



美國波士頓行願淨宗學會 - 行願蓮海月刊 Amita Buddhism Society - Boston, USA

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December 29, 2013

Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE SECOND LESSON:

WAYS TO REFORM

The Desired Result of Reform

But even when we vow to change, assistance is needed to truly reform. We will need constant reminders from genuine friends who are witnesses to our actions in everyday life. As for our good and bad thoughts, we can ask the beings and spirits of heaven and earth to be our witnesses. We also need to be diligent and to regret sincerely and wholeheartedly from morning to night. If we can honestly regret from one to two weeks, one to three months, then continuing in this way, we are assured of attaining results and benefits.

We need to generate our shameful heart, fearful heart and courageous determined heart, for they are the inner, direct cause and condition in reforming. But we still need catalytic factors, that is, good friends on the path to awakening to remind us, to help us from the outside, our visible assisting factor. If we ourselves have one virtuous thought, one sincere thought of trying to correct our faults, all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas would be happy and all benevolent spirits would praise and respect us. Thus, without our even being aware of it, they will most certainly help us. We can see that one virtuous thought can result in inconceivable results. Therefore, we need to truly change through actions when the condition is right.

We need to be diligent in our regretting, to do so sincerely from morning to night. If we are not diligent, then we will inadvertently create negative karma. So, we cannot be remiss! It is best if the Cultivation Hall has chanting for twenty-four hours a day. In the way places of ancient patriarchs and masters, the chanting continued night and day. During the daytime, everyone participated, but at night, they practiced in groups of four, with each group taking a turn.

Although we may not currently have such a Cultivation Hall where we live, we can make use of cassette tapes or chanting machines. We simply chant along with it, as if participating in a big assembly. The volume should not be so loud that it disturbs others, nor too soft for us to clearly hear. We can even listen to it when sleeping. Sometimes, we can even hear it when we dream, so we can chant in our dreams. The ancient people said this was like "hearing the drum play or the thunder roar as we slept". It would be wonderful if we could even hear the chanting in our sleep, as if still participating in a seven-day retreat.

Mr. Liao-Fan spoke of sincerely regretting for one week. Participating in a seven-day retreat, in which the chanting was for a limited time each day, is not as good as gathering a number of like-minded fellow cultivators in a quiet place to chant continuously for seven days. A seven-day retreat should continue non-stop day and night, not just during the daytime. Also, when we attend our first retreat, we should not try to participate for all seven days, because most people have difficulty tolerating the full schedule. We could try one day and night, twenty-four hours. After we feel this is effective for several times, we could try two days and nights, then three days and nights, etc. to gradually lengthen the time span.

Thus, to truly cultivate, we could chant once a week for three days and nights. If we are unable to do this, we could try a

shorter period. The merit accrued from this would be effective and outstanding. Liao-Fan's Four Lessons, tells us how we can create our destiny. When there is a sincere request, a response will follow. If we sincerely seek a way place, a good environment for cultivation, then we should be able to obtain what we seek. If this kind of effort can be sustained for one to three months, then the desired results will be seen.

What are the benefits of contrition? We may feel very much at ease and our hearts may feel light and generous. A person of low intelligence may suddenly become wise. Another might maintain a clear and relaxed mind even in a disturbing and confusing environment. We would also feel an extensive understanding of everything. Or we would be able to drive out all hatred upon seeing an enemy and maintain a happy attitude.

There are many examples of desired results. If we have been depressed or unhappy in the past, now we can become joyful instead. If we had many worries, they can be lifted from our mind after we reach understanding and instead we can become liberated and free. If we were confused, we can become intelligent and no longer be foolish. When we find ourselves in circumstances that are disturbing or agitating or we encounter many diverse and hard to solve matters, we are able to easily resolve them even as others seem overwhelmed by them. We have seen examples of this in some of our fellow practitioners. Some are able settle matters they undertake without any apparent difficulty, while others find it extremely difficult to resolve them.

Mr. Yu said in his commentary, "This is a sign of good fortune, merit and wisdom". This speaks of former enemies, those who resented us, but who now are very favorably inclined towards us, who have changed their whole attitude towards us. All this is due to our merits from cultivation, of being able to influence and change others unobtrusively and imperceptibly. It is said, "A kind-hearted person has no enemies" and has the appearance of good fortune, merit and wisdom.

We may dream of spitting out black things. We may also dream of ancient sages or virtuous people who have come to encourage and escort us or we may dream of flying in space without a care in the world. We may also dream of all kinds of colorful pennants and ornately decorated canopies. These distinctive phenomena are all indications of a successful reform and a dissolving of past offenses.

"Black things" are pollutants or karmic obstacles. In the past, we may have had numerous nightmares or dreams of great confusion, but not anymore. Although we still dream, what we see is as clear as what we see in the daytime. This is obviously very good. We may also dream of ancient sages or virtuous people who have come to help us. As Buddhists, we would dream of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas teaching us about the sutras and guiding us in our practice. We may also dream of flying in space, of colorful pennants and canopies. These are all phenomena that indicate success in our attempts to reform. Whether in our daily life or in our dreams, all these responses are signs that our karmic obstacles are gradually being reduced and eradicated, signs of good fortune and happiness gradually materializing.

However, we must not consider seeing these phenomena as a sign of perfection. Instead, we must resolve to further improve ourselves and work even harder to reform.

We should not be proud that we have made progress. If we become arrogant, then we will once again regress just as our karmic obstacles are being reduced and eradicated. Therefore, we must guard against becoming arrogant. Instead, we need to increase our resolve to attain even further self-improvement and put even greater effort into our reforming. If we become satisfied with what we have accomplished, then we will be unable to make further improvement. We would do well to be constantly diligent, to seek improvement and never limit our efforts to improve. Even when we are born into the Pure Land, we need to continue to improve. How can we be content? We need to be satisfied in our material and spiritual manner of living. However, we should never be content when seeking improvements in our virtue and cultivation, but

persevere with deep-felt confidence.

When Bo-Yu Qu was twenty, he was already mindful of his faults. He analyzed his mistakes and tried to correct them thoroughly. At the age of twenty-one, he felt he still had not completely corrected all his faults. When he was twenty-two, he felt as if twenty-one was spent dreamily, without practical improvement. Thus, year after year, he continued to correct his faults. When he reached fifty, Bo-Yu still felt that the past forty-nine years were filled with wrongdoings. This was how particular our ancestors were regarding the correction of faults!

During the Spring-Autumn period in China, there was a high senior government official in Wei, named Bo-Yu Qu who was awakened when he was only twenty. He knew his faults and vowed to reform. At twenty-one, he felt he still needed to improve. This was further proof of the previous passage that “We should not consider seeing these phenomena as a sign of perfection. Instead, we must resolve to further improve ourselves and work even harder to reform.” Bo-Yu Qu had accomplished this. Every year, every month, every day he would continuously reflect within and reform. This account of Bo-Yu Qu is an excellent example of how diligent our ancestors were. They persevered, practiced great willpower and patience in reforming themselves and they proved that their endurance and efforts are worthy of our emulation.

We are all just ordinary people and our mistakes are as numerous as the spines on a porcupine. Oftentimes when we look back, we do not even see our own faults. This is because we are careless and do not know how to reflect on our own actions. It is as if a cataract is growing in our eye.

Mr. Liao-Fan taught his son to observe the conduct of our ancestors, then to look back on our own conduct and reflect within. We are ordinary people who possess excessive faults and wrongdoings as numerous as the spines on a porcupine. Thinking back over today, looking back at yesterday, at last year or even earlier, it would seem that we have committed no great mistakes, that we have not done anything wrong. What is the reason for this? We are negligent and careless. It is as if a cataract has grown in our eyes, blocking us from seeing our own faults. If we do not see our faults then we will be unable to reform. If we do not reform, we will forever be deterred from standing out from the crowd.

This is why Great Master Lian Chi taught beginners to use the Merit-Fault Chart so that they would be watchful over their every word and deed. Only when we discover our numerous faults, will we be truly afraid. As to reform, we need primarily to change from the heart. We then reinforce this with changing through reasoning. In this way, we are simultaneously practicing both the primary and secondary ways to reform.

All these are the symptoms of having accumulated too many offenses and transgressions! Our hearts may feel confused and oppressed, lacking energy and spirit. We will become extremely forgetful, filled with worries even when nothing is happening.

We receive some small benefits by practicing Buddhism. Not only the signs of our great or small karmic obstacles can be detected, but those of others as well. (When we have committed too many offenses) our hearts may feel heavy and we may become extremely forgetful at work or study. We will find that we are unable to lift our spirits. When young people unexpectedly begin to forget things like elderly people do, it is due to karmic obstacles. True cultivators will find that even in their eighties and nineties, their memories are still good.

It is also an indication of karmic obstacles when we worry even when nothing is happening. The past is past, what is the use of dwelling on it? Tomorrow is yet to come, to think about it is wandering thoughts. Some people are extremely good at worrying and thinking about the past, the future. They can do so all day long. This is to “Make a mountain out of a molehill” and this is a karmic obstacle.

We may feel embarrassed and depressed upon meeting a virtuous person. We become displeased at hearing proper reasoning and when showing kindness to others, we are in turn treated with hostility. We will constantly have nightmares where everything is upside-down and will talk incoherently and behave abnormally. All of these are signs of misfortune.

If we are just and honorable, we will neither be embarrassed nor conscience-stricken when we meet a genuinely good person. Neither would we feel listless, dispirited, dejected or unable to exert ourselves. Also, we will become displeased at hearing proper teachings. In other words, we will not like to listen to the teachings of the Buddha, Confucius or Mencius (or to those of Mohammed, Moses or Jesus or any other teachings of morality). In the earlier years of the Qing Dynasty, everyone in the Imperial court recited the Infinite Life Sutra, but due to Empress Dowager's discomfort in hearing it, the recitation was abolished. Perhaps listening to the teachings on the Ten Bad Conducts and their respective consequential sufferings in the human and hell realms made her uncomfortable, due to her karmic obstacles.

When we are kind to others, we may be met with hostility. For example, if we give someone a gift, not only do they not thank us, they may even resent us for it. Another sign of misfortune is having nightmares where everything is confused and our speech and behavior are abnormal. This means that when we speak nonsensically and disjointedly, when our behavior becomes psychotic, then we have come up against a major karmic obstacle. These are all signs of significant transgressions.

If we have any of the above symptoms, we must immediately gather our willpower and reform all faults. It is necessary to form a new life and not delay!

If we have any of these signs, we need to regret earnestly to rid ourselves of these bad habits. We no longer have the time to procrastinate or to be careless. If we do not reform, then for us there is no future. Therefore, upon discovering any of these symptoms, we need to immediately correct our faults. We need to not stray off on a deviated path and waste our whole life in the process. Only when we truly rid ourselves of bad habits and faults will we be able to accept the teachings, to cultivate good deeds and accumulate merits.

Especially in education, when imparting the teachings to others, it is important to pass the teachings to those who have qualities such as having fewer faults, purity of mind, bravery in reforming and achievement in wisdom. Without these qualities, it would be useless to teach this person. For example, we might teach a person who is not virtuous, does not have the right motivation to learn. They would not learn the true essence. We might have enabled him or her to commit even greater offenses! Without having this knowledge, then he or she would have less chance of harming others, less chance of creating negative karma. With more knowledge and more abilities, this person could commit more ill deeds of greater severity. In this case, the teacher would have selected the wrong person as a successor. Therefore, teachers need to know if the person is qualified to inherit their knowledge and ability. If not, they will not pass down the teachings to them. This is not withholding knowledge. However, if we are unwilling to teach a suitable person, then we have overlooked and possibly wasted a proper Dharma repository. So, if a person is suitable, we teach them. If they are unsuitable, we do not.

In summary, how do we accumulate merit? We need to correct our faults. This will enable us to have the abilities and the conditions to accept the great teachings. We then perform more good deeds to meet the qualifications for being a Dharma repository before accepting the great teachings.

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

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