

THINGS PERTAINING TO BODHI by Master Sheng Yen

ISBN 978-1-59030-790-8

THE FOUR PROPER EXERTIONS

The *Mahaprajnaparamita Shastra* speaks of diligence of the body and diligence of the mind. Diligence of the body refers to using our bodies so that we become more capable of helping others. Diligence of the mind is about cutting off attachments such as greed and desire so we can eliminate laziness. Only when we can begin to control these attachments can we eliminate unwholesomeness. *The Treatise on Consciousness-Only* speaks of diligence in which making and keeping vows is like wearing armor that protects our practice from harm. To develop this armor, one needs courage and strength.

Then there is the diligence that comes through the bodhisattva practice of the Six Paramitas (generosity, morality, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom). Bodhisattvas do not say, "I practiced hard for a few days and I'm tired, so I will take a break." No, they will just keep up their practice with no thought of the difficulties. The first four paramitas lead us to the fifth, meditation, which is needed for cultivating samadhi. After that, the sixth paramita of wisdom can arise. Samadhi is not just about sitting still on a cushion; it is about living in the world without being defiled by it. The true samadhi is that which leads us to wisdom. But what is wisdom? Wisdom is about transcending distinctions between right and wrong, between good and bad, while still dealing with things appropriately. It is being able to deal with subjects and objects while transcending subject/object distinctions.

For practitioners, not only can the body become tired but more subtly, the mind can become weary of the practice. Diligence is needed to keep that from happening. Some people think they can just jump into the practice, and samadhi will come and wisdom will arise. After practicing for a while without experiencing samadhi and wisdom, there is a good chance they will lose faith and give up. This is because they lack diligence. Some practice for a year or two, or even ten years or more, and then give up. That is already pretty good, because they actually practiced for a while. Or some will say

THE FOUR PROPER EXERTIONS

that they'll practice harder the next time around, in the next life. Even that is not too bad, if they sincerely believe they will practice in their next life. All these people can help themselves by practicing the Four Proper Exertions.

The diligence of helping other sentient beings arises out of compassion that does not let up. There are people such as social workers who burn out after working very hard to help people. However, a bodhisattva takes the view that helping others takes place over many lifetimes, but in the process one also helps oneself. It is not how much talent we have, but how diligent we are. Even if you are not now engaged in spreading Dharma, if you can make a vow to help in the future, you will at least have the idea of offering yourself. This of course is the third of the Four Proper Exertions: to give rise to wholesome activity not yet arisen. But without diligence, your vow will not last long.

In one of the sutras, there is this statement: "Being slothful, one falls into unwholesomeness; to avoid sloth, practice diligence." When we are lazy, we will fall from practicing wholesome factors into practicing unwholesome factors. For instance, we may easily fall from practicing samadhi into becoming emotionally afflicted, confused, or depressed. People tend to do things in the opposite direction of diligence. If we can get rid of this habit, we can all become great bodhisattvas. But because we all have these habits, we remain ordinary sentient beings.

We must not misunderstand: being diligent does not mean being overly zealous; it means persisting, ceaselessly working hard in our practice. There are two meanings here. The first applies to sitting meditation: when we sit, we should continuously bring our mind back to the method, continuously staying on the method. The second meaning applies to daily life. For example, tonight if you have a chore that you haven't finished and you're sleepy, does that mean you forgo sleep? No, if you're tired, you sleep. If you are hungry, get something to eat. If you're thirsty, get something to drink. But after

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

THINGS PERTAINING TO BODHI by Master Sheng Yan

THE FOUR PROPER EXERTIONS

you have rested, after you have eaten, after you have something to drink, go back and finish your chore. This is the attitude of ceaselessly trying to get the job done, not taking a break whenever you feel like it. This attitude toward practice is a lifetime commitment. It is not something that you can try for a while and then quit, or just move on to other interests. This would not be diligence.

Diligence Is a Daily Habit

Constant diligence is not only for monks and nuns but laypeople as well. Remind yourself every day what you should do and then do it. Develop the daily habit of doing what you should do and not doing what you should not do. When you are doing what you shouldn't, tell yourself to stop it; when you are doing what you should, tell yourself to continue. If your mind is vexed, give yourself time and effort to quiet it. To quiet your mind, make it a habit to put aside some time every morning to meditate, prostrate, or recite a sutra. All day, from moment to moment, tell yourself not to allow unwholesome thoughts to arise, and if they do, vow not to give rise to them again. If unwholesome thoughts get stronger, meditate. If you don't deal with them early, they may get stronger and manifest as unwholesome actions.

When strong negative thoughts come up, you can practice repentance or prostration, or both. Practicing repentance means reflecting on your past and current behavior, and giving rise to genuine feelings of regret and remorse for any unwholesome patterns. If you have broken any precepts, this is a good time to reaffirm them. Your repentance practice may also include doing prostrations in order not only to express humility, but to practice loosening the hold of ego on your thoughts and behavior. During retreats, when we practice repentance, we will finish by doing twenty minutes of prostrations before the altar. At home you may prostrate to an image of a buddha or bodhisattva in order to focus your mind.

ISBN 978-1-59020-790-8.

THE FOUR PROPER EXERTIONS

But it is not necessary to prostrate before any image of any kind. The main thing is to see prostration as another method of meditation that can help lead to liberation. Just keep your mind clear and focused only on the act of prostrating.

As you use these methods over time, unwholesome mental habits will arise less and less. Do not expect to experience absolutely no unwholesome states any time soon. If your mind were totally pure, you would already be an arhat. But with diligence you will continue to reduce the occurrence of unwholesome states.

Diligence and Desire

The *Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* says that followers who are not deluded by desire, who are not bothered by countless devious things, and who vigorously cultivate the unconditioned, will attain the Way. "Diligence"—vigorous cultivation—here means precisely that one should not allow oneself to be confused by feelings of desire, or misled by devious ideas. If you can do this ceaselessly, you will attain liberation from suffering and vexation.

What desires are we talking about? For home-leavers they include any kind of sexual desire; for laypeople they refer to sexual misconduct outside of marriage. For example, if you already have a partner, desiring another will result in suffering for oneself and others. Humans are driven by more than biological needs; they are also driven by psychological needs for more sex and more partners. I know a married man who has so many girlfriends you can't count them. He fights with his wife all the time and says he is ready for a divorce. He says, "Who cares if I get divorced, I still have all these girlfriends." I asked him, "If you get a divorce and marry one of your girlfriends, wouldn't you fight with her as well?" He said, "It doesn't matter. I'll get divorced again."

People like this are ruled by desire. At first glance, they seem to get a lot of happiness from having many partners. However, they

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL