

[Speaker]

So if anyone would like the recording to be paused, feel free to say so, and I'll pause it.

The question is about physical pain in meditation, also in daily life, and about tension and how to work with all of that.

I think much of what you describe in terms of physical sensation is quite normal. I also feel it can be part of a transformation process. Many people experience different things when practicing with feelings and sensations. Sometimes it's more in the mind; sometimes it's more in the body.

When it's in the body, it can actually be a little simpler and easier to understand how to work with it. That's also why I like the question and feel comfortable speaking about it.

Of course, our body stores many things—different sensations, different tensions—for many reasons. I also have tension, and that is something very normal. We all experience it to a greater or lesser degree. I think there are a few aspects that can help, and you already mentioned some of them.

One is physical movement. Sometimes things get stuck, and practices like Tai Chi or Qigong can help. It's as if some kind of energy is stuck, and when you move, it may improve. That's part of why I strongly recommend Tai Chi or Qigong.

Because you asked the question, I feel you're open to working with it, looking at it, and experiencing it. So I would say: yes, you already described one important part—simply recognizing it and being aware of it.

Physical mindfulness, meditation, and bodily awareness can, sooner or later, help heal and transform that. At the same time, it may also be connected to mental things that can transform as well. But we don't know exactly whether that's the case or how, so for now we can stay with the physical aspect.

If it's very strong, we can take sitting meditation as an example. We can simply be there for it and be aware of it. As in the guided meditations, we sit, we breathe, and at some point we become aware of the body and of sensations, allowing them to be there.

The point is that we're aware of physical sensations, but we're not necessarily asking them to change. It's just awareness. And I think you already said that when you do that, you can notice that it transforms to some degree.

That's the more obvious part of the transformation that I see—the part we can directly work with. There's also a subtler part: over time, things may change on their own. I'm not sure, but it may also be connected with the way we live.

Sometimes you change your lifestyle, and suddenly something shifts there too. I'm saying that because I've had experiences like that myself. Through practice, things simply transformed over time. They disappeared without me doing anything active about them.

I don't know whether that's the case here, but maybe. Those are the things that come to mind, and I hope my sharing is helpful. Thank you very much.

[Questioner 1]

Thank you. Did you choose the EIAB, or were you placed here because you speak German? How does that work in a more practical sense in Plum Village? And since you signed up to be a monk, could you talk a little about that process and how you found your way into it?

[Speaker]

Thank you for your question.

To be very concrete, I came to the EIAB two years ago. While I was in Plum Village, in Upper Hamlet, I asked the brothers, "Can I change to the EIAB?" Everybody said yes, and everybody was very happy that I did, because they know that EIAB needs people, especially people with a German-speaking background.

At the same time, they don't necessarily want to push people, because PV is calmer, more rural, and the community is much larger there. So they were very happy that I myself stood up and said, "Okay, I'm ready to do it."

But in general, if monastics ask for certain things and it doesn't match the needs of the sangha, then it may not happen like that. Sometimes it works the other way around: the monastic community asks someone, "Do you think you could go to that center? We have this and this idea for it. Could you go there for three or four years?" And then the person says, "Okay, I'll try."

That's one part.

The other thing I wanted to share is that, generally speaking—and this is my own experience, but I think it's true for many people who become monastics—you first go somewhere and ordain there, and at that moment you leave a lot of your own ideas behind about where you want to go. The place where you ordain, and the group with whom you ordain, becomes the whole world for a while. You build aspiration together, and you're so immersed in that that you don't think about going elsewhere.

I think this happens often. People leave their hometown or home country to ordain, and at that moment there is really nothing in their mind about going somewhere else. It was very much like that for me too. I went to Plum Village and ordained there.

Only later—maybe four or five years after ordination—did I begin to feel, "Okay, maybe I could transfer and see whether I can live all this in another environment too." I also liked the AV community, and I felt they seemed to need support there. I could imagine myself there, and it felt interesting.

So, something like that. That is my sharing. Thank you very much for listening.

[Questioner 2]

Maybe a question building on that: what were your expectations of monastic life—what you wanted from it, what you thought it would be—and has that changed? If so, how has your overall view of monastic life changed?

[Speaker]

For me it was like this: I went to Plum Village very much with the intention of being a monastic for five years, because Plum Village had opened the door for that. I had already been there, I had seen the sangha, and I could imagine myself becoming part of it.

My intention was to be happier, and probably also to process some suffering I carried. It seemed like a safe path toward happiness, transformation, and maybe deeper insight—perhaps even in the direction of enlightenment. In all those respects, I have not been disappointed.

[Questioner 2]

And how has that changed over time—looking back now, or looking at your life now? What has changed?

[Speaker]

It changes a lot over time, but often you're not really aware of the change as it happens, because many things simply disappear from your life and you stop thinking about them. Your environment changes, you practice, and over time life becomes quite different.

Still, there are some underlying forces that feel continuous to me. One is the wish to support and help—not only myself, but also the place I come from: my family, maybe my friends. That continuity is still there, even if it's not always obvious. It doesn't mean you have to stay in constant contact, but the wish to help and support can take different forms.

Another is the desire to transform—to have less pain, less fear, less suffering, whatever shape it takes. It's like the Four Noble Truths: suffering exists, and somehow we intuit that transformation is possible. In that sense too, I feel I came to the right place.

And another element is what we spoke about before: what I referred to as water nature, or the ultimate dimension, or being in touch with something deeper and more profound. Monastics in other traditions, like Christianity, also have that aspiration. I had that

aspiration in the beginning, and I still have it now. I really feel I found answers to that in Plum Village, and I'm very grateful for that and for the monastics who have been there.

I think there is a force inside us, a kind of life energy, that we can direct in different ways. If we do that skillfully, it moves in the direction of true love, compassion, and helps us collectively touch the ultimate dimension. That is what monastic life is about for me.

I'm not sure whether that fully answers your question, or whether you had something more specific in mind.

[Questioner 2]

I think my question was more about direction—what direction you wanted to go in, and what may not have been so clear to me. There are also associations on your side, and those things fit together. Thank you.

Okay, let's listen to the sound of the bell. I also need a moment to breathe.

[Questioner 3]

We're on the topic of monastic life, so I'll continue with that. I have two questions. The first is about your schedule. Do you have a certain amount of formal practice, working hours, and free time each day?

Maybe let's stay with the first question for now.

[Speaker]

Thank you for your question.

I know two monasteries quite well: Plum Village, Upper Hamlet, and EIAB. So I'll speak about those.

Both have a schedule, though these days Upper Hamlet seems to have a bit more structure than here. I'll explain why.

Plum Village has many young people staying there—some for months, some for a year or longer—who are not necessarily entering the order. Then there are aspirants who want to become monastics, newer monastics, and more established monastics. So there are many different groups.

Because of that, a lot of schedule is needed, and a lot of classes are needed too, because people are new and generally come to learn. The monastic community has to offer them something.

In Upper Hamlet, there is morning sitting meditation, usually around 45 minutes, together with the lay friends. After that, there may be physical exercise, either together or individually. Then breakfast together in the dining hall.

During the morning, depending on the day, there is either working meditation for a couple of hours or a class for about an hour and a half. Different groups have different classes: lay friends, aspirants, newer monastics, and more senior monastics.

At 11:30 there is walking meditation with the whole sangha, the whole hamlet, and then lunch together. In the afternoon there is usually walking meditation at 3:00, four days a week, for about an hour and a half. At 5:00 there is another opportunity for sports or exercise. Dinner is at 6:00.

At 8:00 there is either sitting meditation and chanting for an hour, or something more specific, such as mentor-mentee groups, where people speak in smaller groups about practice and related things.

Two days a week in Plum Village are Days of Mindfulness, when guests can come from outside just for the day. The three hamlets come together, there is one Dharma talk for a large group, and in the afternoon there is Dharma sharing.

Monday is lazy day, with no activities. Tuesday morning is when monastics recite their precepts, so there is no sitting meditation then. So that's more or less the schedule.

When I first came to the monastery, I imagined that monastics must have something extra—some special private sitting practice or something like that—but that is actually not really the case.

The informal way of living together in the monastic residence, and the way you live with other monastics, is itself the teaching. That is a very important part of the whole package. You move into that environment, and of course you have to find a way to adapt. That adaptation itself is practice. It needs a lot of attention because many things happen.

So mindfulness is very much there. Learning by observation and learning by interaction are, in my experience, much bigger than what you learn in class.

EIAB has a little less schedule because the monastics there are all fully ordained. There is nobody living there who is non-monastic. We don't receive aspirants, and we don't have novices. All of us are fully ordained monastics.

So there is a little more experience, and it seems to be felt that we need a little less structure. If no one tells us to do working meditation, we will still do it. There is more personal responsibility, though that is not always easy.

Because we are older in the Dharma, there seems to be less need for structure, so there are fewer classes—at least on the monk side. Still, interaction, living together, and the work of sustaining the monastery—fitting into that, doing what is needed for the collective—form a large part of life there.

That's how I would describe the structure.

And of course, as monastics, we also have what we call precepts. There are certain things we definitely cannot do, and certain things we should rather not do. Some of these are more literal and strict; others need to be understood with sensitivity and appropriateness. The precepts are also part of the structure within which monastics live, so I should mention that as well.

Thank you for listening. Okay, let's have the sound of the bell.

For me, training also means challenge. When you come to the monastery, you may come with a lot of hope, aspiration, and energy for practice. But over time, things come up, and they may be very similar to what you already know from before. The difference is that now you are in very different conditions.

Over time, you learn to embrace those things because you are inside the structure of the monastery, which you chose to enter, and you are trusting the process of transformation.

The monastery offers structures like the schedule, living together peacefully, and the precepts. These are guidelines, and learning to live within them is definitely a training. This is combined with the mindfulness practices we also offer to everyone: mindfulness of the body, of breathing, of walking, of recognizing and embracing emotions, and so on.

That is the real training. That is how I see it. Thank you.

[Questioner 4]

Maybe I can just add one thing. Your answer reminded me of a question from last year's summer retreat, when Sister True Dedication gave a very beautiful answer. She said that the next Zen master is the Sangha.

So Plum Village is not looking for a new Thay as one successor that everyone should look up to and follow. The sangha is the most important element.

And what I also understood from her answer, very much in line with what Brother Khiết Tâm just said, is that the most important practice is to be part of the Sangha. It's not mainly about studying more, learning more, understanding more, reading more books, or translating more things. It's really about being part of the community and serving the community. That seems to be the biggest practice and teaching.

[Speaker]

Yes, I think that's true. And I would add that this is not something Plum Village invented. In monasteries in Vietnam, or in Zen monasteries more generally, you also find that.

As I understand it, Zen monasteries in East Asia place a strong emphasis on exactly this. They trust that process of mind training. They trust the willingness of each person to go as a river, and that this is part of learning to see yourself in ways you previously avoided. So yes, there is definitely a training in that, and I think it belongs to the tradition itself.

At the same time, I would also like to open it up a little, because you are not monastic. Wherever you find yourself, that too can be your path. That can be your training, your Sangha, your place of transformation.

Personally, though, I have chosen the path of monastic.

[Questioner]

I have a question about emotions and meditation. When I feel a very strong emotion and I sit down in that moment to look more deeply into it, it disappears. I can't feel it anymore or get in contact with it.

It actually feels much easier to get in contact with the emotion when I'm not being mindful or not meditating. So I'm curious whether you have an idea or suggestion about what I can do, because when I try to look deeper, it's gone.

I think maybe, because I work as a psychologist, I have this idea that you need to feel the emotion in order to process it.

[Speaker]

Can you give an example of how that happens?

[Questioner]

For example, when I feel sad and maybe cry a little about something, my thoughts are very strong, and I can let the emotion flow. But if I sit down and try to look more deeply into the sadness in that moment, it suddenly disappears.

[Speaker]

So you mean you don't feel it anymore at all in that moment?

[Questioner]

No, I don't feel it anymore.

[Speaker]

Thank you very much for the question. A lot comes up for me from my own experience.

There are different ways to practice meditation. Some are non-analytical and non-intellectual. For example, the guided meditations we are doing here are like that. They don't try to call something up. They simply recognize what is actually there in the moment.

Like in the meditation we did earlier: first you feel the breathing, then the body, then whatever feelings or thoughts are present. In that way, the practice becomes like a mirror. That kind of practice can lead to love and equanimity. It's a matter of simply reflecting what is there.

There is another kind of practice where you consciously bring up a topic. In Buddhism, for example, we may reflect on aging, sickness, and death. Or in some guided meditations, you bring up the inner child. You remind yourself of a certain theme, and then the emotion connected with it may arise.

Even there, though, there is usually very little thinking involved. You just introduce the topic gently, and the experience comes up by itself. You are not creating something artificial. You are watering something that is already there.

But I think your question is pointing more concretely to something else.

Sometimes we want to see something in ourselves, but we may not be so clear what exactly we are hoping to find.

You said you are a psychologist?

[Questioner]

Yes.

[Speaker]

Right. So on one side there is your professional training, which works with models, and on the other side there is this kind of meditative practice, which may not work with models at all.

In mindfulness practice, especially in something like mindfulness of breathing, there can be a kind of understanding that does not come through analysis. Often, when I practice, I also do not know where a feeling comes from. Is it from the past? From my environment? From the way I live now? I don't know. Ultimately, everything comes from countless conditions.

So there is a kind of understanding that is not necessarily conceptual. We begin to sense that experience always comes from many causes and conditions, far more than the mind can fully grasp. Through practice, maybe we understand more and more, but not always in a way that can be neatly explained.

At the same time, psychological work is also valuable. It gives us frameworks, and those can help. So I don't want to dismiss that at all.

What I sense is that there may still be things in you that you want to come into deeper contact with and understand more fully.

Maybe I can say a little more about what "looking deeply" means here. In the Zen tradition, it does not mainly mean intellectual analysis. It means really going into the experience itself: body, feeling, perception, mind, consciousness. In meditation, we become the mirror that sees these things.

And sometimes, through that seeing, understanding also arises: why does this feeling arise like this? Why is my perception like that? But that understanding is not always intellectual. It also comes through direct seeing.

That's where the teaching of interbeing comes in. We begin to see how all these different waves are connected, and at the same time we also see that they are all water. This is what I mean by the horizontal and vertical dimensions, or the conditioned and the ultimate dimension.

In some traditions, including Tibetan Buddhism, they also speak about a process where first one understands and resolves the phenomenal aspect, and then one can rest more fully in direct recognition. In that sense, one no longer needs to keep contemplating interbeing, because everything is already interbeing. One can simply be there and enjoy life.

I've said a lot already, and perhaps in different directions, but I hope some of it is helpful.

[Audience]

No, it was very helpful. I think my question wasn't very clear, but now I have some new ideas. Thank you very much.

[Speaker]

To make it very concrete from my own practice: if you have an emotion, you sit down, and it is no longer there, that can actually be fine. In that moment, what you recognize is that it is not manifesting.

Sometimes mindfulness is exactly that: recognizing whether something is present or not present.

In the Satipatana Sutra, the practitioner is aware whether anger is present or not present, desire is present or not present, ignorance is present or not present. One observes the coming and the going of these mental states.

So simply being aware that the emotion is not there is already part of the practice. It may sound very simple, but it is not a small thing.

From my own experience, it is often not easy to know where an emotion comes from. In monastic life, many things come up. Sometimes you understand something, but it is still there. And then there may be nothing to do except come back to the breathing, come back to the body, and let time do its work.

Gradually, you learn to flow with the practice itself. The conditions we live in, the people we meet, the things that arise around us—everything keeps moving like a river.

There will always be conditions affecting us. There will always be mud. We are not trying to create a life where nothing happens. The transformation is in learning to see clearly and not be caught.

That is very much what mindfulness does. It is this mirror-like recognition.

So thank you again for your openness.

I'm still with that earlier question—it feels like there is a lot in it. Maybe I can add just one more thing.

Deep looking has two dimensions: horizontal and vertical. Do you know what I mean by that?

[Audience]

No.

[Speaker]

The horizontal dimension is the realm of causes and conditions: how one thing comes from another, how phenomena influence one another, how things inter-are. This is the phenomenal realm, the dharma realm.

Looking deeply into this requires mindfulness, meditation, the path, and also compassion. We begin to see interdependence: this is because of that, and so on.

Then there is the vertical dimension, which I referred to earlier with the image of water. Some would call it suchness or the ultimate dimension. I think we already touched on it when we discussed the third verse.

So deep looking has these two aspects.

For me as a monastic, there is deep satisfaction in being in touch with that “water,” with the ultimate dimension. There is a deep fulfillment in sensing that oneness of life.

What I want to say is that understanding exists on both levels. But on this deeper level, it is not necessarily conceptual understanding.

[Audience]

So the horizontal one would be more the historical dimension?

[Speaker]

Yes, exactly.
