Contemplation on the Four Practices of Entering the Way

Great Master Bodhidharma

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The Dharma Master was a native of southern India in the Western Regions, the third son of a Brahmin king. His innate wisdom was lucid and expansive: whatever he heard, he immediately comprehended. His aspiration lay in the Mahayana path; therefore, he cast aside white garments for the black robes, continuing and magnifying the sacred lineage. His mind rested in profound emptiness and stillness, while he clearly perceived the affairs of the world. He was illumined both inwardly and outwardly, his virtue transcending the ordinary world. Grieving that the true teaching had declined in these remote regions, he crossed mountains and seas from afar, journeying and teaching in the lands of Han and Wei.

Those who had relinquished mind all turned to him in faith; those who still clung to views gave rise to mockery and slander. At that time there were only Daoyu and Huike. Though these two sramanas belonged to a later generation, their noble aspirations were lofty and far-reaching. Fortunate to encounter the Dharma Master, they served him for several years, earnestly and reverently seeking his instruction, and capably received the Master’s intent.

Moved by their sincerity, the Dharma Master instructed them in the true Way: thus to pacify the mind, thus to undertake practice, thus to accord with circumstances, and thus to employ skillful means. This is the Mahayana Dharma of pacifying the mind, free from error and confusion. To pacify the mind in this manner is wall-contemplation. To undertake practice in this manner is the Four Practices. To accord with circumstances in this manner is to guard against mockery and censure. To

employ skillful means in this manner is to free them from attachment. This briefly recounts the circumstances of its transmission.

Preface by the disciple Tanlin

A Brief Discussion of the Mahāyāna Contemplation of the Four Practices for Entering the Path

There are many paths for entering the Way, but in essential terms they do not go beyond two kinds: entrance through principle and entrance through practice. Entrance through principle means awakening to the essential purport by relying on the teachings, and deeply believing that all sentient beings share the one true nature, though it is covered by adventitious defilements and deluded thoughts and therefore cannot be made manifest. If one relinquishes delusion and returns to the true, settles in wall-gazing contemplation, with neither self nor other, ordinary beings and sages equally one, abiding firmly and immovably, no longer following written words or teachings, then one secretly accords with principle. Without discrimination, serene and without contrivance, this is called entrance through principle. Entrance through practice means the Four Practices; all other practices are encompassed within them.

What are these four? First, the practice of repaying enmity; second, the practice of according with conditions; third, the practice of seeking nothing; fourth, the practice of acting in accordance with the Dharma.

What is the practice of repaying enmity? When practitioners cultivating the Way undergo suffering, they should reflect thus: “Throughout innumerable kalpas in the past, I abandoned the root and pursued the branches, wandering through the various states of existence. I gave rise to much enmity and resentment, and inflicted boundless harm and injury. Although I commit no offense now, this is the retribution of my past evil deeds; the fruit of unwholesome karma has ripened. It is not bestowed by heaven or human beings.” Accept it willingly and wholeheartedly, without grievance or complaint. A sutra says, “When encountering suffering, do not grieve.” Why? Because one understands and penetrates it. When this thought arises, it accords with principle. By taking enmity itself as the substance of one’s progress on the Way, this is called the practice of repaying enmity.

Second, the practice of according with conditions: sentient beings have no self; all are turned by karmic conditions. They equally undergo suffering and pleasure, all of which arise from conditions. Suffering, gain, superior rewards, honors, and other such matters are karmically invoked by causes planted in my past; only now are they received. When the conditions are exhausted, they return to nothing. What is there

to rejoice in? Gain and loss follow conditions, while the mind neither increases nor decreases. Unmoved by the wind of joy, one silently accords with the Way. Therefore this is called the practice of according with conditions.

Third, the practice of seeking nothing: ordinary people remain ever deluded, greedily attached everywhere; this is called seeking. The wise awaken to the true, their understanding opposed to worldly ways. They settle the mind in non-action, while the body follows the course of circumstances. All things are empty; there is nothing to desire or delight in. Merit and the darkness of ignorance constantly follow one another. Long abiding in the Three Realms is like dwelling in a burning house. Wherever there is a body, there is suffering; who can find peace therein? Understanding this, one relinquishes all states of existence, ceases discursive thought, and seeks nothing. A sutra says, “All seeking entails suffering; seeking nothing is joy.” It is thereby known with certainty that seeking nothing is truly conduct of the Way. Thus it is called the practice of seeking nothing.

Fourth, the practice of acting in accordance with the Dharma: the principle of the purity of intrinsic nature is called the Dharma. In this principle, the myriad marks are empty; there is neither defilement nor attachment, neither this nor that. A sutra says, “The Dharma has no sentient beings, for it is free from the defilement of sentient beings. The Dharma has no self, for it is free from the defilement of self.” If the wise can believe and understand this principle, they should practice in accordance with the Dharma.

The substance of the Dharma is free from stinginess. One gives through dāna, relinquishing body, life, and wealth, with a mind free of miserliness. One is liberated from the threefold emptiness, relying on nothing and attached to nothing; one merely removes defilements, responds through skillful transformation to sentient beings, and does not grasp at marks. This is self-benefit; moreover, one can benefit others and adorn the path to bodhi. Such being the case with dāna, so it is with the other five. To eradicate deluded thoughts, one cultivates the Six Pāramitās while there is no cultivation whatsoever. This is called the practice of acting in accordance with the Dharma.

End of Great Master Bodhidharma’s *Discourse on the Four Practices*.

Inscribed Eulogy for the Stele of Great Master Bodhidharma

Emperor Wu of Liang, Xiao Yan

Upon Lankā Mountain’s summit sits the Precious Sun;
within is a golden man, clad in a coarse brown robe.

His form is like the great earth, his substance like empty space;
his mind is like crystal, its color like snow.

Neither polished nor burnished, ever pure and bright;
parting clouds and rolling mist, his mind is wholly clear.
A white lotus adorns his body;
meeting conditions and things, he is ever serenely joyful.

Neither existent nor nonexistent, neither departing nor coming;
though vastly learned and eloquent, there is no Dharma to expound.
Truly real, truly empty, beyond arising and existence;
great or small, all conditions are cut off.

In a single instant he ascended to the mind of wondrous enlightenment;
leaping like a fish into the sea of wisdom, he arose as a former sage.
In principle, the Dharma-water should flow on forever;
how then could it briefly open and again be parched?

Within the pearl of the black dragon, the lamp of mind fell;
the wisdom-blade of the white curl met its sharp edge [text missing].
Upon the path of life, the wisdom-eye suddenly closed;
the Chan river ceased its flow, and the Dharma bridge broke.

No going, no coming, no right or wrong;
forms, selves, and minds alike are shattered.
Abiding here or departing hence, all return to quiescence;
within quiescence, how could choking sobs remain?

Take it in hand and pass on the lamp;
birth and death, coming and going, flash like lightning.
If one is utterly sincere and free of doubt,
even when the kalpa-fire burns, this lamp shall not be extinguished.

The Dharma of the One True Reality is wholly present;
for those not yet awakened, the deluded path here comes to its end.

Emperor Wu of Liang, Xiao Yan