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25-27 Winter Street, Brockton MA. 02302 歡迎流通, 功德無量

Tel & Fax: Brockton (508)580 – 4349 Quincy (508)646-8168

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Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE SECOND LESSON:

WAYS TO REFORM

Changing from the Heart

What is meant by “proper thought revealed”? It is “Amitufo”. “Amitufo” is the most truthful and ultimate proper thought. We would do well to understand this. The only important issue in our life is to constantly maintain proper thought, not to cling to deviated and erroneous ones. We would do well to be constantly mindful of Buddha Amitabha day and night, without interruption. If we can continue our cultivation in this way, then we will receive wonderful results after three months. If we can constantly maintain mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha, with this one thought we will assuredly reduce our wandering thoughts.

It is impossible for us to not have any wandering thoughts. Certainly, we will have some. Do not be afraid of them. Thoughts of Buddha Amitabha will occupy us the most. Six or seven out of ten thoughts are of Buddha Amitabha with only three or four wandering thoughts. No matter. But, if we are not mindful of Buddha Amitabha, then our minds will be filled with wandering thoughts. If we can continue mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha for three months, letting the thoughts of Buddha Amitabha increase, our wandering thoughts will decrease. Then we will be at ease and free in spirit. Our minds will become more serene and our savoring the Dharma joy will indicate that our karmic obstacles have been reduced. In the past, our minds were filled with afflictions and worries, our futures darker and darker. Now we will be happy and wise. Our lives will be interesting and filled with confidence and our futures will be bright.

Everything will change as we continue our chanting for half a year. We will receive even better results. This will serve to increase our confidence and determination. Anyone, who really wants to go to the Pure Land, will find that it is achievable after three years of cultivation of Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha. Numerous people have achieved this. There are others who have said that they cannot practice this method, for they will die in three years. What can we say? Honestly speaking, many people dare not practice this method for they are still clinging to this world, unwilling to give up reincarnation in the Six Realms. This is shortsightedness. They do not know that the happiness and enjoyment of the Pure Land is peerless, even human and heavenly realms and all other Buddha Lands cannot compare with it. Such a wonderful place and you do not want to go? You prefer to stay here and remain mired in suffering. Then what can I say? Nothing.

People with true aspiration and profound insight need to know that it is the perfect and complete accomplishment to single-mindedly seek birth into the Pure Land and be with Buddha Amitabha. Naturally, we will set our body and mind free, to let go of wandering and discriminatory thoughts and rid ourselves of attachments forever. There is nothing worthy of worry, nothing worthy of greed. We follow and accord with conditions and do not seek affinities in our daily lives. How happy and free we will be for we will have truly achieved.

This is what worldly people are unable to think of, to turn affliction into awakening, to live or die at will, not just to pass away when our time is up, but to leave when we wish. If we feel we need to remain in this world for several more years, there is no harm in so doing. However, there is only one reason to remain. If we still have affinities with those who are here then we need to stay here to encourage them to go to the Pure Land with us. In this way, our time spent here will be to help others. If it were just for ourselves, then we would go early to the Western Pure Land. The purpose of staying here is to help all sentient beings, to propagate the Pure Land method. If there is someone who can assume the task of advocating this method, to continue this teaching, then we can pass on the work to them. We can leave first and let them carry on with this great matter of guiding sentient beings to transcend the cycle of birth and death. What freedom this is. Thus, everyone needs to know that those who “attained achievement and left this world in three years” had no Dharma affinities, had nobody to teach. They would certainly leave and not delay here any longer. Those who cannot leave have no choice, have no alternative but to stay. Those, who are able, will go.

As long as we single-mindedly chant the Buddha’s name without doubt, without intermingling, without interruption, we are assured of attaining achievement in three years. Look at the student of Master Di Xian who solely chanted "Namo Amitufo" and was ignorant of everything else. After becoming a monk, the Master did not require him to be ordained for he was worried that the new monk could not withstand the hardship (of the long training session) due to his advanced age. Also, he was uneducated and illiterate and so it was not necessary for him to attend the lectures. He did not even remain in the way place to work with everybody. If the others made fun of him and he lost his temper as a result, it would have been very difficult for him.

Consequently, he was sent to the countryside of Ning Bo County to live alone in an abandoned way place. From dawn to dusk, he chanted “Amitufo” for three years. He knew in advance when he would die. How did he accomplish this? As Mr. Liao-Fan told his son, “As long as the mind is virtuous and kind, then naturally it will not generate any improper thoughts”. This is to achieve from sincerely chanting the Buddha’s name! Average people cannot compare to him. He succeeded and was born into the Pure Land because he did not have the ability to teach Buddhism to others. He was illiterate with no knowledge of Buddhism, but he attained achievement and was born into the Pure Land. He did not suffer any illness or pain but knew in advance his time of death. When he died, he was standing and remained so for three days, waiting for Master Di Xian to take care of his memorial service. Not at all easy! He is a role model for Pure Land practitioners. Others may say that the Pure Land method is not a good practice, but which other method of practice can present something like this for us to see? Which other method of practice enables us to be clear-headed at the time of death, enables us to remain standing for three days, waiting for others to take care of our funeral arrangements. This is truly our testimony.

The method that I teach everyone is to single-mindedly chant "Amitufo". While our body remains in this world, we have no choice but to make a living to support ourselves. But after work, we can let go and be mindful of the Buddha. When we are working, we concentrate on our job. Once we are finished, start chanting. Even while at work, when there is no thinking required, we can silently chant or play a cassette to listen to "Amitufo" while working. If our work requires thinking, then we can temporarily lay aside chanting to concentrate on work. When thinking is not needed, we can again chant or listen to the Buddha's name while working. We would do well to understand that chanting "Amitufo" is the greatest matter in our life. The rest is unimportant, not worthy of any real concern. This is the way to regret our wrongdoings, to change from our mind. People who know how to practice do so from the root, from the basics.

Demons do not appear in bright daylight. This is the essence, the key for us to turn over a new leaf. All mistakes stem from the heart; therefore, we change from the heart. It is like getting rid of a poisonous tree. If we want to put an end to it, we uproot it altogether so it cannot grow again. Why exert ourselves to no avail by pulling out its leaves one by one and cutting it twig by twig?

An example of changing through behavior is to cut down the branches, the twigs one by one, or to pull off the leaves one by one. To change from the heart is to uproot the tree. Thus, we need to know what is the key? What method do we use to change ourselves? If everybody can memorize, follow and uphold the teaching of Master Ou-I, then everybody will change from the heart. In so doing, all the transgressions accumulated over infinite past aeons will be absolved. "Amitufo" can reform all wrongdoings. By sincerely chanting "Amitufo", we perfectly practice all the virtuous teachings, be they worldly or Buddhist teachings. Cultivating one is cultivating all. Changing one is changing all. Truly inconceivable! Many people have doubts, thinking this method is not very reliable, or thinking there is an even better one. I smile after I hear this, place my palms together and chant "Amitufo" and am not bothered by them.

The best way to reform our faults is through cultivating our hearts. If we are willing to cultivate our hearts, then it is possible to purify our faults right away.

The foremost way for us to change is from the heart. If we were able to let go of everything and continuously chant "Amitufo" for three months, for six months, our minds would be purified, the result would come forth. As for people learning to lecture on the Buddhist sutras, I encourage them to learn just one sutra. By reciting a sutra daily, we can attain purity of mind in three to five months. If we were learning many sutras simultaneously, we would not attain purity of mind in the same amount of time. Consequently, our learning would be useless. The solution is to specialize. Not many people realize this.

When our practice of Buddhism is genuine, the more we practice, the more purified our hearts will be. We will have fewer afflictions, lighter ignorance, increased wisdom as our faces glow with health. These are the effects of genuine practice! We need to keep firmly in mind what Master Lian Chi said, "Let others learn all of the Great Buddhist Canon". We need to remember that the books in the library we have are for others to read, not for ourselves. Why do we need to let them see so many books? Because they do not believe, so we let them read. If they want to travel so many roads, let them. We will take a different road, a single short road. They change their ways through their actions, but they only change on appearance and then only change minor details. We change from our hearts. From here, we can see the difference in viewpoints and the degree of wisdom between the two. This is because wrongdoings originate from the heart.

If my heart is pure, I can recognize and stop an improper thought as soon as it arises. The immoral idea will disappear the moment I am conscious of it.

This talks of changing from the heart. Wandering thoughts are afflictions, are karmic obstacles. As soon as they start to rise, we recognize them immediately and change them into "Amitufo". As a wandering thought arises when our senses come into contact with the external world, whether we like or dislike something, whether the wandering thought is good or bad, we immediately replace it with a second thought of "Amitufo". We can chant either "Amitufo" or "Namo Amitufo". Once our mind has given rise to a wandering thought, it is awakening when our second thought is "Amitufo", to be awakened and not deluded. The first thought is one of delusion but

the second thought is one of awakening. To gain the tremendous effect the awakening needs to be immediate. The delusion must not be allowed to increase or to continue. In so doing, we will truly uncover our wisdom.

If we are able to persevere like this for six to twelve months, we will attain wisdom. Our eyes will be brighten, our six senses will be intelligent and sharp. We will be able to understand completely anything that we come into contact with. Others may have to read numerous books, reference materials or other forms of information throughout the whole world to be able to judge and still may not reach the right conclusion. Whereas, having uncovered our wisdom, we may only need to see something once to totally and perfectly understand it. Ordinary people do not have this ability for this is the ability of a Bodhisattva. The Buddha teaches us to seek true wisdom.

When we have the heart to propagate the true teachings, the key is for us to harbor sincerity, purity of mind and compassion. There is really no need to search for reference materials to learn how to lecture. We do not want to use our sixth consciousness of discrimination for we may misinterpret the Buddha's true meaning. As I have said so many times before, there is no meaning within the sutras. All the Buddhas will protest that they have been wronged if we ponder the meanings within the sutras. Therefore, we only need to honestly recite the sutra without analyzing its meaning, without seeking its meanings. We just need to honestly recite to purify our minds and uncover the wisdom in our self-nature.

If someone comes to ask us the meanings within sutras, we can tell them they are infinite. By not purposely seeking the meanings, the infinite meanings will be revealed, a revelation from the wisdom in our self-nature. Having done so, when we lecture on the sutra, we would naturally do it perfectly whether the talk is complex or profound, short or long. After lectures, when people ask us what we said, we really would not know. Why? When no questions are asked, there is no meaning. With questions, the meaning arises. The generation of infinite meanings is to benefit others. Having no meaning is to benefit self. Self-benefit is cultivating a pure mind, with no thoughts arising but "Amitufo". Lecturing on sutras to explain the teachings is to benefit others not ourselves. Thus, there is no need for us to remember what we just lectured. By not knowing, our mind is pure.

We would do well to constantly maintain our purity of mind. Purity is awakening. Pollution is the mind that is moved, that has wandering thoughts. In other words, pollution is when we have wandering thoughts. Having no wandering thought is original awakening. When we are chanting "Amitufo", it is genuine practice for our every thought initiates awakening in accordance with original awakening. Indeed, the Buddha Name Chanting method is inconceivable. Thus, for sutras we only need to recite the Infinite Life Sutra and the Amitabha Sutra. There is really no need to recite any others.

When we lecture on the teachings to benefit others, we can read the commentaries of the Infinite Life Sutra. We can also read the commentaries of the Amitabha Sutra written by Master Lian Chi and Master Ou-I. The one by Master Lian Chi is very well written, perfect, just as Master Ou-I praised it to be broad and profound. Reading the commentary of the Amitabha Sutra would be the same as reading the Great Buddhist Canon. Master Lian Chi covered all teachings, worldly and Buddhist, for reference citation thus the content indeed is abundant and enriched. Master Yuan Yin and Master Bao Jing also wrote explanatory notes on the Essential Explanation of the Amitabha Sutra commentary by Master Ou-I. These four commentaries, would be enough reference material to propagate the Pure Land School. Mr. Nian Zu Huang wrote the Commentary of the Infinite Life Sutra.

Once we have thoroughly comprehended these four commentaries, not only would we thoroughly comprehend all the Pure Land Sutras but also the Great Buddhist Canon and the teachings of all other Buddhist schools. If we

study many schools, our minds will become scattered. With scattered minds, naturally our wisdom will not be uncovered. These four commentaries are sufficient for those who volunteer to propagate the Pure Land method.

There is no need to look into additional references. Do not think that because we read less we would not have enough materials to lecture on. With shorter, more concise reference material, we would require less time to lecture. Why struggle to try to talk for a certain length of time? When we speak for a shorter time, we will only speak of the essence. The more the essence is refined, the more wonderful it is. Each moment will be valuable as we do not waste any of the audience's precious time. If we compile a talk using many reference materials as if to make up one giant platter of hors d'oeuvres, others cannot even begin to savor any particular flavor. This wastes our time and energy as well as those of others.

If I am unable to succeed at reforming a fault through changing the heart, then I will try at the level of understanding, knowing the reasons why I need to make the change. If I cannot succeed with this, then I will try to reform by changing through action and force the thought to dissipate. The best way is by cultivating the heart and understanding the reasons behind the need to change. The alternative way is forcing ourselves not to commit the wrongdoing again. Sometimes all three methods have to be used to succeed at reforming a fault. It is foolish to dismiss the best way, which is to reform from the heart and to be attached to the inferior way of reforming through action.

If we are unable to achieve using the best method, then we have no choice but to try the alternative way, to try to change from understanding, to know the reasons why we need to make the change. When something happens, we need to think calmly of why it happened. After we understand the reasoning, our minds will naturally become calm. Our wandering thoughts will lessen and our anger will dissipate.

However, if as beginners, we have little sense of reasoning and cannot succeed through understanding, what can we do? We could use an even more basic level of trying to reform by changing through action and in this way, force the thought to dissipate. We need to put a check on our every action, find our faults and correct them one by one. If we cannot do this, we will find ourselves in trouble, creating even more severe negative karma, bringing even greater suffering upon ourselves. Therefore, beginners were required to strictly abide by the precepts for they did not yet understand the reasoning. The spirit of abiding by the precepts is to "stop and refrain from committing further wrongdoings".

Mr. Liao-Fan said that the best way to reform is to cultivate the heart and understand why we need to change. An alternative is to force ourselves not to commit the wrongdoing again. When we attain purity of mind and understand the reasoning, we will be able to uphold and maintain good conduct, which is the best way to change. Until we can do this, all three methods may have to be used to correct a fault. This indeed is achieving self-cultivation while influencing others, for we attain purity of mind while serving as a role model for beginners to follow.

Some people are very rigid about abiding by the precepts. They are attached to the behavior, to the formality of cultivation and are unable to raise the level of their state of mind. Actually, the precepts are very flexible. When we uphold them, we need to understand the logic behind them. And it is even more important that as we abide by them that we strive to attain purity of mind. The purpose of upholding the precepts is to attain deep concentration, which is the purity of mind. If we were overly attached to the formality of upholding the precepts, then it would be difficult for us to achieve deep concentration because we would differentiate and be attached to the appearance,

the formality of abiding by them daily. How could we succeed? Only by severing our discriminatory thoughts and attachments are we able to attain deep concentration. This concentration is still a means, a way, thus it would not do to attach to attaining it or we would still be unable to uncover our wisdom.

Theravada practitioners are attached to achieving concentration. The Buddha talked about the Mind State of Arhats in the Surangama Sutra. They have attained the ninth level of concentration and are partial to the state of empty nirvana. They are attached and cannot let go and thus they guard the gentle and serene state. They are still discriminatory, still attached to “extinguishing all the contaminants”. For example, when Theravada practitioners try to sever their afflictions, virtually all their change is through behavior. Sometimes, they will concurrently use changing through behavior with reasoning, but not from the heart. Thus, it takes seven cycles of birth between the human and heaven realms for a practitioner who has attained the level of Arhat to sever their attachments. The sutras tell us that trying to sever attachments by changing through behavior is as difficult as “trying to cut off a raging waterfall of water that is forty miles wide”. Just imagine how difficult it would be to try to stop it all at once!

As said earlier, this is as difficult as trying to cut down a tree by plucking one leaf at a time. This is a good example of why changes should be made from the heart. How should we proceed? We could try to pluck off all the leaves one by one, then to cut off each and every twig and branch and then slowly try to dig up the root, but this would be difficult and time consuming. Wise people would go straight to the root, to uproot the tree. Then, the leaves would naturally wither and fall. So, why bother to pluck the leaves and cut off the twigs, one by one?

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.amitabuddha.co.cc>

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Be filial to the Buddha.
Be constantly mindful of the kindness of the teacher.
You should foster the great benefit and wholesomeness for rebirth
into the Pure Land.

The Infinite Life Sutra , Chapter 46

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