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Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE SECOND LESSON:

WAYS TO REFORM

Changing through Reasoning

We can try to reform by refraining from wrongdoings by understanding the reason and principle behind why we should not do something. In the instance of killing, we can reform through contemplating that loving all living things is a virtue of heaven. All living beings love life and are afraid to die. How can I be at peace with myself by taking another's life to nurture my own? At times, animals were even cooked alive, such as fish or crabs. They may not have been completely slaughtered before going into the cooking pot. Such pain and suffering reach down into the very bones, how can we be so cruel to them?

When we eat, we use all kinds of expensive and tasty things to nourish our bodies, enough to fill the whole dinner table! But once the meal is done, even the best delicacies will become body waste and be excreted. The result of our killing accomplishes nothing. Consuming vegetarian foods can fill and nourish us just as well. Why let our stomach become a graveyard and reduce our good fortune through the violation of killing?

Here, Mr. Liao-Fan talks of changing through reasoning. We want to know the true reality, to think of its principles, its logic. Then, we will naturally no longer have the heart to eat the flesh of another sentient being. Before, we were not clear on the reasoning and tried to do something very grudgingly. Trying to force ourselves to do something is extremely difficult. We will not be happy or willing and can end up painfully, struggling with ourselves.

Once, we understand the principles, the logic, we can reconcile these problems. Thus, we need to constantly bear in mind that "loving all living things is a virtue of heaven". It is natural for us to do so. Especially now, even scientists are coming to gradually understand this. Today, we speak of the natural ecological balance. This is the same as "loving all living things is a virtue of heaven". Our ecological system is naturally balanced. If this balance is destroyed, all sentient beings in the world will experience the catastrophe. Therefore, those who are wise will do nothing that will result in destroying our ecological system.

Actually of all the animals, humankind is the worst for we are the most cruel, the most evil. Tigers and poisonous snakes only kill when they are hungry. After their hunger has been satisfied, they do not even pay attention when other animals walk back and forth near them. This shows that they killed from natural instinct. But it is different for humans, we have no need to kill, on the contrary, we slaughter at will. Few animals create negative karma. Think about it, the negative karma created by humans is unequalled by animals! When we consider this, we will realize that there is nothing in the Six Realms for us to be proud of. It is great suffering to fall into the animal realms. However, animals at least do not create negative karma. They are reducing theirs!

If we do not practice Buddhism when we have obtained this human form, then what is the good of having it? We commit wrongdoings daily. Animals reduce their karma. We create them. When their karma has been eliminated, they will emerge and be born into the Three Good Realms. On the other hand, our karma has increased and when it comes into fruition, we will fall into the Three Bad Realms. They prepare to emerge from, we prepare to go into. What is there for us to be proud of? Moreover, we need to remember that all sentient beings are mortally afraid of death. When we kill them, it is because they were unable to fight back. Talk about the weak being the prey of the strong! They had no way to resist. Unable to resist, were they willing? If not, then be assured that they will have resentment and hatred. How will we be able to avoid revenge that will in turn breed further revenge?

Once, a fellow practitioner came to me and asked, "Is there any use in transcending the spirits of aborted babies?" I said, "No use! You think transcending them will solve things?" The practitioner asked, "But if the child was born deformed or retarded, would it not undergo much suffering? Would it not be better to abort it?" I replied, "We need to understand that bearing a deformed or retarded baby is bearing one who has come to demand payment of a debt. You owe a debt. By aborting the baby not only are you not allowing the debt to be claimed, but also you have killed him or her. In other words, the debt you owed in the past has now been multiplied. In a future life, it will be even worse. Right now scientists only see what is in front of us, they do not know of cause and effect of the next lifetime. Cause and effect are connected in the three times of the past, present and future. This is a grave offense."

The practitioner persisted, "But the baby has yet to take shape. It is only in its first or second weeks of gestation." I said, "No, he comes upon inception, it has nothing to do with taking shape or not. Upon conception, it has found you. You have this affinity with it from the past, whether it is repaying a gratitude or a grievance, demanding payment of a debt, or repaying a debt. If the baby had come to repay gratitude and you killed it, you would be returning kindness with ingratitude. It would become your enemy in the future. Perhaps, it was a filial child and virtuous grandchild come to repay kindness, but by killing it you have turned the fetus into a mortal enemy. This is terrible! You are trying to accomplish a little merit by spending a small amount of money thinking you can transcend this baby by erecting a plaque? Nothing is this easy! You are only deceiving yourself. It is not the truth".

Therefore, if everyone could just see the past cause and the resultant effect, it would be terrifying! We have to be careful, to understand the principles and know the true reality. It is a grave transgression to kill or harm another sentient being to nurture ourselves. However, today, people regard this as perfectly normal. Some religions even think that animals were creations of God given to them to eat. If these sentient beings were intended for us to eat, then would we not question whether God truly had the virtue of loving all living things? This is wrong thinking, which leads us to commit so many transgressions. And we do not even know how very wrong we are. All sentient beings when killed and slaughtered cry out from their fear and their pain. When we listen to those terrified cries, how could anyone think they willingly submitted to their death.

It is stated in the sutras, "A human dies and becomes a sheep. A sheep dies and becomes a human." Life after life they will kill each other seeking vengeance. Thus, it is said that if you eat sixteen ounces of flesh, you will pay back sixteen ounces of flesh. A debt of money must be repaid in cash and a life owed must be repaid in kind. This is the immutability of the Law of Cause and Effect. Once we truly believe and accept this, we will never again have a thought of harming any sentient being. Why? We do not wish to pay back with our lives in the future.

Nor do we want to seek ill-gotten wealth. Why? Because we know if we do, in the future we will have to repay the debt. By understanding the true reality, we naturally will abide by the law, be content with what we have and be honest in all that we do. Be assured that this is neither passive nor regressive but is to do our best to create a beautiful and bright future for ourselves. It is to seek a good life, not only for this time, but for all of our future lifetimes as well. Without wisdom and without knowing the true reality, we will not be able to attain what we seek.

Mr. Liao-Fan was speaking of eating animal flesh. We see sentient beings being killed, witness their pain and suffering, which reach down into the bones. How could we bear to take their life to nurture our own? Besides, once we have finished eating, even the most delicious foods will become body waste. People long for delicacies, for food that tastes good. But, no matter how we cook it, the only thing that will know and enjoy the taste is our tongue, nothing after that. Just for a few seconds of enjoyment we have killed countless sentient beings, committed innumerable transgressions!

Eating vegetarian food can be just as filling and nourishing. Some may say that vegetarian food is not nutritious. Actually, many vegetarians have lived long and healthy lives. Many monks and nuns who became vegetarians when they were little are strong and healthy. How can we say it is not healthy to be a vegetarian? All these are incorrect ideas. When we take the life of another sentient being and eat their flesh to nurture ourselves, we not only make enemies and incur their hatred for us, but we also reduce our own good fortune. A truly intelligent person would never do this willingly.

Think again of all the living beings with flesh and blood. Like us, they have a conscience since they possess self-awareness. They and we are one entity. We can cultivate virtue and allow these living beings to respect us and feel safe around us. How can we continue to harm them and make them hate us? If we think about it, we will naturally feel sorrow for these animals and be unable to swallow their flesh.

All living creatures not only possess life but have self-awareness. They are no different from us. Other than Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who understand the concept that all beings are one entity. From this segment of the text, it is logical to assume that Mr. Liao-Fan's family has become vegetarian, because he understood the reasoning and knew the true reality. Nowadays, there are still some people that have the wrong idea, thinking that adults can become vegetarians but children are too small to do so. Parents are afraid that they will be malnourished, so they still want them to eat more meat. This thinking is incorrect. Actually, this is akin to thinking that they might not have enough karmic obstacles, might have too few mortal enemies, so we should help them incur more karmic foes. This is what it amounts to. If we explain this to them, not only do they not believe us but they criticize us, saying that we are out of touch, that we are ignorant of science and nutrition.

In fact, this is not the case at all. They are mistaken. It is best to be awakened as early as possible; the younger children start becoming vegetarian the better off they will be. It will help them to build a solid foundation of good fortune and merit. As the Infinite Life Sutra and the Sutra of Good Fortunes and Misfortunes said, "the ancestors were ignorant". The ancestors here are the older generation. They have no wisdom, thus they lead us to unwittingly commit transgressions, creating much negative karma. This matter of our food and drink intake alone is appalling for the offense is indeed serious!

Another example of changing through reasoning is the person who often gets angry. They need to stop and think that everyone has his or her individual strengths and weaknesses. According to my reasoning, if I touched on someone else's weakness, I should feel sorry for that weakness and forgive any shortcomings. If someone

offends me for no reason at all, then it is that person's problem and has nothing to do with me. There is no reason for me to get angry.

In the past, we tended to lose our tempers, to be filled with anger. We would do well to sincerely reflect within remembering that "we are only human, that we all have our faults". Other people have faults, so do we. If we cannot forgive them their shortcomings, how can we expect them to forgive ours? When we think about this, we will no longer condemn them but feel empathy for them. People only make mistakes due to their ignorance, their foolishness. They do not have the ability to distinguish between true and false, proper and deviated, harmful and beneficial, thus they cannot correct themselves, cannot end their erroneous ways and cultivate kindness. We should feel sorry for them and not reproach them. In so doing, we follow the Buddhas' and Bodhisattvas' way of interacting with people, matters and objects.

Mr. Liao-Fan said that when someone offends us for no reason at all, then it is their problem and not ours. If someone attacks us unfairly, it does not concern us. "There is no reason to become angry." Even if they attack us physically. This body is not us. Our purity of mind will never be hurt by attacks, as purity of mind originally contains nothing. It is a pity that we do not employ purity of mind when we interact with others or matters. What we use is our false mind, which is not the true self. What Buddhism seeks is our "original self before we were born to our parents". This original self is the true mind, the pure mind, which does not give rise to any wandering thoughts. The external environment will not affect the pure mind. Thus, it does not concern us, so why should we bother with it? Why should we be so attached to it? Once we sever all wandering thoughts, discriminatory thoughts and attachments, think about it, what is there to concern us? Nothing.

All these are observations from the aspect of reasoning, thus it is said "to have achieved perfect peace of mind through reasoning". By understanding the reasoning, our minds will be settled, no longer affected by external conditions. Regardless of what happens on the outside that which is within can remain calm. In the midst of favorable conditions, we do not give rise to the heart of greed. In the midst of unfavorable conditions, we do not give rise to the heart of anger. Regardless of the circumstances, we are able to maintain our mind of purity, equality and compassion to genuinely reform ourselves.

I also think that there is not a great person who thinks that he or she is always right. There is not a truly learned person who blames their faults on others. Therefore, when things do not go the way we wish, it is because we have not cultivated our virtues and morals, and have not accumulated enough merits to move others!

We should always reflect upon ourselves first. In so doing, criticism can actually become a training ground to refine our character and to strengthen our abilities. Therefore, we should be very glad to accept someone else's criticism and teachings. What is there to be angry and complain about?

This teaches us to reform from the heart. And this is the best way to change. In the Flower Adornment Sutra, the purpose of the fifty-three visits of Sudhana was to practice and learn from experience. It is to cultivate and reform from the mind. Therefore, we need to earnestly reflect upon ourselves.

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