

October 2016

Dear Thay, Dear Sisters, Dear Brothers,

Thay has selected two sutras to help us learn about the teachings of the Buddha on “the better way to live alone”.

The two sutras he selected are:

The Elder Discourse, and

The Discourse on the Better Way to Live Alone.

Thay says that in the Elder Sutra, the Buddha said to the Monk Thera, “Monk Thera, it is true that you live alone. I cannot deny that. But I want to tell you about a way to live alone that is much more enjoyable, much more deep and wonderful.”

These words of the Buddha are so gentle and beautiful. The Buddha engaged the Monk Thera in a conversation starting from a place of acknowledgment and understanding of Thera’s experience. We are not hearing the Buddha say, “Now Thera honey, stop living alone by yourself! You should be living with other monks and you should be engaging with lay people!!”

Instead, the Buddha acknowledged the monk’s choice to live alone and only presented him with an invitation to consider a different way, actually, a better way. The

Buddha was already modeling for Thera a better way to live alone with those very words and actions.

Thay says that the Buddha went on to teach the Monk Thera more in detail what the better way to live alone entailed. He said to Thera: “Let go of what is past. Let go of what is not yet here. Observe deeply what is happening in the present moment, but do not be attached to it. This is the most wonderful way to live alone.”

So we begin to see that the Buddha himself was not attached to having Thera live in any specific way, and as such, he was able to invite Thera into a conversation with a lot of gentleness and openness.

So how about us? How often do we find ourselves with the capacity to live alone in a better way with gentleness and openness when we find ourselves inviting others (or even telling others) to do something differently?

Anyhow, so the Buddha invites Thera to consider that this better way to live alone which involves deep observation of what is happening in the here and in the now without attachment may be quite a wonderful alternative to Thera’s version of living alone.

But the Buddha actually had more to say about what he meant by living alone. Thay says that the Buddha made a distinction when speaking with Thera about living with another. He says that the Buddha wasn't

only speaking about living alone versus living with another person. He was actually saying that a monk who is bound by any objects, even objects of consciousness, is, in fact, living with those objects.

But what might They be referring to by “being bound by objects of consciousness?”

Imagine that our hands have been bound by a rope. Could we say that our hands have been rendered powerless by that rope?

Now, let's say that our mind has been bound by the objects of our consciousness, or our desire for example. Could we say that our mind has been rendered powerless by the object of our desire?

And if we could say that, then why would we hold on to these objects so vehemently?

You know when my doggie, Coco, died recently, I found myself living completely alone again after almost 17 years of having his constant companionship. Toward the end of his life, he got very tired, complained a lot and needed a lot of my attention, which frankly also made me tired. He would start whining for no apparent reason and I would say to him, "Oh His Majesty, Royal Grumpiness, it's not so bad." But I knew that he wasn't feeling well and that he was missing his buddy Tico who had passed away the year before.

After Coco died, my desire to have His Royal Grumpiness back in my life was very strong. And my aversion to having my home be totally empty of his presence was also very strong. I actually WAS completely bound by these objects of my consciousness. And with every passing day with these objects of mind running amok, I could feel myself becoming more disempowered in my capacity to be happy. I found myself suffering. So then I became very determined to engage my practice and find my way back to being happy. In hindsight, I can now see that I was looking for a better way to live alone.

Thay says that knowing the better way to live alone shines light on the essence of living in an awakened way: To let go of the past and the future, and to live mindfully and look deeply and discover the true nature of all that is taking place in the present moment.

So, when I earnestly began to practice with my doggie's continuation, I started by considering Thay's instruction to throw away the idea of loss, and began to consider Thay's other instruction to accept the wonders of life with gratitude, such as the gift of having had all those years of companionship and fun together.

So that's how I began to practice with the objects of my mind consciousness that had me bound and unhappy. And miraculously, the mental formations of

grief and loss were somehow lessened by the mental formations of gratitude and love.

I also began to let go of ideas and stories of what my future life without his companionship might look like, and began to consider instead the possibility of accepting with gratitude the gift of being able to care for myself now in new and more freeing ways with less responsibility of having to care for an elderly dog.

And then I also began to look deeply at the present moment, at how wonderful my life really was, my practice, my health, the blue sky, the white clouds, my loved ones, and all the things Thay invites us to look deeply at. And so I began to follow Thay's instruction on how to untie the knots in my mind, how to stop being bound by the objects of my consciousness.

And true to our practice, I found my happiness again as well as a better way to live alone.

But, you know, we also need to converse about how one practices a better way to live alone real-time, in-the-moment, when one is in the throws of a disagreement with a co-worker or in an argument with a spouse, or when Mr. Trump or Ms. Hillary are on CNN yet again causing some synapses in our head to burst!

In other words, how can one live alone better, in every present-moment, in every situation, without getting

caught for too long, creating for oneself a better and happier way to live?

I had a recent experience that might help illustrate how one might practice real-time the better way to live alone using the practices that Thay teaches us. It utilizes the practice that Thay has taught of recognizing (greeting) and embracing (owning and loving) our feelings just like a mother would embrace her crying baby.

My brother and I went to Brandsmart the other day to buy a new computer for work. I hadn't eaten lunch yet and so when we got there, I made a beeline to the cafeteria.

I pondered on the menu, which had no vegan options at all, and I said to the clerk, "Hello, I would like to order a beef Gyro please, but hold the beef. And I'd also like an order of mozzarella sticks to put on my Gyro." The clerk glared at me and with a surprisingly self-righteous tone and said, "Let me tell you something! ... There is no way that I'm going to sell you a meatless Beef Gyro, okay?! It makes no sense! You still have to pay for the meat which is a complete waste of your money. So, no, definitely not selling your a Beef Gyro with no meat okay?!" And then, to my surprise, she said, "Look, if your want, you can just order a Caesar salad and mozzarella sticks."

Needless to say, by the time she was finished telling me what I could and couldn't do, my inner-Cuban

seeds of self-righteousness and indignation had already been quite thoroughly watered. Fortunately, I quickly became aware that I was standing at an emotional crossroads. Should I turn left toward compassion? Or should I keep going forward and give this woman a piece of my mind?

But right then and there, Thay's teachings came to my rescue and I found myself thinking, "hello my little self-righteousness, hello my little indignation, hello my little surprise, I am here for you." And so I began to embrace these unruly crying babies inside of me right then and there. And once they were fully embraced, my awareness began to shift outwardly, and I was able to look deeply at what else might be happening in that moment around me. Suddenly, I recognized that the clerk too had her very own unruly crying babies going on. But nobody was seemingly embracing them in any way. And then I heard the following words coming out of my mouth that I did not expect. I said, "Okay sure, I'll have the Caesar salad and an order of mozzarella sticks please."

Remember our Plum Village practice song that goes like... "*The realm of the mind is mine I can choose, I can choose where I want to be. Both heaven and hell I know equally well. The choice is upto me?*" Well, I knew that I had the choice either to allow myself to be imprisoned by the object of my desire by letting her have a piece of my mind, or to free myself and live in a better way, in that moment in the beautiful and peaceful island of myself.

But the reason why Thay's teachings came to my rescue, I believe, is because they are watered in me regularly by diligent practice, by staying in contact with our beautiful sangha every week, and by keeping the teachings of our beloved teachers near and dear. My experience is that to be free, one must immerse oneself in practice every day in order to give the practice a real energizing chance to help us create a better way to live alone.

What's more is that when we do find a better way to live alone, ironically, we live in greater harmony with others, like with our loved ones, with our cafeteria clerks, even with our sangha. Why? Not because everything outside of us is suddenly perfect, but because everything inside us is being properly cared for. Thay says that when we live in a practice community there should always be at least one or two people who serve as role models. He says that sometimes we only need to watch them standing, walking, speaking, or smiling in mindfulness, and we feel steady in our own practice. So it's not just a better way to live alone, it's a better way to live with others too. It's just a better way to live.

But again, how exactly do we live alone? Thay says that we first have to stop. We have to close the door on society every day, come back to ourselves, and practice conscious breathing, observing deeply what is going on inside and around us. We must learn to accept all the phenomena that we observe. Yes, even the

phenomena that we dislike whether it's what Trump said or Clinton did.

And all the things that we observe, that we accept, and that we do, we must do them mindfully to the best of our ability. Thay doesn't say to the best of someone else's ability. It's us doing the very best (the wholehearted best) that we can do, exactly where we are, diligently practicing to live an awakened life. This is what is meant by dwelling constantly in the present moment.

Thay also says that we must understand what are the dynamics in our consciousness that compel us to live out our images of the past. So for me with the death of my doggie, the dynamic in my consciousness was actually creating a double bind: I had a desire for what I couldn't have (that is, I wanted to have my doggie back), and I had an aversion for what I did have (that is, I did not want to be alone). That was the dynamic in my consciousness.

How many of us place ourselves in these kinds of binds with our mental formations, or fantasies really, of wanting and not wanting things that are completely unachievable, unrealistic, completely out of our control, sometimes isolating, and many times downright harmful to us and others?

Might it not be a better way to live alone to come back to the island of oneself, to come back to the present

moment, to transform our sufferings, to be happier, lighter, free-er anywhere, any time, in our own skin?

As the Buddha said to the Monk Thera, “Monk Thera, it IS true that you live alone. I cannot deny that. But I want to tell you about a way to live alone that is much more enjoyable, much more deep and wonderful.”

And so did the Buddha tell the Monk Thera, as so to has Thay told us too over and over again. And so I wholeheartedly invite us all to put into practice every day these teachings that our teachers have taught us in order that we can enjoy individually and collectively a better way to live alone.

Zero Circle by Rumi

Be helpless, dumbfounded,

Unable to say yes or no.

Then a stretcher will come from grace to gather us up.

We are too dull-eyed to see that beauty.

If we say we can, we're lying.

If we say No, we don't see it.

That No will behead us

And shut tight our window onto spirit.

So let us rather not be sure of anything,

Besides ourselves and only that, so

Miraculous beings come running to help.

Crazed, lying in a zero circle, mute,

We shall be saying finally,

*With tremendous eloquence, Lead us.
When we have totally surrendered to that beauty,
We shall be a mighty kindness.*

Hope you've found this exploration in personal practice helpful. May it inspire you to explore this further in your own practice.

With peace,

Antonio