

FOOD FOR THE SPIRIT

Learning to Use the Six Sense Organs

-Dharma talk by Venerable Abbot Hua

-Translated by Bhikshu Heng Kuan

When people fall into the hells, or fall into the paths of the hungry ghosts or become animals, it's all because of nothing else other than their eyes, ears, noses, tongues, bodies, and minds. And then again, if you ascend into the heavens and become a god or if you are able to become an asura, or get reborn in the paths of people, it's all because of these six sense organs and nothing else. And even up into the Sagely paths, becoming an Arhat, a Pratyekabuddha, a Bodhisattva up to and including becoming a Buddha, is only because of the six sense organs.

How is it that these six sense organs have such incredible power over us so that they are able to cause us to fall into the hells, or ascend to the heavens? How is it that they can cause us to either become Buddhas or become ghosts? Now in fact, it's the case that they don't really have ultimate control over us. Rather, it's because we don't know how to use them that we get manipulated by them. Basically, all of us should become Buddhas, but how is it that we go off and become ghosts instead?

The problem can be likened to a person driving a car. If he is not familiar with the road, he may get lost. Or if he does not know how to drive very well he may suddenly drive off the road and end up in the ocean. It might be such a big accident that both the car and the person plummet down into the ocean and drown. Or the driver may have been instructed to stick to the broad and level highway, but he decides to go up into the mountains instead. Because the roads there are narrow, he may suddenly drive off the edge of a cliff. It may be such a steep cliff that both the car and the person tumble down so everything is smashed beyond recognition. If someone doesn't know how to use a car but goes ahead and tries to in a reckless manner, it often ends up that terrible accidents happen and the people in the car may even lose their lives.

Now, hooking this analogy up with what happens to our efficacious nature, we find that the driver of the car is like beings who do not know how to use their six sense organs. Basically the driver has the potential for being able to manipulate the car in all kinds of situations without accident. By the same token, our efficacious nature has unlimited ability. It is only when it gets stuck inside our stinking skin bags we call "bodies" that it becomes confused and can't distinguish north from south or east from west. It becomes totally disoriented and loses all its magical qualities. And so, although it should go off and become a Buddha, instead, it falls into the hells. Originally this efficacious Buddha-nature of our should quickly go forth and become a Bodhisattva. Once stuck inside our bodies, it loses its bearings and may end up in the body of an animal.

Basically people who are disciples of the Buddha ought to cultivate and transcend the Triple Realm, but instead they fall into the three evil paths--the hells, the hungry ghosts, and the animals. Why? Simply because they don't know how to drive the car. They get all tied up by the six sense organs and become trapped in a prison of the five skandhas of form, feeling, thinking, activity, and consciousness.

This is like the situation of a person walking in the dark. Not able to see where he's going, he can very easily take the wrong road or fall off a cliff. By the same token, the efficacious nature gets all tied up and can't see where it's going and so beings wander into the wrong paths.

So in the world, the ten thousand circumstances are all speaking the Dharma for us. If we understand them, then everything that goes on is the Buddhadharma; if we don't understand them, then everything that happens is just worldly dharma. If we recognize what is going on, then we transcend the world; if we don't understand the myriad dharmas, then we fall into confusion. It's just a matter of whether or not we have any wisdom. If a person has wisdom, then when questions arise he can solve them and transcend them. If he doesn't have any wisdom, then he's bogged down by all kinds of hindrances and obstructions.

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