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Liao-Fan's Four Lessons

THE SECOND LESSON:

WAYS TO REFORM

There are three ways to reform our faults. First, we must be able to feel ashamed.

Many ancient Chinese sages and virtuous people taught that “being ashamed is similar to possessing courage”. Confucius defined it as great wisdom, great kindness and great courage. What is great courage? It is knowing “shame”. Only by so doing can we learn to regret and turn over a new leaf, to be impelled to improve ourselves. If we do not know shame there is no hope, no future for us. However, we do not want to use other people as the standard for our behavior. We should raise ours a little higher. How high? We can set our standards according to those held by Bodhisattvas. They are humans just like us. So, why is it that he or she can become a Bodhisattva with infinite life while we are still trapped in reincarnation of the Six Realms? This is a major humiliation!

Think of all of the ancient sages and virtuous people whose names and teachings have lasted for hundreds of generations. They were people just like us, but why is my name tarnished and my reputation ruined like a cracked tile?

If we can often think this way and ask ourselves this question, then the “shameful heart” will take shape. This is the first step and the driving force in changing our destiny. What is the force behind this motivation? It is an inconceivable and original ability. Today we can readily identify with what Mr. Liao-Fan is explaining here. There were several great Chinese sages during ancient times, Confucius, Mencius, Zhou Gung and Yi Yin. We can think “They were great men, well I’m great too! They were human. Well, I am human, too! If they can do it, then why can’t I?” This is where and how we start to reflect.

Transcending our world, others have become Arhats, Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. They have lived an infinite number of lifetimes. Well, so have we. Why is it that after countless lifetimes of practicing Buddhism, they have succeeded in becoming a Bodhisattva or a Buddha, whereas, we are still mired within the Six Realms of Reincarnation? This is the greatest shame! No other disgrace in this world can match this one.

In this world or beyond, these sages have all become teachers of heavenly beings. One of the ten names for all Buddhas is “Teacher of Heavenly Beings and Humankind”. Here, a teacher is essentially a role model. He or she can set a good example and be a good role model for all living beings. We can use this to examine our own behavior. Why have our names become tarnished and our reputations ruined? This describes how we would suffer for our offenses.

One of Mr. Liao-Fan's virtues is that he does not attempt to hide any of his faults. He does not talk about other's mistakes, only of his own. As soon as he realized his faults, he immediately began to correct them. This was his strength and the crucial element that led to his later achievement.

We are unwilling to part with worldly desires.

Our first fault or ailment is that we are “unwilling to part with worldly desires”. This means that we are still longing for, still clinging to something. The reason we feel such longing is that our naturally pure mind has become polluted. Worldly desires refer to the Five Desires or emotions and the Six Dusts. Since the word traditionally used to convey sense objects also means “dust”, it carries the implication of pollution.

If we do not wipe the tables or the chairs we use everyday, they will doubtlessly become covered with dust. To wipe them daily is to rid them of dust or pollution. This is similar to our pure minds being polluted by desires and “dust”. Wealth, lust, fame, food or drink and sleep are the desires, which give rise to the emotions of greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance and doubt. These are the elements of pollution. This is why the Buddha called the external environment the Six Sense Objects or Six Dusts. These are impurities, which contaminate our pure minds and are the root of our illness.

If we wish to recover the pure mind of our self-nature, we must let go of clinging to these desires and dusts. To be able to let go is the hardest thing for us to do. But, if we can let go of one degree of desire, our minds will become purer by one degree. If we can let go of two degrees then our minds will become purer by two degrees. There are fifty-one levels of Bodhisattva practice. Each level is based on the amount of emotions the Bodhisattva has been able to discard. Once we can let go of all fifty-one dusts and desires, then we will become Buddhas. If there is still just one degree left that has yet to be relinquished, then we are an Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattva. These dusts and desires are in effect, our karmic obstacles.

The Pure Land School often uses the phrase “Carrying our remaining karma to be born into the Pure Land”. This means that before our death, if we have been unable to let go of all of our longings for worldly attractions, we will carry our remaining karma along with us to our next form of existence. Some people in the past believed that the Pure Land School does not practice the method of "To be reborn with remaining karma". They felt that the phrase should have been “To be reborn after eliminating all karma”. This theory shocked Pure Land practitioners around the world. This interpretation of needing to eliminate all karma is incorrect for it does not correspond with the sutras.

Although we cannot locate the actual words “To be reborn with remaining karma” in any of the sutras, the meaning is very clear. If we believe that we can only be reborn when all of our karma has been eliminated, then when we read the Infinite Life Sutra, we would not help but wonder why we would even need to be born in the Pure Land if we had eliminated all of our karma. Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattvas still have one degree of remaining ignorance and are not yet totally free of all desires. A tiny fragment of karma remains. Thus, Bodhisattvas are called Enlightened Sentient-beings.

Strictly speaking, only one being exists with a pure mind, a Buddha. Aside from Buddhas, no other mind is truly pure. Even Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattvas still possess one degree of remaining karma, still have some of

the Six Dusts. However, they do not have the desire for these emotions. This is why they are called Enlightened Sentient-beings. They are aware of emotion, are unlike we ordinary people who are still clinging to these worldly desires. We would do well to understand this.

The phrase “Carrying our remaining karma to be born into the Pure Land” was said by the patriarchs and is based on the sutras. It complies with the meanings in the sutras. This is especially so in the Pure Land School. We can be born into the Western Pure Land even if we still possess all of the afflictions. We have seen, both in the past and the present, numerous Pure Land practitioners who passed away to be born into the Pure Land. These are true accounts from reliable witnesses. Thus, we need to have the ability to realize the true reality and not be affected by deviated views. We need to accord with the teachings in the sutras, not with individual people for individuals can misinterpret the sutras.

I secretly do many improper things and think others will not know about them. I am shamelessly proud of myself. One day I will sink to the level of an animal without even realizing it.

“Improper” refers to things that we should not do, something illegal, illogical, against moral standards, human ethics or cultural customs. Mr. Liao-Fan secretly did things that he was not supposed to do and thought that others would not know about them. Frankly, some people would not know. What kind? Those, whose minds have been clouded by ignorance and who are totally deluded. On the other hand, those who possess proper thoughts, wisdom and a calm and composed mind will be able to tell. We cannot hide from these people. In addition, there are also the beings and spirits of the heavens and earth, who are present.

The heavenly beings and spirits have five paths of knowledge, which are rewarded, not achieved through practice. So, if the heavenly beings and spirits know; needless to say, the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas know. They are aware of every single thought that arises from beings within the Six Realms. After reading this in sutras and books written by the sages, we would tremble in fear to realize that there is absolutely nothing that we can hide from them. Is it not better to regret our wrongdoings on our own? Since they know everything even if we do not confess, it would make us feel a little less guilty if we voluntarily regretted and felt remorse.

Mr. Liao-Fan was shamelessly proud of himself. This pride is arrogance. It is a heart, which feels no shame. “Shameless” refers to someone who is totally “unfeeling”, someone who feels no shame or remorse. In other words, one who is totally without a conscience. If we feel guilty after a wrongdoing, we can still be considered a good person. Although we hide our offenses from others, we still feel a weight on our conscience. There is still hope for our turning back. However, if we feel absolutely nothing after a wrongdoing, then there is no hope for us. Only the person who can feel ashamed can be helped.

When we are shameless and arrogant, one day we will sink down to the animal realm. While presently in the human realm, as a result of or negative karma, we will eventually fall into the Three Bad Realms. Although we do not know this, the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, beings and spirits of heaven and earth do know. When our luck is down, the bad spirits will come to harass us. These spirits do not just arbitrarily harass anyone. They select their target according to the person's behavior. They dare not bother those who will be born into the Three Good Realms and they are extremely respectful to people with kind hearts and compassionate behavior. On the other

hand, they torment those who perform bad deeds. They will ridicule and bully such a person, be insolent and sarcastic because they know that this person will eventually fall into the Three Bad Realms.

True Buddhist practitioners understand these principles. Once we understand these, we will naturally be cautious and watchful over our every thought, word and deed. In this lifetime, not only do we not want to fall into the Three Bad Realms, but also we want to transcend the cycle of birth and death. If we truly wish to transcend reincarnation, there is only one path to take. It is to seek birth into the Western Pure Land. Therefore, we need to have firm and unshakable determination.

How do we attain birth into the Pure Land? It is attained through firm belief, the vow and mindfulness of Buddha Amitabha and our cultivation of purity of mind. It is attained by permanently letting go of worldly attachments. We do not need to completely let go of everything for if we were able to do this then we would become Buddhas. However, the more we let go the better off we will be. It would be best not to think about anything that does not have to be thought about. Instead, we can settle our mind on chanting "Amitufo". We can then transform our thoughts from those that only benefit our families and ourselves to those that benefit all other sentient beings. In so doing, our minds will become pure.

The difference between enlightened beings who are Buddhas or Bodhisattvas and sentient beings is that awakened beings think of sentient beings, not of themselves, while sentient beings, ordinary people, only think of themselves and not of others. Even if we did not deliberately try to sever our self-attachment, by constantly thinking of benefiting all sentient beings, our self-attachment would gradually diminish by itself. Once we no longer have self-attachment due to our achievements in Buddha Name Chanting, we will attain the level of One Mind Undisturbed in Mindfulness. We would then achieve a higher level of birth, into the Land Where Everything is Temporary. In this way, we are assured of being born into the Pure Land.

We need to start from here and practice earnestly, to set our sights far ahead, to not only consider our immediate future or even just this lifetime. Our immediate future and this lifetime are only illusions and impermanent. The sutra said it well, "whatever takes form is illusion". We need to know that nothing is permanent, that nothing is worthy of worry. As for the family members and relatives around us, we would do well to tell them the proper teachings and encourage them to practice accordingly.

A fellow practitioner who was very anxious about his child asked me for help. His child wanted to study abroad, which was very difficult to do. He himself lived in Paris and he asked me what to do? I taught him to let go of all wandering thoughts and to have the whole family recite the Infinite Life Sutra and chant "Amitufo". Then, there would be an answer. He said, "This won't do, I need to handle this properly before my mind can settle down to reciting sutras and chanting "Amitufo". I replied, "If you think this way, then there will be no hope for you in this lifetime". He asked why and I replied, "You are handling this wrong. The method you have thought of and tried to use is within the control of your karma. But, you do not have the strength from the help of the Triple Jewels".

We need to know how to use the strength from the Triple Jewels and to give up relying on just our own. We cannot achieve on our own. We need to use our pure mind in seeking help from the Triple Jewels. Then, we will

attain inconceivable help from them. This is very important. As I said previously, we need to use the variable, not the constant. The constant is destined. The variable can be used to create our destiny.

In re-creating our destiny, we seek from within our mind. This mind is the true mind, not the false one. When our mind is constantly filled with wandering thoughts, we are using our false mind. It exists because of the constants, not the variables. If we use our true mind, then the constant changes. We can see this very clearly in the sutras and in Liao-Fan's Four Lessons.

How do we seek help from Buddhas and Bodhisattvas? We do not make deals with them, offering terms and conditions. We do not ask them to help us to become wealthy or to make millions of dollars saying that in return we will split the money with them. That we will share it fifty-fifty, five hundred thousand for us, five hundred thousand for them. This is not right! How can we imagine that they would agree to this? It is wrong for us to think of exploiting Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, to want to employ the strength from the Triple Jewels, to offer deals, to make wishes and attach conditions to them. There are no deals to make, no terms to negotiate.

The most basic principle and important point is for us to uncover our purity of mind. This is what Buddhism teaches us to do. "Why bother to seek the self-nature on the outside, when it is already complete within us and is already able to give rise to infinite things". This principle explains that everything already exists. If we seek within, there is nothing we cannot attain. When there is a sincere request, a response will follow. Because originally the self-nature is complete, it is able to give rise to infinite things.

The Triple Jewel does nothing more than act as a catalytic condition. We seek and attain something our self-nature originally had. If we did not already have it in our self-nature, even the Triple Jewels would not be able to help us. "In Buddhism, whatever is sought will be attained." If we totally believe without the slightest doubt, that whatever is sought will be attained, like the vow to become a Buddha, then certainly everything else can be attained, as well. Therefore, we need to understand the principle that by seeking, we will attain. As ordinary people, we do not know this. We use our worldly intelligence in learning and practicing Buddhism. We need to understand that in so doing, we are not attaining fame, wealth and prestige as we believed, but are actually committing offenses. Whatever is attained is still something we were destined to have. It would not be worthwhile to seek it. In the future, we will suffer the consequences from the offenses we have committed.

Buddhism talks of the Ten Dharma Realms. Within each of the Ten Realms exists another Ten Dharma Realms, thus it is called "hundreds and thousands of realms as such". Currently, we exist in the human realm. Within this realm, Ten Dharma Realms exist. This moment, if we are single-mindedly mindful of Buddha Amitabha and seek birth into the Pure Land, then for this moment, we are in the Buddha realm. Being mindful of a Buddha is the cause. Becoming a Buddha is the effect.

In this moment, if we are being mindful of Bodhisattvas and of cultivating the Six Paramitas, then we are in the Bodhisattva realm. Similarly, if we are being mindful of virtue, morality and humanity, we are in the human realm. However, if we are greedy, constantly scheming to make money, to possess the materialistic enjoyments of this world, then we are in the hungry ghost realm. If we are confused and deluded in our thinking, drifting along

through our life, we are in the animal realm. And if we are displeased and angry with everyone and everything, we are in the hell realm.

Although we are currently in the form of a human, we can still be in any of the other nine forms. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the spirits and gods of heaven and earth can see us very clearly as we are, whether we are a Buddha, a Bodhisattva, or another form of being. Therefore, there are Ten Dharma Realms within each Dharma Realm. Once we understand this principle, once we know the true reality, we will know how to choose. This choice ultimately rests in our own hands.

There is nothing else in the world, which calls for more shame and remorse than behavior such as this. Mencius once said, "Shame is the greatest and most important word in a person's lifetime." Why? Because one who knows shame will put forth his or her best efforts into correcting faults and will eventually attain sagehood or become a virtuous person. One who cannot comprehend the word shame will be unrestrained and immoral and will be just like an animal. These are really key words to correcting our faults.

It is shameful for us to still be mired in the Six Realms of Reincarnation while others have become Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Nothing calls for greater shame than this. The word shame has a very close connection with humans. Why? By being ashamed, we can become virtuous, can become a sage. By being unashamed, we will doubtlessly fall into the Three Bad Realms. So we can see how close a connection this word shame has with our future. By knowing shame, we will tirelessly strive to wipe it away and replace it with the inspired enthusiasm to eventually become a sage or a virtuous person.

By not knowing shame, we will be dishonorable and false, engaging in immoral activities. In Buddhism, only those without shame still have greed, anger, ignorance and arrogance. But by knowing shame, we will no longer have these Four Poisons. The mind of greed will lead us into the hungry ghost realm. The mind of anger and hatred will lead us into the hell realm. The mind of ignorance will lead us into the animal realm. What is there for us to be proud of? Compared with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we are unimaginably far behind them! By understanding this, these afflictions will naturally diminish, naturally vanish.

To be perfectly frank, it is shameful to fall behind others in performing virtuous deeds and attaining good results. If we know shame, we will strive energetically to improve ourselves. We hope that those who have generated great aspiration will come together to form a "Sense of Shame Society" to promote the movement of knowing shame, to awaken people to join together in creating a society of peace and happiness for humankind.

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

English website on how to practice Pure Land Buddhism: <http://www.amitabuddha.co.cc>

Boston Amita Buddhism Society new website: <http://www.amtb-ma.org/>

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