

How To Change Your Life

Transcribed from discourse given by Ven. Jian-Hu, Zen Buddhism I class,
Dec. 29, 2000, Buddha Gate Monastery

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Good evening cultivators! We are learning to observe the breath. That is the first step in meditation. We are learning to observe, observe things as they are.

Now this is what awakening is all about. The Buddha was a fully awakened person. Awakened or enlightenment means to see, to understand things as they really are. Understand everything: the world, the universe, your mind, people, and all other beings. Understand them and the self for what they are--not for what you think they are.

Impermanence Is A Fact of Life

We are not called Buddhas, we are not enlightened because we do not see the reality of things. We do not see impermanence as a fact of life. Observe how impermanence is a fundamental element in life. Think about how everything changes throughout your life, how everything comes to pass. New things come and go. Impermanence is all around us.

Suffering is the first of the fundamental truths that the Buddha taught in the Four Noble Truths. This first truth, suffering, is closely associated with impermanence. “Oh, our loved ones have departed, “ we would lament. “Such sorrow, such pain. Why did this happen?” We put the blame on life’s impermanence.

But if you take a closer look, impermanence by itself does not cause suffering. If a stranger died, you would probably not feel any pain. Instead you may think, “People die all the time. That’s life. All people must die one day.”

What is the difference? The difference is that when we come to know a person, we become attached to that person, and *that* is what creates the pain. When we care about someone, often we also simultaneously create an illusion, an illusion of permanence. We think that the person will stay the same, will always be there. We do not recognize, we ignore, or we choose to ignore the reality that all things change. That is the problem. Now this does not mean that we should not form close relationships nor that we should not care about others. What is important is to accept reality when impermanence hits. Do not delude ourselves or escape from facts. Delusion is what prevents us from becoming enlightened. We create a lot of delusions about people, about the world.

It is very important to recognize this. Whatever relationships that we encounter--with parents and children, husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, friends and classmates—do we not always have this inherent belief that “things will stay the way it is; we will always be

good friends; I will always have this good job” ? But this thinking goes against reality, we are not observing reality as it is. When we live in this delusion, we ignore things, we choose not to see things, we lie to ourselves. Then when something happens we are shocked by it. In truth, the world changes continuously. A lot of different conditions come into being. A lot of different factors come into play—things are always changing.

So impermanence is a fact of life. That in itself is not painful; it is not the source of our problems. Not recognizing impermanence, instead creating an illusion that things will stay the way they are for a long time--*that* is the source of suffering. The more we get attached to things, the less we can accept it when they come to pass, and the more pain we feel. To see life for what it is, to accept things as they occur, is an important lesson for us all. You need not believe in what I have just said. In his teachings, the Buddha always encouraged people to examine things for themselves.

When we live in illusion of permanence, when we cling to the past, then we will not be ready for the present. When things happen we are surprised, displeased, thinking it is unfair. And we wonder about the future. At some time or another, we have probably all asked questions like, “Why do these things happen? Why was I born? Why do these good/ bad things happen to me instead of others? Why are some people born so rich? Why are some people so poor? “ There are reasons. They are not accidents. There are reasons for everything.

Can The Future Be Foretold?

Many Chinese people in the olden times, and even nowadays, are very interested in fortune telling. “What’s my future?” They want to go find out, and so there are many fortunetellers around. Few of them even seem to be somewhat accurate. But nobody is a hundred percent accurate all the time. Now in the western world, in these modern times, how do we view this? Is it a superstition? Can future really be foretold? We shall soon understand.

In the Ming Dynasty there was a well-known man named Yuan, Liao Fan. When he was about five or six years old, he met a fortuneteller, who foretold his life. He said, “You will take a government examination when you are eighteen. You will get this grade and pass. You will then obtain a certain position in the government.” He even knew how much salary Liao Fan would get. “But,” he continued, “you will only go this far. You will not be able to get very high in the government. You will get married at this age. You will have no children. And then, you will die at the age of fifty-three.”

This is a true story. As Liao Fan grew up, everything that was foretold came true. When he took his government examinations, he got exactly the same grades, position, and salary that the fortuneteller predicted. He was amazed. “So life is predestined,” he thought to himself. “What’s the point in making an effort then?” So he came to believe that life and the future were all predetermined. How else was it possible for someone to foretell your future? “Things will just turn out the way it is supposed to. What would be the point of trying?” He stopped striving and took an easy life. He started traveling and sightseeing all over China.

One day he came upon a mountain. In that mountain was a monastery where a renowned Chan (Zen) master lived. He went in and saw the Chan master sitting in meditation. So Liao Fan sat down in meditation also. They sat that way for three days and three nights without moving.

The Chan master was quite surprised. “This is no ordinary person,” he thought. As we all know, having just sat through a half-an-hour session, that this was no easy feat!

The Chan master asked Liao Fan, “What experiences have you had in your life? How can you sit there without raising a single thought? You are very calm.”

Liao Fan told the master about the fortune-teller and his predictions, and then added, “I came to the realization that everything in life is predetermined. What is the point of doing anything? What is the point in raising any thought? I just take life as it comes. Things will run their own course.”

Upon hearing this, the Chan master laughed at him. “And here I thought you were someone extraordinary. Actually, you are only an ordinary man. Quite ordinary.”

Liao Fan was a bit upset. He was bright. At the age of eighteen, he passed his official exams, and received a fairly decent governmental post. Back in those days, this also was not an easy task! He did quite well for himself and was proud of the fact too.

He asked, “Why do you say that I am an ordinary person?”

“When you were six, someone predicted your life. It’s been twenty years since, and what he predicted is still true. This means that you are common like the rest,” the Chan master’s replied. “Ordinary people’s lives can be foretold while exceptional ones cannot be. For the very virtuous and very immoral people, their lives cannot be foretold.”

Liao Fan became curious.

Weaving The Future Pattern

The Chan master explained, “Why is it that your whole life can be prophesied? As you react to things the same way, a pattern forms. You don’t really learn, you don’t really change yourself. When someone gets angry with you, you get angry in return. When someone praises you, you are flattered, and then your pride becomes inflated. In the past you were like this, now you are like this, in the future you would still be like this. So the pattern continues.”

Whenever we think or do something, something called karma is created. Karma is action, and actions have effects on the universe, the cosmos; karma has an effect in Dharma realm. Whatever you do, the retribution will come back to affect you. This concept is actually very scientific. Newton discovered that, when you apply a force, a same and equal force from the opposite direction will return; for every action there is a reaction. This is just one of the special cases of karmic law. When we perform good deeds, good things will happen to you. When you perform bad deeds, negative things will come back to you. Anything that you do, performing an action or deed, you create karma. A corresponding outcome will thus be created. Its effect will show in due time.

Now there are people in this world who can tell the future, see the future “patterns.” Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, great cultivators, people with samadhi (people who have attained deep concentration states), they can see that. And then we have the fortunetellers who may also predict that. He may not be a Buddha or a cultivator. He may not even know how to meditate. But yet he can tell something about the future. Why? Simply put, fortune telling is based on statistics, a set of rules devised by observing many people and averaging out a common pattern.

There are signs that one can learn to observe. Some people can look at your face and tell something about you. It is a matter of acute observations and following some rules.

What we have done throughout our lives leaves imprints in the mind. Your gestures and physical characteristics become extensions of these imprints. The Buddha sees that the body and the mind are not separate entities, they are one of the same. Your face, your body reflects your mind. If you can learn to perceive this, you would have the ability to know more about a person. But nobody can be a hundred percent accurate.

Your future is the accumulation of all your actions done up to the present moment. Everything done from the past up to now weaves a future pattern. This is just causality. If we never improve or change ourselves and we react to situations in the same manner, then basically everything will run accordingly. For example, if I slapped you, I would be able to tell your future. You would probably get angry or slap me right back. That is predicting the future. I took a probable guess and predicted your future reaction.

Then why is it that the lives of virtuous people cannot be determined? They do not fall into the norm. Very virtuous people examine their own actions closely; they are constantly improving themselves, and so change their future constantly. Thus their future becomes difficult to determine. The same holds true for very immoral people. Their minds are constantly going on the wrong track. They always create evil karma and thereby alter their lives for the worse. In both these cases, the actions have fallen out of the norm, out of the range of predictability for that of an average person.

So the Chan master told Liao Fan, “Why do I say that you are ordinary? Because the predictions still hold true. You are of the average lot.”

“Are you saying then that I can change my future, that it doesn’t always have to be this way?” asked Liao Fan.

”Yes, certainly. And I will teach you.”

Understanding Causality

Now we come to a very profound concept: the causal relationship of all things. It is a fundamental Buddhist realization. If you wish to obtain a certain result, you need to do certain things. We need to examine, to recognize the right causal relationship of situations. You need to find the right cause and conditions that will create the right results. That is science. In fact, that is exactly what science and scientists do. They try to find the right causal relationships of things in the world.

If you do not want awful things to happen in the future, you can try to change it. As we have said, the future is determined by everything previous to it. Why did the fortuneteller predict that Liao Fan would die at the age of fifty-three? He must have preformed some action, some karma, to get this result. How does one change this? How do we live a longer life? We need to understand the causal relationships between long lives and short lives. If we do a lot of killing, we take away the lives of other beings. As a karmic result, we will have poorer health, or live shorter lives. And if in a single lifetime we kill excessively, we will live shorter lives or be killed for many lifetimes to come. This is causality.

Once we have understood causal relationships, we must not forget another important element: acceptance. Everything that happens to us, good or bad, is due to things that we have done previously. When we get into an “accident”, when we earn a good living, when someone dies, etc., if these things have already happened, then they are in the past. There is nothing else to do but to accept. We often say, “time can heal everything.” Does time heal anything? No. What happens is that as time goes by, we gradually accept reality. Acceptance, that is what heals. So why not accept things now, as they happen?

However, this is not the same as believing in a predetermined future. The point stressed here is to learn how to let go *now* instead of ten years later, then we will not suffer as much. Sooner or later you will have to accept. Wise people perceive things as they are, accept events as they come. This is not being pessimistic. This is being realistic. We can still try to change the world and change ourselves, because things can still be changed *before* they happen, not after.

The Chan master continued, “If you want to change the future, if you want to live a longer life, then you need to understand what are the causes for a long life. You need to stop acts of killing, and even more importantly, protect and save lives. Do things that can save people and animals. For example, donate medicine. Save animals from being slaughtered. When you perform these acts, you change your future.”

He then added, “Promise yourself to do a thousand good deeds. Perform a thousand virtuous actions to help others. Whenever you complete an act of goodness, mark it down in a book. Keep a track of these. Try to finish in three years.”

And so he did. One, two, three years finally passed and Liao Fan finished. He felt very happy. His life was more meaningful. He decided to make a new vow, a new resolve. “I will do ten thousand more over this many years,” he promised himself.

Gradually things began to change. The predictions were no longer accurate. He was not supposed to get any higher positions in the government but he got promoted. He was to have no children but he had two excellent sons. And then when he was fifty-three, he did not die. Liao Fan actually changed his future. When he was sixty-nine, he wrote a book about his realizations called, “The Four Lessons of Liao Fan.” (了凡四訓) It is still in circulation now and is even translated into English.

As we see, a large degree of the future is in our hands. I say to a large degree because there are still some things that are very difficult to alter. But our current actions can definitely change what is yet to come.

The Key to a New Future

The Buddha once said, “If you want to know what you have done in your past (including past lives), just look at what has happened in this life. If you want to know what will happen to your future, just look at what is being done in this life.” (欲知過去因，今生受者是。欲知未來果，今生作者是。) There is no need to go to a fortuneteller. All we need to do is to look at this life’s experiences. Has it been good? Has it been bad? Has it been mixed? If it has been mostly good and happy, then that means that in the past you have done many good deeds. You made others happy, you created good karma between you and other people. If most of your life has been unhappy and unfortunate, then that means that we have not planted good seeds previously.

We created a lot of bad karma. Just by understanding this Principle of Causality, you can tell about your own past. We do not need a fortuneteller or go to get hypnotized. The details, who you were, what you did, are not all that important. Why? It is already in the past. What would be the point? Take a deep look at this life and you will have a good general idea of the past.

As for our future, “If you want to know what will happen to your future, just look at what is being done in this life.” This is the key. There is an important difference between “what has happened” and “what is being done.” For example, if somebody treats you badly, that is a result of karma from the past. This is something that you are experiencing now, something that “has happened.” How you react to this situation though is “what is being done” and *this* will determine the events in the future. Do you understand? You cannot change what has already occurred. However, when you change your *reactions*, you change the future outcomes. If someone treats you badly that means that somewhere along the way, bad karma was created between the two of you. If you react to things in the same negative way and think, “He treated me badly, I will get him back, fair is fair,” then you have created the same cycle over again. This is samsara. It like playing ping-pong, hitting back and forth. The same situation happens over and over again. A predictable pattern forms.

If we understand this, we should be determined to change our reactions. Instead we say, “He treats me badly, I will forgive and forget. I will be like the vast empty space and let go.” Immediately the karma between the two of you changes for the better. Bad karma turns into good karma.

The future depends on what you have done, and what you do now. And what you do now comes from the mind and the thoughts that you have at this moment. That is why we need to meditate in order to become more mindful. Everything begins from the mind. Everything you do, everything you say. You need to be aware of the type of your thoughts that you are having. What are you thinking? How do you react to things? The change starts from there, the future changes from there.

Through awareness you can detect your thoughts, catch them before they turn into an action. It is like catching a thief before it commits a crime, and transforming the thief into a sage. Transform your thoughts into actions that will bring you happiness. Have thoughts of equality, of tolerance, of compassion. Then turn these thoughts into actions. Generosity and charity will bring you prosperity; giving comfort, solace and compassion will bring peace and blessings. Protecting life will give you good health and a long life. This is the Buddhist principle of causality. When you understand it, you take life into your control. Life then becomes very positive. You can always change things for the better, beginning at *this very moment*. Detect your thoughts, become aware. What are you thinking? Exam them closely. Catch yourself and ask, “am I falling back to my old ways, the old habitual ways of reacting? That is not being very mindful is it?” Become mindful, live a mindful life, that is cultivation.