

Relationship between Practising Buddhism and Cultivating the Mind—A Mahayana Tradition’s Approach¹

Jun Lu

Australian Chinese Buddhist Research Centre
Australia Oriental Media Buddhist Charity Association

30 November 2011

Abstract

A vivid description of how a Buddhist practitioner can attain a higher level of spiritual practice is provided in this chapter. It is widely known by Mahayana Buddhist researchers, teachers, and practitioners that merits and virtues are vital to the reduction of one’s karmic obstacles. However, as everyone is at different stages of cultivation, the strength of the constraints imposed by affinities also differs. The stronger affinities we share with other people (such as family members, friends, colleagues, etc.), the more attachment we have towards them. This underlines the importance of training our minds and non-attachment in making a real progress along the path of our Buddhist practice.

Keyword: Mahayana Buddhism, Mindfulness, Karma, Samsara

¹ This article is an excerpt from Master Jun Hong Lu’s *Buddhism in Plain Terms Vol.1*

1. Affinities and Samsara

Why do we study Buddhism and cultivate the mind? Many people have an answer to this question: To be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. But here comes a few practical questions. Which level of practice is required for a cultivator to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss? How can one cultivate to be reborn in the Land? What would happen to a person if he fails to attain the required level of practice to be reborn in the Land? Now many people may find it hard to answer these questions. In fact, to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss is a lofty goal; therefore, it is not quite easy to achieve such a goal.

After people pass away, they have to undertake an assessment that will determine which realm they will be reborn in. No one is exempted from undertaking such an assessment, regardless of whether he/she is going to the underworld, the hells, the heavens, or the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Studying Buddhism and cultivating the mind can be compared to preparing for the university entrance exams. To be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss can thus be compared to gaining admission to the top universities of the world such as Harvard or Oxford. To most people, however, it is too difficult. The more realistic goals are, for example, other top national universities, second-tier ones, and those in the capital cities of the country. The equivalents in the Dharma Realms are the heavens, the realm of asuras, and the realm of humans. Therefore, we cultivators should aim at the highest standard, but with our eyes fixed on the realistic goals—the heavens. The heavens comprise thirty-three levels. The higher level you are, the longer you can stay in this realm. In contrast, the closer you are to the realm of humans, the more likely you are to fall in the realm of humans. Hence, each one of us should strive for the highest level.

Exactly what is life like in the heavens or the underworld? In fact, our world is the epitome of all the different realms—the aggregate of the individual lives of people around us is nothing less than a real-life version of the Buddhist canon. For example, some people hold high positions, wield great power and can do whatever they please; some seem to have stars aligned for them—they succeed in anything they do, as if they live in the heavens; the lives of some other people are filled with struggles, and they focus on the process, not the result—typical characteristics of humans. Most people have a run-of-the-mill existence, encountering no dramatic ups and downs, and leading an ordinary life, which is exactly the feature of the realm of humans. Other people suffer prolonged illness, endure considerable hardship, or even get caught in natural or man-made disasters, or worse still, become afflicted by war. Their lives are just like those tragic scenes described in the hells. Therefore, it goes without saying that our goal of cultivation should be the heavens.

Since the assessment of our cultivation can be compared to the university entrance exams, the exam questions should be consistent and not everyone can sit in the exam room. During our preparation for the exam, we need to find out what the requirements are for taking the exam to be reborn in the heavens, as well as what the exam questions are about. But before we get into the details about these issues, we need to understand what exactly bind us so that we human beings stay in the realm of humans.

Due to what we have done in this life and the previous lives, all of us have karmic obstacles and blessings in our souls. The only difference between people is the quantity of karmic obstacles and blessings. When a karmic obstacle or blessing arises, it forms like a thread: we are at one end, and the beings that have affinities with us are at the other. Figuratively, the black threads derived from karmic obstacles represent the hindrance, or the power of resistance, and they are connected to the people that you owe, namely, your karmic creditors. On the other hand, the white threads derived from blessings represent the power of assistance, and they are connected to the people who owe you. It is the power of karma. The greater the karmic obstacles or blessings, the thicker the threads, and the greater the corresponding hindrance or assistance.

Even before you are born, you start repaying the debt you owe your parents, who form a thread from a web that connects you with them. After you are born, the web connects you to your siblings, relatives, and friends. When you go to school, your classmates and teachers are also connected to the web. And then your colleagues, wife, children and other related people are all drawn in the web that connects you with them. One by one, they either repay or collect the debt. This web is formed by threads of worldly relationships and affinities, hence the name: The web of worldly affinities. Our souls are caught in the centre of the web, and tied down by these worldly affinities, which in turn affect the direction in which we move along the journey of our lives. This explains the ups and downs of our fates. Each day, at every moment in our lives we create or receive new affinities. Affinities arise from our minds, and our bodies, speeches, and minds are the source of our karmic obstacles. Therefore, every time we have an evil thought, do a bad thing, or berate a person, we create new negative karma and make the web that traps us even more tangled.

Before a karmic obstacle materializes, it strains your nerves in your body, obstructs your fortunes, and gnaws away at your body. In addition, you cannot get what you seek and your health deteriorates—these symptoms serve as the interest payments on the debt and as a reminder that you should repay your debt. Whenever a karmic obstacle materializes and the deadline to pay off your debt approaches, your karmic creditor will start collecting the debt in various ways such as causing sudden illness or accidents. Once you pay off the debt, this karmic obstacle is eliminated, and a worldly affinity comes to an end.

Good affinities are also a kind of affinity; those who owe you are equally bound to pay off the debt, otherwise your worldly affinities will not end, either. But there is one

difference between good affinities and bad affinities. The debt derived from bad affinities is usually settled within the three periods of time (the past, present, and future). In contrast, the blessings derived from good affinities are usually settled in the next life. Before a person reaches age 45, he enjoys the blessings derived from good affinities in the past life. After reaching age 45 or 55, he starts receiving the blessings derived from the good deeds he has been doing in this life. Generally speaking, the fetters of good affinities in the web of worldly affinities are not very strong. The main constraint comes entirely from bad affinities—this is why we treat eliminating karmic obstacles as our top priority.

As long as we have unfinished affinities with other people, we will not be able to get rid of the worldly entanglement, nor can we attain liberation. We often hear of the Chinese expression, “the worldly affinities are not finished yet.” Unfinished as these affinities are, one is bound to undergo rebirth. If a person simply lets the web determine his fate and fortune, not knowing how to cut the threads of worldly affinities, then he will be caught in the cycle of paying off the old debts and creating new debt (negative karma) for many lifetimes. As the debts snowball, he subjects himself to the ups and downs of the worldly life, drifting with the tide as the crowd does, and enduring the life’s suffering. This is exactly why many people undergo the cycle of rebirth in the realm of humans, the underworld, or even the hells, and are unable to enter the heavens. In other words, they are still burdened with outstanding debts. Every thread in the web of worldly affinities represents a cause and effect. Following the law of cause and effect, no force can unfairly cut the thread in the web. Hence, it is impossible to rely on the help of others to escape the web of worldly affinities.

The Dharma reveals how the law of cause and effect works. For this reason, it also points out the one and only dharma door that allows us to eliminate bad affinities and get rid of the web of worldly affinities by ourselves. In other words, the Dharma instructs us how we can escape from the web of worldly affinities by ourselves. The law of cause and effect is more than just stating the concept that, “with causes, there are effects.” Another important aspect of the law is that “a set of cause and effect can only be altered by another set of cause and effect.” It is because of this aspect, the second feature of the law of cause and effect, that our efforts to study the Buddhism and cultivate the mind can be recognized as a set of cause and effect, and thus be recorded as our virtue by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Consequently, the set of cause and effect related to our karmic obstacles can be eliminated. From this point of view, it is not an overstatement to say that, “the Dharma of the Buddha is boundless, and it saves all living beings.”

2. Beyond the Human Realm

Hence, the first lesson for a Buddhist cultivator is to learn to cut the threads of worldly affinities, namely, to pay off the old debts and avoid creating new debt. From earlier

chapters, you may have already been familiar with the concept that paying off the debt is equivalent to what the Master often refers to as eliminating karmic obstacles. To stop creating additional bad affinities, one needs to rely on cultivating the mind and practising the dharma. How to stop creating additional good affinities then? Does it mean that we cannot do good deeds? To answer this question, one has to distinguish between good deeds and virtue. When you make a vow in front of the Bodhisattva and say that you will do good deeds, such good deeds will be recorded as virtue. The reward you receive is the virtue. In particular, since your mind is clear and calm, the moment you help other people, you do not expect to obtain the reward. As a result, no good affinity will be formed, nor will there exist the thread of worldly affinities.

Different dharma doors have different approaches to eliminating karmic obstacles, but the principle of doing it is the same. Whether it is the dharma door that focuses on the cultivation for a better next life, or our Guan Yin Citta Dharma Door, which emphasizes the cultivation in this life, the principle is to eliminate karmic obstacles with virtue. The difference is that our Guan Yin Citta Dharma Door enables us to pay off the debt when, or even before, the karmic creditors come and collect them. Many people believe that one can only cut the threads of worldly affinities by entering a monastery. In fact, simply shaving your hairs does not change anything because all the bad affinities are still there. Only by observing the precepts, diligently practising the Dharma, and accumulating virtue can a monk or nun eliminate bad affinities with his or her virtue, escaping from the web of worldly affinities. So the key still is virtue. However, what makes being a monk or nun different is that the moment he/she enters a monastery, if precepts are observed, he/she can prevent “the dust” from alighting on him/her. That is, his/her web of worldly affinities will no longer attract new threads.

By studying Buddhism and practising the Dharma, we can pay off the debts and settle the worldly affinities. Meanwhile, we also meet the requirements for taking the exam to be reborn in the heavens. The exam results determine which level of the heavens we can enter. To get good marks, we need to understand what the exam questions are about. The answer is simple: Virtue and the level of cultivation. This also underlines one important aspect of how Buddhism saves living beings: It reveals the exam questions and teaches us how to prepare for the exam. Everyone needs to take such an exam; the level of exam varies across people, however. Those who never get to hear the Dharma know nothing about the exam questions and cannot prepare for it. That is why these people are pitiful.

Virtue is the result of practising the Dharma; the level of cultivation is the result of cultivating the mind. In fact, practising the Dharma and cultivating the mind are the two aspects of the same question, and they complement each other. On the one hand, practising the Dharma is the means of cultivating the mind. On the other, as one attains deeper realization through his continuous practice, his mind also reaches the more advanced level of cultivation. Cultivating the mind is the root of practising the Dharma, and bringing forth a resolve to cultivate is the starting point of practising the Dharma.

The higher the cultivation level of one's mind, the greater his resolve becomes. This in turn enhances the quality of his practice. For example, if someone saves all the people on a boat by coincidence, he creates a great virtue and will receive a great blessing. However, since he has not cultivated his mind, and he is bad-tempered and greedy, he still cannot enter the heavens.

Virtue and the level of cultivation are the two mandatory performance indicators of the assessment, both of which are indispensable. For this reason, the Dharma places enormous weight to these two indicators and explains in details how to improve our performance. In particular, it explains all kinds of obstacles, misunderstanding, and constraints that prevent us from improving, and teaches us specifically how to overcome demons of our minds. During the process of our cultivation, it even provides practice exams (e.g., tests that take place in our dreams) to help us ascertain the current level of our cultivation so that we can revise the way we cultivate accordingly.

As everyone is at different stages of cultivation, the strength of the constraints imposed by affinities also differs. Some people are reluctant to leave high positions and great wealth; some are like, "as long as he can come back to me, I can do anything." There are people who cannot let go of the affection between family members, and many others are never tired of work, social engagements, or things that they believe are important. Some people's minds scatter like willow catkins when they recite sutras; some find it easy to concentrate. Some have been cultivating for many years but still fail to figure out why his life is filled with obstacles. While some can be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss simply after decades of reciting sutras, some remain in the realm of humans even after entering monasteries for the past two lifetimes. There are all kinds of cases and the list does not stop here. Therefore, it is not easy to settle worldly affinities. In addition, cultivating the mind and studying Buddhism are more than just reciting sutras and doing good deeds. The key is to become "enlightened". Attaining "wisdom" is the purpose of establishing virtue and cultivating the mind. Once you uncover your wisdom, you are in a better position to receive new tests along the path of cultivating the mind, and establish greater virtue.

3. What Does It Mean to Become Enlightened?

Once we know the goal of cultivating the mind, the next question is how to cultivate? How to wipe our minds clean? This can be achieved by understanding of our minds, that is, enlightenment. To become enlightened is to think it through. We always say that we need to be enlightened, but everything has manifested itself already—cycle of rebirth, cause and effect, conditions and the fate—what else is there to get enlightened about? In fact, the moon, a flower, a blade of grass, or a tree—all provide us with an opportunity to become enlightened. Each day, everything in our lives may help us appreciate the Dharma better. To become enlightened is a process—a process that one applies the Dharma to his day-to-day life, and from doing so he also comes to

understand the Dharma better. Use the analogy of exam preparation again. It is the process that one repeatedly applies the principles of certain knowledge to answering the exercises, and from doing so he is also able to grasp the principles better until he becomes very skilful. Along the path of cultivating the mind, every time you correctly apply the Dharma, your level of cultivation improves by one degree. It is possible that you have done it correctly in the first nine times but fail to do so the tenth time. That may ruin your cultivation altogether and all your previous efforts are wasted. Therefore, along the path of cultivating the mind, you should be very careful as if you are treading on thin ice.

Many Buddhist practitioners very carefully study the Master's exposition, thoroughly understand these concepts, and diligently put them into practice. This is a good sign, and demonstrates the fact that many people recognize the benefits of this dharma door. However, judging from the questions posted on our website, and the way many people interact with each other, it is fair to say that many people are still at the stage of repaying their debts. They have not recognized the fact that the Dharma is life. To study Buddhism, one must learn to be a good person first. Because of reciting sutras, many people have changed and are able to keep their temper under control. But they have not spontaneously started to reflect on their minds yet, or actively find fault with themselves. In other words, they have not applied the Dharma to their lives; they have not applied the Dharma to themselves. For example, many people have heard of the term "precepts, concentration, and wisdom". But lots of people still do not understand why they should observe the precepts, what they should abstain from, and how observing the precepts can bring about concentration. Neither do they understand why they need concentration, nor what they should concentrate on. These are the issues that one needs to clearly understand in their mind.

Likewise, we have heard of, or even become familiar with the pithy findings on cultivation shared by several predecessors. We also need to investigate the principle behind these findings, and find out which laws in Buddhism these findings are based upon, so that we can understand why they said so. As an example, why it is said that practising "patience" can bring about "vigour"? Which principle is such a saying based on? Also, why is the term "non-self" emphasized so much in Buddhism? How does it work? If one simply learns these concepts and follows them, his response is merely mechanical. Only when he truly understands the principle behind them can he apply the principle to all kinds of situation. This is the same as how we learn and apply the theorems in mathematics.

Therefore, "to become enlightened" is not that distant and abstract as it appears. For us who practise the Dharma every day, we are actually in the process of becoming enlightened, albeit unconsciously. For example, we would investigate how to recite sutras, why reciting sutras change our lives for the better, and how do the *Little Houses* work, etc. The next step is to become enlightened systematically, and consciously. We should come up with more "Whys" and "Hows" so that we can understand the principle

behind the Buddha's teachings. Just like someone who knows the law will not dare to break the law, someone who cultivates his mind will not dare to do anything bad, since he understands the principle of the Dharma.

4. What Does It Mean to Practise the Dharma?

To practise the Dharma is to rectify one's behaviour. The goal is to attain the highest level of enlightenment—thorough enlightenment. There are three aspects of practising the Dharma: First, the regulation of one's conduct. Second, the regulation of one's speech. Finally, the improvement of one's conscience, character and conduct. As we understand that the power of karma constitutes a very large part of the web of worldly affinities, and moreover, karmic obstacles result from bad act of "body, speech, and mind", it is fairly easy for us to realize that the three aspects are meant to help us avoid creating negative karma. Specifically, the regulation of one's conduct can prevent one's body from creating negative karma. The regulation of one's speech can prevent one from creating the speech karma. And the improvement of one's conscience, character and conduct is aimed to prevent one from having improper thoughts, so that he can abstain from creating the mind karma.

Once we understand the principle, we can use this principle as the benchmark to rectify our behaviour, reduce negative karma, and stop weaving new threads of worldly affinities. But it depends upon one's wit when it comes to application of this principle to daily lives and the extent to which this principle can be applied. As an example, your supervisor at work intentionally gives you a heavy workload, making you bury yourself in work, so you have to work overtime. With the same level of salary, your colleagues are much more relaxed. Under the circumstances, you may be able to hold your temper and not burst into a tirade, you may be even able to avoid doing anything out-of-character. But can you truly control your anger deep down? And why is it so important to keep your temper? If you do not get angry, will other people reckon that you are a coward? What should be the right attitude then?

These are the questions that require us to comprehend. Your level of cultivation increases by one degree for every answer you give to each question. The level of cultivation varies according to the different level of comprehension. If you cannot figure out, then you will always compare your workload with that of others, continuously feel that you are being unfairly treated, and gradually start getting indignant. In the meantime, the seed of bad affinities has already been sowed without your knowledge, but instead, you regard yourself as the victim. Bit by bit, you are losing your resolve to cultivate. As a Chinese saying goes, "The Master merely leads you in the door, you have to cultivate on your own." Since everyone is in a different situation, the issue he/she needs to deal with is also different. There is no way that the Master can present the answer that requires your comprehension in front of you for you to choose. Fortunately, all kinds of issues that we face are simply variations on the same theme,

and there is a set of rules for us to follow. The key is to use the concept of cause and effect, along with the concept of affinities to analyse and understand our lives. In addition, follow the Guan Yin Citta Dharma Door to solve the problems in our lives. And finally, discipline yourself by accumulating virtue and refraining from creating bad affinities.

The three aspects of practising the Dharma that I just mentioned do not include accumulation of virtue, why then virtue is the result of practising the Dharma? In fact, the direct result of implementing those three aspects is doing good deeds, saying good words, and having good thoughts, all of which are virtue.

5. This Very Mind is the Buddha

Cultivating the mind is a topic that one has to face when he reaches a certain level of cultivation. For beginners or those who have not received the response from the Bodhisattva, they can at first dedicate themselves to eliminating karmic obstacles and accumulating virtue. Because when a person still has a lot of negative karma, the burden of debt is so overwhelming that he has no time to wipe the stains from his mind yet, it is too early to talk about cultivating the mind. However, as we reach a certain level along the path of eliminating karmic obstacles, we would start undergoing the tests that take place in our dreams, detecting the fragrance of sandalwood, and receiving responses such as noticing that the Bodhisattva smiles at us. Gradually, cultivating the mind becomes a task before us. This is how this Guan Yin Citta Dharma Door, which focuses on cultivation in the present life, different from other dharma doors that focus on cultivation for the next life. Moreover, demons arise from our minds. The demons of our minds and karmic obstacles are indeed inseparable. As we are now able to pay off our debts, it would be like traveling with a light pack when we embark on the journey of cultivating the mind. Therefore, although the goal of cultivating the mind is the same across dharma doors, the Guan Yin Citta Dharma Door can effectively reduce the obstacles on our minds, allowing us to easily overcome the demons of the mind so that we can improve our level of cultivation.

We can also learn from the three aspects of practising the Dharma that both practising the Dharma and cultivating the mind are closely related. To rectify our mistakes, we first need to be aware if there is anything improper with our behaviour. This process of “being aware” is the process of cultivating the mind—to reflect on oneself, and to reflect on one’s mind—so that our level can go up. There is no set of rules that specify the steps that one should follow to cultivate his mind. The power of karma that each person faces is different, so is the obstacles that one encounters as he cultivates the mind. Each person’s path of cultivation also varies. But ten thousand methods return to one path—however different our paths of cultivating the mind, there is only one ultimate goal, which is the Buddha’s mind and the Bodhisattva’s mind. The Buddha’s mind is the mind of all beings, and the Bodhisattva’s mind is compassion. Therefore,

only when one reflects on his mind and compare that with the Buddha's and the Bodhisattva's mind at all times can he find out where he should rectify in his mind, so that he can rectify his behaviour accordingly.

Having the Buddha's mind is to selflessly think of the suffering of all beings, and the Bodhisattva embodies the quality of kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. These represent a very lofty level of cultivation; therefore, they serve as our role model and the ultimate goal. The starting point of cultivating the mind is to rectify the heart and soul; the goal is to attain the cultivation level of purity and firmness of mind. Practically speaking, we start by finding fault with ourselves, eliminating the Three Poisons (i.e., greed, hatred, and delusion), and getting rid of attachments to ourselves and other people, then we acquire firmness of mind, and can single-mindedly cultivate. Furthermore, we attain purity of the heart and soul, gradually seeing our true nature with a clear mind, and seeing our inherent Buddha nature, which contains the good conscience and the wholesome state of mind. We should in turn nurture them, so that they can develop and grow into compassion.

6. The Process of Purifying Our Minds

Rectifying the heart and soul is the starting point of cultivating the mind. However, the view on "propriety" differs across people. More often than not, people from opposing sides may both regard themselves as being "proper". This is the first issue that confronts us—what kinds of behaviour are in line with the concept of "propriety" then? A selfish person would defend himself by saying, "all people are selfish." Someone who frequently bickers with his wife would think that his wife never cares about him. A son that has stopped talking to his eighty-year-old mother for ten years might vehemently argue that, "She was very cruel to my wife back in those years." Under these circumstances, what would be the opportunity for them to reflect upon their behaviour? For years they have never thought that they were wrong, what would suddenly prompt them to question their own behaviour? The opportunity mostly comes from the outside. For example, it can be the case that he was struck by a sentence the Master mentioned before, or that he suddenly awakened to something when he had a ride. The opportunity for him to repent can also arise when he sees a son helping his frail mother cross the road, or when he hears his co-workers talking about a story in their neighbourhood back in the old days. However, the occurrence of such opportunities requires one's accumulation of virtue as the foundation, in a similar fashion to the Chinese saying, "demonstrate what you know after steadily accumulating your knowledge." Your accumulation of virtue, whether it is done through reciting sutras or doing good deeds, must reach a certain level before there is a possibility for you to "understand it right away when given an opportunity." Such a level can bring about the removal of the karmic obstacles due to "impropriety". Only when the stains that cover your true nature of your mind have been wiped off can you see the nature of

“unselfishness”, the nature of “love and tolerance”, and the nature of “filial respect” in yourself.

In the meantime, there remains the source that generates these stains in our minds—Greed, hatred, and delusion. It is often said that nine out of ten things in our lives are disappointing. These disappointing things are mostly due to greed, hatred, and delusion. That is why these three things are called the Three Poisons. No sooner had you started blaming yourself for your selfishness than you aggressively competed for promotion like “if not me, then who?” Or, just when the son welcomed her frail mother home and the strained relationship seemed to begin to thaw, a few words from the mother made the son fly into a rage. The goodness in the son was just about to emerge and now it disappears without a trace again.

Without eliminating the Three Poisons, the effectiveness of cultivating the mind would not improve much even if we put in lots of effort. Worse still, we might not even be able to get our cultivation off the ground. In fact, even for those experienced and famous cultivators, there is a possibility that they have not completely eliminated the Three Poisons. However, we are the only people who can solve our problems. Help from the outside such as other people’s advice or assistance will have no substantial effect. Even if the Master earnestly admonish you to stop being greedy or deluded, you will not change if you cannot see through the true nature of things. How many men and women are still painfully thinking of one another, although they know their affinity has ended? How many people who went from riches to rags could not be satisfied with the existing state of living, choosing to risk everything on a single venture in the hope of making a comeback? These are examples of people who cannot see through the true nature of things—they fail to see that life is short and everything is impermanent. Although they seem to understand the concepts of affinities and causes and effects, they do not know how to apply these concepts to their situations when they truly need them. No longer do you feel sad when you see affinities arising or declining, since affinities change with the passage of time due to the causes and effects that you sowed in the past lives. When an affinity comes to an end, a constraint also vanishes. No longer do you lament that everything in life is unreal, like falling leaves and fluttering petals. How much wealth you can acquire in this life is associated with how many good deeds you had done in the past lives. If you are interested in accumulating wealth, then you’d better work hard to create virtue so that you can live in glory in the next life. Hence, the harm caused by the Three Poisons inflicts upon us all along the path of cultivating the mind; the Three Poisons are the biggest challenge that confronts every cultivator at all times.

There is no other way to tackle the Three Poisons but to follow “precept, concentration, and wisdom”. In other words, you need to learn to discipline yourself first. Once you are a disciplined person, you can concentrate your mind so that you can continue your cultivation. There will be one day that you can see through the true nature of things, and that is when you attain wisdom. From that point on, a certain Poison will

not be toxic anymore. However, in your next stage of cultivation, the Three Poisons may show up in other forms of temptation. For example, once you are able to see through the true nature of wealth, you may be tempted by social status. Once you see through the illusory nature of status, you may be tempted by a woman's beauty. Once you see through the impermanent nature of the human body, you may be tempted by fame, or other things. In addition to temptation, people are also worried about all kinds of things in life. As the Chinese saying goes, "The affairs of the family, the affairs of the country, and the affairs of the world—all affairs concern my mind." A person with an anxious mind is restless and fickle, and he can be disturbed by all kinds of things. How can such a person be expected to cultivate his mind?

Living in this world, we cannot avoid interacting with other people. Although we may be able to discipline ourselves and avoid creating bad affinities with others, we are not able to prevent people around us from having bad affinities. When other people have bad affinities towards us, that is, when we are treated unfairly, misunderstood, or even insulted, resorting to "patience and vigour" is exactly what we should do to restore purity of our minds. Exercising patience is not the act of a coward. On the contrary, it is the only dharma door that can protect us from "receiving" bad affinities. If someone shoots a thread of bad affinity to us and we react with anger and hatred, then the thread will stick on us. From that moment on, the cause and effect of a bad affinity takes shape. Only by exercising patience and not receiving this "bad air" can we stop the bad affinity from taking root in our minds. Exercising patience is what appears on the outside. The essence of it is to ensure that the insult thrown at us causes no ripple in our minds. In other words, we have to make sure that our minds are not swayed by the changing circumstances when we cultivate the mind.

Another thing that one should expel from his mind is "attachment". Whether it is attachment to "self" or attachment to "others", it is a kind of bias generated by an incomprehensive way of understanding things in life. Since everyone's experience or feelings about things in life are unique, one easily forms biased views that he believes is impartial and correct. Therefore, if one has attachment, then he can only imagine how biased he can actually be in terms of the way he sees things in life and the way he thinks is the true nature behind them. But the difficult part is that, if we do not know, nor are we aware that our views are biased, then we will be fooled by this false appearance of truth and stick to it. The fundamental solution to this problem is to get rid of the notion of "self". Avoid using "the knowledge of the self and the view of the self" to understand the Dharma. Instead, we should learn to examine the issues in life dialectically and comprehensively, so that we can appreciate the Dharma with real-life experience.

Moreover, we should constantly wipe our minds clean and eliminate karmic obstacles so that the dust of anxiety or temptation will not alight on our minds. It is how we attain "purity of mind" (purity of the heart and soul), through which our true nature will come to light. When our minds attain a certain level of purity, a large part of our true nature will emerge, and it will not be easily obscured by stains any more. It is the time that we

need to carefully look after our true nature, nourish it, and expand it, so that it will not get lost again. This is also when we are truly about to enter the door of studying Buddhism.

One may ask if leaving the worldly life is the only way to attain purity of mind. In fact, the worldly life provides the best venue for us to cultivate our minds. With an impure mind, even if you hide yourself in a deep mountain you still cannot let go of things. To attain purity of mind is not equivalent to putting down everything, letting go of affinities, or even avoiding interacting with people so that you can escape from affinities. Purity here means being clean, not tainted by the defilement of habitual behaviour and bad affinities. Hence, purity of mind is the result of cultivation, not the result of hiding.

7. Concentration and Firmness of Our Minds

People have come to follow Buddhism because of various opportunities and conditions. It appears easy for some people to firmly follow this dharma door after they attended the Master's Dharma Talk. Some other people, however, believe the dharma door only after they listened to the Master's radio program and followed the Master's instructions given to someone in a similar situation as they were. As they found that the Master's method indeed worked, they started to realize that everything the Master said is true. No matter what kinds of opportunities and conditions that bring you closer to Buddhism, once you have faith in it then you attain firmness of mind. But such firmness is only temporary. Once you recover from your illness, or your kids start talking again, you may begin to say, "But I am so busy that I do not have time to recite sutras." even though you appreciate the greatness of Buddhism. There are also situations where some people are very diligent at first, but gradually they become lazy. Or, some simply follow what have been taught and choose not to actively study Buddhism or seek understanding. These are examples of someone without firmness of mind. Next time when they encounter other issues, for instance, they get fired or their relationship hits a rough patch, they would be back to square one again and have no idea how to deal with them. It may also be the case where someone followed what the Master told her and successfully found a new job within a month, and then she adopted the same method for half a year but wondered why her Mr. Right has not showed up. Consequently, doubt and confusion arise. With karmic obstacles comes worry; with worry, the "self" would fall under the sway of worry and the mind would lose firmness. Therefore, to practise the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism (the dharma of saving all beings), one needs to practise the Theravada tradition as the foundation. In other words, one needs to be a well-cultivated person first, making his own family members well-cultivated as well, before he can start cultivating his mind and save other people. This is in line with what the *Heart Sutra* says, only when "your mind has no obstructions" can you "have no fear".

Firmness of mind has two interpretations. One is related to a firm belief, the other is related to a resolute goal. Firmness of mind is grounded in the attainment of understanding: to understand the distinction between the mundane dharma and the super-mundane dharma, to understand causes and effects, to understand the truth of the spiritual world, to understand the cause of ups and downs in life, and to understand the relation among good/bad affinities, the power of karma, and the web of worldly affinities. Once you attain such understanding can you calm your mind and cultivate. In the meantime, we should understand the kindness and compassion of the Bodhisattva, the greatness of the Bodhisattva, and that the Bodhisattva is true, real, and actual. We should also understand that, while the Bodhisattva hears the sounds of those who suffer and rescues them, we also need to do our homework along the path of cultivation. In doing so, we will be able to firmly believe that there is a reason for being in hardship, and that being in hardship is also temporary. Consequently, we can attain the level of cultivation where our minds will not be swayed by external circumstances—circumstances may change but our minds remain firm. It is a level where one becomes enlightened with single-mindedness. Of course, it is a pretty high level of cultivation and not everyone can attain that level. But at least we know the direction now, we can work towards that goal. As for the outcome, we can only find out after we undertake the assessment and get the result.

In sum, the true value of the Dharma can only be appreciated by applying it to our daily lives, from which one also deepens the understanding of the Dharma. As we persistently and dauntlessly proceed along the path of cultivation, our cultivation will surely bear fruit.