water thing. But it's not about the miracle so much as the fact that he had true life. If we're also talking about guilt and shame, I don't think anybody that would be in a difficult situation would want us to... They would be crying to us, please, you have good conditions, please, please appreciate, really appreciate what you have and live your life deeply. Yes, of course we do what we can to help and reach out as well. So this is why when we take our food, we have the contemplation that we are very much aware that many people do not have food. When we take the food without awareness, it is not so that we have to be miserable about eating, but that we keep connected and have our compassion alive and know that the food should be seen as a medicine.

Yes, we're still compassionate with ourselves that we also enjoy food as a kind of comfort or an indulgence. We see that tendency to want to take refuge in food and okay. But there's also... We try to connect, especially when we're aware of suffering of other people and we say, I know that there's those that do not have food and we are very grateful for the food and we eat it mindfully. We eat it with nourishing us, our bodies so that we can be available as best we can. So we have the energy for the practice, we have the energy to love, to serve. So in these times... Yeah. So I'm aware, I've kind of gone

over time and it just made me mention about against schedule. Certainly I'm so grateful to be in a community where there's a schedule and this is part of your schedule, if you come every Monday evening for this. But what else you do a schedule will be a great support for you if you can have one.

So whatever, we can call them pebbles, pebble meditation, you can think of it like putting pebbles in your day. What things would really nourish your joy, what things would nourish your compassion, what things would nourish your stability, what things would nourish your body? Some exercise, connecting with nature. Call them pebbles and make sure and see if you can have those pebbles come into your day in whatever time it works for you. But try and make sure that you bring those pebbles into your day. Because if we use the word schedule, sometimes it becomes something we think of as something that is a must do. It becomes a burden. So maybe if we can choose to call things by these nourishing things that will really support me in the day.

Of course to give special times to these things, to make sure that we can do it. That we've given time for that and we don't just get to the end of the day. So I didn't have time in the end. That's why we try to set aside time and then we call it a schedule to make sure that we don't forget. But yes, of course schedule is going to be so supportive, especially in these times, if we're in that kind of lockdown situation. I don't have the self-discipline to be a good example of that. But I'm lucky enough to be in a sangha where it's not such a question in that I have so much choice. I still manage to miss the occasional things, but on the whole. So I've gone well over time and Annie thank you for saying that I could, but I think I've now stretched that. So I'm going to bow out and thank you for your kind attention.

Part II

Hmm. So, the first question about people having different views and ego versus how to bring true love into a situation. Yeah, I think that that is the... That was happening well before the COVID thing and it will go on. And, well, the true bodhisattva is not attached to any views, lets go of views, has done with views and responds to what is in the present moment with love. And actually... Yeah. And for sure arguing our view. We can put a lot of energy into it and we know that there will be a lot of people putting energy into arguing probably our view as well as other views.

And there will be chaos. There will be ambiguity, complexity around this. What is the best thing we can offer is our stability in that situation of not getting involved so much in the views but staying grounded in our presence, in our love and trying to just meet people where they are. And of course, we can ask questions that are human questions. We can put our human situation in the the conversation in a way to meet the person even who has the opposite view with our humanity, with our vulnerability also, like saying, "Oh, well, yeah, I get your view. This is difficult for me because of this," but not to get into arguing any view, not to get into trying to prove anything or trying to get that kind of result.

Even we know... Well, we feel we know that this is the way. And we may find... I want to recommend... I know this is a funny thing to do, but I recommend a documentary that you can watch on Netflix called Meeting the Enemy. I don't know if anybody has seen it. Nobody. And it's a... Wow. This woman is a Muslim woman originally from Norway, but she lived in the UK. Yeah. And she went to meet the far right who were sending her hate mail. So, she met them and kind of is an amazing exempla in this

documentary of what I'm talking about of how you can meet and you can challenge, but not from this place of kind of trying to argue your view. So, reason seldom works. Getting passionate, intimidating the other maybe works for a little while. Making the other person feel small, maybe it works for a little while. You maybe feel better.

But yeah, in the long run, it's not the thing that... Yeah, it doesn't help. It just adds to the energy of disharmony and hatred, actually, and going on to the role in the family from Susie... Trying to see where Susie is.

Top right.

Oh, hi. Yeah. Susie, your role in the family for supporting somebody with Alzheimer's, right? And wow. I mean, just again, I think it's this. If you can just be solid and fresh and available and not reactive and just try to see clearly, "What can I do helpfully right now..." And also even, especially with somebody with Alzheimer's, I think that can be this, as I mentioned with my friend, I think we should not underestimate our presence for that person, even though it seems that they don't recognize whatever stage they're at.

But also to recognize that this is having an impact on the family, on the people that are... It's touching fear and touching... Everybody has a lot of fear about this. It's the worst fear to get something like that. So, it may be touching fear in people. So, also recognize maybe what's... Being touched in other members of your family in relation to this, the kind of anxieties and therefore their reactivity and having compassion. Holding that in your mind, it's like maybe then this is putting them off balance. So, you keeping your balance is the best, and keeping... The name of your Sangha is so appropriate, keeping your heart open, opening your heart. [inaudible 00:06:28]. Yeah.

And then maybe that also connects with Cindy's question about feeling abandoned. Where is Cindy? Oh, yes. Hi. So, this question about feeling abandoned is... When I mentioned it, I was specifically thinking of how we abandon ourselves. So, if you feel that your family has done that, be careful with that notion. But first of all, check to see, "Am I actually abandoning myself?" So, to come back to yourself and say, "If I'm feeling that is happening to me from the outside, what can I do to at least not abandon myself? And what does that mean to me?" And see what it means to you to not abandon yourself and offer yourself presence, offer yourself friendship, offer yourself time to just be with you and be with what is and not have parts of you that are excluded from your love. And even there are parts which are difficult that you would rather... You know, recognizing, "Oh, I see. I have this part of me that I don't want to be there." And start to recognize that, that that is also taking place in you.

So, you are also pushing out aspects of yourself or certain things that you feel you don't have time for, you can't deal with, you don't like about yourself and see if you can bring them back into your internal family. So, you have an internal family as well as an external family. I like to say we have an internal Sangha. So, give them all a chance to sit in a circle like in a Dharma sharing, get all of those members of your internal family a chance to share. So, start there, Cindy and see what fruits that bears. Okay? And don't focus on what you feel that your family is doing. Be aware that that label abandonment that you've given that, "They are abandoning me," is a kind of wound you're giving yourself to say that to yourself. "My family has abandoned me." All the causes and conditions for them to behave as they are, they maybe don't see it like, "Oh, let's abandon Cindy," you know?

There's all sorts of causes and conditions that account for what they're doing. And actually, if we see what we do internally, we can maybe see that, "Actually, yeah, I do that too. I also exclude parts of myself and maybe other people." And so also then you say, "Huh, you know, I have more compassion" and more space around it and more questioning. "Am I sure you know? I don't really know." And see how you can be there for your family, how you can also show up in certain ways that they will actually recognize as helpful for them, even if you think you know what's helpful for them or you know your intention is good, but maybe asking them, "What would be helpful for you from me?" You can even shock somebody with a question like that. So, those are a few thoughts on that question.

And Adriana? Hello. Yeah, your question is so touching. It's about guilt of where you should be. We can't be everywhere at once, huh? There's a reason why you are where you are. Identify those reasons and also identify the reasons why it might be good to be back in Mexico with your family, with whoever it is. And yeah, maybe the choice is not entirely... It's ambiguous, it's complex, it's not certain what is the best thing, and situations are changing. And what can you actually do? I mean, it's quite difficult at this time to be sure, to discern this is the best place, even if all of your intention is to help. It's not clear all the time what is the best thing to do, but maybe again, get that out on paper, get that clear for yourself, all of these points, but then also know that maybe there's no rational right choice. There's too much ambiguity. And just also give yourself compassion then for that situation that you can't do everything, and then maybe let it go.

Just let it all go and just sit and just know that you are being present in your situation there. Offer love to those that you would want to support by bringing these people into your heart, into your mind and send them some love and attention in that way and send them also your gratitude for being so grateful that they are in your life. To have somebody to care about is something to be grateful for. That somebody would be grateful for your presence, that means there's an incredible connection between you. So, touch your gratitude, your appreciation for these people, and touch the joy of that connection, not the guilt. Touch the joy of that connection. And then, again, just stay with yourself and stay with yourself in the situation and see also just without thinking and without judging and noticing when you're judging yourself and just giving yourself, letting go of that if when you can, when the guilt comes up and say, "Oh, hello, guilt. You're there again" and say, "I'd like to just... Would you mind just letting me be free for a while to touch? Because I'm actually trying to do what you want, which is really get in touch with a deeper sense of what is my purpose, where am I supposed to be?"

And ultimately, you are supposed to be exactly where you are, but then try to give yourself that space... And then there may actually be something that comes up and says, "This is what you're supposed to do," but in the meantime, there's so much you can do before you jump like a frog off the plate to go to Mexico, you know? So, thank you. I think I've, again, gone over time. Thank you. Thank you for staying with me. Okay.