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Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE SECOND LESSON:

WAYS TO REFORM

A Fearful Heart:

From Fear Comes Sincerity and Respect

The second way to reform is to know fear. The celestial beings and earthly spirits all hover over our heads in observation. It is impossible for us to deceive them.

Constantly having this fearful mind will enable us to discipline ourselves so that we will no longer dare to commit wrongdoings. It will help us to be constantly apprehensive. But, what are we fearful of? Above us, there are celestial beings who have supernatural abilities of clairvoyance. They are able to see very clearly our every movement. Below us, there are earthly spirits who also have the five supernatural abilities (clairvoyance, clairaudience, knowing their past lifetimes, physical abilities and knowing the minds of others). Although their abilities cannot compare with those of the celestial beings, their perceptions are much keener than ours. For example, they have greater abilities in sight and hearing. However, we exceed them in wisdom. It might be difficult for us to believe that even having these abilities they are not more clever and wise than we are.

Presently, scientists have proven that numerous animals possess unique senses. For example, a dog's sense of smell is keener than that of humans. Thus, they can detect scents that we are unable to. Dogs also have keener hearing than we do. But, they are not as intelligent as we are. Other animals also surpass us in various abilities. It should not be at all surprising that ghosts and spirits surpass us as well. Thus, it can be believed that spirits and ghosts have the five kinds of supernatural abilities. Why do they still suffer? They are not as wise as we are and most do not possess as much good fortune as we do. We need to constantly remember that above and below, there are spirits and ghosts that are perfectly aware of our every thought, every act.

Even when my wrongdoings are done in a concealed place, the beings and spirits of heaven and earth are just like a mirror, clearly reflecting all my faults. If my offense is serious, then all kinds of adversities will befall me. If my fault is minor, it will still deduct from my current good fortune. How can I not feel fear?

Even if we are committing minor faults in the most concealed place where nobody is around to witness them, the beings and spirits who are clairvoyant can see everything very clearly even through walls. This is appalling! But the capabilities of these beings are still not considered great, for their abilities are nothing compared to those of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Fortunately for us, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have great compassion and loving-kindness. Since they have purity of mind, when they witness our wrongdoings, they will not cause us trouble for they do not mind our offenses.

However, Dharma Protectors are ordinary beings who will cause trouble for those who have committed wrongdoings. Also, the spirits and ghosts are still ordinary beings. They get angry when they see us committing wrongdoings and will sometimes cause trouble for us. They are even more prone to punish us for our severe wrongdoings, thus adversities and

calamities will befall us. If we truly understand this truth, how would we not be afraid?

Therefore, there are several passages in the Infinite Life Sutra that call for respect and fear. There are an infinite number of beings in the Western Pure Land, each has the Heavenly Eye, is clairvoyant, can see everything without any obstruction. Each has the Heavenly Ear, is clairaudient, can hear every sound throughout the universe, in the past, present and future. They see what we cannot see. They hear what we cannot hear. When we think about it, what is there that we can hide from the utmost virtuous people in the Western Pure Land? If we cannot deceive them, then how could we even think of deceiving Buddha Amitabha, Great Compassion Bodhisattva and Great Strength Bodhisattva? It is impossible!

Once we understand this and we deeply realize that we need to seek birth into the Pure Land, it is not important what form our merit dedication takes. All the beings there know our aspirations. There is no need for us to verbally say, “We seek birth into the Pure Land.” They already know this. They knew it the instant that we first gave rise to the thought. The truth is that we need to honestly chant the Buddha’s name. There is no need to say any unnecessary words. We just need to seek One Mind Undisturbed, to seek the highest level of birth into the Western Pure Land. In so doing, we will be foremost in wisdom, merits and virtues.

And there is more. Even when we are alone in our room, the beings and spirits watch over us very carefully and record everything. Even if we try to conceal or cover up our improper acts with clever speech, the spirits and celestial beings can see through to our hearts as clearly as seeing into our lungs or liver. Ultimately, we cannot deceive ourselves. If others were to see our behavior, we would find ourselves discredited. Therefore, how can we not be constantly cautious of our every action and be fearful of the consequences they might evoke?

Previously, we read about when we are outside, interacting with others. Here Mr. Liao-Fan wrote of when we are alone in our room. When we are alone behind closed doors, we can become careless, behaving as we wish, not realizing the importance in cultivating alertness even when alone. When with others, we tend to restrain ourselves. When alone, we tend to relax.

My late teacher Mr. Bing-Nan Lee told of an occurrence that happened almost two thousand years ago. Mr. Kang-Cheng Zheng and a group of classmates were reflecting on their faults. As each reflected, they found that they had many shortcomings. Only Mr. Zheng could not think of any. Finally, someone told him, “Think again”. He replied, “I am thinking!” He thought for a long time. Then he remembered. One time, when he went to restroom, he forgot to put on his hat. This was his shortcoming. (In the past, it was a Chinese custom for a man to always leave his hat on, even at the time of death or it would have been a disgrace.)

It is obvious that in times long past, people were constantly watchful over their thoughts and behavior even when alone when their appearance would be as neat and orderly as if they had company. Nowadays, people would say “Why bother”? But this was how people used to behave. They were watchful over their behavior even when alone. In their minds, even if they were to hide themselves away, beings and spirits of heaven and earth could still see them. It would have been impolite to them if people were careless and behaved as they pleased. Even a concealed spot is still visible to the beings and spirits. Thus, our demeanor should always be respectful. We should never indulge ourselves even the slightest bit.

Even in our room, it should seem as if innumerable pairs of eyes were watching us, innumerable fingers were pointing at us. We should be as watchful and cautious of our deeds as if we were in public, not daring to behave as we please. Although we are extremely secretive in trying to conceal our behavior, or to cover up our faults with glib talk, actually, this cannot be accomplished. It is as if our internal organs were visible to all. This is how clearly the spirits can see us.

This is just an example to relate how even in a concealed room, in a bedroom, our every movement, our every thought is known to the spirits. There is simply nothing they do not know about. We may think that we have secrets, but we are only deceiving others and ourselves. In actuality, spirits of heaven and earth have already seen through all of this. Once seen through, we are worthless, our attempts to hide were useless. Once we have realized this, how could we not fear?

But there is more to it! As long as a person still has one breath left, then he or she has the chance to regret even the most serious wrongdoings and offenses.

When we are ashamed, we will have a respectful and fearful heart and this will enable us to reform and we will eradicate our offenses. Many Buddhists attend repentance ceremonies daily, doing so for their entire lifetime trying to repent and eradicate karmic obstacles. Not only do some fail to eradicate their karmic obstacles, the more ceremonies they attend, the more their obstacles increase. Why? They do not know how to sincerely regret, but conceal them even more. To truly cultivate is to be able to feel ashamed, to have respect and to know fear. It is essential for us to understand this and to change our improper thinking.

Those who have committed the greatest transgressions such as the Five Deadly Offenses or the Ten Bad Conducts are bound for the hell realms. However, as long as they still have one remaining breath, are they able to be helped? Yes, if they are willing to regret and correct their erroneous ways. If so, then they are still able to turn over a new leaf. If they are truly ashamed, sincerely give rise to a respectful and apprehensive heart, deeply regret their ways, vow to be born into the Pure Land and chant "Amitufo" one time to ten times, then they are assured of being born there.

For example, during the Tang Dynasty (over one thousand years ago) a butcher named Shan-He Zhang, chanted "Amitufo" just ten times at the last moment before his death and was born into the Pure Land. The Visualization Sutra tells us that in ancient India, King Ajatasatru killed his father, egregiously mistreated his mother and caused dissension in the Sangha. There was no evil that he would not commit. In the Ajatasatru Sutra, Buddha Shakyamuni told us of his cause and effect. At the last moment of his life, with still one breath left, the king truly regretted and attained single-mindedness of Buddha Amitabha as he sought birth into the Pure Land. He was born into the eighth level, truly inconceivable.

From this, we know that there are two ways to be born into the Pure Land. One way is to cultivate and accumulate merit and virtue daily, to follow the regular way of practice to seek birth into the Pure Land. The other way is for those who have committed great evil and who feel deep remorse at the last moments of their life. Therefore, we do not want to look down on those who have committed wrongdoings. Perhaps at the last moment of their lives, their ability to feel deep remorse will be so strong that they will attain a higher level of birth than we will. This is very possible. It is said, "A prodigal who returns is more precious than gold". A reformed person is even better than an average practitioner. Average people are incomparable to them. Thus, we do not want to look down on those who have committed wrongdoings.

Once we understand this, we will not even consider counting on our luck, thinking we can commit transgressions and that as long as we feel regret in time before our last breath to still be born into the Pure Land. It would be wrong for us to think in this manner, for this way will guarantee our falling into the Three Bad Realms. It is extremely difficult to be able to regret at the last moment of life and to be born into the Pure Land. On appearance it would seem as though there was only one lifetime involved here, that one who was deluded has awakened at the last moment of life. But, for what appears to only involve our last minutes actually involves all of the good roots and good fortune accumulated throughout innumerable past lifetimes. We must possess deep-seated, solid good roots.

If we visit a hospital, we will understand. Look around. How many people are still clearheaded and alert in their last moments? Being rational and alert is the first criterion. If we are confused and unaware at that time, are unable to remember

to feel remorse and if we forget that we need to chant, then we will fall into the Three Bad Realms. We need to know the true reality and not dare to think this way, not count on our luck. Why? It is unimaginably difficult to achieve in this way. It is rare to have one out of thousands of people remain clear-headed at the time of their death. This is the first criterion, without meeting this we will be unable to achieve. We have to ask whether we can guarantee ourselves that at the instant of our death, we will remain clearheaded and alert?

The second criterion is to encounter a benevolent teacher. And the third is to turn back immediately at that instant, to single-mindedly regret, to be mindful of Buddha Amitabha and to seek birth into the Pure Land. Can we guarantee all these conditions will exist at that precise critical moment? If not, then we need to honestly, sincerely and regularly cultivate daily to accumulate merits and virtues. This is our only truly reliable and safe way. If ten thousand people practice the Pure Land method accordingly then ten thousand will achieve. Mr. Yu said in his commentary that, "By laying down the butcher knife, one can become a Buddha right then and there. If we have the heart to regret our wrongdoings, then we can begin again." Obviously, the earlier we awaken the better. So please, make haste in turning back and do not commit any more wrongdoings.

Once, a person who behaved badly during his entire lifetime felt remorse just when he was about to die. He realized his past mistakes and regretted all the bad things that he had done. His mind came to a very kind thought and immediately afterwards, he peacefully passed away.

There are many examples of this, some of Buddhist practitioners, some not. In recent years, one that we personally witnessed was that of Mr. Guang-Da Zhou, a businessman who lived in Washington, DC in the United States. Mr. Zhou had been a good person who had not committed bad deeds. He proved to us that one may encounter Buddhism in his last moments of life, chant "Amitufo" one to ten times and be born into the Pure Land.

Mr. Zhou did not encounter Buddhism until a kindhearted friend introduced him to the Pure Land teachings just three days before he passed away. He was joyful upon hearing of them and accepted without the slightest doubt. He made the vow to be born into the Pure Land and single-mindedly was mindful of Buddha Amitabha. This was the result of his good roots from past lifetimes. Once he had vowed to be born into the Pure Land, although he was ill, he no longer felt pain.

This is the reward or retribution for good or bad things done. Once the true mind is generated, the Triple Jewels help it. Although he was in critical condition, he was still spiritually uplifted. This was due to the strength from his vows and the joy of practicing Buddhism. It is similar to experiencing something good, which puts us into high spirits. His energy and strength came from within him and from Buddha Amitabha. Thus, Mr. Zhou was able to have the spirit to chant "Amitufo". After chanting for three days, he was able to see the three sages of the Western Pure Land descend from high in the clouds to escort him to the Pure Land. This happened recently, how can we not believe?

In our practice, the essence or what is in our heart and mind is important, not formalities. Mr. Zhou never listened to Buddhist lectures, nor had he previously read any sutras. He had not taken the Three Refuges or the Five Fundamental Precepts. He just had a kind friend who encouraged him to chant "Amitufo". Really! Buddha Amitabha and the sages came to escort him to the Pure Land. Thus, cultivation stresses the heart, the true mind.

The Yu commentary stated that, "It is never too early to begin practicing. It is never too late to regret. To pass away peacefully is a phenomenon of transcendence". It is still not too late to regret at the time of our death. Every time a person dies well, he or she is assured of going to a good place. Die well, born well. The fifth of the Five Chinese Good Fortunes is to pass away peacefully without suffering, assuring our being born into one of the Three Good Realms, of not falling into the Three Bad Realms.

This is to say that if a person can have an overwhelming and courageous kind thought at the most important moment, then it can cleanse away hundreds of years of accumulated misdeeds. This is just like only needing one lamp to bring light into a valley that has been dark for a thousand years. It does not matter how long one has been committing misdeeds or if the offenses were newly made. He or she is an exceptional person as long as they are able to reform!

Both Buddhists and Confucian scholars have spoken this truth. It is the truth, not something false. We need to be brave and determined in regretting and reforming. Even if the offense is major or of long standing, it can be regretted and eradicated. Having an overwhelming and courageous kind thought at this most important moment is to truly and sincerely regret and eradicate karmic obstacles. In this way, it can indeed cleanse away hundreds of years of accumulated misdeeds.

The book speaks of only needing one lamp to light a valley that has been dark for a thousand years. This is comparing the lamp and the brightness to our bravery and determination in reforming and in our ability to wash away long accumulated misdeeds. Thus, no matter how big or small, no matter from time long past or newly made, what is of utmost importance regarding offenses is that we reform. We must reform.

It is often said in Buddhism that, “true Dharma repositories are rare”. If we are not true repositories, we will be unable to continue the lifeline of Buddhism. For example, a cup has to be cleaned very well, for the water it holds to be drinkable. If it is not clean, but is tainted with just a trace of poison and we fill it up with water and drink it, then we will be poisoned. Poison is the negative karma. To become true Dharma repositories, we first need to completely eliminate our afflictions for us to be capable of receiving the Buddha’s teachings. And then we will be able to benefit not just ourselves but others as well.

We reform and cultivate good fortune. Why do we need to reform first before we make ourselves into a repository for the Dharma? So that we are able to receive all of the good fortune that Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, beings and spirits of heaven and earth bestow on us. This is true good fortune not that which deteriorates. If our repository is not clean, but is filled with afflictions and negative karma, then the good fortune given to us by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will turn into even deadlier poisons. How will we be able to withstand it? This is why we first need to start anew to cultivate good fortune.

If we do not reform our erroneous ways, then the good fortune we cultivate will serve to increase our faults to their fullest. Why? Without good fortune, we only commit small transgressions, since we do not have the opportunity to create bigger ones. However, with great good fortune, then the wrongs we commit will be even bigger. In the future, this will lead us deeper into the hell realms, to bear even more severe sufferings. Although poor people may have thought of committing transgressions that are more serious, they are generally unable to create serious ones. Whereas, the ones that rich people create are more grave than those of average people.

We need to understand that we first need to reform to eradicate misfortunes before we cultivate good fortune. We do not want to seek good fortune first, but to rid ourselves of misfortunes. Then, the good fortune we cultivate will be genuine goodness. If we do not eradicate our accumulated habits before we cultivate good fortune, then as our good fortunes increase, it is most likely that we will create even worse offenses. In passing on knowledge, will a truly benevolent teacher teach this kind of students? No! Why not? He or she knows that it will harm the student. Buddhism would say that such a student is not a Dharma repository. If he or she is not, then the teacher cannot pass on the teachings.

This is not to say that only a very smart and wise person is a Dharma repository, no. If a person has a pure mind, has a kind heart without greed, anger, ignorance and arrogance, then he or she is a Dharma repository, regardless of intelligence. We read in Master Tan Xu’s memoirs, about a monk who took moldy candles outside to dry in the bright sunlight. He was very slow-witted, without even the slightest bit of wisdom. But his mind was pure, he was honest and he bore no ill will for

anyone. The old Master took a liking to him. He was a Dharma repository so the Master taught him to prostrate to the relics of Buddha Shakyamuni at the King A Yu Temple, three thousand times a day. After three years of prostrations, he was awakened. And after awakening, he was able to compose poetry, verses, was extremely articulate. Eventually he even lectured on sutras and was widely welcomed. But although he had achieved attainment, he still lived thriftily, remained very humble and courteous towards others. To be able to do so is to be a Dharma repository. This is true good fortune.

By choosing a successor, a Master can either help a person achieve or can harm that person. Since the past, good teachers, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist, have been selective in choosing their successors. The most important criterion for selection is virtuous conduct. Other qualities are not taken into account because they can be nurtured. Thus, we need to start by reforming if we really want to achieve, to be born into the Pure Land and to benefit ourselves and others. As Mr. Liao-Fan said, "It is of utmost value to be able to change."

Besides, we are living in a tumultuous and constantly changing world. Our body, made of flesh and blood, is extremely perishable. If our next breath does not come, then this body will no longer be part of us. Then, even if we did want to reform, it would be too late to do so.

These four sentences advise and encourage us to grab hold of the opportunity, to regret and reform while we still are able. This world is ever changing, is impermanent. The sutra stated that, "life is only a breath". If our next breath does not come, it is the next life and it will then be too late to think about regretting and reforming. Knowing that this is the utmost important matter in life, we need to treasure this opportunity, to not waste time but to reflect daily within ourselves and to earnestly regret and reform daily. Being able to do so is true cultivation.

However, many people think that cultivation is simply reciting sutras, prostrating to the Buddha, or chanting a Buddha's name daily. To do so in this manner has nothing to do with our own negative habits. It is simply a formality. It will change nothing. To cultivate is not simply reciting a sutra. Cultivation is to not give rise to wandering thoughts as we focus our attention on the sutra text during the time we recite a sutra. Nor should we analyze the meanings, because to do so is also wandering thoughts. Thus, the goal of cultivation is cultivating the pure mind, is halting our wandering thoughts. Reciting sutras, chanting mantras or chanting a Buddha's name, all share this goal to cultivate the mind. When the mind is pure, the body will be pure.

Throughout these years, we have truly taken to heart that with purity of mind, the body will become pure and not fall ill. Naturally, we still need to be careful with our daily intake of food and drink and with our manner of living. Although we are advancing in age, with a body that is pure, an environment that is pure, without worries, without afflictions, we would neither fall ill nor grow old. My late teacher, Mr. Bing-Nan Lee, was a perfect example of this. Even in his nineties, every day was a rush of lectures, appointments, social engagements, etc. From this we can clearly see how a person who is advanced in years, can remain perfectly competent while living a healthy, long life, without falling ill. Many younger people cannot accomplish this. It was all due to the purity of his mind and thus, his body.

Therefore, when we commit a wrongdoing, our retribution in the physical world is a bad reputation, which will last for hundreds, even thousands of years. Even filial children and loving grandchildren cannot restore our honor. Then in our afterlife, we might end up in hell suffering immeasurable pain.

If we do not know to regret and to correct our wrongdoings, then we will be burdening future generations with our bad reputation. Even our filial children and virtuous grandchildren will not be able to wipe these away.

We are currently unable to see the hells with our own eyes. But, please be assured that our negative karma will lead us to the

hell realms and they are truly terrifying. Sutras talk of the hells and there are many explanations of how long we will remain in them. The easiest to read and understand is the one Mr. Lee listed in the Fourteen Lecture Outlines. They are very believable and accord with the sutras. One day in hell is equivalent to two thousand seven hundred years on earth.

The Chinese often proudly tell of their five thousand years of history. But this is only two days in the hell realms. And think how terrifying hell is! The shorter life spans are ten thousand years! If we were to calculate their days to be three hundred sixty five in a year, that means a day in hell is equal to almost three thousand years in the human realm! We must understand the magnitude of this! The suffering is ceaseless, without a day of release. We will not be able to emerge for hundreds and thousands of aeons. And in this lifetime, it is very easy for us to create the cause of going to the hells. However, once we have fallen into the hells, it is unimaginably difficult to get out. Therefore, if we believe that the Buddha only tells us the truth, then how can we continue to act rashly and blindly commit any offense!

Even the sages, virtuous people, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas cannot help us escape from the bad consequences. So how can we not be afraid?

Even the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with their great compassion and kindness, are unable to help us when we fall into the hell realms. Can Earth Treasure Bodhisattva who presides there help to us when we fall into them? No! Very honestly, he can only help those who possess abundant, solid good roots and good fortune, and who can accept and accord with his teachings. Then, they will truly regret and mend their ways to be able to transcend the hell realms. However, when we are suffering intense pain, it is virtually impossible to accept even good words. The more we suffer, the more malicious thoughts and angry feelings we will have. Then, even when others say something pleasant to us, we may feel that they have insulted us and hate them even more for it. This is true for those who are suffering in this world let alone those in the hell realms! Thus, more often than not, those suffering in the hell realms will commit even more serious offenses, consequently making the transcendence from the hells even more difficult and this is why even Buddhas and Bodhisattvas cannot help us.

What kind of people is Earth Treasure Bodhisattva able to help? Those who truly possess good roots and good fortunes. Because of one erroneous thought, these people fall into hell but are able to be helped. Earth Treasure Bodhisattva can advise and encourage them. Because they are willing to listen, to regret and be awakened, it is easier for them to transcend from the hells. Otherwise, there is no way to help them. Even Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are helpless in this matter. After seeing how it is and considering all this, how could we not be afraid?

The second way to reform teaches us to have a fearful heart. We need to know that we cannot hide even the slightest faults from the beings and spirits of heaven and earth, much less from all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Therefore, even if we were in a dark room, we would do well not to give rise to deviated thoughts. And without deviated thoughts, we naturally will not commit any bad deeds. This is the simple truth! Therefore, when we regret and reform, we need to start from our hearts. When our hearts, our minds are virtuous and kind, naturally our speech and behavior will be likewise. When our hearts are not virtuous and kind, no matter how we try to pretend, our speech and behavior will be a lie.

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