

Untying the Knots

..... source unknown (adapted and modified by Amy Fox)

One morning the Buddha came into his assembly of the monks. His disciples were sitting and waiting for him— and they were puzzled. This was the first time that Buddha had come with something in his hand: a handkerchief. They all looked at the handkerchief and thought, *there must be something special in it.*

Buddha sat on the platform and rather than speaking to the assembly he looked at the handkerchief and started tying a few knots in it...five knots in all. The whole assembly just watched and waited.

After quite some time the Buddha asked, "Can anybody tell me, is this handkerchief the same as it was before the knots were tied?"

One of the disciples said, "This is a tricky question. The handkerchief is the same because nothing has changed in its substance. The inner nature of the handkerchief is the same as it was. But, its outer nature – its form— is different. There are now five knots where there was none before and in this way it is not the same."

Buddha said, "Right. Now I want to open these knots." He started stretching both the ends of the handkerchief, away from each other. He asked the disciple, "What do you think? By stretching farther will I be able to open the knots?"

The disciple said, "No, you will be making the knots even more difficult to open because they will become smaller and tighter."

"Exactly so," said the Buddha, "Then what should I do so that I can open these knots? How can I untie them again?"

The disciple paused for a moment and then said, "I would like first to come close and see how in the first place the knots have been tied. Unless I know how they have been tied, it is difficult for me to suggest any solution."

The Buddha nodded in delight at his wise discipline and said, "Quite right. You are blessed, because that is the most fundamental question to ask. If you are in a certain fix,

the first thing is how you got into it rather than trying to get out of it. Without asking the most fundamental and the primary question, you will make things worse."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & PROMPTS

OPENING CLASS

When you change the way you see things, the things you see will change.

Notice where your mind is in this moment. What's holding your attention?

It's not about trying to fix or solve anything in this moment— or even trying to force setting something down— simply notice and observe what's taking up space for you.

DURING CLASS

AFTER TELLING THE STORY

Throughout our days and our life, we'll tie knots in our proverbial handkerchief. Any thought that isn't aligned with our true nature of love will cause knots or fluctuations in our mind. And most often, our first approach is to escape this feeling, to search for the way out. We ask ourselves, "How do I get out of this?" But without knowing how we got into it, we'll continue to feel the discomfort we're feeling, we'll continue to make the knots tighter.

The question to ask ourselves is, "How did I get hooked into this?" and to work to untie the knots of our mind in this way.

CLOSING CLASS

The entrance to whatever we are feeling, is also the exit. It's only by examining the problems themselves that we'll find a solution.

EXTRAS

Mindfulness teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, explains that mindfulness gives the understanding we need to untie the 'knots' that have formed within us through the course of our everyday life. Every encounter, every word, everything we witness, has the potential to form or release inner tensions. He says: When someone says something unkind to us for example, if we do not understand why he has said it and we become irritated, a 'knot' will be tied in us... If we practice mindfulness, we can learn the skill of recognizing a knot the moment it is tied in us, and find ways to untie it. These knots need our full attention as soon as they form, while they are still loosely tied, so that the work of untying them will be easy (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2011, *Your True Home*).