



Sister Chan Dieu Nghiem at the International Business Retreat

photo courtesy of monastic Sangha

This is the first day of our Mindful and Compassionate Leadership Retreat for Business People. We all have come here because we want to understand or learn something about how to become a mindful and compassionate leader. Maybe this can be best expressed in the question: “Who is the boss?” I mean the *real* boss. Who is the real boss in our life? Where is our boss leading us? In what direction? Are we happy with that direction or would we prefer to go in a different direction? *Last but not least*: Do we have a say in this? During this retreat we will look into these questions. We will get to know our boss and learn how to take good care of our boss. If our boss is happy, compassionate, patient, and kind, then everyone around us will be happy, compassionate, patient, and kind, as well.

Some of you may go to an office every day, and others may work from home. Plum Village is a very big enterprise, and you may want to know: Who is the boss? Who is the *real* boss? People come here and ask: “How do you do it?” Every year we receive thousands of people during our big retreats as well as people who come to practice with us outside of our big retreats. Every Day of Mindfulness, we may be with 450 people, of which about 200 are monastics. As residents, we are the employees leading retreats for 400 to 800 people on a regular basis throughout the year. How are

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we able to do this, again and again, year in, year out? The retreats continue to grow bigger and bigger, and the number of people who come to Plum Village to practice with us is increasing. How do we do it? We work from home! [Laughter] Many people like our home.

Coming Back to the Present

The logo of Plum Village is “Mindfulness, Concentration, and Insight.” In the Upper Hamlet, you can see the logo on a stained-glass window at the entrance to the meditation hall. Mindfulness means being present. Sustained mindfulness is concentration, and sustained concentration allows us to look deeply into things

in order to understand and come to an insight. We practice the art of mindful living. In our daily life, we generate the energy of mindfulness by our way of sitting, our way of walking, our way of eating, our way of working. Every moment, we are bringing our mind home to our body. Our body is the home of our mind. When we hear the sound of the bell, we bring our mind home to our body to be truly present, and being truly present means being mindful, coming back to the present moment, bringing our mind home to our body again and again.

When we bring our mind home to our body, we are truly present, and we have one moment of calm, one moment of peace, one moment of clarity. Every time we take a step mindfully, we have one moment of calm, one moment of peace, one moment of true presence.

Nowadays, we receive a lot of information; we speak of information overload. Many years ago, when the laptop first came out, I saw an ad in a magazine with a business person standing on a beach and holding a laptop. The ad said, “Now we are available and reachable any moment, anywhere!” I thought, “Oh no, where are we going? No more respite, no more peace?” Now we need to be available and reachable any moment, anywhere. Emergency medical doctors need to be available every minute, so they carry a pager (beeper). But do we still know what is an emergency and what is not? Do we need to text right now this particular information at this particular moment to this particular person? By doing

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this, we contribute to the idea that we all need to be available any moment, anywhere, anytime. We contribute to robbing ourselves of freedom and possibly to the loss of freedom of the person receiving our messages.

Our practice is to come back to ourselves, to be truly present, to do what we do in freedom and enjoy it. What is robbing us of our freedom? Our mind absorbs everything, and whatever comes in through our senses—mostly through our eyes, our ears, and our thinking—waters seeds in the depth of our consciousness. A seed is a potential in us. We have the potential to be happy; we have the potential to be free; we have the potential to be inclusive, to be understanding, to be compassionate. We also have the potential to be irritated, to be angry and impatient, to be discriminative and exclusive. What goes in will determine what comes out. If we are not happy with what comes out of us, then we have to be aware of what goes into us.

A seed is watered through the contact between an object and our sense organs including our mind. Contact is one of the Five Universal Mental Formations. When one Universal Mental Formation is present, the other four are also present. The Five Universal Mental Formations—contact, mental attention, feeling, perception, and volition—are always together and are present in every mental formation that manifests itself. When we look around us, we are in contact with many objects and then our attention is drawn to one of the objects. The objects of our attention water seeds in us.

Looking out of the window I am in contact with many things: trees, cars, a house, a bicycle, the sky, and the grass. What is my attention drawn to? When it is the cars I may think: “Oh, pollution. Why didn’t they come by train? We could have picked them up with the van from the station.” What kind of seed does this way of thinking water in me? A little annoyance? I have the capacity to be annoyed. By focusing on the cars and thinking like that, I water the seed of annoyance in me and thereby make it a little stronger. However, I could also look at the trees. They look so beautiful with the ripening cherries. A gift of the Earth. The tree doesn’t ask for anything. It just offers its fruit, and that waters the seed of gratitude in me. With gratitude present in us, we are better equipped to look into and take care of our suffering. The seeds that are watered more through our sense organs become stronger, and have a chance to come up and manifest themselves as a mental formation most often. They become habit energies, the inclination of our mind, which can be either positive or negative. Do we see possibilities or obstacles?

Observing Our Minds

It is very interesting to observe our mind. What is our first thought when we wake up in the morning? “Woo-hoo, another day!” Or “Oh, not another day!” What is the first thought we have when we meet a loved one? “Ah, here comes my love.” We feel happy to have them in our lives. Or if we have a little conflict we may think, “Oh no.” What is the first thought when we step into the office? What is our first thought when we meet a colleague?