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Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE SECOND LESSON:

WAYS TO REFORM

Changing through Reasoning

In Buddhism, Buddhas are "great persons" and Bodhisattvas are heroes. They stand out among others and they do what others cannot. Thus, Buddhist main halls are called "Grand Hall of Great Heroes". What ordinary people are unable to do, to regret and reform, the Buddhas can. Buddhas are able to correct all errors, thus to be a great hero. Therefore, there is not a self-righteous Buddha or Bodhisattva. There is not a great sage or virtuous person who is not humble, who is not patient, conciliatory and agreeable. Humility and respect are a revelation of our virtuous nature.

A truly learned person would never blame others or the heavens. Knowledge and good conduct are wisdom. It is revealed from our true nature, whether it is Buddhism or Confucian teachings. The wisdom spoken of in Confucianism also flows from our original nature, thus it is called "the sincere and honest mind". Sincerity is the true mind, it flows from the sincere mind, it is wisdom, it is called knowledge and good conduct. Therefore, a learned and wise person never blames others or the heavens for their misfortunes. Therefore, one who complains about others is not a genuine learned person.

When we do not succeed in our undertakings, when in everyday life our speech and behavior are criticized or slandered by others and things are not going our way, we do not want to blame those who criticize us. Instead, we would do well to reflect within, to understand that it is because we have not yet achieved in our cultivation of morals and virtues. And this is why we are unable to touch them.

Therefore, we need to look within first and see if we have mistreated others. When people verbally abuse us, criticize us, slander us, we can accept it. Not only will we not have thoughts of vengeance, but also we will have a grateful heart. Why? They have provided us with invaluable assistance, which can help us to reflect within, to correct the mistakes if we have them, to guard against them if we do not. If we are not at fault, we do not blame them. If we are at fault, then we correct our mistakes immediately. Sudhana adopted this method when visiting his fifty-three spiritual guides to completely correct all of his faults and to eventually become a Buddha.

The fifty-three visits concern training the mind through experience. Experiences are the interactions we have with others and matters in our daily lives. Everything and everyone provides us with the means to reflect within. Using the external environment, no matter who the individual is we are to regard them as our teachers. We are to regard what they teach us as lessons taught to us by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. We need to earnestly reflect within, to learn and practice. There is only one student, us. Everyone else is our teacher, our benevolent advisor. All are Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. They do not have faults, only we do. This is how Sudhana became a Buddha.

When we read the Flower Adornment Sutra, Sudhana did not change into another body, he became a Buddha in his own body. He started as an ordinary person and continued to practice until he reached the ultimate perfect enlightenment in one lifetime. And if we learn this ability, this method, then we too are assured of becoming a Buddha in this body, in this lifetime.

How did Sudhana cultivate? How do we cultivate? First, do not blame everyone and everything else. Blame only ourselves. If other people are disagreeable to us, it is because our karmic obstacles have surfaced. All other people are Buddhas, are Bodhisattvas without the slightest faults. Whatever we see that incurs our dislike is our own karmic obstacle, our own fault.

The Sixth Patriarch of Zen, Master Hui-Neng, said it very well, "It is our own shortcoming if we see the faults of others, as we will fall back also". When we mind the faults of others, our karmic obstacles will surface and we will regress. He also said that, "A true practitioner does not see the faults of others". Sudhana was a true practitioner. He did not see any faults in others. He only saw his own. He was afraid of not having enough time to correct his own, much less having the time to find the faults of others. Thus, he saw everyone as virtuous people, as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In this way, he himself also became a Buddha, a Bodhisattva. If we still see the faults of others, it is our fault, our karmic obstacles materializing. So, in the eyes of the Buddha, everyone is a Buddha. In the eyes of ordinary beings, even Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are ordinary beings. Therefore, the best way of reforming starts from within.

Criticism can actually be a good thing. It is not easy for us to discover our faults even when we try to. When others find them and tell us about them, it will save us a great deal of trouble. Therefore, we should be very glad to accept someone else's criticism, as this is our "training ground to refine our character and to fulfill our goals". They have come to help us, to be our benevolent advisors. We simply need to adopt this manner of acceptance. In this way, we will see that there is nothing to be angry about. Nothing to complain about. How can we be angry? How can we not accept? How can we give rise to the heart of revenge? This is too great an offense! They are our benefactors and yet we want to repay them with reprisals! This is a major offense.

When the Chinese speak of filial piety, we are reminded of Emperor Shun (who lived over four thousand years ago). In Chinese history, everyone recognizes him as the model of filial piety, able to move heaven and earth. Who helped him to achieve this? His parents and half-brother. After his mother died, Shun's father remarried. When his stepmother mistreated him, his father went along with her. Then, years later after his half-brother grew up and he also mistreated Shun. Consequently, not only did three people mistreat him but they even tried to kill him.

He did not change his gentle heart, but constantly reflected, "Why can I not make my parents and brother happy?" He regarded their actions as his own faults for he did not see the faults of others. Everyday he reflected on his faults, on how to regret and correct them. In the end he finally influenced and reformed his whole family. He did not try to run away from home, did not think of revenge. When Emperor Yao learned of Shun, he chose him as his successor and married his two daughters to him. For if Shun was able to influence his whole family, then he was able to influence the whole country.

In the sutras, we read of "Endurance Celestial Being". Who helped him to attain achievement? Kaliraja. Buddha Shakyamuni spoke of this example briefly in the Diamond Sutra and provided further details in the Great Nirvana Sutra. Kaliraja is a Sanskrit word meaning a tyrant, a self-indulgent ruler who is without principles. The celestial being was cultivating on a mountain. For no reason at all, Kaliraja lost his temper and put him to death by dismembering him. Endurance Celestial Being did not have the slightest trace of hatred. Indeed, he perfected the paramita of patience. He did not view any person or matter as evil. Think about it and try to imagine the level of purity of mind that he had attained. What do we learn from practicing Buddhism? The importance of attaining purity of mind through endurance.

People might say that we are simply insensitive if we do not differentiate good from bad. Even with the Law of Cause and Effect laid out in front of us, our hearts are pure without any attachments. It is not that we do not understand what is happening around us, we are clear on everything, but we are without the slightest discriminatory thought or attachment. As for Endurance Celestial Being, his mind was pure because he had found the true reality. But because sentient beings have

afflictions, it is necessary to explain to them the principles in a progression of ideas. For ourselves, we understand that the four attachments of self, others, phenomena and time are not real. Everything is equal, without the slightest difference. Differentiation is based on the principle of equality to help others. Therefore, differentiation is non-differentiation, because differentiation is not for ourselves, but for others to use.

Since sentient beings have not yet found their true nature, we should teach them to end their erroneous ways and cultivate good deeds. When we ourselves have attained this state, there will be no erroneous ways to be ended, no good deeds to be cultivated. This means our minds are in a state of purity and equality, the One True Dharma Realm, the state of non-cultivation, non-attainment. Within these, we still do whatever is needed for cultivation and attainment. In so doing, we are not attached to either extreme of emptiness or existence.

If we have achieved this state, but do not put into practice, then we will fall into the extreme of "emptiness". If we are attached to the appearance of matters and do not thoroughly understand the logic, do not see into our original nature, then we fall into the extreme of "existence". We should neither attach to emptiness nor to existence. As Great Strength Bodhisattva explained, we are "to concentrate the six senses on uninterrupted pure thoughts". With concentration of the six senses, we do not fall into the extreme of existence. With uninterrupted pure thoughts, we do not fall into the extreme of emptiness. In so doing, our mind is pure and nondiscriminatory, with everything in accordance with the true nature. We chant "Amitufo" continuously, without interruption from dawn to dusk, without attaching to either existence or emptiness. This is what we need to learn.

Additionally, we should maintain the mind of stillness when we are slandered. Although the slanderous rumors and tale bearing spreads like a huge fire burning to the sky, eventually, like a torch it will burn itself out in space.

This not only tells us what we should do in principle, but in behavior as well. When others insult and slander us, if we remain calm and unaffected, then naturally everything will pass. When others verbally abuse us, we do not need to respond in kind. When they curse us, we just listen. After a few hours, they will get tired and stop. This is a very effective method to handle this type of situation.

I learned this from a classmate when I was a teenager studying in school. Because at that time, I was very caustic like Mr. Liao-Fan. I loved to ridicule people and play tricks on them. However, that classmate became my spiritual guide. I was overbearing towards him, even ridiculed him in public. But, he never responded in kind. It continued like this for an entire year and in the end, he got through to me. This person was truly amazing. He simply did not return one blow or one insult. I learned this skill from him and have used it my entire life.

It can also serve to increase the cultivation of our inner-self. As for accumulating good fortune, average people would praise us even more saying that we were truly good practitioners! If it were not for these people insulting and slandering us, then we would not have the opportunity to practice endurance. They have come to help us to succeed in our practice. Why would we not accept their help? If someone treats us like this at work and we can interact with them with a mind of purity, our supervisor will admire us, our co-workers will respect us and our opportunity for promotion will be greater than expected. This person has brought a great advantage to us. How could we not want it? If we respond to their verbal response in kind, then we would be sinking to their level.

When I was in school, if two students quarreled, usually the teacher would punish both by having them kneel on the ground. We would feel it was unfair! Obviously, I was right, so why did the teacher also punish me? It was not until later that I understood. In any arguments, any fights, both parties are at fault, are at the same level. If one is high and the other is low

then the argument would not have taken place. For example, an adult would not fight with a baby. It was very logical. Now, when we encounter this kind of situation, we can tell right away the high or low level of the individual's cultivation.

Thus, when we encounter these matters, we need to know that these individuals are our benefactors who have come to give us a gift. We cannot return their kindness with ingratitude. First, they have come to test our level of cultivation. Second, we will accumulate good fortune for we are about to gain the praise and respect of others. Therefore, these benefactors are not bad people, but are actually good friends whom we do not want to wrong unjustly.

If we hear others slandering us, get angry and try to defend ourselves, it would be like the spring silkworm spinning its own cocoon tying itself in suffocation. Therefore, no benefit but rather harm is derived from getting angry.

What this passage teaches is not only important in worldly teachings, but also in Buddhism. There are two essential practices in the Six Paramitas of Bodhisattvas. The first is giving. When we practice giving, we cultivate good fortune. We cannot live without good fortune. This is even truer for Buddhas. We call the Buddha "Respected One with Perfect Wisdom and Good Fortune". He is unsurpassed in wisdom and good fortune. Thus, it is logical for us to seek good fortune and wisdom, as our self-nature is originally complete with them.

There are three kinds of giving. From the giving of wealth, we gain wealth, from the giving of teaching, we gain wisdom and from the giving of fearlessness, we gain health and long life. This is what all sentient beings seek. The Buddha taught us that by planting good causes, we are assured of harvesting good results.

The other Paramita is the practice of patience. This enables us to maintain the good fortune that we have already cultivated. If we only practice giving and gain good fortune, but do not practice patience, we will lose our good fortune. The Diamond Sutra tells us that "everything is attained through patience". We have no choice but to cultivate the Paramita of Patience to safeguard achievements, whether worldly or Buddhist. We often read in the sutras of "the fire burning our forest of merits". What is this fire? It is anger and hatred. If we lose our temper, then we lose our merits as well. Thus, it is extremely difficult to cultivate and safeguard our merits. If we want to know how much merit we have cultivated and accumulated, think of the last time we gave way to anger. When we give rise to one angry thought, the fire burns our forest of merits.

If Pure Land practitioners were to get angry at their last moments of life, then all would be lost! This explains why the Buddha taught us not to touch the body of the deceased within eight hours of passing away. Although the person has breathed their last breath, the spirit has yet to leave the body. If we were to touch the deceased, it would cause great pain and possibly anger. If he or she were to become angry at this critical moment, they would lose all of their merits. Thus, merits are indeed difficult to cultivate and accumulate for they can be lost at any time. However, good fortune and virtue will remain intact.

What is merit? Merit is the pure mind, is concentration, is wisdom. Think about it, once we lose our temper, how would we have concentration and wisdom? We would not. As for good fortune, it is our wealth and intelligence. When our mind attains Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha, One Mind Undisturbed, we can accumulate merits and virtues. But with just one outburst of temper, all is lost: no Constant Mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha, much less One Mind Undisturbed. Therefore, we need to constantly bear in mind that merits are difficult to keep, so we want to maintain vigilance.

In our cultivation, on the path to awakening, our karmic creditors will often come to create trouble for us. Why? They have an overwhelming need for revenge. They see that we are about to succeed in our cultivation and know that once we have attained achievement, they will no longer have the opportunity for revenge. Thus, they will do all they can to obstruct us, to

block us in our progress. And the way they hinder us is by making us destroy, making us burn our forest of merits. But, if we are determined not to have our merits destroyed, then no external force can do so.

Sometimes, when we encounter unpleasant circumstances or personal problems, we become unhappy and lose our tempers. Once we do this, we burn our merits. Who makes us unhappy, so angry? Probably all those unfavorable conditions, enemies and people stirring up trouble. This is another example of "The speaker had no such intention, the listener interpreted it to be so". Perhaps, the speaker had no intention to upset us, but we interpreted what was said to be deliberate, feeling uncomfortable and miserable. We may burst out in anger. We may manage some control and keep it inside. Whichever, our merit is gone.

Why would all of our merit be destroyed with just a little anger? Because we have lost our purity of mind. Therefore, all the teachings and attainments are based on patience and deep concentration. Not only is concentration the key to our cultivation in transcending the Six Realms, but is the key to worldly teachings as well. "To remain unmoved by slander" is deep concentration, is wisdom revealed. To get angry due to slander is a manifestation of karmic obstacles. We can choose whether to have our wisdom revealed or our karmic obstacles materialized. We need to be clear on this.

Are these encounters good for us? Where practitioners are concerned, yes! It is a good training ground for us to constantly have someone causing trouble for us, to not have things going as we wish. If we do not cultivate under such circumstances, then how would we achieve concentration? Therefore, the presence of adverse conditions and affinities provide just the right opportunities for us to discipline ourselves and to practice the Paramita of Patience. We cannot be thankful enough for these opportunities much less complain about them. How can we get angry? This is instead just the right opportunity for us to train ourselves.

In the past, the method people used in helping a person to learn discipline was to teach them to practice the Paramita of Patience. If they regarded this person as having potential to be a Dharma repository they would not look at them with pleasant expressions. They would purposely pick on them at every opportunity, acting as if they disliked that person. This was to see whether they were able to be patient, able to endure the harassment. If the person was unable to endure and left, then they were forgotten! If we cannot endure or be patient, then we cannot attain achievement. Even if we are exceptional in all other areas, if we do not have the patience to endure, then there is a limit to our achievement.

In the Valuable Teachings of Zen, we read of an old monk who severely mistreated one particular student. He constantly reproached and verbally abused the student at every opportunity. One time, when the student was washing his feet, he poured dirty water all over the student but the student would not leave. Later, the old monk really got angry, kicked him out and refused to allow him to come back! The student had no alternative. Unable to stay near his Master, he camped out in a distant hallway of the way place. When the old monk lectured, he would listen outside the window, not letting the old monk see him.

After one year had passed, it was time for the old monk to pass on the teachings, to retire and choose a new abbot to take his place. No one knew whom the old monk would choose. The old monk asked those who were present to get the student who was listening outside the window and to bring him in so that he could pass on the teachings and position to him. Only then did everybody realize that for all those years, the old monk was purposely training him.

If we want to give up every time we encounter some small unpleasantness and are unwilling to be patient and accept the torment, we will not achieve, no matter how outstanding or excellent we may be in other areas. The key to success or failure in achievement lies in patience and endurance. If we can patiently endure, we will achieve deep concentration. And with deep concentration, we will uncover our true wisdom and not be affected by external conditions.

Sometimes we will see new people, with excellent qualities, at a way place. But after only a short time, they leave. The residents will smile thinking that it does not matter. If people do not have the patience to endure, they cannot achieve. It would not matter much whether one person more or less, who could not achieve, were to stay at the way place. Those who were shortsighted would consider the loss of such a talented person as regrettable. But, in the end, it is not so. A truly talented person is one who has attained deep concentration and wisdom for only with these will we be able to pass on the wisdom of the Buddhas, thus enabling Buddhism to remain in this world. Without deep concentration, we will not attain wisdom. And first, we have to have patience and endurance to achieve deep concentration. Without these, how would we succeed?

If we have the wisdom to recognize a true way place where we can learn from those who can help us on the path to enlightenment, then no matter how they mistreated us, we would not leave. If we have not yet obtained the learning how would we be willing to leave? We would be willing to endure any kind of mistreatment. Why? Only when we had learned everything, would we be willing to leave and not before. Only by doing so are we truly seeking to learn the teachings. If we could not endure the slightest disagreeable circumstance and just left, then we would have been useless and it would have been pointless to keep us.

The words in this passage are very important for they are a wonderful way to end slander and disputes. We simply ignore them. Even the worst will fade. Therefore, when people slander us, do not dispute it or debate it or we will bind ourselves further. Thus, it is said, "No benefit, but rather harm is derived from getting angry". At work, a superior will not give an important job or a promotion to someone who easily becomes angered. When a superior tries to assess the efficiency of a subordinate, he or she will observe the way the individual interacts with others on a daily basis to decide whether or not this person is worth training, is a promising employee. When they observe that we are easily angered, then they will know that we are not worth training because our anger will only cause difficulties.

There are other faults and offenses we can change. If we can understand the reasoning behind the need for reform, we will not repeat our mistakes.

These two sentences are the highest principles underlying our ability to change. Mahayana Buddhists adopt this method as it is faster for us to achieve with it. Others change themselves through actions, which are minor details, like the branches and leaves of a tree. It is easy to repeat mistakes using the latter method because it is to change on the outside, action by action! Also, it is very painstaking and time consuming to gain a good result by this method for it is more difficult than changing through reasoning. It is much wiser to change through reasoning than through actions for the mind is the root and everything arises from the mind.

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

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