

News from the Dharma Realm

Buddhism and Education

*A talk by Bhikshu Heng Sure
Buddhism into the Year 2000 Conference*

Buddhism will flourish in the 21st century via education, and the success of its educational policies will establish the teachings of Dharma as a universal treasury of wisdom and truth.

A saying goes, "When one's humanity is perfected, Buddhahood is accomplished." Humanity is perfected when one's virtuous conduct is cultivated to the fullest. Perfect people are both wise and compassionate. Sages past and present teach the need for moral discipline and filial duty.

The Buddha himself, immediately upon his realization of Proper Enlightenment, spoke the Brahmajala Sutra, which contains ten major and forty-eight subsidiary articles known collectively as the Bodhisattva Precepts, which have been recited twice monthly in the Bodhisattva Pratimoksha Uposatha Ceremony, for cultivators of the Bodhisattva Path, since that time. In the text the Buddha explained why he instructed on a code of moral rules as his urgent priority, his first message after his liberation from the suffering of birth and death:

"These rules come from filial compliance to one's parents, one's teachers, masters in the Sangha and the Triple Jewel. Filial respect is an ultimate Dharma of the spiritual path. It is known as precepts and can also be called restraint and stopping." (Sutra on the Buddha's Teaching of the Net of Brahma, or Brahmajala Sutra.)

The remarkable point is that as he realized the joyful liberation of Bodhi, the Buddha's mind turned immediately to a sense of duty, a need to repay a debt of kindness he had received from those who made his attainment possible: his parents, who gave him his physical body, the teachers and Sangha-members who in lives past gave him his precept-body, and the Triple Jewel that provided his "life of wisdom," which for purposes of discussion will be described as "heritage learning," a treasury of knowledge common to all living beings and developed through practices of Dharma.

As we see, the Buddhas wisdom selected both moral discipline and filial compliance as urgent matters to share with living creatures.

The Buddha's great disciple, Ven Mahamaudgalyayana, as described in the Sutra of the Buddha's Teaching on Ullambana, similarly looked for his mother's place of reincarnation immediately after his attainment of the deva-eye, a faculty of psychic vision. Perceiving her woeful rebirth among the Pretas, he requested the Buddha to bestow an expedient method to rescue her. This request led to the Buddha's discussion of the means to repay seven generations of ancestors' kindness through cultivation of blessings and then transferring that merit for their salvation, thus fostering the Ullambana Celebration, widely observed throughout Buddhist countries the world over.

At the end of his teaching career, the Buddha took, among his retinue of bhikkhus, Ven. Maudgalyayana to the Trayastrimsha Heaven to speak the Sutra of the Past Vows of Earth Treasury (Ksitigarbha) Bodhisattva, in order to repay his mother's kindness for having borne him. That Sutra explains and lauds the Vows and spiritual teachings of Earth-Treasury, the greatest exemplar of filial devotion among Bodhisattvas. He extends his determination to deliver from suffering to bliss the

parents of living beings in "countless myriads of worlds." He brings that fundamental wish to recognize and honor the gift of kindness, received from one's benefactors, to its highest expression.

Clearly, wise Buddhist teachers identify as fundamental to humans the need to repay the goodness received from parents. This is a virtue belonging to the "heritage-learning" innate to the human condition.

Most interesting, however, in the case of the Brahmajala Sutra, is the link between moral precepts, the Bodhisattva Pratimoksha Code, and the filial duty so evident to Enlightened Beings. The virtues of holding moral precepts makes the fulfillment of our first job as people to be mindful of our roots in goodness: filial compliance.

Teaching this lesson to school children has been the proper work of educators in Asia for centuries. Children trained to filial respect in elementary school can easily expand that foundation to mature participation in a social and national group, learning to see a specific culture or country as a natural extension of the nuclear family. Service to the social unit can then develop into identity with all human-kind and potentially reach "single-substance Great Compassion," the unity with all living beings that the Buddha's sutras describe as an ultimate liberated state.

Children trained to filial respect naturally explore the many virtues that proceed from that foundation: brotherhood, loyalty, honesty, righteousness, propriety, incorruptible integrity and a sense of shame. Such virtues, when identified and venerated in a systematic program, can lead students to moral integrity, to the ability to tell right from wrong, and to make ethical choices free of greed, selfishness and harm. Such children are prepared to take part in society in meaningful ways. A child who recognizes his link with his parents will not harm his own person, nor will he quickly abandon his stance in virtue for selfish pleasure-seeking or greedy profit-making at the expense of global welfare.

Modern educators such as Derek Bok, chancellor of Harvard University, have pointed to a lack of training in virtue as a major failing of current approaches to learning. Students can emerge from the system with no effective understanding of basic human values. Yet one hundred years ago the University was recognized as the guardian of moral values. Training students in ethical decision-making was the hallmark of a school. Specialization in hard sciences and social sciences that transformed University curricula after the Korean War signaled the abandoning of traditional understanding of the role of genuine learning.

A system of education founded on filial respect and leading to the Pratimoksha code, holds great promise of filling the need for ethical training lacking in current education policies.

Education in virtue has now become the proper job of Buddhists. The Buddha exemplifies virtuous conduct, the art of being a person, to perfection. His wisdom, compassion, eloquence, and strength inspire us to imitate him and to seek the source of his radiant goodness. The Dharma protects the treasury of learning that leads to Buddha's wisdom, and the Sangha propagates that treasury in each new country and age that hosts the Dharma-banner. Perfecting, protecting, personifying and propagating the "heritage-learning" of virtue through discipline and moral conduct is work now given to the Triple Jewel.

Filial respect is the foremost of good deeds and can lead those well-educated in virtue all the way to the liberation of Bodhi, thus making filiality "an ultimate Dharma of the Spiritual Way."

To summarize: the Buddha felt gratitude upon awakening to the end of the "long night of Samsara," and he looked for the roots of that liberation. He identified, as did Ven. Maudgalyayana, the kindness he had received from his parents as the source of his wisdom. He sought the most direct and complete

means of repaying that kindness and thus spoke the Dharma of precepts to return the goodness in the highest order.

Because the Buddhist Sangha's role is to protect and exemplify the precept codes, the Sangha's contribution to humanity through teaching of the "heritage-learning" of virtue will continue to be vital to the well-being of the world through the 21st century and beyond.

At the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Talmage, California, USA, elementary school students at Instilling Goodness School first learn of filial respect from their Bhikshu and Bhikshuni teachers. Children learn from Buddhist disciples for whom the teachings of virtue are a vital source of inspiration to growth: stories of the Buddha's filial conduct in this life and the Jataka Tales of his filial devotion in lives past, as well as stories of Ven. Maudgalyayana, Earth Treasury Bodhisattva, and other exemplars of virtue. These include China's traditional 24 Filial Paragons, and the lives and writings of Buddhist Patriarchs in China, such as Great Master Lyan Chr (Lotus Pond), of the Ming Dynasty, Master Ngou Yi of the Ching Dynasty, and Great Master Syu Yun (Empty Cloud) of the Republican Era.

Students develop their foundation in virtue at the high school level, learning of patriots, heroes and worthy models of Eastern and Western cultures. They learn of selfless service to all humanity and of righteous conduct. At Dharma Realm Buddhist University, students investigate the primary sources of religious faith as spoken by their founding teachers: the Buddha, Confucius, Mencius, Plato, Mohammed, Jesus, as well as the great contributions of the translators and systematizers who make religions endure: Aquinas, Jwang Jou, and the Ven. Sywan Jwang, China's great pilgrim and translator. They learn and practice the wisdom and compassion found in Buddhist Sutras, as well as gain a thorough exposure to standard academic disciplines, texts and resources.

Does the foundation in Virtue-study work? Can Western students absorb and benefit from the lessons of filial respect?

Both parents and teachers will affirm that children will follow teaching they see and recognize as true in their hearts.

An Indian woman from the local Pomo tribe, native to northern California, entered the office of Dharma Realm University early this autumn.

"I've come to sign up my grandson Tommy in your regular-year school program. Then I want to go practice some of that bowing to the Buddhas I heard so much about from my boy. He just finished your summer program and I don't know exactly what you Buddhists are doing but it surely works. Tommy used to be the worst-tempered boy I ever saw. He always fought, never cleaned up his room or listened to me. I couldn't control him. But after six weeks in your school you wouldn't recognize him. He's a changed boy. I don't have to remind him, he looks for ways to help out at home and never gives me trouble or back-talk. He says he likes to please me. I can't believe a child can change so fast. In fact, he's made me want to look into this religion of yours. I'm just an old grandmother, but if your teaching can transform my grandson, it must have a lot to offer me, too. Do you have a course of study for old folks?"

The above talk was presented at the conference "Buddhism into the year 2000" in Bangkok, Thailand. See Vajra Bodhi Sea issue #238 for more information.