

Part Two:

EXHORTATION
to
RESOLVE ON BUDDHAHOOD

By the Dhyāna Master & Pureland Patriarch
Śramaṇa Sheng'an Shixian (1686–1734 CE)

6. MINDFULNESS OF THE SUFFERINGS OF CYCLIC BIRTH AND DEATH

What then is intended by “mindfulness of the sufferings of cyclic birth and death”? One reflects, “From far off kalpas ago on forward to the present, I and other beings have constantly dwelt in cyclic birth-and-death and, even now have not yet succeeded in gaining liberation. Whether it has been among humans, up in the heavens, here in this realm, or off in other regions, our emerging and sinking away has been in a myriad different forms.”

This ascending and submerging occurs so suddenly that, one moment we are in the heavens and then, in a trice, we are back among humans. From there, in a mere instant, we may fall back down into the hells, among animals, or into the midst of the hungry ghosts.

One may go forth from the black gates of hell in the morning and then return again in the evening. One may depart from the iron cave temporarily, but then return and enter it yet again.

When one climbs the mountain of knives, there remains no place on the body where the skin remains intact. When one climbs the tree of swords, then every inch of the body becomes sliced open. Hot iron does not get rid of hunger. When one swallows it, the liver and intestines are all scorched into ruination. It is hard for molten copper to cure a person’s thirst. When one drinks it down, the bones and flesh are all burned into a paste.

When sharp saws slice open the body, though cut apart, it joins itself back together. Then an artful wind arises which blows upon it and causes it, though already dead, to come back to life.¹⁷

In the “city of fierce fire,” one must bear listening to the pitiful misery of screaming and howling. Where [hell-dwellers] are being stewed in a cauldron, one hears only the sounds of intense agony. When, [in the cold hells], the icy cold first starts to harden [the body into ice], its form becomes similar to the closed bud of a blue lotus. Once the blood vessels and flesh have been split open [by expansion of the ice], the body then resembles the fully-blossomed red lotus.

In just a single [human-realm] night, one goes through death and rebirth in the hells ten thousand times. In just a single [human-realm] morning, one passes through what would be like a hundred years of intense agony among humans.

Thus one repeatedly troubles the guardians of the hells, driving them to the point of exhaustion. But who now actually believes in

the remonstrances of old Yama?¹⁸ When forced to undergo [such punishments], one realizes the sufferings [following on bad actions]. Even though one then feels deep regret over one's transgressions, how could one go back at that point [and undo them]? Later, once set free [from the hells], one forgets yet again. Then, in one's karmic actions, one behaves just the same way as one did in the past.

When one whips the donkey to the point of drawing blood, who could know, "This is the anguish of my own mother"?¹⁹ When one leads away the hog to be butchered, how could one recognize that its pain is that of one's very own elderly father?²⁰

One could be eating the flesh of one's own son and yet fail to realize it. If this was the case even for King Wen who [was tricked into] consuming the flesh of his own relatives, then this would be true for any common person.²¹

Those who in years past related to us with kindness and affection may now be acting as our rivals. Those who in earlier days were enemies may now be seen as our very "flesh-and-blood."²² One's past-life mother may be the present life's wife. It may be that he who long ago was a father has now recently become one's husband. When someone possessing knowledge of past lives becomes aware of this, he may find it a basis for chagrin and embarrassment. When one observes it with the heavenly eye, one may find it laughable and pathetic.

One endures the difficulty of ten months in the womb amidst fecal impurities and, passing through the canal of viscous fluids and blood, suddenly turns upside-down and descends in a pitiful state.²³

When one is still young, what does one know? One cannot even distinguish east from west. As one grows up and one's consciousness develops, desires then develop. In but a short time, aging and sickness both chase along behind.

Then, so swiftly, impermanence arrives yet again. One is roasted in a convergence of elemental wind and fire. One's spirit and consciousness disperse and become muddled. Once one's yin-essence and blood have become exhausted, one's skin and flesh dry and wither from without. There is not a single hair-pore which does not feel as if reamed by needles. Wherever there is an opening in the body, one feels as if is stabbed by a knife.

When one is preparing a tortoise for stewing, [the agony it endures] in having its shell ripped off [may be said to be] relatively

easeful [when compared to the discomforts of death]. When one's spirit is about to retreat, its discarding of the body is doubly difficult to endure.

The mind has no enduring power to control the course of things. It is analogous to a traveling merchant who is forever running off from one place to the next. The bodies which one inhabits have no fixed form. In this they are comparable to houses from which one is forced to move time and time again. Just as with the dust motes of a great chiliocosm²⁴—it is difficult indeed to trace back all of one's physical comings and goings.

Even were one to take the billowing waves of the four great oceans as a comparison, how could one measure all of the tears which have streamed down because of forced separation [from one's loved ones]? The towering heap of one's past-life skeletons would rise above even those highest of mountains. The immense accumulation of one's fallen corpses would be more massive than this entire great earth.

Were it not for hearing the words of the Buddha, who would be able to perceive this matter and who would be able even to hear of it? If one had not already laid eyes on the scriptures of the Buddha, how could one become aware of this principle and how could one awaken [to its reality]?

One might otherwise simply fall into relying on one's former affections and, as always in the past, continue on in delusion and confusion. One could only fear then that, in the thousands of lives across a myriad kalpas, a single error would become a hundred errors. The human body is a difficult thing to gain, but easy indeed to lose. The good times pass by so easily and then become difficult to retrieve.

The road ahead is dark and obscure. Once one becomes separated [from the human body], it shall be for a long, long time. The horrible retributions of the three wretched destinies²⁵ come back around and one is bound to undergo them oneself. The agony is indescribable. Who would stand in for us then?

Now that this flourish of words has reached this point, how could one fail to feel one's heart grow cold? Thus it is now only appropriate that one cut short the stream of cyclic births and deaths, extricate oneself from the ocean of desire, rescue both one's self and others, and climb together onto the other shore. The most excellent form of meritorious service which one might perform in a vast

stretch of kalpas is accomplished by doing this one single deed. This is the sixth of the causal bases for generation of the bodhi resolve.

7. REVERENCE FOR ONE'S OWN SPIRITUAL MIND

What is meant by “reverence for one’s own spiritual mind”? One reflects, “This presently manifest one mind of mine as it is right now—comparing it to that of Shākyamuni Tathāgata—they are not two separate entities. They have nothing distinguishing them.

Why then is it that, early on, the Bhagavān²⁶ already realized the right enlightenment countless kalpas ago whereas we are still confused, are still ruled by inverted views, and are still but foolish common people? Additionally, as for the Buddha, the Bhagavān, he embodies countless sorts of spiritual superknowledges and wisdom while also being adorned with all of the meritorious qualities. We, on the other hand, possess only countless varieties of karmic fetters and afflictions and remain wholly tied down in the sphere of cyclic births and deaths.

The nature of the mind in these two cases is singular. Nonetheless, the difference between confusion and awakening is as vast as the gulf between the heavens and the earth. When one quietly contemplates this, how could one *not* feel ashamed?

[This spiritual mind] is like a priceless jewel which has become sunken in the mud and which thus is looked upon just like broken tiles or rubble. We devote no caring concern to it at all.

Hence it is only right that we should take up the countless sorts of good dharmas to counter the afflictions. As the meritorious quality of cultivation produces results, the meritorious quality of one’s nature will then become manifest. This is comparable to subjecting that jewel to cleaning and then suspending it aloft in a canopy where its penetrating brilliance shines everywhere. This then may be said to qualify as not failing in gratitude for the teaching of the Buddha and not turning one’s back on one’s own spiritual mind. This is the seventh of the causal bases for generation of the bodhi resolve.

8. REPENTANCE OF ONE’S KARMIC OBSTACLES

What then is intended by “repentance of one’s karmic obstacles”? A sutra states that if one merely transgresses a single *duṣkṛta* precept,²⁷ one will fall into *niraya*²⁸ for a period of time equaling five-hundred years in the heavens of the Four Heavenly Kings.²⁹ If one might undergo such severe retribution for transgressing a minor *duṣkṛta* precept, how much the more might this be the case for committing

a major transgression? The retribution involved would be difficult even to describe.

Now, in the course of our daily lives, in every gesture and every movement, we are continually transgressing the moral precept codes. With every meal and every drink of water, we go against *śīla*³⁰ multiple times. Thus the transgressions committed in a single day would be countless. How much the more so would this be the case for this entire life and throughout the time we have coursed through the kalpas. Then, the karmic offenses generated would be even more impossible to describe.

Additionally, just to discuss this with regard to the five precepts, nine of every ten persons might be said to have transgressed against them. These transgressions are seldom revealed and are usually concealed. Now, the five precepts are referred to as the *upāsaka's* lay precepts.³¹ If one is unable to fulfill even those requirements, how much the more would this be the case for the *śrāmaṇera*,³² bhikshu,³³ and bodhisattva precepts. For those, it would be even less necessary to describe [the seriousness of] the situation.

When one is asked one's name, one replies, "I am a *bhikshu*..." however, were one to inquire into the reality of the matter, then one might not even be qualified to be an *upāsaka*. How could this not be cause for feeling ashamed?

One should realize that failing to take the precepts of the Buddha is one thing. But, once one has taken them, one must not transgress them. Refraining from transgressing them is one thing. But if one actually does go ahead and transgressed against them, then in the end, one will certainly fall.

If one fails to take pity on oneself and take pity on others, if one fails to feel regret for oneself while also feeling regret for [one's transgressions against] others, if one fails, with body and voice intently joined in crying aloud and shedding tears while seeking in anguish to repent before all beings, then the horrible retributions earned in thousands of lifetimes across myriads of kalpas will be difficult to escape. This is the eighth of the causal bases for generation of the bodhi resolve.

9. THE ASPIRATION TO GAIN REBIRTH IN THE PURELAND

What then is intended by "the aspiration to gain rebirth in the Pureland"?³⁴ This refers to the fact that advancing on the Path when cultivating in this land is difficult whereas it is easy to achieve buddhahood once one has taken rebirth in that land. Because it is easy,

one may reach the goal in a single lifetime when there, whereas, because of the difficulties, one may not have reached it even after a series of kalpas when here.

It is on account of this that the āryas³⁵ of the past and the worthies who were here before us all finally directed themselves thither. In a thousand scriptures and in a myriad treatises, in place after place, one is directed to return there. As for cultivating a practice in the Dharma-ending age, there are no methods which are able to surpass this one.

Now, the [*Amitābha*] *Sutra* states that if one possesses but little goodness, one may fail to achieve that rebirth, whereas, if one has accumulated much merit, one may then succeed in arriving there. If one wishes to discuss “much merit,” then there is no means for gaining it which can compare with upholding that [buddha’s] name. If one wishes to speak of “goodness,” then there is nothing which can compare with generating the vastly magnanimous resolve.

Thus it is that if one were to practice maintaining mindfulness of that ārya’s name only for a brief period, that would be superior to cultivating the practice of giving for a full hundred years. If one were to generate the great resolve but one time, that would allow one to leap beyond the progress gained from passing through eons of prior cultivation.

Now as for mindfulness of the Buddha, its very root is the aspiration to become a buddha. Thus, if one fails to generate the great resolve, then, even though one might carry on the practice of mindfulness, how could one expect to succeed?

As for generating the resolve, its source lies with cultivating the practices. Were one to fail to achieve rebirth in the Pureland, then, although one might actually generate that resolve, still, it could be easy to retreat from it. Thus it is that, when one plants the seed of bodhi, one then tills [the mind ground] with the plow of mindfulness-of-the-Buddha. As a result, the fruit of the Path naturally develops and grows.

When one climbs aboard the ship of great vows, one then succeeds in entering the seas of the Pureland and then definitely gains rebirth in that region in the West. This is the ninth of the causal bases for generation of the bodhi resolve.

10. CAUSING RIGHT DHARMA TO ENDURE FOR A LONG TIME

What is meant by “causing right Dharma to endure for a long time”? This refers to the fact that, from countless kalpas ago right on to

the present, our Bhagavān cultivated the bodhi path for our sakes. He was able to practice what is difficult to practice. He was able to endure what is difficult to endure. The cause became perfect and the fruit of it became full. Consequently, he arrived at the achievement of buddhahood. Having succeeded in achieving buddhahood and having then concluded his transforming those beings with whom he had affinities, he entered nirvāṇa.

Now, the Right Dharma Age and the Dharma Image Age have both entirely expired. There remains only the Dharma Ending Age wherein the Dharma continues to exist but there are no longer people [embodying realization of Dharma]. The deviant and the correct are no longer distinguished. Right and wrong are no longer discerned. Struggles proliferate between "them" and "us." People are entirely devoted to chasing after prosperity and fame. Wherever one looks, we are inundated with such people. The entire world has become this way.

People now do not even recognize who "the Buddha" is; they do not recognize what is meant by the word "Dharma" and they do not realize what is designated by the term "Sangha." Matters have now deteriorated to such a miserable state that one can barely bear to speak of this. Whenever one starts to reflect upon it, tears stream down spontaneously.

If, as a son of the Buddha, I am unable to repay such kindness—inwardly, there shall be no benefit for one's self and outwardly, there shall be no benefit for others. It shall then be the case that, while alive, one provides no benefit to anyone during this era and, after one's death, one affords no benefit to those who come along afterwards.

In such a case, though the heavens may extend high above, still, they remain unable to give me cover. Though the earth may be massive, it remains unable to support me. Then, if "a person possessed of the most extremely grave karmic crimes" does not apply to me, to whom could it even be applied at all?

On account of this, one feels unbearable pain and discerns that there would be no way to escape [from this indictment]. Suddenly, one forgets one's inferior qualities and then immediately generates the great resolve. Then, although one remains unable to turn back the Dharma-ending process dominating this era, one nonetheless remains determined that he will strive to guard and maintain right Dharma throughout one's future lifetimes.

Consequently, joined together with friends devoted to goodness, one arrives along with them at a *bodhimaṇḍala* (a temple or monastery) and arranges the convening of a *kṣama* assembly.³⁶ Having set up this Dharma assembly, one then makes the forty-eight great vows wherein each and every vow is devoted to bringing beings across to liberation. One sets forth the profound resolve which endures for a hundred thousand kalpas and which, in thought after thought, is devoted to becoming a buddha, making this vow effective, “from this very day onward to the very end of future time.”

One vows that, when this physical body meets its end, one will return to [the land of] “peace and sustenance”³⁷ and, having ascended through the nine classes [of lotus abodes],³⁸ one shall return into this Saḥā World³⁹ so that the sun of buddhahood will manifest its shining glory here yet again, so that gateways into Dharma will be expounded once more, so that this world’s Sangha sea will be clarified, so that the populations of these eastern regions⁴⁰ will receive the transforming teachings, so that the era before the arrival of the inevitable will become extended by this, and so that right Dharma will thus be caused to endure for a long time.

This then is what I humbly set forth here in the way of genuinely-felt and patiently-enduring resolve. This is the tenth of the causal bases for generation of the bodhi resolve.

III. THE CONCLUDING SECTION

Thus it is that the ten conditions may be well recognized and the eight dharmas completely understood. Having accomplished this, one now possesses the gateways through which one can set forth and possesses the grounds upon which one may initiate generation [of the bodhi resolve].

Additionally, one has gotten this human body, dwells here in the domain of Chinese civilization [wherein the Dharma flourishes], possesses the six sense faculties free of any impairment, and enjoys [physical health supported by] the four great elements abiding in a state of light easefulness. One has equipped oneself with a faith-filled mind and has the great good fortune to be free of demon-inflicted obstacles.

This is all the more true for those of us who have also left behind the householder’s life, have also gained the precepts of complete ordination, have also encountered a *bodhimaṇḍala*, have also heard the Buddha’s Dharma explained, have also personally viewed the *śarīra*, have also cultivated the dharma of repentance, have also met

up with the good [spiritual] friend, and have also become entirely equipped with the superior conditions for success. [Having now gained such a propitious circumstance], if one does not now on this very day proceed to generate this great resolve, then for which more suitable day [could one possibly] be waiting?

I only pray that the Great Assembly will take pity on this foolish display of sincerity, will feel sympathy for my deeply-felt resolve, will join together in setting forth these vows, and will unite in generating this [bodhi] resolve.

Those who have not generated it may now generate it. Those who have already generated it may now cause it to develop more fully. Those who have already caused it to develop more fully may now cause it to remain perpetually manifest.

Do not, fearing difficulty, shrink back in timidity. Do not, regarding this matter as easy, take it but lightly. Do not, seeking a swift conclusion, fail to make a long-enduring commitment. Do not, through indolence, remain bereft of heroic bravery. Do not, on account of being shiftless and spiritless, fail to incite yourself to bold action. Do not, drifting along in customary fashion, continue to put it off for another time. Do not, judging yourself to be foolish and dull-witted, continue depriving yourself of resolve. Do not, possessing only shallow roots [of goodness], judge yourself to be an inferior person with no share in this.

This endeavor is analogous to the planting of a tree. Once planted, those roots, once shallow, grow deeper each day. This is also analogous to the sharpening of a knife. When one has honed it for a while, that knife, once dull, becomes sharp.

How could one, on account of shallow [roots], fail to plant [the tree], thus allowing it to dry up [and die]? How could one, on account of the [knife's] dullness, just set it aside and stop using it?

Additionally, if one regards cultivation to be a form of suffering, then one fails to realize that indolence entails even *more* suffering. In the case of cultivation, one need only be temporarily devoted to diligent effort. Afterwards, one enjoys peace and bliss for an eternity of kalpas. In the case of indolence, one may steal a single lifetime of peacefulness, but then be bound to undergo many lifetimes in suffering.

How much the more so is this the case when one employs the Pureland as a ship [to one's destination]. What worries could there be that one might retreat from [one's quest]? Additionally, once

one gains realization of the unproduced [dharma's patience] as the source of one's power of endurance, what concerns could remain about any difficulties?

One should realize that even those karmic transgressors in the hells generated the bodhi resolve at some point in kalpas past. How then could a son of the Buddha sharing in the social order of humans somehow fail to make the great vows in this present life?

All across the course of beginningless time we have been immersed in confusion. Although one cannot plead [for changes] regarding one's past, nonetheless, were one to awaken now, one might still hope to change the course of the future. As for those who abide in confusion and have not yet awakened, one certainly finds them pitiable. However, it is only in a case where someone comprehends [the situation] but still fails to act that one is moved to feel especially deep regret.

Were one to feel terror over the sufferings of the hells, vigorous effort would naturally arise. Were one to become mindful of the swiftness of the effects of impermanence, indolence would not manifest. Additionally, it is essential to employ the Buddha's Dharma as one might use an instigating whip and to avail oneself of the good [spiritual] friend as a source of assistance. If one were to refrain from carelessly separating from them, but rather continued such reliance for one's entire life, then there would be no danger of retreating and losing one's way.

Do not claim that a single thought is insignificant. Do not hold the opinion that "empty vows" are devoid of any benefit. If one's mind abides in truth, then one's endeavors will be genuine. If one's vows are vast in their scope, then one's practice will be profound. It is not the case that empty space qualifies as great. Rather it is the mind king which qualifies as great. It is not the case that *vajra*⁴¹ really qualifies as durable. Rather it is the power of vows which is most durable.

If the Great Assembly is truly able to refrain from casting aside my pronouncements, then, based on this, a congregation destined towards bodhi may join together. Thus the alliance of a lotus society may be formally initiated from this very time.

As for what we have vowed to achieve, it is for all of us together to gain rebirth in the Pureland, for all of us together to see Amitābha Buddha, for all of us together to engage in the teaching of beings, and for all of us together to perfect the right enlightenment.

This being the case, how can one know that our future attainment of the thirty-two marks with their hundred-fold adornment of merit is not a result inaugurated on this very day by this generating of the [bodhi] resolve and by this declaration of vows?

I wish now to offer encouragement to everyone in the Great Assembly. This is so extremely fortunate—so extremely fortunate!