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Essence of the Infinite Life Sutra - Venerable Master Chin Kung



EXCERPT SEVENTEEN

Always using the practice of the Six Paramitas of giving, precept observation, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom, he taught and transformed beings to help them steadfastly establish a bodhi mind.

“Always” means forever and never changing. One should follow these six principles at all times.

The first paramita is giving. For us, this means letting go and helping others. There are three kinds of giving: the giving of wealth, the giving of teachings, and the giving of fearlessness. Giving is a karmic cause. If we want to have wealth, we should practice the giving of wealth. If we want to be intelligent and wise, we should practice the giving of teachings. If we wish to have good health and a long life, we should practice the giving of fearlessness. In the giving of fearlessness, the most important thing is not to harm any being. In addition to not killing beings, we should not even cause them to have afflictions. A vegetarian diet is a form of the giving of fearlessness: We do not eat the flesh of animals or cause them to have afflictions. To be more proactive, we should free captured animals.

I was supposed to be a person with little good fortune and a short life span. But I have lived to this age and my good fortune seems to increase year by year. Both are the rewards from my learning the Buddha's teaching and practicing it accordingly in this lifetime.

One should not enjoy the good fortune oneself because one will use it up very quickly. When one has good fortune, one should share it with others. This way, one's good fortune will never be used up. This is the truth.

As I gained more wisdom, I saw the ins and outs of everything more clearly than before. Thus, I was able to do things that benefited others in a more appropriate and perfect way. Moreover, I did not ask to have my life extended but it was. This is true freedom!

In the bodhisattva practice, giving is listed first. My rewards from the three kinds of giving can be clearly seen by everyone.

The second paramita is precept observation. We should observe the precepts and codes of behavior that the Buddha laid out. The teachings in the sutras that the Buddha earnestly and patiently taught us should be followed too. We should also abide by the laws and customs of our countries. If we abandon the precepts, then the practice and upholding of the Buddha's teachings will disappear. So even if we lecture on the Dharma, and study and discuss it every day, it will be futile. Why? Because our lives are disconnected from the teachings, we are not applying what we are learning. No matter how profoundly or how well we can lecture on Buddhism, nothing will be achieved. That is why Buddhism has always emphasized practice.

The Buddha taught "three cumulative pure precepts." "Three cumulative" means three main categories.

The first category is "uphold precepts and codes of behavior." This encompasses all the teachings that the Buddha taught in the sutras. We should practice all that the Buddha wants us to do and not otherwise.

The second category is "uphold precepts by practicing virtuous dharmas." A deed that is good should be done. A deed that is bad should not be done. We should know that the spirit of the precepts is to prevent wrongdoing or stop evil conduct; it helps us to end wrongdoings and to practice virtuous conduct.

Even though the Buddha did not list everything we should or should not do, we need to adhere to the spirit of his teachings. For example, the Buddha did not tell us not to smoke, but we know that smoking is not good for us or for others. Therefore, we should not smoke. Things of this nature fall under "uphold precepts by practicing virtuous dharmas."

The third category is "uphold precepts by bringing lasting benefits to all sentient beings." When a deed benefits beings, we should do it. There are three kinds of beneficial deeds. The first kind is the deed that will bring immediate benefit but will have a harmful effect in the future. This kind of deed should not be done. The second kind is the deed that will bring benefit not only now but also in the future. This kind of deed is truly beneficial. The third kind is the deed that will not bring immediate benefit but will bring great benefit in the future. This kind of deed is also beneficial.

This shows that Buddhas and bodhisattvas look far ahead, not only at the immediate future.

The third paramita is patience.^[20] To accomplish any undertaking, one needs to bear any hardship that one encounters. In the process of cultivation, one will surely encounter frustration. The more diligent one is, the greater the amount of frustration one faces. Why is there so much frustration? Because of the evil karmas that one has committed over countless kalpas, obstacles from karmic forces are unavoidable. The only solution is to tolerate any hardship. This will decrease karmas. If one has meditative concentration, it can eliminate karmas. One should face obstacles with wisdom, resolve them with forbearance, acquiesce, and make diligent progress. Only with the paramita of patience will one be able to improve. If one is not patient, one will encounter obstacles.

The fourth paramita is diligence.^[21] The Chinese term for “diligence” is jingjin. Jing means “pure and unadulterated” and jin means “making progress.” For bodhisattvas, diligence is their only good root.^[22]

Nowadays, many Buddhist practitioners make the mistake of learning too many different things, resulting in a mixture. Although they make progress every day, their progress is adulterated. They spend a lot of time and effort but their accomplishment is very limited.

The little achievement I have in this lifetime is due to having a good teacher. He forbade me to proceed in an unfocused and random way. I learned from Mr. Li Bingnan in Taichung for ten years. His teaching method was that even if a student was very smart and had an exceptional capability, he or she could simultaneously learn only two sutras at most. If the student wanted to learn three sutras [at one time], he would not teach this student. Students who did not have a good capability learned only one sutra. Only when Mr. Li considered that a student had learned a sutra well enough would he teach the student a new one. Otherwise, he would not allow the student to learn a new sutra. During my ten years with Mr. Li, I learned five sutras, whereas in a Buddhist college, the students study more than five sutras in one semester.

The first sutra I learned was the Sutra on Ananda Asking about the Good Fortune and Misfortune of Learning the Buddha’s Teachings; the second was the Amitabha Sutra; the third was the “Chapter of the Vows and Practices of Samantabhadra”; the fourth was the Diamond Sutra; and the fifth was the Surangama Sutra. I spent ten years learning only these sutras. Mr. Li’s criterion was that only when one learned one sutra well enough could one learn a new one. “Well enough” meant that the student could explain the sutra thoroughly on stage to an audience. When the student lectured on stage, Mr. Li would sit in the last row. Without using a microphone, the student had to talk loud enough for Mr. Li to hear. Heading toward one direction and one goal, his students were thus laying a good foundation and would naturally understand the other sutras.

“When one masters one sutra, one naturally masters all sutras.” The question is whether one has truly learned and understood the sutra and entered into the states described in the sutra.

The fifth paramita is meditative concentration. It means being in control of one’s mind. Within, the mind is unmoved; without, the mind is not attached to phenomena. One should not be easily tempted by any external phenomena. For example, when one learns a sutra, one concentrates on this sutra. This way, one would be in control of one’s mind.

The sixth paramita is wisdom. Simply put, when one interacts with people and engages in tasks, one should do so based on reason, not on emotions.

This excerpt teaches us the six principles for interacting with people and engaging in tasks in daily life. These are also the guidelines that bodhisattvas use in teaching and transforming beings to help them be steadfastly established [in the bodhi mind].

[20]

The cultivation of this virtue involves two aspects: to be patient without anger in the face of harm done by others and to endure various afflictions and suffering and to be unafraid of the implications of such Mahayana teachings as emptiness.— Damien Keown, Dictionary of Buddhism (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), 148.

[21] Diligence means to courageously cultivate good dharmas and end evil dharmas. It is to focus and to progress tirelessly.—Trans.

[22] Diligence is the only good root of the bodhisattvas because they are already replete with worldly good roots of no greed, no anger, and no ignorance. This good root of diligence allows the bodhisattvas to advance in cultivation without regression until they attain enlightenment.—Trans.

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