

FLOWER ADORNMENT SUTRA

Commentary by Tripitaka Master Hsuan Hua

WONDROUS ADORNMENTS OF WORLD RULERS CHAPTER ONE

-translated by Bhikshuni Heng Tao

-reviewed by Bhikshuni Heng Ch'ih

-edited by Bhikshuni Heng Hsien

ANANDA'S FOUR QUESTIONS

When the Buddha was about to enter Nirvana, Ananda was advised by the Venerable Aniruddha to ask the Buddha four questions. Before Shakyamuni Buddha entered Nirvana, the Venerable Ananda had not yet been certified to the fourth fruition of Arhatship, so he still hadn't cut off all his love and desire. Like a small child, he was weeping so hard that he completely forgot everything else. His heart sank into the depths of sorrow and his eyes were swollen to the size of peaches.

At that time the Venerable Aniruddha, who was foremost in the penetration of the heavenly eye, reminded Ananda, "The Buddha transmitted the essence of his Dharma to you. Since you are the compiler of the Buddha's Storehouse, you should ask the Buddha about how to handle certain matters in the future."

Ananda said, "What business could there be in the future? The Buddha is going to pass into the stillness. I won't do anything anymore."

The Venerable Aniruddha said, "Don't be a child. The responsibility of propagating the Dharma rests on you. You should quickly ask the Buddha about important matters."

Ananda woke up a bit and asked, "What matters should I inquire about?"

Aniruddha said, "Ask the Buddha about four matters: 1. When the Buddha is in the world, we rely on the Buddha to dwell. After the Buddha enters Nirvana, on whom should we rely to dwell? 2. When the Buddha is in the world, we take the Buddha as our teacher. After the Buddha's Nirvana, whom should we regard as our teacher? 3. When the Buddha is in the world, he himself can tame and subdue evil-natured bhikshus. After the Buddha enters Nirvana, who should tame and subdue evil-natured bhikshus? 4. During the compilation of the Sutra Store, how shall we begin each Sutra?"

Ananda agreed that these were urgent questions and so he came before the Buddha, stood to one side, and asked him about those four matters.

The first question was, "We have always dwelt with the Buddha. After you leave, with whom shall we dwell?"

The Buddha replied, "You should dwell in the Four Applications of Mindfulness: mindfulness with regard to the body, feelings, thoughts, and dhammas.

Relying on the Four Applications of mindfulness, one can be certified to the fruition and get out of the revolving wheel.

The Four Applications of Mindfulness

1. Contemplate the body as impure. Why can't people get off the revolving wheel? It's because they don't really recognize their bodies as being impure. Everyone is attached to a self. "This is mine, that is mine. That house is mine. These clothes are mine," and so forth. But when they breathe their last breath, nothing belongs to them. There is a verse that says,

Fish jump in the water.
People mill about in the marketplace.
Not knowing to do good acts and create virtue,
They harden their hearts and create offenses.
Gold and silver piled up as high as a mountain
Are all gone when you close your eyes.
With empty hands you go before King Yama,
Regretful, as your tears fall.

The body constantly perspires and if you don't wash it frequently, it starts to smell bad in no time. This phenomenon applies to ordinary people. There are those who have body odors which are so rank (literally: "fox stench") that no matter how often they wash, scrub, and spray on perfume and deodorant, they can't get rid of the smell. All it takes is to have one person with this problem and everyone in the room will gag. Some people have body odor which smells worse than the strongest Camembert! Why do they smell so bad? It's partly because of their diet. If they eat all sorts of onions, garlic, and a lot of dairy products such as milk, cheese, and so forth, then they will start to smell just like what they eat. Why are people impure? It's because they came via a very impure way. Moreover, the nine apertures constantly ooze filth. The eyes flow forth tears and matter. Wax accumulates in the ears. Mucus comes from the nose. Saliva and phlegm come from the mouth. Add to that excrement and urine and that makes nine apertures constantly flowing forth impurities. Even if you adorn your body with gold and bathe it in perfume, you still won't pass for a Buddha image. Such attempts at camouflage are like trying to ornament a toilet with brocade. No matter how beautiful you try to make it, the toilet still remains a dirty place. And no matter how delicious the food was you ate, after it passes three inches down your esophagus, you wouldn't want to touch it again.

If you enlighten to the fact that the body is actually filthy--a "stinking skin bag"--you won't be so attached to it. Lao Tzu grasped this principle when he said, "The only reason why I am plagued with a huge illness is because I have this body. If I didn't have a body, what illness could there be?" He understood the contemplation of the body as impure.

2. Contemplate feelings as suffering. Feelings are sensations that you experience, whether pleasant or unpleasant. However, in the end they are all suffering. As to suffering, there are the Three Sufferings, the Eight Sufferings, and all the limitless sufferings.

The Three Sufferings

A. The suffering within suffering.

This refers to the poverty and misery to which poor people are subject. For example, a person may be so poor that he doesn't have a house to live in. And then on top of that misery, the heavens open up in a downpour. Or such a person doesn't even have any clothes to wear, and then the weather suddenly turns icy cold. Basically a person doesn't have any food to eat, and as if that's not enough, he falls sick. So that is the suffering within suffering that poor people go through.

B. The suffering of decay.

Rich people may presently enjoy wealth and honor, but eventually those things decay. Perhaps their houses get burned down, or their company gets embezzled, or their stocks take a nose-dive and they lose all their money. Add to that all the disasters of fire, wind, water, and war that might suddenly and unexpectedly affect the people's wealth and you have examples of the suffering of decay.

C. The suffering of process.

All of us undergo the suffering of the life process. From birth we pass into the prime of life; from the prime of life we pass into old age; and then we go on to die. The shifting and turning of our every thought characterizes the suffering of process.

The Eight Sufferings

A. The suffering of birth.

When an infant is born, it feels as if it is being crushed between two mountains. That's why babies always cry at the moment of birth.

B. The suffering of old age.

When people get old, their hands and feet lose their agility, their eyes can't see well, their ears can't hear clearly, their hair turns white, their teeth fall out, and they lose control of their bodily functions. Everything starts to fail. That experience is a lot of suffering.

C. The suffering of sickness.

Sickness occurs as a result of an imbalance of the four elements. When the earth, water, fire, and wind in our bodies go awry, we get sick and also experience a lot of suffering.

D. The suffering of death.

At the moment of death, people feel as if they are being flayed alive as one would beat a cow. They also feel pain like that inflicted when ripping the shell off a live turtle. It is indescribable suffering.

E. The suffering of being separated from what one loves.

The greatest suffering experienced by most people is the separation from their loved ones at the time of death. Why? It is because there is love. Love is the source of all offenses. If you can cut off love

and desire, then your karmic offenses will be light. If you have heavy emotional love and desire, then your karmic offenses will be heavy. As it is said,

When karma is ended and emotions are emptied, one is a Buddha.
When karma is heavy and one is confused by emotion, one is a common person.

Because living beings can't see through love and put it down, they are entangled in all sorts of sticky relationships. When it comes time for them to part from one another, they experience a lot of pain.

F. The suffering of being around what one hates.

For instance, you may absolutely loathe a certain person and you run far away thinking to avoid him or her. But what do you suppose happens? In the next town you encounter a person just like the one you ran away from! That's the suffering of being around what one hates.

G. The suffering of not getting what one wants.

Anytime you want something and you don't get it, there's suffering. People may seek fame, or money, or boyfriends, or girlfriends, or children, or prestige. If they don't get what they seek, they feel miserable.

H. The suffering of the raging blaze of the five skandhas.

The five skandhas are form, feeling, thought, activity, and consciousness. They are like a roaring blaze which torments our hearts without respite.

Aside from the three sufferings and the eight sufferings, there are limitless kinds of suffering that constantly harass one. So in the second application of mindfulness, one contemplates feelings as suffering.

3. Contemplate thoughts as impermanent. Thoughts of the past, present, and future--none can be got at. They are all fleeting and impermanent. Why? It is because "All dharmas arise from conditions, and all dharmas are extinguished from conditions." There is nothing that stays fixed and unchanging. People's ordinary minds are unreliable too. Their thoughts are like waves, constantly shifting without cease; also like dust motes, bobbing up and down in the air. Well, then, what is permanent? The true mind is permanent. Our clear pure nature and bright substance, our original Buddha-nature, is permanent.

4. Contemplate dharmas as without self. Within the dharma of the five skandhas of form, feeling, thought, activity, and consciousness, you won't be able to find a "self." Mistaking there to be self in those dharmas causes attachment to self, to an ego. On top of that, mistaking dharmas to be true and actual causes attachment to dharmas. That is why one can't gain self-mastery and liberation. People should contemplate dharmas as without self. See clearly that the ego is just an illusory projection, not real. Only then can the attachment to self and dharmas be smashed.

Let us examine contemplating the five skandhas as being without a self.

A. Form dharmas. "Form" refers to anything that has shape or appearance. If one can't see through form, one will never attain comfort. There is inner form and outer form. Outer forms have shape and appearance. Inner forms are the images and shadows of your own mind, which means your false thinking. The reason why you are enamored of form is because you are attached to a "self." If you can put down that attachment to self, then there is no more attachment to form, either.

B. Feeling dharmas. "Feeling" refers to reception of external stimuli and includes all sorts of experiences taken in by the sense organs. These dharmas also stem from a sense of self. If there is no ego involved, then one won't be caught up in the dust of feelings.

C. Thought dharmas. "Thought" refers to false thought, the basis of which is the falseness of an ego. When there's no more self, what thoughts could you possibly have?

D. Activity dharmas. "Activity" means the constantly shifting process of mental activity. In thought after thought people's minds rage on like torrents. But when one breaks through the activity skandha, there is no more sense of self.

E. Consciousness dharmas. In general there are eight kinds of consciousness: The consciousnesses of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, the sixth mind consciousness, the seventh manas consciousness, and the eighth alaya consciousness. The eighth consciousness is the watershed between true and false. On the part of ordinary people, it still contains defiled seeds and functions as a consciousness. When this eighth consciousness is purified, it is transformed into the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom. Hence, all eight consciousnesses can be turned into the Four Wisdoms. The secret is to do away with the self.

The Four Applications of Mindfulness are the Buddha's answer to Ananda's first question.

-continued next issue