



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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April 30, 2015

Essence of the Infinite Life Sutra - Venerable Master Chin Kung



FOREWORD

In August 1993, Venerable Master Chin Kung gave an eight-hour lecture series titled Essence of the Infinite Life Sutra at Ta Kioh Buddhist Temple in San Francisco, USA. The Hwa Dzan Lecture Notes Team transcribed the recorded lectures and organized them. In addition, relevant segments from the lectures on the Infinite Life Sutra given in San Jose in June 1992 were excerpted as a supplement.

This compiled transcription was given to Venerable Master Chin Kung for correction and editing. Originally titled Lecture Notes on the Essence of the Infinite Life Sutra, it has now been translated and published under its original name. Freely circulated, it is humbly offered to readers for them to benefit from the Dharma.

Pure Land Translation Team

Toowoomba, Australia

November 2013

PREFACE

For this lecture series at Ta Kioh Buddhist Temple, I plan to give four lectures, eight hours in total, to introduce the Infinite Life Sutra. The Infinite Life Sutra is called The Longer Sutra in the Pure Land school. I have given several lecture series on it in the United States.

In the past few years, the Buddhist Canon has been printed in Taiwan and distributed worldwide. After more than ten reprints, the number of copies in circulation is very impressive. Chinese classics such as the Complete Library of the Four Branches of Literature and Selections from the Four Branches of Literature have also been published and given to libraries around the world. Therefore, there is no fear of their being lost to the world.

The literary treasures are abundant, but it would be a shame if no one read them. How many people have an opportunity to read the Buddhist Canon from beginning to end even once in this lifetime? And when they attempt to read it, they may not be able to comprehend it.

It occurred to me that important passages in the sutras can be excerpted and compiled into a book to facilitate reading, studying, and practicing in life. In this way, traditional Chinese culture and Mahayana Buddhism will truly be able to benefit all beings.

Master Hongyi's Wanqing Ji is a collection of excerpts from the sutras and quotations from the patriarchs, 101 of them in all. I once lectured on the Wanqing Ji in an easy-to-understand way and the audience liked it very much. Therefore, I feel

studying the excerpts is worth trying. This time I have taken sixty excerpts from the Infinite Life Sutra. If this experiment is successful, I think that the Buddhist Canon can be studied in this way. The Taisho Buddhist Canon is one hundred volumes. If it is condensed into one volume, studying it will be more convenient. The voluminous classics like the Complete Library of the Four Branches of Literature and Selections from Library of the Four Branches of Literature can also be condensed into one or two volumes by excerption. This way, in the future, everyone will be able to read them.

Excerption requires identifying the essence. This is a must. It is like finding the right medicine for an illness. What symptoms are present society and people exhibiting? Today, society is in disorder. People have conflicting thoughts. They feel helpless and do not have any sense of security.

When we look into the root cause, we find it is none other than (1) people not maintaining proper relationships with others, (2) the loss of morality, and (3) people ignoring the principles and truth of the law of cause and effect. These are the main causes of today's problems in society. This is why our excerpts should focus on morality and the principles and truth of causality.

The sixty excerpts were chosen based on problems in society. The focus was not on Pure Land practitioners. For

Pure Land practitioners, instead of these excerpts, I would definitely choose the forty-eight vows and chapters 32 through 37.

These are the chapters Pure Land practitioners must study and understand.¹

1 Regrettably, we do not have an approved English translation of the Infinite Life Sutra.—Trans.

Reading these sixty excerpts is the same as reading the entire Infinite Life Sutra. It is impossible for a sutra to suit one's capacity from beginning to end. There may be parts that seem boring and that are not applicable for the reader. The reader may thus lose interest.

The excerpts, on the other hand, are the essence. Whether one reads them or listens to lectures on them, one will be highly interested to learn and practice them.

Shi Chin Kung

EXCERPT ONE

All followed and cultivated the virtues of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, were replete with infinite vows and practices, and steadfastly dwelt in the virtues and merits of all dharmas.

This first excerpt points out the objective of the Pure Land school.

A well-accomplished practitioner added “The Chapter of the Vows and Practices of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva” to the three Pure Land sutras and named them the four Pure Land sutras. He did so based on the above excerpt. These words tell us that the beings in the Western Pure Land—in the four lands and from the lowest to the highest of the nine rebirth grades—all cultivate the virtues of Samantabhadra. It is not surprising then that in the Lotus Treasury assembly, all forty-one levels of Dharma-body Mahasattvas follow the example of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva—they mindfully chant the Buddha-name and seek rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

It is also stated in the Mahayana sutras that if a bodhisattva does not cultivate the practice of Samantabhadra, he will not be able to perfectly attain Buddhahood. “Perfect” refers to the attainment of perfect Buddhahood, which is the Buddhahood of the Perfect Teaching mentioned in the Tiantai school.

“Vows” in “infinite vows and practices” means aspiration. “Practices” means implementation, to carry out. When we condense “infinite vows and practices,” we have the Four Great Vows. When expanded, the Four Great Vows become infinite vows and practices.

Samantabhadra Bodhisattva uses the Ten Great Vows as the key guiding principle for infinite vows and

practices. The practice of Samantabhadra differs from other methods, for the mind of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is truly pure and impartial: there is no discrimination or attachment. He treats everyone in the entire Dharma Realm equally.

The first of the Ten Great Vows is “to respect all Buddhas.” “All Buddhas” encompasses all beings. The Avatamsaka Sutra and the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment both say: “All beings are Buddhas in nature.” Therefore, “to respect all Buddhas” is to equally respect the past Buddhas, the present Buddhas, and the future Buddhas (all beings).

It is stated in the sutras that all sentient beings have Buddha-nature. It is called Dharma-nature in non-sentient beings. Buddha-nature and Dharmanature refer to the same nature. This is why the Avatamsaka Sutra says: “Sentient and non-sentient beings all have the same Buddha-wisdom.”

We should be as respectful to non-sentient beings as to Buddhas. For example, tables and chairs are non-sentient beings. Our respect to them should be the same as that to Buddhas, without any difference. This is the practice of Samantabhadra. When we see tables and chairs, we put them in their proper places and keep them clean. This is showing our respect to them. The respect in our hearts is exactly the same, though how we express the respect differs. Practicing respect for all Buddhas starts from this point [the impartial respect for all beings].

Respect—everything should start with it, not just when we are learning the supreme Buddhadharma. “Single-minded respect”—we often read these words in the repentance section that appears in the Buddhist practice book. Single-mindedness is the practice of Samantabhadra. It signifies impartiality. Single-mindedness is maintaining the same mind whether we encounter Buddhas, people, animals, or tables and chairs. With two minds, differences and discrimination arise. Therefore, with two minds or three minds, we are not quite respectful and not following the practice of Samantabhadra. We must clearly understand this before we know how to learn.

The second vow is “to praise Tathagata.”¹ What is the difference between “Tathagata” and “Buddha”? From the aspect of form, we say “Buddha.” We should single-mindedly and equally respect all [Buddhas, all beings]. From the aspect of nature, we say “Tathagata.” If something accords with the true nature, then it is good and we should praise it. If it does not accord with the true nature, then it is bad. We should be respectful to all but we should not praise bad things or wrongdoers. We should keep our distance [i.e., not learn from them] and continue to be respectful. In our respect, there should be no difference.

Sudhana’s visiting fifty-three wise teachers² is a very good example of this. Normally, when he visited a wise teacher, he would first pay respect and then praise the teacher. But among the fifty-three wise teachers, all of whom he showed respect to, there were three he did not praise. The first of the three teachers was a Brahman named Jayosmaya, who symbolized ignorance. The second was a king named Anala, who symbolized anger.

The third was a woman named Vasumitra, who symbolized greed. To these three teachers who symbolized greed, anger, and ignorance, Sudhana showed respect but did not praise them.

1 One of the ten titles of the Buddha.—Trans.

2 The accounts of Sudhana's visits to the fifty-three wise teachers are from a chapter in the Avatamsaka Sutra—Trans

From this we understand that when we praise, we praise the good, not the bad. But when we pay respect, we do not differentiate between good and bad. There is a significant difference between praising and paying respect. We must realize this.

I will not go into detail about the Ten Great Vows, as I have done so elsewhere.

The ten vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva sum up infinite practices and vows. But the fortyeight vows of Amitabha Buddha are more detailed than the Ten Great Vows. However, the most important of all is to be “replete.” Are we “replete”? If we have belief and practice but no vows,³ then we will not be able to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land. If we truly want to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land in this lifetime, we must chant the forty-eight vows in the Infinite Life Sutra as our morning cultivation every day. By chanting them every day and constantly learning them, we make the forty-eight vows our causal vows.⁴ Then we are “replete” with the vows. Amitabha Buddha’s fortyeight vows are infinite practices and vows, and include the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva and the Four Great Vows.

3 Belief, vow, and practice are the three requisites for being reborn in the Pure Land.—Trans.

4 Causal vows are vows made before one becomes a Buddha—Trans.

“All . . . steadfastly dwelt in the virtues and merits of all dharmas.” “The virtues and merits of all dharmas” is “Namo Amitufo.” During the Sui and Tang dynasties, eminent monks compared the sutras from the Buddha’s forty-nine years of teaching to determine which was number one. They agreed that the Avatamsaka Sutra was number one. It was the king of the sutras and the fundamental Dharma-wheel. Next, they made a comparison between the Avatamsaka Sutra and the Infinite Life Sutra and concluded that the Infinite Life Sutra was number one. Why? At the end of the Avatamsaka Sutra, Samantabhadra taught the Ten Great Vows and guided all beings to the Western Pure Land, and with this the sutra was perfectly completed. On the other hand, the Infinite Life Sutra, from the beginning to the end, describes the Western Pure Land. Hence, the Infinite Life Sutra sums up and fulfills the final goal of the Avatamsaka Sutra. The Infinite Life Sutra is thus number one of all number ones.

Mr. Xia Lianju divided the Infinite Life Sutra into forty-eight chapters. Which chapter is number one? The chapter with the forty-eight vows. The forty-eight vows were spoken by Amitabha Buddha himself and are the most important part of the entire sutra.

Of the forty-eight vows, which vow is number one? The eminent monks said that the eighteenth vow is number one. Why did they say so? The eighteenth vow says that through mindful chanting of “Amitufo” ten times at the end of one’s life one can attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land. This illustrates the inconceivability of the merit of the name of Amitabha Buddha. This is why the name of Amitabha Buddha is “the virtues and merits of all dharmas.”

When the name of Amitabha Buddha is elaborated on, we have the forty-eight vows. When the forty-eight vows are elaborated on, we have the Infinite Life Sutra. When the Infinite Life Sutra is elaborated on, we have the Avatamsaka Sutra. When the Avatamsaka Sutra is elaborated on, we have all the sutras from Sakyamuni Buddha’s forty-nine years of teaching.

Therefore, the name Amitabha Buddha is the key guiding principle. When we master this guiding principle, we will thoroughly understand the entire Dharma, all the sutras, and all the Dharma doors.

“Steadfastly dwelt in” means focusing one’s mind on Amitufo. For a true practitioner who wants to have a fast, assured success in his or her practice in this lifetime, the Buddha-name is all he or she needs. One chants and reads the sutras to understand the truth. Once confidence is established upon one’s understanding of the principles and the truth, one will naturally let go of everything else.

Not only did Sakyamuni Buddha use this method as the foremost method to teach all beings, but all Buddhas do the same also. The Pure Land method is hard to believe but easy to practice. Only when one has great good fortune and great wisdom will one be able to believe this method. In the Theravada tradition for example, Sariputra 5 is foremost in wisdom. In the Mahayana tradition, Manjusri is foremost in wisdom. Therefore, if one is not superior in wisdom, one cannot believe this method.

Let’s think about this. Not only can our wisdom not compare with that of Manjusri Bodhisattva, it cannot even compare with that of Elder Sariputra of the Theravada tradition. But when we hear the Pure Land method, we are immediately delighted, believe and accept it, and are willing to learn and practice it. From this viewpoint, we are not inferior to Manjusri Bodhisattva. He chose this method, so have we. His choice was a wise one, so is ours.

“Steadfastly dwelt” means our minds will no longer waver once we understand the principles and the phenomena of the truth, after which our minds will truly settle in “Namo Amitufo.” This [Namo Amitufo] is “the virtues and merits of all dharmas.”⁶

5 Both the Elder Sariputra and Manjusri Bodhisattva are listed in the assemblies listening to the Amitabha Sutra and the Infinite Life Sutra.—Trans.

6 These are the virtues and merits of Buddhahood.—Trans.

Web link to the article: <http://www.amtb.cn/e-bud/Essence-of-the-Infinite-Life-Sutra.html>

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