

# *Pray Seriously; Devote Yourself To Your Chosen Religion*

*Address Given at the Buddhist Christian Conference  
Berkeley, California, August, 1987*

*by Venerable Elder Abbot Hsuan Hua*

All of you Good and Wise Advisors! Brother David just explained the principle of prayer, and I feel what he said was "most excellent and fitting". I don't know how each of you heard it, but even I, who can't understand English thought it sounded quite fine!

Why was it fine? It's because what he said was able to unite with the Spirit of God. Since it united with the Spirit of God, and he himself was filled with the Spirit of God, therefore even I, who knows no English, seemed to understand, without actually understanding.

Why is that? It is because, having heard it, my mind and nature are completely full of happiness and joy. And being that way myself, I know that each of you, in your minds, are also full of happiness and joy.

Since I know that this is the situation with all of you, I would like to say something to you today that will make you neither too happy nor too unhappy.

Why? It is because if you feel too happy, then you are not in accord with the principle of prayer. And if you are too unhappy, you are also not in accord with the principle of prayer. Therefore, the matter of prayer must be treated with the utmost seriousness. We have to be solemn and earnest, totally respectful and reverent. As Brother David said just now, we must be one million percent sincere and earnest when we pray.

Why is that necessary when praying? It's because when we pray, it is as if we were before the Buddha, before God, and as if beside our Teachers and Elders. Consequently we must be very earnest and reverent, true and sincere. Since truth and sincerity are required, it has nothing whatsoever to do with putting on an act.

Prayer is also repenting of our faults. It requires changing what is wrong with us and renewing ourselves, changing from being evil to becoming good. Since it requires changing from bad to good, therefore, before we pray, we must first cleanse ourselves inside. We must begin by washing away all the greed, hatred, and stupidity that we carry within us. If we use an attitude of greed when we pray, then I believe that the power of our prayers to evoke a response will be less. If we use an angry attitude to pray, the power to evoke a response will be minimal. Further, if we pray with an attitude of stupidity, then there is even less possibility of having a response.

And so, before we pray, we must rid our minds of arrogance, jealousy, and feelings of envy for others who are more capable and worthy than we are. We should truly, like Jesus, have universal love, loving even our enemies, and sweep all evil thoughts from our minds. After that, we can unite our light with the light of God. Once our light unites with God's light, then what we say will be acceptable to God. If instead our bellies are full of jealousy, obstructiveness, and intentions of harming others for our own gain, then even if we pray until our throats burst, I believe there will be no response. The method of changing what is wrong with ourselves and of self-renewal is the way to draw near the Buddha and the True God.

Every day when we want to see the True God, the True Buddha, or True Sages, we have to recognize the darkness that is in our minds and get rid of it, and let our light flow forth. We need to repay the kindness of each of the Saints and Sages for teaching us. We should want to be good disciples of the Founders of our respective religions, good adherents of our own religions. We should have respect for all beings, and a wish to benefit others, not a wish to benefit ourselves. Most important of all is that we should "decline the merit and take on the responsibility for the offenses." We should not be self-satisfied, saying, "I did such-and-such a good deed in the world," and become arrogant. At no time and under no circumstances should we be proud or smug when we pray. Whether we believe in Lord God, in Jesus, in the Buddha, or in Mohammed, we should genuinely understand what spirit the Founder of the religion we believe in had when he or she started that religion. If we truly understand the spirit with which the Founder established our religion, then that is true prayer. If we can take an attitude of sharing the merit and taking responsibility for all the errors and mistakes," then we are the transformation bodies, the representatives, of the Founders of our religions.

How does one "take an attitude of sharing the merit and taking responsibility for all the errors and mistakes"? As we pray, we should say to the Lord, to the Buddha, or to another Sage, "I wish to take on all of the offenses which have been created by each and every person in the world. And if I myself have any strengths or good points, any merit and virtue, or have done any good deeds, I wish to dedicate that merit and virtue to all living beings, to enable them all to leave suffering and to attain bliss, to resolve the matter of birth and death, to enjoy great peace and happiness, and to have long lives and great wisdom." We should forget ourselves and pray on behalf of all living beings, not only the beings of this world, but including all living creatures in all worlds to the ends of empty space and the entire Dharma Realm. If we can pray that way, I believe that Jesus will be happy, God will also be happy, the Buddha will be happy, and so will Mohammed. You could say they will all be very happy.

Since all of you just applauded, and are so happy, that indicates the Founders of your religions everywhere are shining their light upon you, and making you feel very happy. But we still have to remember the Buddha's kindness and compassion, Jesus's Universal Love, and Mohammed's Purity, Truthfulness, and Recognition of the Lord. Whatever religion we belong to, we should be good children of the Founder of that religion. We should not cause the Founder of our religion to worry about us or be unhappy. We should not forget the hardship and the difficulty the Founder of our religion went through in order to establish the religion. The Founder at that time experienced such hardship and difficulty, and if all we do now is enjoy the kindness of our Founder without knowing how to repay that kindness, but instead make the Founder concerned on our behalf, then I believe we are not good disciples of our religion. I hope that each of us will

take the Founder of whatever faith we follow as our model. If we can use the Founder as our model for all our actions, then we definitely will not go astray.

I recall that several years ago, the Roman Catholic Cardinal from China, Cardinal Yu-bin, came to Gold Mountain Monastery. The first time I saw him, I said to him, "Cardinal, you should be a Buddhist Catholic." He was quite puzzled by that comment. How could he be a Buddhist Catholic? It was fundamentally contradictory. Then I said to him, "Cardinal, you shouldn't be so surprised. I wish to be a Catholic Buddhist. If the two of us understand each other—understand the spirit of not wanting to fight with others, which the Founders of our re-spective religions both had in starting their religions—if our religions do not fight with each other, then the people in the world will follow our example and will not fight. And if they no longer fight, there won't be any wars. What do you say to that?"

Cardinal Yu-bin thought it over and then said, "Good! Let's do that!" I believe after our discussion he became even more ecumenical in his outlook.

He stayed for a week at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. I told him, "We want to establish an Institute for the Investigation of Religions here at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. We want to investigate religions, not compare them and compete with one another." I said, "Every religion has its strengths and weaknesses. Our principle is that we want to adopt others' good points to make up for our own shortcomings. That way we respect each other. We should cherish each other, assist one another, and urge each other forward. We do not want to look upon any religion, no matter what it is, as being inferior to our own religion. Our aim is to establish such an Institute for the Investigation of Religions." Then I invited him to be the Head of the Institute.

I don't know whether he was joking or serious when he answered, "This is your place, and you want to volunteer it as an Institute for the Study of Religions. The other religions can all have their own places of worship; there can be a Catholic cathedral, a Protestant church, a Jewish synagogue, and a Moslem mosque. But what if I don't want your Buddhist temple here, then how would you feel about that?"

I said, "I will absolutely do as you say. It's even better if there's no Buddhism inside a Buddhist Way-place." At that time he felt it was quite strange for me to say that and so he asked, "You are a Buddhist. Why don't you strive for a place for Buddhism?"

I answered, "It's not necessary to strive for a place; I don't want to fight even that much. Whether it has a place or not is all the same to me."

That's the exchange I had with Cardinal Yu-bin at the time, and I've taken this opportunity to let all of you here know about it.

***DIALOGUE:***

***VENERABLE ABBOT AND BROTHER DAVID STEINDAHL-RAST***

Moderator (Bishop Seigen Yamaoka): Thank you Master Hua. At this time, I would like the two speakers, if they wish, to question each other if they have any questions, and have a form of dialogue between the two speakers.

Brother David: I'm very much looking forward to the part of the evening when we have questions from the audience, but just to follow protocol, I have two very brief questions that I would like to ask you (Master Hua). I was very much moved by many of the things that you said, Master Hua. But particularly when you spoke about, in prayer, taking upon ourselves the whole world, basically; uniting ourselves in prayer with the whole world. There's a beautiful story reported about the Hassidic Rabbi who always began his prayers by saying, "I unite myself with all those who are closer to God, further ahead in this direction to which we lift up heart and mind in our prayer, so that through them I may go to God. And I unite myself with all those who may still be further away than I am from the goal, so that through my prayer they may get there." I think that is the basic attitude in which we all pray. But this prayer of petition seems in a sense furthest removed from thanksgiving as the basic gesture of prayer, and yet I understand this petition as an anticipated thanksgiving, and therefore also the intercession for others. When we pray for others, we simply are at the place of the heart united with all others, and so we can never pray without praying for them, in the sense of praying with them. And when our heart is lifted up, everybody's heart is lifted up. But that implies also a sense of social responsibility. Prayer is inseparable from social responsibility. If in prayer we find our true self, then we have found that self which is meant when we are called to love our neighbor as our self. It is not something dualistic—that I love my neighbor as I would love myself if I were somebody else. But rather, that I love my neighbor because I have discovered that he and I are one self. And Self is that which you can't help loving.

And so my question is, is there something in the Buddhist tradition, in your particular branch of the Buddhist tradition, a similar connection with prayer and social responsibility? In other words, we cannot pray for the world, and take the world upon ourselves, without doing something for the world when we come out of prayer.

Master Hua: Not only is there such a concept, there is the requirement that we actually put it into practice. That is why, at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, all of the left-home people (members of the Buddhist clergy) eat only one meal a day. In that way, we save two meals for all the people in the world who don't have enough to eat. Regardless of whether they actually receive it or not, that is our wish.

Brother David: Thank you very much. This process of questioning and translating is a bit cumbersome, so in the interest of time, maybe I will save my second question for private discussion, and throw open the time to the audience.

Bishop Yamaoka: At this time, I would like to open this up, if I may, to questions from the floor. Please make your statements brief, and please indicate who you are asking the question to. Thank you. Any questions?

Question from the audience: I'm quite familiar with the controversy between the monastic Buddhist tradition vis-k-vis the more socially-oriented Buddhist tradition about the efficacy of

their respective methods. One thing they go on is the need for social actions. And the point here is that, in the traditions of both Christianity and Yogacharin and Zen and other forms of Buddhism, there is a common knowledge that around big monasteries there is a tremendous power that can be released, a force of Goodness from above, which can perhaps do more for the world than a lot of the outer activities at the body level. This was quite true, for instance, in medieval Christian countries. The villagers would be happy to have a monastery where monks would simply come and contemplate God, because they knew that it created such a positive vibration that the crops would grow better, there would be less fighting in the village, less crime. I'm quite aware of this in the Buddhist tradition. So I wish the two of you could both speak to that issue. I guess my question is I think some people are trying to renounce a lot of the inner prayer work that can be quite close to and very useful to the world, in exchange for going out and trying to do something concrete in the world.

*Master Hua:* Cultivation of the Way requires both inner merit and outer results, and is not weighted to one side or the other, When you establish outer good works, you should not be attached to the idea of obtaining something from them. Inwardly, if you purify your mind and reduce your desires, so that you do not have so many desires, that is truly helping yourself; if you rid yourself of greed, then that is helping others.

*Brother David:* In Christian history, the monasteries have often been seen as schools for prayer, and sort of hothouses and powerhouses for prayer. At this present moment, however, the discovery that householders have their own special way of relating to reality, and therefore should cultivate their own prayer and not depend on the monks, is a very important discovery. And so there will be householder prayer coming from which we monks ought to learn. I think that is the more important task at the present moment.

*Question:* What is the difference between the Buddhist-Christian and the secular Humanist position regarding prayer?

*Brother David:* while we can express the reality of prayer in Christian terms, we also ought to be able to express it in secular Humanist terms, in basic human terms, because prayer at its heart is that which makes us human. At least, that is the way I see it. So, while we can express it in specifically Christian terms, it is not necessary to do so. Of course, I find a great enrichment personally in expressing it in Christian terms. For instance, the elaboration of the Trinitarian Dogmas, and the Christological Dogmas, is not so much concerned with the question of the Jesus "out there" as with the question of who we are when we pray, who we are in our relationship to God. It is a basic human reality, but it can be expressed in Christian terms.

*Master Hua:* His answer was quite sufficient.

*Question:* Is there any difference between prayer and meditation?

*Master Hua:* If you think they are the same, then they are the same. If you think they are different, then they are different.

*Brother David:* That's a very fine answer. However, out of a sense of responsibility for precision, I would say the way I have used the terms, Prayer is the over-arching term--Prayerfulness, Prayer with a capital "P"--and all the other forms of prayer are means to that end of Prayerfulness. And contemplation is one of them. And then again, there are so many definitions for contemplation, it is not a very precise term. It has been used in so many different ways.

*Questions:* There is a quotation attributed to the Buddha, something to the effect that "If I want to help others, I should go and meditate. If I want to help myself, I should do something to help others." I think about this a lot, so I would appreciate it if you would say something on it.

*Master Hua:* Don't make so many distinctions between self and others. By helping others, one is helping oneself, and by helping oneself, one is helping others. Benefitting oneself and benefitting others have the same merit and virtue.

*Bishop Yamaoka:* At this time, I would like our speakers to make a final statement, and I would like to begin with Brother David.

*Brother David:* Well, instead of making a final statement, I'll tell you an experience that was a high point, a peak experience, in my own encounter with Buddhism, and specifically in the area of prayer. And it sheds light on something that I'm still groping to express really, namely, that this whole idea of "Buddhist-Christian Dialogue" seems to be an awfully Christian idea. I don't know whether the Buddhists would really have come up with that on their own. It is all talk, talk, talk, you see. And so sometimes I would feel much more comfortable with no words, and sharing that way.

And the particular experience that I would like to tell you of is one of Buddhist-Christian shared silence. I had the great privilege of sitting next to His Holiness, the Dalai Lama during some sessions during the Conference at Middlebury College on "Christ and the Bodhisattva." And he had wonderful ways of sharing. At one point, he pulled the little prayer beads off my finger and instead gave me his. And during that hour we were using one another's prayer beads. And then we changed them back. Even though I didn't know what kind of prayer he does on those beads--and I don't know to this day, that really didn't matter.

*Master Hua:* (after the translation) And so the two of you were like children playing together.

(final statement) I give all of you my best wishes. No matter what religion you belong to, I hope that you will all do a good job as disciples of your respective faiths, and in the future fulfill the thoughts and vows which the Founders of your respective religions had in establishing their religions. If all of you can fulfill the vows of your Founders, then you are certainly good disciples of their religions. There is a saying that goes.

*The Way is to be gone on,  
If you do not go on it,  
How is it the Way?  
Virtue has to be practiced,*

*If you do not practice it,  
How is there virtue?*

I hope that all of you will work hard and go forward with courageous vigor!