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Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE SECOND LESSON:

WAYS TO REFORM

Changing from the Heart

What is meant by "changing from the heart"? Although we have thousands of different types of faults, they all stem from the heart, from the mind.

Positive and negative karma are created from our mind, as is the entire universe. The Buddha told us in the Flower Adornment Sutra that "The nature of the Dharma realms arises from our mind. Nature is essence. Essence is the mind". How do Mahayana Bodhisattvas enter the hell realms when they go to help the beings there? By understanding the principle that everything arises from our minds. We learn from the Earth Treasure Sutra to break through the doors of the hells. This is explained in the Flower Adornment Sutra. What is Hell? A creation of our mind. Understanding this, we will learn that there are no gates to Hell, we can come and go freely.

So, we can correct our faults by starting to change from our minds and practicing good deeds. If we practice from our minds, then even a tiny good deed like freely giving a penny to a beggar, would be of infinite merit and virtue. Why? It comes from the great compassion that is brought forth from our true nature. It is boundless broadmindedness. Because it arises from our mind, the good fortune from it is infinite for it accords with our true nature. However, if the good deed arises solely from our actions then it is a small merit for it did not arise from our true nature.

How then do we reform ourselves from our mind? Through sincerity. We do so by cultivating from the mind, by wanting to correct our offenses, practicing good deeds and refraining from wrongdoings. When we correct from the mind, there is no such thing as should or should not. It is necessary to meet the requirements when reforming ourselves by reasoning and realizing the principles. When we reform from the mind, it is unconditional, pure and sincere. In this way, giving rise to even the slightest of kind thoughts will connect with our true nature. Knowing that everything arises from the mind, we would do well to correct our faults by starting from the mind.

If my heart is still of thoughts, then actions will not arise and faults can be avoided.

This is an unsurpassed principle. Purity of mind can cancel the negative karma accumulated over infinite past aeons. How can we attain purity of mind, stillness of thought? Through the unmoved mind, which is deep concentration. This is called "One Mind Undisturbed" in the Buddha Name Chanting Method. Once we attain this state all of our negative karma will be eradicated. However, when a new wandering thought arises, our negative karma will again materialize.

For example, when we are watching TV and turn it off, there is no longer a picture, only a clear screen. When we again turn on the TV, the picture reappears. The karmic phenomena stored in the mind of sentient beings is the same. When our minds are in deep concentration and calm, none of the karmic phenomena will manifest. When

our minds give rise to wandering thoughts, the karmic obstacles will again materialize. Understanding this, we would do well to nurture purity of mind, the state of not giving rise to a single wandering thought. As Master Hui-Neng said, "The true mind originally contains nothing, collects no dust". We need to know that karmic obstacles exist in our false mind, not in our true mind. Originally, our true mind was pure. It still is pure.

An example is wearing eyeglasses. Originally, our eyes are pure. When our glasses are covered with dust, our vision is blurred. There is nothing wrong with our eyes, the problem is with the glasses. Where are our karmic obstacles? The dust on the glasses is the contamination. There is no obstacle within our eyes. When we completely eradicate the contamination, the dust, as well as the glasses we will have pure vision to see clearly. This is the same as uncovering our true nature to become Buddhas. If we wear glasses, there is still a barrier. Then we are ordinary people, sentient beings. Once we can rid ourselves of these obstacles, we are Buddhas.

What kind of mind are we now using? The deluded mind, not the true mind. There is no hindrance in the true mind. When we try to see everything with our naked eyes, it is like observing things with glasses of distortion, seeing the external environment through a layer of delusion. This delusion is the Eight Consciousnesses and fifty-one mind objects, glasses that have been heavily contaminated. We then interact with the external environment through the Eight Consciousnesses and fifty-one mind objects. Therefore, the environment has changed to that of the six dusts. If we do not apply these Consciousnesses and mind objects to see the external environment, then we do not see the environment of the six dusts but that of the true nature. So, we would see the nature of form, listen to the nature of sound and transfer the six dusts or pollutants to the nature of our senses. This will purify the mind enabling it to be able to see our true nature, to become Buddhas.

Now the big problem is that we simply cannot rid ourselves of these glasses, of the Eight Consciousnesses and fifty-one mind objects. The goal of Buddhist practice is to teach us to let go of these things, to transform consciousness into wisdom. Wisdom is the functioning of the true nature. Consciousness is the functioning of the deluded mind, the function of the Eight Consciousnesses and fifty-one mind objects.

Arhats, Pratyekabuddhas and Theravada Bodhisattvas still use these Consciousnesses and mind objects. They have yet to clarify their true nature to become Buddhas. They know how to regret through actions and through understanding the principles. But they do not yet change from the mind, from the heart. Why? They do not know where their hearts are. We learned in the Surangama Sutra, that Venerable Ananda was very clever, but he did not know where his heart was. In the beginning of the Surangama assembly, Buddha Shakyamuni asked Venerable Ananda where his heart was. Ananda could not answer for he did not know what or where it was. How can we regret from our heart, if we do not even know what our true heart is?

For Mahayana Bodhisattvas in Truth Teaching, the level of Bodhisattvas above the First Dwelling in Perfect Teaching, forty-one Dharma Body Bodhisattvas described in the Flower Adornment Sutra that their way of regretting is to feel remorse and to reform themselves from the mind. We will better understand once we study the Flower Adornment Sutra, particularly Sudhana's visits to the fifty-three spiritual guides. How did Sudhana practice? These fifty-three spiritual advisers represent Bodhisattvas of Perfect Teaching from the level of First Dwelling to the highest, the level of Equal Enlightenment. They manifested as men and women, young and old, from all walks of life. How did they cultivate? The genuine practice of Buddhism is comprised of principle, examples and practical applications for us to follow. The forty-fascicle version of the Flower Adornment Sutra is peerless. Although we cannot study the complete Flower Adornment Sutra, the chapter on "Universal Worthy

"Bodhisattva's Conduct and Vow" is very important. We need to know how to apply this most outstanding Mahayana teaching so that modern people will incorporate it into their daily living. This is an excellent sutra for sincere cultivation and is worthy of being widely propagated.

Following this principle, ancient virtuous people have often provided us with guidance to help us "to generate the Bodhi Mind and be constantly mindful of Buddha Amitabha", regardless of the circumstances. Is this reasonable? To single-mindedly chant "Amitufo" all day and night to reduce all of our wandering thoughts into one thought of "Amitufo"? Is "Amitufo" good or bad? Neither. It is separate from the duality of good and bad and accords with our true nature. Good and bad is duality and this duality only exists in our conscious mind, not in our true mind. We will naturally attain enlightenment when we have been constantly mindful of "Amitufo" for a long time. Among eighty-four thousand methods, this method is unsurpassed.

If we cannot attain complete enlightenment due to our insufficient efforts, it is all right because we can see Buddha Amitabha. And once we see Buddha Amitabha, we will uncover our true nature. This expedient and convenient way cannot be found in any other methods. In other methods, if we do not obtain enlightenment we will not be considered as having achieved. It is not necessary for us to be able to see the true nature when we practice mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha. But, if we can see Buddha Amitabha, then we are considered as having achieved attainment. How do we cultivate the mind? We do so when we are constantly mindful of Buddha Amitabha. All our negative karma will be eliminated when we sincerely and single-mindedly chant "Amitufo". How could "Amitufo" have any negative karma? It is true and perfect goodness. It is not the goodness of good or bad. That kind of goodness is relative. True goodness is separate from duality. It is the absolute great goodness.

If our heart is rooted in faults such as desire, fame, profit or anger, we do not have to find ways to get rid of each fault.

This is just to give us some examples. We may have millions of faults. But we do not have to find each of them one by one. Those practitioners specializing in abiding by the precepts do so by disciplining their behavior. They think about what went wrong. They think about how many mistakes they have committed every day. They carefully think of each and every one and then correct them one by one. They not only reflect upon their behavior daily, but also keep a record of their merits and faults.

This method of record keeping may work well for some. Each of us has a different personality and character related to our habits accumulated over innumerable lifetimes. Mahayana practitioners however, do not practice in this way. On the other hand, Theravada practitioners are very happy to practice this method and benefit from it. Different people, different characters, thus different principles, different methods are used.

There are many practitioners in China (Tibet, Korea and Japan) who practice Mahayana Buddhism. However, in South Asia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka most practitioners are Theravada Buddhists and have been so for generations. They end their erroneous ways and practice kind deeds to change their behavior. Whereas, Mahayana practitioners refrain from wrongdoing and practice kind deeds through reasoning and an awakened heart.

All we need is a sincere, kind heart and the willingness to practice good deeds. As long as our heart is virtuous and kind, then naturally our mind will not generate any improper thoughts.

This is an excellent method, simple and clear. However, if we do not have true wisdom, we still cannot achieve. Why? Because of doubts. Because of wondering how it could be possible for us to eradicate all the offenses we have committed. We doubt, we do not believe, we cannot accept. When we hear that we are “to concentrate our mind on Buddha Amitabha and to seek birth into the Western Pure Land”, we still think that since we have committed so many wrongdoings, how can we possibly go to the Pure Land. We would be ashamed to see Buddha Amitabha. Not only this, we would not even dare to pay our respects to his image in the way place, thinking that our offenses are too numerous and heavy. It would be embarrassing to see him. If we think in this way then it would be better to regret and reform through behavior for at least if we corrected one fault when we discovered it, our minds would be more settled. Then it would be good.

Those who can accept the Pure Land method possess great good roots, good fortune, causes and conditions. If we did not already have the best root nature, it would be impossible for us to accept the Buddha Name Chanting Method. Once we do accept it and practice earnestly, then we can neutralize the transgressions accumulated over infinite lifetimes with the merit of our chanting. The Pure Land is a gathering place for the assembly of utmost virtuous people. Once we are born into it, we are a member of this assembly and are equal to such virtuous people as Universal Worthy Bodhisattva, Great Wisdom Bodhisattva, Great Compassion Bodhisattva and Great Strength Bodhisattva.

As Mr. Nian Zu Huang stated in his commentary on the Infinite Life Sutra, the Pure Land Method is for sentient beings of supreme root nature. Who are those with this utmost root nature? Those who can believe, vow to go to the Pure Land and practice mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha. Master Hui-Neng only taught those with supreme root natures. However, his students, although they had achieved, could not maintain their level of attainment. Pure Land practitioners with foremost capabilities will never regress, for they have perfectly achieved in the three non-regressions. The students of Master Hui-Neng achieved the three non-regressions, but not perfectly.

The Pure Land method is unsurpassed. We are unbelievably fortunate to have encountered it. But it is no accident that we have done so. It is due to the maturing of our good roots, good fortunes, causes and conditions that we have accumulated over infinite eons. And this is why we have encountered this method.

To practice good deeds with one sincere mind means to have no wandering thoughts, no second thought. Proper and virtuous thought is the first thought, is the absolute and ultimate proper thought. Also, it is to chant "Amitufo" to practice single mindedly Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha and wholeheartedly seek birth into the Pure Land. The most marvelous way to reform and reduce our karmic obstacles is to have no wandering thoughts. It does not mean no proper thoughts. If we are without proper thoughts, we become ignorant. Wandering thoughts are discriminatory thoughts and attachments. It is not easy for average people to achieve the state of no wandering thoughts. However, everyone can achieve this by practicing the Buddha Name Chanting Method.

Web link to the article: <http://www.amtb.cn/e-bud/chinese/chinese.htm>

English website on how to practice Pure Land Buddhism: <http://www.amtabuddha.co.cc>

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