



VIETNAM BUDDHIST UNIVERSITY SERIES



INNER FREEDOM

THICH NHAT TU



HONG DUC PUBLISHER

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8

INNER FREEDOM

(Third Edition)

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Edited by Dr. MANPREET SINGH

HONG DUC PUBLISHER

CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Preface	ix
Turn around and there is the shore	1
Temptation leads to suffering.....	3
Story of a robber who became enlightened	5
When stopping means beginning	6
Dropping violence and bad deeds.....	8
Controlling ego	9
Lessons in compassion.....	12
Changing for good	15
Contemplate everyday.....	19
Renewing your life.....	21
Creating life out of waste	23
Refreshing everyday life	24
Story of ambapali.....	25
Life is changing every moment.....	29
Never too late for a fresh start	31
Bad comparisons	35
Facing suffering courageously.....	38
Sharing amidst troubles.....	40
Renew life for happiness	45
Inner freedom.....	51
External freedom and inner freedom	53

Considerate actions.....	55
Attaining inner freedom.....	56
Freedom through meditation.....	57
Checking bad habits.....	59
Intelligent investigation.....	61
Controlling desires.....	64
Cultivating moral character.....	65
Renouncing the errant life.....	69
The cunning tiger.....	71
A sad life with no exit.....	73
Fruit of good deeds.....	76
Poems of regret.....	77
Consequences of wrong thoughts.....	79
Karma in buddhism.....	83
Misinterpreting errant life.....	88
Escaping traps wisely.....	90
Errant life is short.....	93
Your life can be changed.....	95
Turning around for a new life.....	98
Changing destiny.....	103
Amnesty as result of practice.....	105
The taste of freedom.....	106
Effort to renew one's life.....	108
Don't blame others for your own problems.....	111
Transforming by changing habits.....	114
Moving from suffering to happiness.....	117
Taking refuge in the triple gem.....	122
About the author.....	125

PREFACE

One of the great social problems of our contemporary world is the large and growing population within prisons. The hundreds of thousands of inmates, a large percentage of them young men who committed offenses in their teen years, create a financial and human burden that has reached staggering proportions. In the state of California in the USA, prison budgets now exceed the allotment for higher education. Those of us who visit and teach in prisons appreciate the willingness of a Buddhist leader such as Ven. Thich Nhat Tu to address this issue directly, showing tenderness and compassion for a group that are so often treated with indifference. He reminds us of how methods and policies affect the welfare of those who have violated concrete prohibitions of communities. As a Buddhist teacher he approaches this group with reference to individual conduct, and uses the counsel and advice based on precepts of his tradition.

In the teaching, he has used gentle and sensitive instruction aimed at the development of qualities and capacities latent in the individual listeners, abilities that can help them face their situation. Thus, his goal has been to assist the inmates by

giving help that will assist them in mastering some of the difficulties that are involved in prison life, providing them with new knowledge to use as a part of their mental life. It is difficult to fully comprehend the impact of his presence when he visits the facilities. For many inmates after a long period of being away from family and friends, there are no visitors, no letters, and no attention from loving and caring people. When Ven. Thich Nhat Tu enters to talk with them and spend time teaching and listening, he is seen as an individual but also in an iconic fashion as the very embodiment of morality and compassion.

His message gives solace; there can be an “Inner Freedom” even in the face of a daily life that is restricted. For many of the inmates, the hardest task is to live with the guilt they feel over their actions, actions that caused harm and sorrow to others. It is at this basic level of experience that the teachings provide the necessary quality for remorse to give the power to receive, hold, and absorb understanding of reality and the possibility of inner transformation. It is a message that can have application to all of us, as we face the problems of our past and present life.

Lewis Lancaster

Emeritus Professor, University of California, Berkeley
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PREFACE

The prison is a place where man is confronted with the consequences of his own actions and the circumstances of society and life which brought him into isolation by curtailing his physical freedom. “*This isolation from society restricting one’s physical freedom,*” notes Venerable Thich Nhat Tu in his series of jail talks, offers an opportunity to get to know oneself better. This is the first step on the path of good karma, which leads to discovering the inner spiritual freedom, so important for one’s own good and consequently for the benefit of the whole society.

Venerable Thich Nhat Tu, from his vast knowledge of Buddhist teachings and scriptures, gives interesting as well as inspiring talks which provide solace, comfort and hope to the jail inmates, guiding them to lead a good, meaningful and peaceful life. He helps the inmates to see their condition from a fresh and optimistic perspective and shows them that their experiences in jail and life are an opportunity to renew themselves for inner freedom and a rewarding life.

The range of subjects covered in these talks is immense: From *Turn around and There is the Shore* to *Renouncing the*

Errant Life, which further leads to *Renewing Your Life and eventually to finding Inner Freedom*.

These engaging Dhamma talks are instructive not for prison inmates alone. The emotional and spiritual issues faced by jail inmates are not that much different from the ones faced by us, even though we live without any physical restrictions being imposed by the society.

The cycle of temptations, suffering and the process of looking for inner freedom are not exclusive for any particular group of people, but apply for the whole human race and all sentient beings.

Ven. Thich Nhat Tu relates these all-encompassing and relevant issues to the background of our everyday lives where we strive to break free of desires and mental chains.

Wishing you a meaningful reading and a peaceful life.

Dr. Manpreet Singh

TURN AROUND AND THERE IS THE SHORE



A Dhamma Talk given to 2000 Jail Inmates at the prison K.20, Chau Binh village, Giong Trom district, Ben Tre province, on February 5, 2007.

Transcribed by Dieu Thuy and translated by Nguyen Long and edited by Marketa Zemanova and Joe Talibudeen.

TEMPTATION LEADS TO SUFFERING

We would like to begin today's Dhamma talk with a story called: *"The Eel and the Tilapia Fish"*. The eel and the tilapia were very close friends. One day, the eel discovered a fish trap net in which there were lots of tasty baits like sun-dried coconut meat, meat paste mixed with bran, and things like that. After trying the coconut meat, the eel thought of her friend tilapia and so she came back to invite her along. She said: *"Buddy Tilapia, I found a great food source and would like to share it with you"*. The tilapia replied: *"Well, I just had a breakfast and am still very full. Thanks for letting me know but you could just go ahead"*. The eel said: *"I don't want to eat by myself, come with me, there are many really tasty baits for us to enjoy"*. Thus the tilapia agreed and went along with the eel, although still full from the breakfast, but craving for some more tasty food.

The fish trap net had two open ends. The entrance opening was big but the exit opening was narrow, which made it very difficult to get out. The eel went in first. The tilapia was hesitant at first but then also went in after some words of encouragement from her friend. The eel ate the coconut meat and the tilapia ate the meat paste and bran. After finishing eating, the eel got out of the trap easily because of his narrow body. But the tilapia got stuck inside the net. The more she tried to get out, the more stuck she was which was causing her a lot of pain. The tilapia cried out: *"I'm stuck and can't get out!"* The eel thought that her friend was just playing. The story ended there. It is rather thought-provoking and philosophical in order to make everyone reflect. There are two

different motivations amongst the two friends. The eel wanted to share the food source with her friend although his good intentions ended up dooming the tilapia. Her friend would soon become a good meal for the fishermen. The tilapia ran after the fun of being in company although she was still full from a big breakfast, thus brought about the bad end. Inside the fish trapping net, there are always good baits. Such baits from the Buddhist perspective represent wealth, beauty, fame, food and entertainment, all of which are the worldly desires and temptations of contemporary life dominated by consumerism and materialism. The baits are always very tempting. But once one falls for them, that is the end. The pain is great. The tilapia could cry her eyes out and that would not save her. The eel at first thought it was just some game that the tilapia was playing, but once she found out what really happened, she also cried for her friend's fate.

Suffering can appear at any moment for anyone who gives in to temptation. The difference between a wise person and an un-wise person lies in whether they are able to control their desire or not. There are fish traps everywhere waiting to catch us. It is easy to go in but it will be extremely difficult to get out. And when one cannot get out, the suffering is unbearable. How then, at this point, can one turn around? It is a big question and it relates to the art and the technique involving effort, awareness, changing one's habits and one's way of life, and a combination of many other efforts. The way to turn around to reach the other shore of peace and happiness is the process of cultivating compassion. Buddhism makes it clear that once one turns, away from the worldly traps, then there

is another shore, but whether the journey to that shore is long or short, fast or slow, favorable or unfavorable, depends entirely on the will to avoid such traps. What the eel and the tilapia really wanted for peace and happiness was to get back to their water world, the world where they can live freely, play and enjoy. It is the same with human beings.

STORY OF A ROBBER WHO BECAME ENLIGHTENED

We follow with a true story about an ascetic (who later was known as the Buddha) and a bandit. The story describes an interesting conversation between the two of them. The bandit, who also was a ruthless killer, had a sharp dagger and was very strong and aggressive. The ascetic was a peaceful and a kind man who did not carry any weapon. His strongest weapon was his big noble heart. It was the heart of compassion towards all human and other sentient beings.

The kingdom of Sravasti back then under the rule of King Prasenajit was a kingdom of peace and prosperity. But when the notorious bandit Angulimala showed up, peace no longer existed. The king enforced a curfew in order to maintain a level of safety for the people. One day, following the ascetic's tradition, the Buddha left his cave and went into the village for the morning alms. To get to the village, he had to cross the wood where Angulimala was hiding.

The Buddhist lay people knowing the curfew hours, suggested that the Buddha remain in their houses while they checked the surrounding areas. They were concerned about their great teacher's safety.

The Buddha then asked: "*Why is there a curfew in this area?*"

The layman answered: *“My Teacher, the notorious bandit showed up in this area and so your alms would not be safe”.*

The Buddha said: *“If I see Angulimala, I will know how to deal with him”.*

The layman was very surprised. He said: *“Dear Teacher, you are not strong enough and don’t have any weapon. How can you deal with a cruel robber who is carrying dangerous weapons?”*

The Buddha said: *“Do not worry. I have compassion as my weapon. Compassion is a very valuable source of energy that could heal wounds, untie knots, and settle any breakdown in human relations. Trust me, I will be all right”.*

The Buddha then headed for Sravasti. After walking for about two hours, he heard some noise coming from behind him. He knew Angulimala was coming.

Angulimala with glowering eyes screamed at the Buddha: *“Monk, stop! I order you to stop!”*

WHEN STOPPING MEANS BEGINNING

The Buddha kept on walking as though he did not hear anything. Angulimala caught up with him and screamed at him again: *“Are you deaf? Why didn’t you stop at my order?”* The Buddha kept on walking without paying any attention to him. Angulimala then stood right in front of the Buddha and said: *“Who are you? How dare you? Everyone who heard my voice either trembled in fear or froze to death right on the spot. Only you dared to keep on walking. Do you want to die?”* The Buddha then said: *“I have stopped a long time ago. It is you*

who is still walking". Angulimala was very surprised hearing what this fearless monk just said: "Before I kill you, I'll give you a chance to explain what you just said. It's very strange. Maybe I'll learn something new". The Buddha said: "Anything unwholesome and dangerous, I stopped years ago. Even though you are still standing there; your dagger, your killer's mind and your anger are still moving at great speed. If you don't stop, life would be full of pain and suffering. I would like you to stop all the unwholesome habits of killing and hatred right now". Angulimala was enraged: "What did you say? You are asking me to stop killing? So many people have tried to harm me in this life. No one deserves to live. Life is despicable. No one has a good enough conscience and virtue that I could trust. If I don't kill them, they'll kill me. Prove to me that there is a compassionate being in this universe and why should I follow his path?"

The Buddha said: "There are many compassionate beings. It is just that you have not been fortunate enough to meet them. There are monks who are well instructed in compassion. They see everyone as their relatives. If you meet them, I'm sure all your resentments will dissolve".

Angulimala was moved by the Buddha's words. It might be true that there are kind-hearted people living around. Looking back at his long sinful life, he felt it was so difficult to turn back to the right path. He said: "Oh Monk, my numerous sins could fill the sky, how can I turn back to the right path? Even if I turn back, would the law spare me? How about all those people whose dead relatives were my victims, would they spare me? I cannot find answers to these questions."

The Buddha said: *“If you trust me as one among the compassionate beings, I can help you to turn back to the right path.”* “But how?” inquired Angulimala.

The Buddha said: *“I will ordain you to become a member of the Sangha. There you will learn about compassion, how to eliminate all defilements in your mind, your emotions, your habits, and your actions. There you will have a chance to change your old way of life. You will have a new life, breathing fresh air, surrounded by the open sky, enjoying the unhindered freedom of an ascetic mind. Follow me and become my disciple. But I can only help you if you truly are sincere and determined to turn back on the right path.”*

DROPPING VIOLENCE AND BAD DEEDS

Hearing those words, Angulimala dropped his knife. All the evil thoughts vaporized. He begged the Buddha to become his Teacher.

In Pali, Angulimala is composed of two words: Anguli, which means fingers and Mala, which means the chain. The reason people gave him that name was because after he killed someone, he would cut off the victim’s finger, drill a hole through it, and then append the finger to the finger chain that he wore around his neck. This was used to show off his power and to instill fear into people’s mind.

Seeing the Buddha was such a precious opportunity for Angulimala to change his sinful life. He was determined to turn to the virtuous path. The Buddha shaved his head, walked with him back to the monastery, and began teaching him about the law of causality, using a simple example. He threw a small stone into the water container. He asked

Angulimala to observe it and tell him whether the action has been completed. Angulimala said that the action was completed. The Buddha then asked him to observe the effects the stone had created on the water. Angulimala said that the stone caused interference in the water and thus the ripples lasted for about five to ten seconds until it totally settled again. The Buddha then said that it was the same with all human actions involving the body, speech, mind, and even those subtle thoughts lying deep within one's mind which eventually manifest into concrete behavior. Their effects continue to manifest just like the stone causing the ripples on the water surface. And like this one's actions could be beneficial to him and others or they could also bring harm, especially to those who are close to that individual. All of us must be fully aware and responsible for our actions – the ones already done, the ones we are doing and the ones we are about to do. By being fully aware of negative or positive behaviors, one is able to make the appropriate choice which will be beneficial to him and others.

CONTROLLING EGO

The short story was thought provoking and can provide some meaningful lessons. Firstly, the confrontation, if it happened, between the Buddha and Angulimala could become an unfair match. On the one side, there was a person who was without weapon. He had nothing but compassion and wisdom. On the other side, there was a person who was very strong, aggressive and fully armed. In the case of a fight, the Buddha would very likely become his next victim. Why was a potential fight transformed into a positive outcome? Before analyzing that point, let's investigate the threatening mentality of

Angulimala when he shouted: “*Monk, stop!*” It is a manifestation of an ego. The ego wanted to become a tiger, a gang leader, an establishment of control and domination. Because of that egoistic mentality, people do not recognize that their tone while speaking could bring so much pain and suffering to others, whether directly or indirectly.

There is a commonly quoted Vietnamese proverb: “*A price tag is worth three slaps*”. The price for threatening makes the other person worry, since they do not know when or where they will be attacked. The anxiety and worry dominates the mind. Joy and happiness disappear. A slap on the face can cause some pain but it will disappear in a few minutes. The dominating, controlling ego resides in each and every person. It is when one considers himself as the most important while others have to obey and follow. If the sense of self is not skillfully transformed, friendships and relationships will suffer. There will be a great wall or a mountain between oneself and others, including the dear ones. So to end all confrontations, it is necessary to see that the ego should be abandoned, it should be dissolved. Once the ego is abandoned, all hindrances in life between oneself and others will be lifted.

The second lesson is about stopping. The Buddha walked in a calm and serene manner. This is the calm and serenity of a purified mental state attained through stopping all unwholesome actions. When someone stops all negative actions –living in accordance with one’s own conscience, peace, and happiness -- one will no longer fear and be afraid of anything in life. All ups or downs, praise or insults, friends or foes, good or bad, winning or losing will no longer influence the individual.

The Buddha, in order to make Angulimala understand his teaching, through his skillful use of words said: “*I have stopped, but you are still moving*”. Moving and stopping should be understood symbolically. When someone, explicitly or implicitly, has an intention or acts in a way which can have negative impact on others, that individual is still moving. It takes great effort and determination to stop and turn around. Sometimes the effort is not strong enough to bear fruits. The skillful words and the serene attitude of the Buddha really made Angulimala to reconsider what he had been doing. The Buddha said that the one who repents returning back to the right path is like a bright moon shining its light without being covered by dark clouds. The dark clouds block all the light coming from the moon. Pain, suffering and all things unwholesome are like those dark clouds. To bring forth the light, the dark clouds must be cleared away. To stop is to turn around. Stopping is an action that allows one to switch the direction of where he is heading. If in the past, one’s direction was unwholesome, then one’s stopping will open the door for a wholesome future. Angulimala was aware that the stopping all unwholesome thoughts and attitudes was a must.

The third lesson is about the question Angulimala posed to the Buddha: “*In this life, why do I need to have compassion?*” Any pain or suffering caused by others in the past, cannot be the basis of an entire outlook on life. One cannot blame the whole population just because some individual caused him pain. Blaming everyone is an action that will only cause more pain to others. A vengeful mentality in life itself stems from some concrete personal

pain. But that mentality clouds the mind from recognizing actions that are right from the wrong ones.

Feudal or gang mentality will always end in mutual destruction. Stronger clans destroy the smaller. In a world that operates in the “an eye for an eye” way, joy and happiness are lost. Pain and suffering numb one’s conscience. Vengeance can become a need or necessity. There is an urge to act like a strong notorious man. All those notions are false. Pain and suffering need to be stopped, not spread. One who brings sorrow to others ultimately brings sorrow unto himself. Besides, meeting vengeance with more vengeance is an endless cycle. It will never stop.

LESSONS IN COMPASSION

Understanding and compassion are the great lessons we all learned from the way the Buddha treated Angulimala. Understanding and compassion must walk hand in hand. The Buddha clearly saw and understood the motives of Angulimala. If the Buddha had answered his threat with the same negative reaction, a fight would certainly have started. There is no winner in a fight. There is only a total loser and a partial loser, a totally miserable one and a partially miserable one. Understanding and compassion must be manifested through the words, the kind look and the expression.

The Buddha’s calm composure showed the sharp contrast with the natural instinct of fearing death and desiring life seen in most people, which is a common trait in all sentient beings. That is why it is pretty easy to tell that

someone with a happy smile, joyous eyes, and lively walk is being happy, as suppose to someone with sad eyes, long face and dragging walk is sad. With his composure, the Buddha showed Angulimala that a mental state full of vengeance and hatred would not bring happiness. The Buddha showed that there are seeds of suffering and seeds of happiness within each person. The seeds manifest themselves through actions. Actions slowly become a personality because of repeated habits. People tend to stick to their own personality. They rarely want to transform any negative habits that they have. Thinking that a personality is unchangeable, one would stubbornly cling to it without any consideration for others. But by doing that, one inevitably seals ones' own unfortunate destiny. The Buddha makes it clear that there is no set destiny, fate, or order of a higher being that pre-arranges the happiness or misery of an individual. It is one's attitude, speech, action, thought, behavior, work and way of life that shape one's destiny.

It is the person himself, alone, who is the author, the director, the actor, the culprit, the accomplice, the tempter, the company, and no other except himself, has to accept and live with all the consequences of the actions that one has created.

There are always seeds of compassion. People saw Angulimala as a killer and wanted to hunt him down. When a member of their family became a victim of his act, the entire family wanted revenge for him. Vengeance will keep piling up with time. The seeds of compassion are forgotten and never get the chance to be watered and developed. People no longer have happiness. Since there is no happiness, the words are harsher and eyes are filled with hatred. Buddhism shows that the individual's

thoughts generate a human field around him that can be felt by others although it cannot be seen or touched. This affects the interaction between individuals. This explains why people have negative or positive impression when seeing each other for the first time. It is all connected to the state of the mind, whether manifested intentionally or not. Form is manifested, depending on the state of mind. The mind is the director that directs the body. When the seeds of hatred are watered, this mental state will dominate all other emotions. Other wholesome seeds and happiness will be neglected.

The Buddha said that hatred would not dissolve hatred. It only piles up more pain and suffering. “*An eye for an eye*” may be a just law of the feudal society but it is not a just law of happiness. Most people would want to pursue happiness, not sorrow. So the jungle law needs to be replaced by the law of compassion. There is a Buddhist proverb: “*Nullify knots, nullify knots, and nullify all animosity knots*”. To nullify is to open. Animosity knots are all the animosity, hatred, vengeance, pain or suffering caused by one self or others, intentionally or unintentionally. All those knots, if not nullified in this life will be carried over to the next. Just like the Buddha’s stone parable, those ripples caused on water surface, the consequences of negative actions will continue to follow one throughout his life and all following lives. That is why one ought to try and untie the knots between oneself and others.

Why did the Buddha ask to nullify and then to open? There is certain kind of animosity that is so intense that the act of turning around is not enough. The other party might

still hold some grudge and is not ready to forget everything. They are not ready to open their arms to welcome everyone. That is why there is a need to try again the second time, or the third time, until mutual happiness comes about. Notice the rose blossoming on the twig that is full of thorns. Just like that, there are always people around you who will bring sorrow and pain. But that does not stop the rose from blossoming. There are many roses just like there are also beautiful people in this world. There are teachers, artists, ascetics, and so on. If one sees and interacts with them, then compassion will grow just like the blossoming flowers. It was unfortunate that Angulimala only saw the thorny part of the flower, not the rose itself. The whole world appeared treacherous and dangerous in his eyes. It is stifling like there is not enough oxygen. And if the world has generated too much CO₂, then he would retaliate with even more CO₂. Eventually there will be no oxygen left for anyone to breathe. That is why it is important to turn around and abandon all acts of violence or hatred and replace them with understanding and compassion.

CHANGING FOR GOOD

According to the Buddha, transformation involves two factors: Change and replace. Sometimes one only needs to change the environment from a negative to a positive one. Sometimes there is a need to replace. To replace one's unwholesome thought and behavior with wholesome ones is just like replacing the contaminated air full of CO₂ with refreshing oxygen. Oxygen stands for compassion, tolerance, joy and forgiveness. Whoever is willing to do this, a world of happiness will open up to him.

Angulimala said one thing that is very understandable: “*It is too late Oh Monk, I created too much sin and I killed too many people, will the law would spare me? Will the victims’ relatives forgive me?*” Those questions reflect some flashes of conscience and also a potential careless attitude to continue down the dark path if life does not welcome him back. There are two mixed states of mind: one filled with guilt and one of carelessness. The feeling of guilt is only the first step toward transformation. From the feeling of guilt, one has the tendency to inflict the damage to oneself to make up for what one had done to others. In some cases, some went as far as committing suicide.

The Buddha said: “*Self-infliction is not equivalent to turning around, and true turning around is not a shift in direction but a change for the better*”. If a hand did harm to others, that same hand must know how to be like a cane that helps the elders cross the street. If a hand was used to punch or slap someone, that same hand must find a way to take care of the elders, the unfortunates, the disabled, the blind, and all those who need help. Any action that brought fear and terror would need to be replaced by acts of compassion, tolerance, development and care.

Only when one carries out those wholesome actions, the process of transformation starts. This is a big necessity. Feeling of guilt by itself would only bury one even deeper inside their misery without the hope of getting out of it. One needs to be fully aware of what was done and carry out concrete and positive actions. The wholesome actions will bring happiness. Express one’s repentance through

wholesome deeds. Careless attitude will also bury one deep into their past without direction, mounting miseries, loss of friends and relatives, and loneliness in one's own world. It would be a world without future.

While recalling previous incidents in one's life, some will shed tears. Some cannot find the way back, maybe because the opportunity for turning back was not there, or one's misery was too severe to have any care for life. One then continues on the path of misery, becoming one's own victim. Why turn oneself into a miserable victim?

The Buddha taught: *“Take care of your self. Compassion for others is obvious. But that compassion can never be fully manifested unless one takes care of oneself with wholesome actions. Take care of the body and protect it from harm. Take care of emotions and do not let them be dominated with pain and suffering. Take care of views and do not let them fall into the state of restlessness. Take care of one's life so that one's relatives and loved ones will not become lonely beings. One will see that one is not lonely. He or she is closely connected with relatives, parents, siblings, loved ones and friends”*. Love and kindness need one's presence, one's care, and one's responsibility to create a life of happiness. The nature of happiness and suffering are inter-dependent. When there is oxygen, everyone can breathe. When there is CO₂, no one can breathe. One's own happiness or suffering is directly related to one's parents, relatives and loved ones. Because everything is inter-dependent, one needs to take great care in every action. One will not do harm to oneself and to others. It is never too late to turn around and head for the right path. If one is ninety or a hundred years' old, or even before one dies, it is never too late to turn around. If one doesn't turn around,

he will be unconsciously dragged around by the law of causality forever. The law of causality can never be corrupted, bribed or conquered by anything. It is of utmost accuracy and fairness.

The Buddha said: *“When the seed of an unwholesome deed bears fruit, even if one flies high into the limitless space, goes deep down into the core of the earth or the ocean, or hide inside deep caves and mountains, the consequences will always reach him no matter where he is”* It is because the nature of causality is not influenced by space and time. It comes to one when the time and the consequences are right, when one has exhausted his good merits, and when the interaction of the multi-dimensional cause and effect is ripe. It is a natural process that is related to all actions caused by people in this and all lives. The process of transformation taught by the Buddha was analogous to the process of washing a vase. Sentient beings are like vases. Unwholesome actions or emotions that lead to pain and suffering, any careless attitude about life, direct or indirect harm done to others stand for the taints on the vase. When one no longer uses his hand to cause suffering, or when one is aware of the bad things that he had done, one will develop a need to wash away all the taints one had created. After that all the water that is poured into the clean vase will retain its freshness. Of course, if there are too much taints and dirt, then it will take a long time, maybe months or years to wash away all of them. In short, the process of transformation is just like the process of washing away the dirt and taints on a vase.

Secondly, one needs to learn the method of contemplation on compassion. There is the seed of compassion in everyone.

People love their parents, spouses, children and loved ones. The seed is there, but is often neglected or sometimes even suppressed with heavy stones of hatred.

The Buddha was different from uninstructed beings in the sense that he clearly saw the seed of compassion deep within the notorious bandit Angulimala's mind, whom everyone feared, hated, and wanted to take vengeance upon. The seed of compassion needs to be watered and fertilized so that it can grow. When it develops, Angulimala will first be able to take care of himself, and then of his family. His family will no longer have the guilty feeling of being the relatives of a notorious killer. They will no longer feel the stress from the community and the society. All pain and suffering will be dissolved. The Buddha clearly saw the seed of compassion and that was why he taught Angulimala to contemplate and cultivate the seed of compassion in every action, thought, speech and behavior.

CONTEMPLATE EVERYDAY

The Buddha taught: *“Before bedtime and after waking up, contemplate this energy source of compassion spreading to all of one's actions, one's relatives, loved ones, then also spread it to everyone around, even including one's enemies”*. It is easy to love one's loved ones. It is also not too hard to love people around oneself. But it is very difficult to love one's enemy. Why should one love one's enemy? If not, then both the person and his enemy will become victims of hatred and both will be unfortunate beings. Express compassion through spreading its energy. It can compensate the negative effects of bad actions. If one was full of anger and hatred in the past, compassion

will transform these negative energies. Contemplating on compassion will help one dissolve all stagnation in the past. Hatred is like CO₂. Imagine a house with a blocked chimney. If the CO₂ cannot get out, everyone in the family will be in danger. Oxygen stands for happiness. If one's life is filled with CO₂ like misfortunes, disasters, mishaps, then one will need to know how to unblock the chimney. It is for the sake of oneself and the whole family. One needs to quarantine the zone of suffering by injecting a strong vaccine into the body. That way, the viruses of greed, anger and delusion cannot spread to other areas and eventually they will be destroyed altogether. Only then happiness will arise. Being taught by the Buddha about the wonderful process of transformation, Angulimala became a wholesome and virtuous person.

RENEWING YOUR LIFE



A Dhamma Talk given to 400 ex-prostitutes at The Phu Nghia Center of Social Services, Binh Phuoc province, on March 6, 2007.

Transcribed by Le Quang Tuan Vu and translated by Vien Bao An.

First of all, on behalf of the Buddhism Today Foundation, I would like to extend my gratitude to the board of directors at the Phu Nghia Re-education Center. Given this precious opportunity, we were allowed to pay a visit to you all after the fifteenth day of the Lunar month of January, and bring you our spiritual support by coming here and speaking to all of you today. The chief director of the Center has just quickly announced that there will be an exciting show performed by singers and professional artists who were invited to come for your entertainment. They are on their way from Ho Chi Minh City, and the show will be held in about an hour or so. We very much hope that by organizing this show we can bring a lot of joy and laughter for everyone to share. And at this moment, I would like to tell you a story entitled “*Renewing Your Life*”.

CREATING LIFE OUT OF WASTE

During the period between the years 1994 and 2002, we studied abroad in India. We lived in a beautiful and very clean city called Chandigarh. Most tourists who come to travel in India list Chandigarh city as one of their “must-see” destinations. It is located in the region of Punjab, which is widely known for its artistic inspiration and scenic beauty. There are many interesting sites attractive for tourists within this city, but the most attractive one is rather ordinary in its nature.

At this site, you will encounter an elderly artist whose hobby is to look for and collect different pieces of junk disposed from toilets. Throughout the past 10 years, he has created masterpieces out of this junk and displayed his works in a 10 acre open field. There are many statues, flowers, and

images made to capture the values of India' cultural history and many other countries' in the world.

Junk that comes from our bathroom, is often regarded as a worthless stuff. But in the eyes of a good-hearted artist, this junk can be turned into invaluable masterpieces. We cannot help thinking that this old junk could not be given any face value by us, whatsoever. Although these are by themselves only objects of everyday use, when put together by the artist they come to resemble a figure, a mountain, a drawing, or a famous architecture.

What gives this discarded junk that the artist collected so much of aesthetic value and appreciation for spectators? It is the artist's heart and creativity. All of this junk cannot generate the process of self-renewal. They were renewed only by an artist who can recognize their true beauty with his eyes and a true heart.

REFRESHING EVERYDAY LIFE

In Buddhism, everyone is encouraged to refresh their lives on a daily basis. From what we have received out of life, we can re-use it by giving it a new perception. Almost all of us are granted with the presence and caring love of our parents, our family members, friends, our neighbors, and our community. Only by reaching out to one another can we generate the process of self renewal for every one of us, present here, who wishes to make a positive change in their life. We strongly believe that as long as you are determined to go through the process of self renewal, your accomplishments will be as worthwhile and humane as those of the artist in Chandigarh.

Where can we begin to renew our life? It is a question that most people do not have the answer for. Renewing your life does not mean that you intend to end your life by committing suicide or be reborn into your next life. What it means is that using what you already have such as your eyes, your face, your features, your own hands, your head, your present job, you will only change your perception of yourself as a person and achieve a new awareness about your life from this moment onward. By changing the way you look at life, actions you take in accordance to your new awareness will benefit you as well as the community in which you reside. Therefore, renewal of our lives on a daily basis is one of our most relevant needs in order to lead a good life. These efforts not only cost us nothing, but also help us see our weaknesses and mistakes not as something to be ashamed of. They help us to look at them from a new perspective.

STORY OF AMBAPALI

About 26 centuries ago, in India, in the city of Vesali, lived a Buddhist nun. She was an orphan, named Ambapali. In the Pali language, the word Ambapali is comprised of two words with separate meaning (Amba means mango and Pali means mango leave), combined meaning a mango orchard. This beautiful woman was named Ambapali for a mango orchard, where she was actually born. Ever since birth, she had never known who her parents were.

India was a country with a deep-rooted caste system in which people were solely associated with their caste status. People who belonged to royal Brahmin families would always

keep their royal blood within their families. People who were born in merchant families would never have to worry about losing their wealth, whereas people who were unfortunately born into the lower caste, which was the slavery caste, would forever stay slaves. The caste system was created to be extremely exclusive within each caste and did not respect personalities or abilities of individuals whatsoever. Being an orphan, Ambapali was classified under the caste of slaves. Since her childhood, she had to work for the people of higher castes to survive. Ambapali was treated poorly because of her impure background as a slave. She was beaten, treated disgustingly, and was constantly hungry. Her life's suffering symbolized a heavy gender and class stratified society of India in that time.

After reaching the age of 13, Ambapali's attractive appearance became apparent. There were many young men who would fall in love with her on first sight. Her beauty created such an irresistible attraction that men who were drawn by her beauty came to offer her gifts and their help. Receiving their help, Ambapali's hardship was becoming smaller and smaller. At that point, she felt her life was changing for better and that she would no longer have to live the life of a slave. Instead, she started to spend her time with different men, bringing them happiness in her company in exchange for a more comfortable material lifestyle. In her awareness, she was leading a happy life because she was no longer hungry from lack of food, had money to spend, and was always surrounded by countless numbers of suitors.

Ambapali's reputation soon spread to the Vesali royal palace. She was sent to Vesali to accompany local royal patrons to bring

them pleasure. Life set another turning point for Ambapali. Now she was living a life of luxury and affluence as that of any aristocrat from Vesali. Wanting to make Ambapali their own possession, men became jealous and engaged in conflicts with one another over her. As a result, Ambapali was forced to be with different patrons from time to time. Ambapali soon realized that the nature of this lifestyle caused more suffering and instability than happiness in her life. She felt trapped, yet unsure to stop pursuing a life of committing herself to men because of her patrons' persistence in keeping her around. One journey of love after another journey sucked Ambapali into a vicious circle of physical and material pleasures.

Nearby Vesali, in a neighboring country lived a king named Bimbisara, who was known for his kindness. In the old time, powerful countries with strong military powers would conquer neighboring countries to annex new territory and became bigger nations. King Bimbisara defeated Vesali. As the result, one of the compensations he won out of the war with Vesali was Ambapali. Because the King had fallen in love with Ambapali, he wanted her to be his. After the war, the King finally obtained her as Ambapali's patrons reluctantly gave her up.

The King attempted to make Ambapali his queen. However, there was a strong public opposition towards the marriage, due to Ambapali's coming from a lower caste. The existing status quo in Indian society made it almost impossible to break the taboo of inter-caste marriages. Marrying Ambapali meant that the King's royal status would be disgraced and all of his people would lose respect for their King. Ambapali continued to live an

unmarried and illegitimate life with the King knowing that she could never have a future with him because their love could never be recognized. Ambapali's suffering was amplified as her life was threatened constantly by the attacks from the King's jealous wives. Ambapali barely survived several assassination attempts aimed at her. In the end, Ambapali had to leave her King in despair and returned to her hometown. Upon her leaving, she found out that she was pregnant with the King's child. She had no family and no money and on top of that, she had a child to bring up. Compared to the affluent life she used to have in the past, Ambapali was devastated to start living a life of hardship all over again.

Her son was a handsome boy. He had a charisma that assembled both of his parents' beauty. Despite his popularity among young girls, the son wanted to become a monk. After attending one of Buddha's lectures, he asked his mother's permission to give up his worldly life to pursue the life of an ascetic. After her son was gone, Ambapali's life did not get any better. Sometimes, she had thoughts of killing herself to escape suffering. Once when coming back home to visit his mother, her son witnessed his tormented mother's suicidal attempt. So he sat down with her and talked to her about the nature of life which was impermanent and changing constantly and how human bodies are subject of aging.

Youth and beauty are impermanent because people cannot turn back the hands of time to stay young and beautiful forever. Once we grow older, our body deteriorates causing sickness and suffering. Life is as short as the blink of an eye. Before we know it, we already

arrive at the other end of our life and are tempted to look back to our youth as it was just yesterday, with regrets. People are nostalgic about their youth, their beauty, their talent, and their health. While facing old age, regretting the life that passed so quickly, the remaining lifetime seems drastically unbearable to some people. All of the good old things suddenly come alive. People start feeling that youth and the times they had were always so much better than what they have to face now. There are two ways to look at impermanence.

LIFE IS CHANGING EVERY MOMENT

First perspective: Life changes constantly. Life is impermanent because it never stays the same. Things come and go. We can have our best memories, our happiest times, our best accomplished moments, and so forth. Because they come to us, the same way they will leave us soon after that. Time goes by, regardless whether we like it or not. We grow old and it is beyond our control. And that is the natural law and we cannot change it with feeling incompetent, depressed, lonely, or inferior. They are very negative feelings which can influence us badly in judging our situation and finding the answers to our problems.

Second perspective: If you take a look at the leaves on a tree in fall, you find that all of them gradually turn from green to yellow and also gradually fall off until the trees are left entirely bare. In a deeper meaning for this phenomenon, the falling of the yellow leaves opens a new beginning for green leaves to come to life. Without the sacrifice of the yellow leaves,

there would be no miraculous re-appearance of beautiful green leaves for us to enjoy.

Men and women both become scared when they witness their body aging. Experiencing youthful appearance gradually fading is one of the most psychologically upsetting experiences that human beings are willing to endure. The monk told his mother: *“Mother, please be sad no more. Maturity enables you to see wisdom out of the life in which you were living. You can learn a lot from all the things that you have been through. Your life is worthwhile every second”*.

The monk referred back to one of the statements made by the Supreme Buddha:

“The thing that stands out as the most worthwhile doing, during one’s lifetime is one’s ability to stand up again on his/her feet after the fall”. The saying has two implications, the first of which indicates the fact: It is natural that people fall. People encounter rough turns sometimes during their life and as the result, they fall. Each time people meet difficulty, it causes painful experiences. The causes vary. They can be a swelling on the ankle, headaches or bleeding from stepping on sharp objects.

All of the times we fall, it leaves us with a painful experience. As by our karma, we are all different in our characters, we have different ways of reacting to pain. Some stay moaning upon their wounds, some scream and cry, some hope somebody else would come to give a hand, whereas some manage to get up again with their own effort to overcome the difficult situation. Even with that, if we ignore the sharp piece remaining in the wound and continue to walk, we end

up bleeding more and hurt more from the wound until we collapse. The second implication of the statement gives us a motivation to rise above our own misery and suffering in order to find happiness again. The best way to do it in order to stop the pain is to first find the wound, take whatever is causing the bleeding out and get back on our feet again. Even if we can no longer stand, we can still crawl using our remaining strength and energy. Like this we will be able to keep on moving.

NEVER TOO LATE FOR A FRESH START

In human values, as long as we are determined to cure our wounds each time we fall, it is always possible to start our life once again in happiness. Our life can always be renewed. Chance for a better life can only be possible when we make that opportunity come to us. Ignoring your wounds, feeling victimized in your unfortunate situation, or feeling nostalgic about life that has passed, only causes you getting deeper into denial and confusion.

The young monk helped his mother to practice: *“Look at trees in fall when old leaves have to shed before new leaves come out, bringing new life for the trees. Your suffering in the past can only make you appreciate happiness in present and in the future. The essence of life is when you can recognize its’ value. Essence of life cannot be found in the past because it lies in the present. Therefore, if you live your life in the moment, you will see how many good possibilities, like fresh air to breathe, nice clothes to wear, good food to eat. The value of life is to enjoy what is present”*.

The young monk did his best trying to help his mother let go of her painful past. However, her being relatively inexperienced about real life, his advice was not convincing enough to her,

who had seen and been through a lot of awful experiences in life. Ambapali was so attached to her suffering that it kept her unable to pull herself out of her miserable past.

A few months later, it was heard that the Supreme Buddha would come to town to deliver his teachings and the young monk persuaded his mother to attend the talk. Ambapali agreed to go.

During the lecture, the Supreme Buddha gave Ambapali special attention as he preached to her and listened to her life's story.

Ambapali told him: *“Dear Great Buddha, my life is full of misery, too many mistakes and regrets. Now I have no desire to live any longer. Please advise me with your wisdom before I commit suicide.”*

Buddha replied: *“What is the reason that makes you want to end your life? Life is beautiful. There are many things that give meaning to our lives such as our family, our loved ones, the community surrounding us, and so on. What makes you not wanting to live?”*

Ambapali briefly explained to Buddha about her background, her occupation, and her loss of happiness. She thought her life was miserable because of her good appearance and beauty had led her to live a life full of trauma, deceit, and dissatisfaction. Therefore, once she killed herself she would no longer feel suffering.

Then, Buddha told her: *“I don't see any connection between having a beautiful appearance and living a life full of suffering. Being beautiful does not make your life miserable, but it is essential to ask how you use your beauty during your lifetime. Suffering is an emotion responding to our perception, for our perception*

determines every action we take. You made mistakes because you had thought the wrong way, which then drew you on to the wrong path that you mistook for the right direction. The easy way is not always the right way. You may feel pleasant and happy for a while in the beginning, but it is not a life that generates real long-term happiness. Ending your life now does not erase the truth and the suffering you have been through and you will carry it on to your next lives. Not to mention, the suffering you will pass on to the people who care for you and love you dearly. Your son and your neighbors will be hurt a lot by your death. Even though your son is now a monk, he won't be feeling any better grieving his mother's death than anyone else in this world. Besides, all of your friends and people whom you met and grew close to will be devastated to know that you ended your life like that. Therefore, because of your son and all of your good friends, you should live, and you should live with a good faith. By believing in renewing your own life, new happiness will come to you to make up for your unfortunate loss and agony in the past”.

Ambapali replied: “The only thing I knew how to do was to please men. Besides that, I have no other skills. If I have to continue living, I have no other choice but going back to do the work that I did in the past in order to support myself. In your opinion, what should I do for my living?”

Great Buddha said: “We can do anything as long as we have two hands to work, and we can walk in our life in any directions we wish as long as we have two legs to walk on the path we choose for ourselves. There are many paths to choose from in life: smooth paths as opposed to trails, bumpy roads filled with stones or holes. No matter what the roads are, we can still walk as long as we have our feet. In protecting our feet from the bumpy roads, we ought to have

a pair of sandals. Being placed on the bumpy roads cannot make us stop moving forward because what we have to do is to put on that pair of sandals for our protection against the bumpy road. Different roads symbolize different kinds of work. The right livelihood is when we use our own labor to earn a living. Using your labor to work is very hard and tiring, yet it does not give you emotional exhaustion, self pity, disrespect, and rumors judging you because of what you do. Therefore, if you can find yourself a good supportive system that can prepare you for the bumpy road, you will get to the desired destination with your will and determination”.

Ambapali: *“The job which I did was no doubt my own labor. It was an art that required high skills in pleasing men and knowing what to do to make them happy. I had to work hard to earn a living. I did not beg any men for money. I made my own money with my own labor. Why is it so wrong then?”*

Great Buddha answered her: *“When looking at the face value of your job, it is hard work that pays well. But your job created the desire for lust and infatuation that can make men lose themselves. Hence, values and responsibilities which men ought to have towards their families and society can be neglected, or worse, be destroyed because of their unfaithfulness. Therefore, you should give up your past job and find a new job that gives you positive associations in order to build a sense of new purpose in life”.*

After their talk, Ambapali realized a lot about her past and what she had to do to relieve her suffering. She started looking for and found herself a new job. For the first time in many years, Ambapali felt happy and peaceful. During her youth, she bought and owned a mango orchard from the money she received from her patrons. The orchard was able to earn Ambapali a large amount of profit, enough to make end needs. However, she

never once felt proud about the orchard and that it belonged to her because it reminded her of her shameful past. Even though she realized that her ownership of a mango orchard was her only property that she had gained in her life and her possession of that orchard made her happy, it was rooted in the cause of other people's suffering. It was the loss and tears of those women whose husbands Ambapali once served. Her life's comfort was founded on some else's loss. Having understood this, Ambapali wanted to offer her mango orchard to Buddha to make up for her mistakes. The Great Buddha kindly accepted the orchard and built a large monastery on that land. In that new monastery, there were lots of people who came to study and practice Buddhism in search for rejuvenation, and many acquired it.

This is a true story that took place about twenty six centuries ago. It entailed many lessons and implications which we can apply to benefit our own lives. First of all, Ambapali's natural attractiveness was her blessing. Despite her low caste status, Ambapali was much more fortunate than many women who did not have a good appearance. She didn't have to go through a life of a slave due to her beautiful appearance. Through marriage, chances for beautiful girls to alter their life for the better were commonly possible. If the girls knew how to use their advantage wisely, they could later be content with their accomplishment. Nevertheless, Ambapali was not satisfied with her life. She constantly compared herself with other girls, who unlike her had parents and were adequately raised and educated.

BAD COMPARISONS

A poor and stratified society puts its people through a life of hardship and dissatisfaction. Once having lost their

direction, people are more likely to have a tendency of jealousy. Comparing yourself with others can happen in two ways: You can learn goodness from others or you can imitate others for your own personal gains. If we misuse comparisons, we can bring a whole lot of dissatisfaction into our lives. Ambapali is an example of a person who had a distorted view of her own reality. She was upset seeing other girls who were fortunate enough to be born into high class families. Even when she was much better off than those of her same caste, Ambapali remained feeling jealous because she could only see people who had power and more money than she ever wanted in her life. She felt dissatisfied and was unable to be happy with what she had because of what she did not have. She thought to herself: *“I am a beautiful woman, much more beautiful than many other women. But why is it that I cannot be as affluent as they are? Shouldn’t I have the right to desire that lifestyle?”* In order to make up the gap between her own situation and the vanity of the lifestyle in which she wanted to live, Ambapali came to seek patrons who could provide her means to pursue such a lifestyle. Ambapali became a courtesan.

In Buddhism, the act of comparison is viewed from two angles. First comparison is: *“On tiptoe, reaching hands”*.

Comparing ourselves with someone who is more successful, happier than us in order to learn from them is a worthwhile effort to have a good life. If we are not careful in selecting an appropriate comparison, we can become too self-important to appreciate the roles of other people in our lives. We need to choose the right people with whom we compare, so that self reflection and comparison could be beneficial for our personal growth. People who generate

and create good deeds in their lives are some of the people we should use for comparison. For instance, for any of you here who admire renovation play actress Lê Thủy, should try to practice alongside her voice if they want to improve their vocal skills.

In Buddhism, there is a saying: “Everyone is a lotus bulb. In greeting, we Buddhists greet one another by putting our hand palms together in front of our chest. The gesture symbolizes lotus bulbs. Fully blossomed lotuses represent fully awakened people. Each and every one of us is regarded by Buddhism as a lotus bulb in which we have our own seed of lotus bulb in us, and through right intention we will eventually evolve into a fully blossomed lotus of enlightenment. Therefore, in wanting to cultivate beautiful lotuses we have to water the bulbs, fertilize them sufficiently, and take good care of them. By believing in its potential, can we use that source of potential which is deep within each one of us. Thus, we all have a potential of greatness stored within us. Women have their own unique potentiality as well as men. As long as we can make that unique source of greatness surface, we can each use it to contribute the society in our own way.

Mines lying beneath the ground have no value whatsoever, unless we give them face value in terms of potential economic value. Commonly, value entitled to things is pre-determined by society. In addition, each of us possesses endless potential of compassion, wisdom, happiness, and of great dedication. As long as we can recognize the potential of our values and make use of our potential wisely, we can be very happy.

Second type of comparison: “*Comparing yourself with people who are less fortunate*”. Many people facing pain and loss in life find it unbearable to handle. The feeling of suffering is so overwhelmingly large that they are miserable while tolerating it. The causes can be poverty, unexpected tragedy, loss of family members, and pressure of social expectations, social norms, and so on. The extent to which pain is felt depends on the different level of tolerance people have. The lower the level of their tolerance is, the more miserable they are going to feel about their lives.

We compare ourselves with others who are less fortunate than us in order to appreciate what we have. We should be thankful for having eyes, a normal healthy body, a perfectly functional mind, shared values, and the possibility of living our life of in a human being body. Therefore, we need to overcome self-pity, shame, depression, hopelessness, and anger before they leave us with no way out of our problems. Each day, we have to remember that, just like us, everybody is going through suffering, we take different paths indeed, but they are more or less leading in the same direction. There are many kinds of pain which are tolerated differently by different people. Thus, we all do once or twice in our lives encounter pain whether it is emotional or physical, whether it causes an enormous or minor effect. We all feel the existence of suffering.

FACING SUFFERING COURAGEOUSLY

Suffering is a reality. We need not run from it but instead, we have to look at it straight in the eyes to find the way to live through reality. One of the most typical reactions to the presence of suffering is that we deny it, refuse to face it,

or use something else to occupy our troubled minds. One of the tendencies in replacing suffering is to buy ourselves immediate pleasures through material things.

Ambapali lost direction in life because she was surrounded by many men who all wanted her at such an early age. She was so occupied that she had no time to figure out her own place or purpose in life. But when she found real love for the first time with King Bimbisara, she was rejected by the royal tradition because of her low caste origin. She was not good enough to marry the King, and not to mention that he already had a queen.

Back in the old times, getting married to more than one woman was acceptable by the society. With this tradition, women had to tolerate a great deal of subordination to their husbands. Being one of the wives, women had to share their husbands with other women, which deprived them from having full happiness, love, and a sense of worth. Historically, for a long time women were regarded as a tool to satisfy men, nothing more or less. Ambapali did not have any more hope in being officially united with her King after going through so many assassination attempts by the King's other wives.

It was lucky for Ambapali that back in the old times acid had not been found. She could not have been disfigured by the King's wives if they decided to throw acid on her. And if she had not wanted to kill herself, and her suicidal intention had not been disrupted by her son, she would not have had come to meet and talk with the Great Buddha. In life, when experiencing suffering, it is important that we can talk and

discuss it with someone. If we can imagine and take a look at this conference room, in which all of the windows are closed, fans are turned on at maximum, and there is a lot of smoke. Smoke gradually spreads throughout the enclosed room with no oxygen. What would we do? Sitting around doing nothing, the smoke would suffocate us to death, so we have to find a way to find oxygen to breathe. We have to either break the window or break the wall to let the air in. Thus, misery and suffering can lead us to feel helplessly drowned in our emotions. Sometimes, we choose the path we do not like, just because we have no other choice. But no matter how hard our situations are, we ought to find the path leading us to oxygen, not to carbonic, in order to continue to live.

In Ambapali's situation, she finally made a decision to reveal her feelings with her son. Talking about our feelings is a way to relieve our pains effectively, and of course it takes an understanding person to be a good listener. When listening to our family members and friend's stories, it is important that we know how to put ourselves in their shoes, listen to feel their pain like our own pain, help them find a solution, and not to instigate more problems.

SHARING AMIDST TROUBLES

Now that all of you have come and lived here together, you all now share the pain of sickness, family alienation or abandonment by your own family, and memories of your past. Therefore, you should come together and treat one another like your second family and to take care of one another as if they were your family. You all should count on one another for emotional and spiritual support. Caring for

someone is the medicine that can heal pain and suffering most effectively.

When reaching deadlocks we react by looking for an exit to run away, this is one of our most basic instincts. Being stuck in a room full of smoke, our reaction is to go forward towards the door of escape. In Ambapali's case, she wanted to kill herself and misperceived it as an exit, but death is not an exit. Overcoming your suffering by looking it straight in the eye is an exit. Let's imagine there was a pond in which lived many fish, suddenly somebody dumped a 20 liter can of oil into the pond causing the oil to slick the water surface and eventually causing all the fish to die. The fish have two reactions, one of which prompted them to make a jump out of the water's surface in search for some breath. This allows the fish to live on for couple more seconds or minutes before they run out of air. Some other fish react to this pollution by swimming away to find a different place where the water is not polluted with oil.

Every drop of oil represents one cause of suffering, of unexpected situations that none of us can not avoid. The occurrence of these life events makes us look for an exit in order to survive. Some find themselves an exit that can help them escape for maybe ten days, one month, or one year, but it can never be a long-term exit. We have to be like those fish which are willing to swim their way out of the troubled environment where the trace of oil is no longer found. Then we can call that place a real exit, a complete separation from the former environment in which we used to live and were influenced.

The environment in which we live creates certain sets of

habits, which eventually become an addiction. Pleasures felt by certain senses being stimulated can be too addictive to stop. Addiction to smoking, drugs, food, material luxuries are common. These addictions generate certain chemical reactions in our brains which drive us to satisfy the addiction by all means.

Our two most important senses are the eyes and the ears. The eyes help us see colors and shapes leading us to have needs for travel, big houses, jewels, fashion, and anything else that is attractive to the eyes. The ears are used to hear the sounds of music, voices of our friends, and of lovers. The other senses like the mouth and the nose are not as influential in our lives as the eyes and the ears in terms of stimulating our cravings. Therefore, we need to find a long-term solution to our suffering in life. To satisfy our habits we become their slaves whereas to take control of our habits, we are in control to make our lives better.

In classical Chinese script, the word deity is composed of three separate words, the part to the left is the ear, part to the right is the mouth, and the part below the other two is the king. The word deity implies that whoever can take control of what they see and of what they say, can be called deity. In taking control, we have to learn how to be content with what we have. Instead of being content with what she got out of life, Ambapali was constantly unhappy for not coming from a family of high society. As a result, she slid down in a spiral of emotions, shifting one another - happiness, suffering, satisfaction, love, betrayal, and fear. It is worthwhile to know when to be content with the accomplishments that we have created with our own

hands and minds. Being able to do this, we create a long lasting meaning to our existence on this earth.

Giac Ngo Buddhist Temple, which is located in Ho Chi Minh City, next to An Dong market, has been a widely popular place among Buddhist followers. Everyday there are countless numbers of fruits being brought to the temple as offerings to the Buddha by the dedicated followers. The best fruits will be later on saved for the Buddhist monks to have. Sometimes, there are people from the countryside coming, bringing mangoes to the temple. Even though they don't bring the best fruits like many others, they offer Buddha everything they have. We treasure their gifts so much more because of the fact that they planted, tendered, and grew the fruit tree with their own hands and sweat for years. And sour the fruits may taste, the people who planted them have to offer to Buddha so much more than their sour fruit, which are their honest labor and contains all their sincerity.

Buddhists usually say: *“You are rich, not because of your wealth, but because of your commitment in life, and your own labor to create things beneficial to your society. It can be one stick of incense or a small bowl of rice, but monks like us will take your offerings with all due respect. Those things make you a rich person”.*

But back to our search for the exit, like the fish, it is important that we can find a new and safe environment in which we can eliminate our old habits that linked us to the lifestyle in the past. Addiction to these habits can be very strong and difficult to remove because of the pleasures and comforts they brought. But we should not forget the

accompanying pain caused by them. Everything we think, say and do form habits. So, while in the process of breaking these habits, we feel very depressed, moody, and easily worn out. It is because we are used to getting up anytime we like, eating whatever we want, and dressing in anyway we like. Free to do anything we want to please our senses, which we mistake for being our happiness. In Buddhism, we understand that sensational pleasures are not happiness, but they are rather chemical reactions released in our brains which are caused by external stimulus upon our bodily senses. When released, these chemical reactions create temporary states of excitement and stimulation. Mistaking these sensual pleasures with real happiness means we miss our chance of witnessing real happiness. Happiness is not when we buy a house, earn lots of money, own expensive jewelry. Happiness can be felt when facing rough changes, losses, or gains in life; we are aware of our emotions and consciousness, and take control. As long as we are in constant control of what we want out of life, and do not let ourselves go with the flow, we are happy people. Happiness relates to how we perceive the nature of life. There are many people who are abandoned by their parents, and who are very poor, but they are continuously determined to rise above their disadvantages and prove their own place in the society.

We have come to be acquainted with this young lady who is known as Ms. Hường Dương. She was also mentioned in the news and on radio for her contribution to the community. She was a beautiful woman, but in a train accident both of her legs were crushed. She tried to kill herself many times, but was unsuccessful. She came to the Buddhist temple and

met with an old monk, who consoled her by helping her to see the profound meaning behind the accident. He pointed out that her value as a person does not have anything to do with whether she has or no longer has her legs. He assured her, that what matters is how we live our lives while dealing with the loss. At that moment, she realized how fortunate she was to be alive, and to have another chance to relive her life to the fullest extent and strengthen herself due to this experience.

Hương Dương knew that she had a distinguished voice, so she made use of her gift by using her voice to serve the more disadvantaged people, who were blind. The Blind people use their fingers to read Braille, and they read very slowly, word by word. That hit Hương Dương's sympathy, as a result, she came up with an idea in which she would read lots of books, record them into tapes, and donate the tapes to many homes for the blind around Ho Chi Minh City.

Only within a couple of months, these reading tapes became widely distributed and eventually were made into electronic versions. With this invention, the version allowed the blind to select any pages of the book just by pressing buttons. Hương Dương can still bring happiness to other people despite her disability.

RENEW LIFE FOR HAPPINESS

Therefore, happiness can be cultivated when we know how to use our life wisely, consequently happiness does not depend on what we have or do not have in life. A vision of life is an essential condition which gives us a new purpose

and motivation in order to renew our lives once again. What makes the transformation successful is that we have to build new awareness of our efforts. We need to be aware of our daily behaviors, acknowledging them as the old habits, and make the effort to remove them. Doctors at this Center are here to help you along the process. It is important that we continue our efforts on a regular basis until we can establish new positive habits in replacement of the old ones.

This Center's objective is to help you go through the self-transformation process. It is required of each of you to adopt positive views of your situation. The first right thought is: *"It is never too late to renew my life"*. Anyone who does not think so, will not have enough will to overcome difficulty during the process. Being happy is everyone's basic need. Even if we are to die tomorrow, today we can still start to renew our lives. Therefore, please remember again that it is never too late to make the effort to be happy again.

Ambapali once said to Buddha: *"As long as I have lived this life, I caused so much suffering for myself, others' wives, daughters, and sons of men to whom I served. There is nothing in this world that is greater than the pain I feel. And there is nothing that can be compared with the amount of suffering I caused"*.

Buddha then replied to her: *"No need to worry! If you start your life's renewal right at this moment, you can still have a chance to be happy again. By ending your life, not caring more about your life, or letting your life take control, you will get nowhere."*

Therefore we need to remember this motto twice before going to bed and also after getting up in the morning. The

motto is: “*There is nothing that I cannot do*”. You may experience some difficult time during the process of removing the old habits in order to regain control over them. During the difficult times, we have to resign ourselves to the right and only thought that we want a change and we will succeed. Hường Dương who lost both her legs rose above her tragedy to contribute her voice for the benefit of the community as well as the blind. Hence, we definitely can do something like this or much more for we still have a functional body, good health, and so much more potential existing within each one of us. All we have to do is to believe in ourselves that we are able to do it.

The third thing I want to share with you is that I want you to be well aware of your psychological reactions caused by the old habits resisting to be changed. In following our old habits, our senses are conditioned to release chemicals which are felt by us as pleasures making it hard for us to remove the old habits. They cause emotional, depressive, and weakening feelings. By recognizing these typical symptoms during the renewal process, we can help and support one another to overcome our own trials successfully.

In order to fight our trials, we have to want something better for our future. We can dream of happiness, of getting rich, or liberating our lives, thus a dream in which everything can be possible for us. In addition, besides having good dreams, it requires us to act upon them.

And then at the end of this process what are we going to gain and what are we going to lose? The answer is we will lose the old habits. Because they are no longer relevant in our

renewed lives, we would have no regrets. In our situation, this loss is necessary for our growth and our cultivation of new happiness and new purposes in life. Be courageous to move forward, we will then find the skylines of success and hopes. Do not misperceive this Center as house arrest, we can find it hard to live otherwise. Think of this place as your home, a big home full of planted fruit trees, in which there is blue sky, white clouds, and our big family. Even though they are not related to us biologically, they met us and eventually shared this big home together.

In Buddhism, the Universe is essentially explained by causes and effects. This law of cause and effect points out that all of the events occurring in our lives are not random occurrence after all, and instead, they are under influence of the law of cause and effect. In this life, we are all sharing a home with one another, meaning that we were family members in our past lives. The Supreme Buddha taught us that we should regard all of the people we know as our own family, in which we see other women as our grandmothers, aunts, mothers, our sisters, and we see other men as our grandfathers, uncles, fathers, or brothers. Establishing such bonding relationships with others will help us avoid causing sufferings for others as well as enriching our relationships in life. Once we enlarge our interconnections with other surrounding people, we will find enjoyment and happiness in the company of others.

In living together, mutual understanding, communications, and settled agreements will be needed in order to bring harmony to this collective community. Every day, we have to deal with many people with different personalities

coming to stay here. We have to share the same living space, eat, and sleep together. This can be the hardest thing for us to do.

Therefore, by considering this Center our big home, we can go through any difficult time. Having become comfortable with our living environment, we then proceed to renew ourselves, alter our emotions, and adopt new way of thinking. The most important thing to remember is that we should never feel ashamed of our past because it will drown us in self-pity and feelings of negativity associated with guilt. Only to move forward and not looking back is the only path which will enable us to get our lives and happiness back again. Open your eyes to see life as it is and take deep breaths to acknowledge the essence of the air in every moment we are alive. Rejuvenating our lives is also to believe in our potential that we will succeed in our trials.

Today, we have shared our thoughts together through the topic of “*Renew Your Life*” illustrated by a factual story from history. This can help all of us think hard in order to learn our own lessons and eventually find an exit out of our past. Our past is importantly relevant to our present as well as future because it makes us want so much more out of life in addition to material comforts or sensual pleasures. Thus, our past gives us the chance of going into the future, knowing that we desire real happiness helps us avoid making the same mistakes. Every lesson has its own meaningful value. We should always believe in our potential to become happy again.

INNER FREEDOM



A Dhamma Talk given to 2000 Jail Inmates at K.20 prison, Chau Binh village, Giong Trom district, Ben Tre province on April 23, 2007.

Transcribed and translated by Le Trinh, edited by Sister Nhu Nghiem.

EXTERNAL FREEDOM AND INNER FREEDOM

The feelings of comfort and happiness usually go along with the idea of a person being free. Freedom is of two kinds: External freedom and inner freedom.

In the Western way of life, they often speak of external freedoms. External freedom is manifested in the conduct of outside activities such as: Free speech, political freedom, social freedom, freedom of choice and so on, to meet individual aspirations. With an individualistic attitude, people get upset when these freedoms are restricted.

People who seek and guard this external freedom often compete against one another. This way of life always has been praised and protected by legal rules in the western culture. Unfortunately it has caused increased selfishness and a wide gap between people, due to the tendency toward minding one's own business and not paying any attention to others.

Another kind of freedom, very often mentioned in Buddhism, is inner freedom. In this state of mind, people release their mind from all bondage. One observes carefully his own mind, working with the six senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and mind) to unveil the basic ignorance which has caused one's fear, suspicion and hostility and which could eventually lead one to retaliate, kill or hurt others.

In this process, it is inner freedom that is sought. Firstly, we have to overcome all limitations of self-concept and the entanglement of thoughts that can make us lose all freedom, and release ourselves of all habitual emotions, perceptions and deeds to live in a state of freedom.

Secondly, according to Buddhism, we must make an effort to release craving, anger and delusion, which are the three main causes of people feeling distracted and unhappy. Though it is only a mental process, the bigger this attitude of craving becomes, the more people become slaves of their own emotions and lose self-control, easily becoming depressed.

Cravings are normally people's urges for everyday things like food, clothes, jewelry, love, and so on. However, if in rushing to satisfy these demands we lose our sense of direction, we can become totally dependent on them. Moreover, if we don't acquire these things honestly, we bring serious consequences on ourselves and our relatives.

Thirdly, we need to release inhibitions and inner conflicts. Sometimes in our search for a lasting happiness, we end up hurting other people in the community through our careless deeds. If we can resolve these inhibitions and inner contradictions, we can have inner harmony and mental equilibrium. This is the first step towards inner freedom.

The Master of Healing Sutra mentioned two Bodhisattvas named "*Sunlight lighting up everywhere*" and "*Moonlight lighting up everywhere*". It was thought that the Sun and the Moon never could appear together; either the Sun was visible or the Moon was, as it was either day or night. If they were present at the same time, a solar or lunar eclipse would occur and would damage crops and health. However, in the Sutra, these two Bodhisattvas were efficient assistants to the Healing Buddha, the Buddha of Spiritual Medicine who merged two opposite entities completing each other.

Similarly, if we can settle the conflict of inward contradiction between looking for one's own happiness and protecting other people's happiness in the community, we truly will find a lasting happiness.

CONSIDERATE ACTIONS

In Buddhism, there is a principle, which teaches us to be mindful of our actions: "*Before you decide to do anything, think of the result*". We should recall these words frequently as a reminder to carefully consider our actions, even if they are only saying a word or harboring some secret thoughts nobody knows about. Even in these cases we have to suffer the consequences of our own actions, and those consequences affect, directly or indirectly, not only ourselves and our relatives but also other people around us. If we can distinguish right from wrong, we are morally responsible and have some control over our deeds.

Inner freedom makes us feel free in spirit, peaceful and joyful wherever we are. All of us can be free and successful if we strive to improve our morals. Our sense of our own inner freedom gives rise to respect for other people's freedom. It opens our eyes. It is as important for us as having air to breathe, food to eat, clothes to protect us from harsh elements, and so on; it is essential for living.

An act performed without inner freedom can cause us loss and regret in the future. Inward freedom causes the growth of one's morals, changing one's actions and mind for the better.

ATTAINING INNER FREEDOM

To acquire inner freedom we must limit our pursuit of objects of desire and try to pursue them in accordance with laws and morals. We have to remember to aim at true and lasting happiness for ourselves, our family and the community, and this is maintained only on the basis of inner freedom.

To begin with, we must identify what the objects of our desires are, and then evaluate which ones need to be developed and which ones need to be dropped. Satisfaction of desire that harms other living beings could cause us to suffer. Therefore, changing these desires is an important need. To be able to perceive the good and bad in our desires, we must observe carefully. We should recognize that some desires can not only give us problems but can also cause damage to the community and society.

First, each of our choices requires serious thought, and we have to know the way to design and calculate our life not only in the present but also in the future. A person who designs his or her life, based strictly on right thoughts of moral standard will surely avoid feelings of regret in the long run.

Secondly, we should think whether these desires can be obtained or not. Some desires can be obtained in a few days or years but some could take 50 – 70 years. These are the desires of cultivating morality, positive values and happiness.

We should not be disappointed about the time it takes to attain them and as a result give up their pursuit too quickly when we come across challenges. If we only want to satisfy our sensual desires and ignore the consequences then we run

the risk of becoming a slave to these desires and poor habits; leading to the loss of our values and inner freedom.

Thirdly, we must aim at happiness and the ways to retain it. The aim of inner freedom is to build personality for the self on a basis of respect for others. Everybody in the world is born equal, enjoys the right to freedom, peace, and lasting happiness.

The Buddha taught us “*we should appreciate highly among all things of what we do not like to be hurt by others*”. Thus, we should respect everybody.

FREEDOM THROUGH MEDITATION

The first step reaching towards the inward freedom is Dhyana or meditation. Dhyàna is a process to clean one's mind. It does not relate to belief in religion, or superstition, it is a process of inward transformation. The sorrow experienced during life can cause us to lose our happiness and peace. Dhyàna has the ability to balance feelings and cultivate awareness in order to re-establish the spiritual values lost in humdrum everyday life. When we practice Dhyana, we have the power to transform the prison (tù) into a monastery (tu).

There are silent rooms in the monasteries available for monks when they need to rejuvenate their spiritual energy after long periods of engaged activities. They must serve themselves -- eats, drink and keep healthy during these periods, observe silence, and isolate themselves from the outside world completely.

During the first days, we could be faced with a lot of fear and loneliness. Most people typically depend on the presence of others to express their sorrow, release their stress and share

their happiness but it is not allowed to be in contact with other people in these silent rooms. The monks must look inward on themselves and transform their minds through Dhyana meditation.

The basic practice of meditation is to sit cross-legged with the left foot put on top of the right foot if you are a beginner. After being acquainted with this posture then you can try to cross the left sole of the foot on the right thigh and the right sole of the foot on the left thigh. Sitting in this posture gives us a lot of energy. The Buddha named it “*Posture of Lotus*”, or “*Yin –Yang merging*” i.e. Yin and Yang work harmoniously in one’s body. In the field of medicine, we keep a Yin – Yang balance, which means we create a biological energy source in support of our spirit actively allowing for the transformation of all of our fears, anxieties, sorrow, cravings, anger and delusion.

The posture of Dhyana is to sit with back straight with the head and spinal column in a straight line. The practice is to maintain this posture for a long while and to relax the mind by breathing deeply and smoothly and releasing any mental inhibitions.

We should practice to concentrate on the breath and to keep the mind and breath together. Breathe in and out by the nose, not by mouth. When we breathe in and out through the nose we conserve our energy and we allow our hairs in the nose to clean the air which is better for our metabolism and nervous system, leaving us feeling light and tranquil.

Sitting in the lotus posture allows our body and spirit to relax. Thus, our emotions change allowing us to reflect, keep

thoughts and breath together and throw away thoughts of lovers, relatives, friends, family, work and desire, etc. During the practice of Dhyana, we have only the breath and correct thoughts of a life of morality and spiritualism. We breathe as light and deep as possible with a smile on our lips to support and reduce the stress on the brain. We can sit like this for as each of us can maintain. We can our combine breath with our thoughts for example, "*When I consume materials, material things consume me*".

Why should we recognize this fact? We daily consume food including vegetables, meat so on and so forth. Each of the foods reflects a different culture of eating and drinking. All animals have a life and the right to live. When we eat meat, we cause the death of animals and unhappiness and lament for their souls. It makes our body heavy and unclean and the chemical reaction in our physical chemistry also causes us to easily get angry, to worry and have sorrow which also negatively affects our health. Further, the meat today is produced from animals, who have been improperly fed to gain weight from food full of toxins. Therefore when we consume meat we bring a lot of poison into our body.

CHECKING BAD HABITS

If we are not careful we can become victims of consumerism. We can become addicted to toxic products like alcohol, beer, tobacco, drugs and so on which cause us to crave their taste. However, the more we consume, the more of a slave we become to the product. Therefore, knowing that these products have a bad effect on our health and emotions, we should not consume them.

One's sense of dressing, activities and habits in communication with each other, are called a person's character. The Buddha taught us: "*It is not right to think that character doesn't change*". This point of view could make us accept easily the idea of fate. If we were in financial and social difficulties, we would always come to a standstill, and have a thought: "*It is useless to do one's best*", and become a slave of a Godhead.

The Buddha taught us: "*Anybody who believes in Spirits and God, will lose one's inner freedom*" and "*we have to take direct responsibility for happiness and unhappiness to others and ourselves*".

Therefore, the first step of inner freedom is to strive by Dhyana and give up a faulty thought process that tells us that fate rules over happiness and unhappiness, and they are predestined.

"Arrange a vicissitude life, would be a vicissitudes life. Arrange a noble life, would be a noble life".

A vicissitude or noble life is the effect caused by words, deeds and occupation, in a state of consciousness or unconsciousness.

We have to observe ourselves while we use materials. Materialism could corrode us, if we are not wise in its use we can become a slave to western pragmatism. We can also become a victim of unhappiness and then suffering would follow us for a long time.

Young people think that they formed the habits of smoking and drinking due to following the examples of

the society. The first time, it is due to one's companions, but gradually we become a victim and without realizing it we are soon addicted to smoking, wine and drugs.

At first, a habit is just a cobweb to break through easily by a finger or a blow. After sometime, however, it becomes like chains tightening one's awareness, actions and living. Then, we depend on it completely. For example, a woman liked chewing betel leaves, and she would feel tired if she did not have betel. Somebody who has a habit of drinking coffee cannot concentrate on work unless he has a cup of coffee. The monks were trained by never using stimulants like coffee, cigarettes, beer, wine and so on. Once bad habits are formed, they cause oneself to corrode.

We should combine our breath with thought like this: 'Materialism has the capacity to corrode me if I use it'. Thus, we can give ourselves a choice to use necessities and reject unnecessary things.

INTELLIGENT INVESTIGATION

We should practice to observe our mind as a mirror that would reflect a true image about what is in front of it. For example, if we have the desires of sensual enjoyment, possession, adultery, and so on then the mirror of the mind would give us an image of a human being having fully lost his or her inner freedom and happiness. We should return to our own mind without any evil stick in thought, and at that time desire, anger and delusion would disappear.

We should have an intelligent investigation about all aspects of difficulties in living, like the desires and the pleasures, and we

should also have an understanding as to how they appear, what is their course, whether it is natural or unnatural, and then we could control our mind.

Whenever desires appear in our mind, we learn that *“If I consume desires, desires will corrode me and I will be unhappy”*. If someone gives us a slap on the face and we decide to retaliate against him out of anger then peace and happiness would not exist in us anymore. It is the same thing with suspicion, jealousy and selfishness or with regard to other people’s unhappiness, who have to bear our anger. When we remain cool and sit like a stone or a piece of wood, and ignore other people’s bad behavior then we know how to retain peace and happiness.

We investigate that by feeling inwardly free we gradually release bad habits and overcome difficult emotions. This investigation is very necessary, and we could do it before going to bed or after we get up. During this time our mind is calm. We can develop happiness becoming a completely new person. We take a rebirth once more, unchanged in physical figure, but changed in manners.

The process of inner freedom can create a new face of happiness to replace sorrow in everybody. We should not talk about one’s mistakes so much, for it would cause the spread of bad morals to everyone, particularly to those who have not yet the ability to change themselves. They would learn bad habits easily, and become a victim of unhappiness. It is better to talk about good and right things of life, and let the sorrow go by.

To have success in Dhyana, we should not recall the past, the Buddha said. Due to all the good memories having passed along with time, the happiness does not exist anymore. The mistakes done in the past, intentionally or unintentionally, always bring pain in our mind, throwing us off-balance.

Letting go of our past and sorrow and focusing on our current happiness is the standard in the Dhyana. Do your best with all your heart, awareness, love and strong faith. “*I could become a new person who is positive and happy*”. With thoughts like this, we can still practice the Dhyana while we are at work.

“*One day without labor, one day without eating*”, Chinese Zen Master Gui Shan said, i.e. not to have a meal unless we work. Thus the fruit of one’s labor would be a repayment, and the value of work would bring the reward of blessedness. By not working, one would owe to a benefactor.

One should not harbor thoughts that: ‘Labour is an obligation’, but should consider “*labour would bring a fruit of good deeds*” then, enjoyment in work will appear immensely. We sometimes have to work double time due to the absence of a colleague. We should consider ourselves fortunate to have a chance to work as two persons. The result of that work would be great, if we truly work with a pleasant heart. The monks in the monastery always work eight to ten hours a day. They feel very happy to plant a tree, pull grass work for public benefit, all without monetary payment.

While working, the monks should not talk idly with each

other because they lose a lot of energy. One should observe silence, and follow the breath even while working. Actions done while following in-and-out breathing bring us a lot of happiness. The monks always practice this at monasteries except when repeating the name of the Buddha.

CONTROLLING DESIRES

We should practice the attitude of “*less desires and causal satisfaction*”. Wise people should know how to minimize desires. For a climb up at a ladder would bring snobbery. If desires are not met then we remain discontent. Fierce desires can arise from comparison with others about personal property, so much so that they end up satisfying one’s craving no matter whether they had to act illegally or unethically. In the end, one would become a prey to a trap of pleasures. By observing less desire i.e. by reducing unnecessary demands, one would not appear to climb the demand ladder, and could be satisfied with what we really got from our labours. We lose happiness when we harm others, but we do not lose happiness for being poor. Riches are only material conditions to give us pleasure, not for being happy.

We can cultivate happiness by knowing how to reduce negative desires, and to realize that it is better to be content with what one has and not to complain about one’s loss. We must do our best by using our intelligence, physical labour and heart. It would not bring much gain by being dissatisfied with life.

According to Buddhism, cause and effect are the essential conditions to decide failure or success in life. We must practice to maintain mental equilibrium, despite meeting

with life's ups and downs. That is way we could have self-control, and form the process of inner freedom.

CULTIVATING MORAL CHARACTER

The persons at all levels of the society, be they monks, Kings, Prime Ministers, civilians, so on and so forth, still need to improve their morals and personality. The process of self-improvement in Buddhism includes the following factors.

- Change acts of killing humans or conscious beings into acts of respecting life and protecting rights of living animals as well as natural environments which can contribute to the survival of species.

- No stealing; but to have respect for each other's ownership. The Buddha taught us to share money, and advised us to lend a helping hand whole-heartedly.

- Change habits of saying useless, bad and hurtful words that create divisions and hurt others' feelings. One must use truthful words that can establish solidarity, reconcile two enemies and help them become friends, and lift the spirit of people who are depressed.

- Change character and have right conduct in marriage. Polygamy and flirting with others would cause disaster and destroy a happy family. Buddhism always encourages us to have just one husband and one wife in a family. Love and happiness are established by two hearts having sympathy and respect for each other. It is not acceptable to have illicit relationships, even if they are only feelings in the mind. Moreover, today there are many diseases spread through sex.

- Buddhism tells us to abstain from bad habits like drinking, smoking, drugs and toxins, for it affects one's health, family and the society.

A man who is a drunk and an addict neglects his duties towards society and family and could lose his lucid mind, self-control, and do bad, violent actions. So, by changing the habit of taking stimulants, we can avoid deeds which harm oneself, and one would not regret and have a clear conscience. We should be afraid of the consequences of immoral deeds which not only last during this life but also in future life, and unhappiness in the present will follow us everywhere in many different ways.

If we changed this, we would not be uncomfortable, afraid and nervous any more. We would be a new man with a moral life.

We should self-improve to keep a balanced disposition even when we are cheerful, sad, angry and nervous. If feelings are not balanced, grief will burn oneself ten times to one hundred times more than the hottest month of June. When we are angry and sad, and argue with someone, we should breathe in and out deeply with a smile to help us reduce the stress. If we find it hard to practice, we could go in isolation and breathe smoothly and think that happiness of life is one's aim. Forget anger and remember that "*a soft answer is better than wrath*"; and by doing this we overcome our anger.

People always have cravings, so we should remind ourselves frequently that happiness is not related to wealth or poverty, but it only goes along with personality and moral life. Happiness that we get from a material life, is merely a feeling of sensual pleasure, lasting only for a short period. We should

not blame others and God, in that way, we could remember our responsibility. Thus, what we should do at that time is an intelligent contemplation. Whenever sorrow rises, we should use this feeling as a tool to self-improve our moral values. We should think about the image of a lotus. Although it grows up and flowers in mud, it is very beautiful and useful. Meditation on the symbolism of a lotus gives us encouragement to alleviate feelings of sadness and find true happiness.

Finally, we should release all thoughts of sexual desires by realizing that desires do not relate to happiness. The monks have to overcome sexual desires and most of them are successful. The physical and mental restraints change one's attitude. Thus, we must release desires by cultivating loving kindness and compassion in our mind as substitutes for sexual desires. The inhibition is to give up desires that we did not satisfy even if it is right or wrong, we should consider it as an obvious truth to overcome, and we could have to make efforts for a long time to have peace and happiness. We should consider any matter in life as very normal, not to exaggerate sorrow and unhappiness, let it pass with time. This attitude could change our lives with regard to health, work, sex, society and so on. Besides, we should realize that moral life is important and we must self-improve to bring us a lasting happiness.

The practice of inner freedom implies that one acts peacefully everywhere. The way of inner freedom would help recover one's physical, spiritual and moral life. It is a long process and is not simple. We should analyze our psychological behaviors carefully, and should not commit mistakes of thought. We should work

with our whole heart and wish to bring happiness to others and ourselves.

A good action would bring a good reward. If we make efforts in doing good deeds, the fruit of happiness and peace will prevail. The monastics do not attach to worldly things in order to keep their minds free so that they can study and practice successfully. We are not happy anywhere unless we practice inner freedom on the basis of morality and wisdom.

RENOUNCING THE ERRANT LIFE



A Dhamma Talk given to 2000 Jail Inmates at K.20 prison, Chau Binh village, Giong Trom district, Ben Tre province on September 25, 2007.

Transcribed by Nguyen Le Sang and Dieu Tinh, and translated by Nguyet Van Hoa.

Today, we as well as all of you are very happy because we know that the Auditorium for cultural and music activities is inaugurated today. It can help us avoid weather conditions in collective activities which give us meaning, happiness and a cheerful mind all these days, and it is also the opportunity to change your personalities to renew your lives.

“Peaceful Bridge” – as its name – it is a path to connect two river banks. Each river bank also has the peace. But to get the peace from this river bank to the other river bank we need to have a bridge.

Between the two peaceful banks, there also is the danger. If we do not know the method we can fall into that danger. To have the peace and happiness, maybe we have to pay a very high price.

Today is the mid-autumn festival, maybe the moon is very round and bright in this night. We are sure that ladies and gentlemen here will have the opportunity to enjoy the blue sky, white clouds, blowing winds. Especially, we have the opportunity to eat moon cakes with the hot tea cup and remember our relatives, our beloved ones who are staying at home and hope day and night for you to return and reunite in happiness, and in their compassionate arms.

THE CUNNING TIGER

In Buddhism, there is a fable of the tiger. After years of life in deep forests, an old tiger was unemployed because he was too old to hunt. He brainstormed but he still did not find a plan to support himself. There was an animal that concocted a plot for him to pretend to be ill and be in convalescence in

the cave, so that all animals in the deep forest who had known his authority would visit him. And this would be the good opportunity for the tiger to show off his power and to have an easy prey. On hearing this news, most animals came to visit the tiger with their whole-hearted sympathies and finally became the prey for this fierce tiger.

One day, it was the turn of the dog. When he came near the door of the cave, the tiger began to weep bitterly: *“My friend, please do not hesitate, please come in. Today is the mid-autumn day and there is alcohol and delicious meat. We should drink together. Maybe it is very interesting”*.

The dog began to observe. With his nasal instinct, he sniffed around. He realised that there were drops of blood which were still on the ground over there. Some pieces of bones were scattered. He felt: *“This is not the peaceful place for me to come”*. He said: *“Hi! I send you my wishes, I hope that you will be healthy to have the happy life with your relatives”*. After saying this, he went away.

This fable is very simple but it makes us think that in our life there are many people who have personalities, speech and deeds like the tiger in this story. When they are living in the errant life and cannot support themselves, they begin to concoct other plots. The credulous animals will easily fall into that trap. They will fall into the place which is very easy to enter but it is very difficult to get out.

The dog in this story is very fortunate because he can sniff and smell the bloody stench in this cave. He feels that this is not the place to come in because maybe there is no way to go out.

A SAD LIFE WITH NO EXIT

Some ventures in our life will open one direction which is like an infinite errant river. It is very difficult to return, although we want to return, there are rarely successful people. Because the habits work like inertia and force us to become the bad people due to our activities which are not good for us.

Today, we will share some ideas about renouncing the errant life.

The errant life is understood as the underworld which has a lot of traps. It looks like the strategy plan of the eight-sign figure. The entrance has eight doors but the exit is in a maze and there is no exit although it appears easy to get out.

In that bloody world, there are decisive battles. The person who knows it better than the other people can make us realise our mistakes, but often it is too late. It may be one of the ways we can follow to destroy our grief and forget our misfortune. But the more we follow it, the more misfortune will increase and the more the pain will increase. Then, it leads us to come to a standstill and we will not have the way to return.

Within two months when we intended to visit you again, we had received some anonymous letters, some of them were sent by email on the internet. In those letters we find some profound confidences of people who used to live for years like you here. They write to help their relatives, their beloved ones to realise them with new faces. We are sure that those confidences are very meaningful when we share them here. The special thing which we want to point out is that these

confidences were written as poems, but we do not know who their authors are.

As we eat moon cake and drink tea this night, it will be very interesting to listen to these poems. They help us to have some thoughts. Each road in those thoughts will help us to have some meaningful changes in this life.

The first poem has the character of dreaminess, fancy and profound imagination.

*“Entering the prison like the dude enter the palace
The hands were worn fetters like wearing golden bracelets
Taking morning exercise like the mandarins doing martial arts
Pulling grass in the afternoon like the princess picking flowers
Smoking roll-up like smoking tobacco “333”
Drinking spring water like drinking Coca Cola
Beating mosquito like Phoebe catching butterflies.
Why do mice and cockroaches interfere with us?
The mosquitoes are unhappy when they suck the prisoner’s
blood.”*

This poem is very interesting at the first sentences, but it is very bitter at two final sentences.

Maybe this poet used to live in this waterway place like K20 prison in Giồng Trôm town, Bến Tre province. Every night the poet makes friends with mosquitoes, flies which the poet cannot stand when they bite him. So the poet has to say that *“The mosquitoes are unhappy when they suck the prisoner’s blood”*.

When we lose something, we realise its value. At that time, we have the deep thought that “*All the things that we possess in our life are valuable*”. Like the way we esteem our blood and our body. Because these are the essential things which nourish and maintain our lives. Lacking them, our happiness cannot be guaranteed.

The author of this poem has the logical thought process of one imagining how to create imminent free space. If he thinks that he was in prison due to the punishment then he will feel very uncomfortable, day and night. This time is the necessary condition for him to have the isolated environment. Thanks to this isolation, the old habits in the errant life in which he used to experience hardships will have the opportunity to be forgotten and renewed.

According to Buddhism, this method is called the intelligent contemplation. That means we imagine one concrete event to direct one's content, which has more profound substances. Entering the prison like living in a palace, but it is not a palace for us to eat, sleep or rest. This is a place, a very good environment for us to change our personality. The hands were worn fetters like wearing golden bracelet. Maybe it is one habit which we think when we live in the free life. Understanding like this, the grief will be reduced partly. Replacing it, that is the necessary effort to have the peace and happiness like the situation when we used to live at home. To achieve it, we should salvage the time when we live here to renew our life by renewing our awareness. The normal work at the prison is that you must work for public benefit. First, it is the necessary support to guarantee our health. Thanks

to meaningful work, our life will be better. If we do not do some work everyday and every time, some diseases like obesity, physical unfitnes, diabetes, arthritic pain will occur. With your youth, you can do many things for our society. Therefore, we should know how to work to keep our health by the pleasure in public welfare.

FRUIT OF GOOD DEEDS

In Vietnamese Buddhism, there is very good word, “*công quả*”, meaning “*fruit of the good deeds*”. All of the public work, sometimes we may think that we work for others because this is a prison. But in fact, we work here for ourselves. Because due to our good work done with sacrificial spirit and pleasure, we have the fruit of the good deeds as a blessing. Therefore, all of these works will renew our life. If we do not do any work, then the homesickness, the memories of your parents, your wife, your husband, your relatives, your beloved ones will fidget with your emotions.

Living in this environment, everybody esteems vitality and health. Therefore, we do not want anyone be abused, exploited, fleeced of properties even it be one mosquito whose life is depended on two ways: sucking dew in the sky or sucking human blood. Its life does not have the third choice. Therefore, when we offer it little of our blood, it is trivial but we still have unpleasant feeling with our lament: “*The mosquitoes are unhappy when they suck the prisoner’s blood*”.

In this society, if we do some works but the essence of these works do not bring moral value to us then these work

are like the way the mosquito stings our body. That pain makes our body swell. If they are poisonous mosquitoes, maybe they have the infectious diseases which are very dangerous for us. Our actions are also like the infections of these mosquitoes. There are some actions which give us the pain not only for few days, but also few months, few years or even until we die but that pain still does not fade away. That swelling and ache can lead to other diseases. Therefore, we should be very cautious. We should not let our action sting our life, other people or our community. It is also like that if we do not want the mosquito to sting us then we should not do the same to other people.

That is the thought of a lucid person who has the values for which everybody in our society has to appreciate him.

POEMS OF REGRET

Now we will continue to read some poems selected during the last few days. These poems are written by the teenagers in the age group of 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20. Each poem reflects different context leading to the errant life. While thinking again, the grief is dropped and the road to return still opens with us who have the heart and determination.

“At the age of 16, I was very innocent.

Smoking and injecting are imagined as digesting nourishing medicines.

When realising it, it is actually the bitter medicine.

Abusing it, so it is very difficult to give it up”.

This poem expresses the innocence of one boy who

early entered a bad way of life. Seeing his friends who enjoy different white powders, he thinks that is nourishing medicines because they can make us have the feeling of flying like the fairy in the sky. Abusing them we will have two dependences: the first is physical dependence, the second is psychological dependence. Physical dependence will make us feel tired and haggard. Lack of smoking or injecting it will make us restless, making us an addict.

When we realise this habit, it has already created the dependence. Every day if not our relatives, our beloved ones provide means to buy it. If we follow it blindly, then our grief and emotions will make us very uncomfortable, scowled, haggard and we will become the people hovering between a lunatic life and death.

So at the youth age we could not do any good work for our society. Therefore, our determination plays a very important role because the wrong determination can make us regret in future.

In Buddhist tradition, all of the primary learners of Buddhism must practice five moral principles. In these principles, the fifth principle has a very important meaning related to the poem above that is *“Do not use all substances which make us be dull-witted. These substances include alcohol, drug and the other toxic agents”*.

Maybe Buddhism which is the only religion in the contemplative history of human and religions, in general realises very clearly the negative effects of these toxic agents to our body.

We have the habit to prove that we are the people who have just become grown-ups. Therefore we want to do something which our fathers, uncles, brothers used to do, like a habit to prove that we are grown-ups. But the errant life is wicked and everything is very difficult to predict. Our knowledge and experience are very weak and sometimes we may stick in traps which appear as award at first. Then we become the people who work to form the habits for which we will have to pay a very high price. Engaging in these activities, directly or indirectly, will keep us stuck in grief.

Legal systems all over the world, not only in Vietnam, and especially in the Middle East countries, the use of white powders at a severe level can lead to being sentenced to capital punishment. Therefore, our future, our career will become a gloomy abyss. Although at first we think that we can control alcohol, drug and the other toxic agents, and we think that we will never abuse them. That thinking is wrong.

CONSEQUENCES OF WRONG THOUGHTS

Habit is a mechanism which occurs automatically. At first, it looks like the cobwebs which are connected every seconds, minutes, days and years. Only one incense stick, one chopstick can cut them easily. It makes them think that we can stop or enjoy anytime when we need. Thinking like that is wrong. In the long run, habits become a chain, with each ring of that chain having 2-3cm diameter. It is very difficult to destroy each ring by the saw to set us free. It requires a very long time. Therefore, anyone who wants to have many experiments and extreme pleasures, the happiness and peace are often not associated with these things.

The next poem is composed by a 17-year-old boy.

The 17 years old is very innocent.

My friend call for drinking hugged beer

I think that I should not be humble

Drinking hugged beer is not harmful.

That is one of the normal thought to prove that he is strong man. At the age of 17, people usually say that this age is as strong as a buffalo that can plough, work or even has a rational and intellectual life and do anything by his strength. When his friends call for entering hugged beer restaurants, he does not think that behind these restaurants it is the gloomy underworld. He thinks that if he shows he is so hesitant that he cannot to enter these restaurants, he will be called a coward. Entering these restaurants, he will not stop at drinking beer but he will have the demand to hug. Hugging love and money which in fact he does not have the ability to create earnestly, and sure they won't be lasting. Each hug is similar to hugging knives, hammers, grief, thorns, broken glass and misery into his life.

Therefore, entering the life without orientation in the long run, without true efforts and foundation to receive meritorious values, will not bring the real happiness. Then the boy confides that going to hugged beer restaurants can lead to other tendencies such as the demand of dance hall, debauchery and comparison with his friends who are rich and have money while he is penniless. His innermost feelings of inferiority complex begin to rise. These feeling make us want to satisfy the

demand of hugged beer and the other activities related directly or indirectly to the other actions which are actually not permitted by his conscience.

When entering this underworld the boy has to utter:

“Dance hall is the place for enjoyment

Chí Hòa prison is the rest of the errant life”.

These pleasures in fact related to beer, hug and dance hall are chemical reactions in our brain which have been analyzed very clearly by the scientists. They are not real pleasures. Because under the stimulation of sound, musical instruments, dim lamplight, the applause, the hug, the pleasures we are rolled in their whirlwinds. Therefore, we come into them then we are bewitched. Although we know that we should not come in but we regret to go out. Entering is “one minute of pleasures but extreme griefs”. It is like which Ksitigarbha Sutra in Buddhism has taught us. The extreme pleasure also occurs same as the chemical reactions existing in few seconds. Its consequence extends few years or even the whole life. Therefore, we should consider by the conscious balance to know which is the instant pleasure or real pleasure so that we do not have to rest in the place like K20 prison that the author of poem calls that place as Chí Hòa prison, a notorious place in Ho Chi Minh City. Anyone who enters into it will inevitably has compunction. Then we received one poem from an 18-years-old girl:

“At the age of 18, I left my home to lead a life like dust

Snatching gold necklace to give my lover

*Robbing Dream motobike to take my lover going downtown
Due to karma I was put into prison.*

This is the underworld for women, it is different from the style of the errant life of the men. Because the men gallantly take care of their lovers by proving that they are rich to occupy the heart of their lovers. So sometimes they do anything without considering by their conscience and lucid awareness.

On the contrary, this poem is composed by a girl. Maybe her health is very special which is not worse than the health of Ms. Phúc Bồ in Hanoi who everyone knows her in the 90s decade of the 20th century. This year, she passed over the age of 50 and she had finished serving her sentence. She had ill fame in the past because she had many knight-errants and men who were as handsome as actors to become her loyal escorts. In the past, when she ordered many people obey her orders and she was happy in the powers such as alcohol, love and money. To have and enjoy these things, if we do not work by hands we have to use our brain which this woman had described such as snatching gold necklace. The men in the underworld when they do these above things, they can be suspected because their faces are not amicable, then the other people feel frightened and vigilant. But with the beautiful and charming girl, people will not notice her then and the opportunity to do these works is easily successful. Only entering the instant success, she can have the happiness with her lover. Proving that she is a rich, gallant woman, that her love can make two hearts be fervid with the dream of two hearts living in a thatched cottage. In fact, it only exists

in the novels not in the real life. Many young boys and girls, if they are not wise they can have an unrealistic dream and life like this girl. Robbing motorbike is usually implemented by thoughtless boys but this girl dares to do this. Maybe this is very rare case. The purpose to have motorbike is to take the lover go downtown. Maybe her lover is very weak, does not have spirit, skill and ability so he can not survive by his labour and he has to rely on the money of her lover, the source of which is not reliable. Therefore, at last she had uttered one sentence which has the Buddhist character: *“Due to karma I was put into prison”*.

KARMA IN BUDDHISM

Each karma is an obstacle. Karma according to Buddhism, is one action. That action originates from one determination whose motivation can be related to greed, resentment, un-enlightenment. With the greediness, we can think that our ego is the number one. The satisfaction of that ego is food and clothes, richness, property and that ego does not let anyone in this society scorn it. Furthermore, that ego wants to prove that he is actually the rich and noble. Therefore, that ego makes our conscience feel suffocated. Buddhism indicates an example that between the ego and conscience there is space for only one to exist. They cannot exist together.

The more the ego which originates on the basis of wrong thought increases, the more the space for conscience and happiness shrinks. Therefore, to maintain our happiness we have to make our ego go to the orbit of moral life. We have to

know to respect the values which are created from sweat and tears of the other people.

The third moral principle which the Buddha encourages us to follow is to respect properties and values of the other people, then we will realise very clearly that when we lose anything accidentally, we feel regretful infinitely. The salary per month sometimes is not enough for us to support our whole family. We have to economise anything such as no alcohol, no drug, no make-up to support our children (if anyone is fortunate to have a child, the pleasure of love, the bond of marriage in society). The essence of life is the same as everywhere.

We should not think that the United States is the economic heaven. They may have all the material things, but to have these things, many people have to work even 10-12 hours every day. They work very hard and do not have the time for leisure when they can have enough food to eat and clothes to wear. Everything also has to be paid with a high price. If we let that conscience exist, then our labour will extremely be respected.

Therefore, the Buddha taught that: *“Anytime when we have the property we have to realise that there are many more miserable people beside us”*. Hence, the Buddha uses the compassionate structure in the practical way *“a little torn leaf covers the ragged leaf”*. The intention of the Buddha is that everybody in this life also has torn or ragged life but the difference is of degree. We should not think that we are poor and do not have the condition to share our compassion for

other people and the community. What matters is the heart. If we have the heart we will perform actions to share with the others according to our condition and our ability. When we respect the labour, we will never take the labour of the other people like the confidence of this girl which she thinks that it is the karma. Karma looks like a reel of thread. If we throw it on the slope like a triangle, the thread will leave from the reel every passing minute. And the surface before the reel will determine the way which the thread rolls. Similar to this, the responsibility of all our actions lies with ourselves.

In the Buddhist tradition it is determined by a very profound sentence which, the more we ponder it, the more we understand it.

If we can perform the miracle to fly in the sky or hide in the mountainous caves, like Bin Laden in mountains in Pakistan, or vanish under ground like martial arts Chinese, or dive into the sea like submarines, we have to receive consequences of our wrong actions when they have full condition to occur. Although we do not have any awareness. This responsibility and morality is called as karma by the girl, the author of this poem. The manifestation of this karma is that she was put into prison. That pain which we see is that she wants to prove that she is a rich, gallant person, she is happy person and she wants her lover to share the happiness from her wrong actions, and then she received unexpected consequences.

Another person at the age of 19 composed this poem:

“At the age of 19, Living an errant life

Knife and gun in hands to rob cars

Having full of money, love, prison, criminality

Escaping death two times, fright makes the rhythm of heart stop”.

People usually said that not seeing the coffin we do not cry. However, there are people seeing the coffin but they do not cry. When they are in prison, then they begin to cry. That is the situation. Because when we see the other people we think that we are fortunate to escape the errant rule, the upright judgment of legal system and escape the revengefulness of our victims.

I used to have these fortunes. Falling into some concrete situations like escaping death two times, what is the psychological attitude in this situation? It is the fright making the rhythm of heart stop. It was fortunate for him not to die, only the rhythm of heart was stopped. If this person has the heart diseases in the past maybe he will get the stroke.

We realise that the errant life is very complicated. You may be the victim of your friends, your relatives, your parents or the people who use the power to threaten you in some situations which are very difficult in some aspects such as social, financial and parental. All of us, as well as our society actually sympathize with you. You have to go to the world, which now when we remember it we feel cold with fear and get goose-flesh.

Each recollection will make our pain rise when we imagine the pain or the plight of the other people or the misfortune which were created by us such as using knife and gun to rob cars. The errant life is the life in which

the most powerful person is the best person. Anyone who can persuade the other people by his strength can become the senior. Therefore “*the thick peel of tangerine*” always confronts with “*the pointed fingernail*”, like the English proverb “*diamond cuts diamond*”. We should not think that we can be better than the other people merely by our strength, cleverness or deceptive tricks. Because those things can be disclosed by the honest people and legal system that are very lucid and can disclose the clue of traps in errant rules. Therefore, eventually it still does not have any future.

We want to have the love but that love is not established by the real compassion, because that love actually relies on the physical appearance, countenance, social status and charming characters of one person. At last, we have to follow that thing by earning money to satisfy them. The use of money in the love affair which does not have the future will make us lose all our money very quickly.

These properties like that are called as “*ill-gotten gains never prosper*” or “*ill gotten, ill spent*” by the Vietnamese people. That means it comes through the front door then it will go out from the back door; it never stays with us. It can be created easily by someone but it is spent very quickly because it is not created by our labour and our sweat. Sometimes we do not respect it. We have to pay it according to time and psychological attitude of our awareness. If after a period we realise that we are walking on the wrong way, we feel that we want to return to find a peaceful bank then this debt will not create interest. But actually if we do not pay the debt now we have to pay it in the future.

MISINTERPRETING ERRANT LIFE

The errant life is like the life in the Chinese swashbuckling romance story which is called as the very horror word “ruthless”. We cannot know the ruthlessness in the errant life thoroughly. Although we have 30 years of experience in that life, our experience is only within these 30 years. The errant life has existed since the beginning of humanity. Therefore, their tricks as well as their traps have many honeyed engagements. When we enter into that life with the immature experience, we feel that we are very happy. Following it, hostility and resentment spin on all sides.

When we do the bad things to other people their hostility will rise. If they cannot take revenge this time, we have to receive that consequence in some other time. Causal principle is a very equitable balance. Nobody can stand in its center to judge and decide. Because we do not see anyone who represents the law to do this work, we easily ignore and think that it is not related to us. If anyone talks to us about our shortcomings, then we will have the feeling to calm our nerves that the circumstances forced us to do like this. We ourselves should think about some lives we should respect in this society. These are the poor with their hands, their brains, their efforts and they also have knowledge and find one stable job to live with things which they create.

Every time, when we had the opportunity to go to Bình Dương province to visit the orchard of my grandfather, we were given some bananas, some small rambutans by our

relatives. Although they are not as delicious as the fruits which were sold at the big markets in Ho Chi Minh City, their sentiment and value make us appreciate it so much. Because we know that it is the sweat and tears of our grandparents, our relatives.

If anyone has an orchard or a field, he himself takes care of it. He has to cultivate and destroy pestilent insects to have the crops then we will know that each drop of sweat and tears is heavier than 100kg which is burdened on our shoulders. Therefore, illegal properties will make us incur a debt. And this debt will rise up the interest now and in the future.

Hence, when you are confronted with living in prison, we wish you should think that this is a valuable opportunity. Sometimes, some of you confide to us that: *“Sir, we are so unfortunate that we were put into prison. If we had not been put into prison, we would have had multi-storied houses, cars with all modern conveniences”*. Thinking like that is wrong. We are not unfortunate when we are living here. It is your fortune because you have one opportunity to renew your awareness and renew your life. Because these means of isolation and environment will make us forget your works in the past.

Public work, cultural activities, good learning or the other good programmes can help us to renew our awareness and our actions. When we had escaped death, we are fortunate to live to renew. At that time, the stop of the rhythm of heart will be the lesson for us to come back. Buddhist psychology mentions three psychological states which are called as 3 impressive words: bitter taste, sweet taste, escape taste. Most

of us like sweet taste because it brings us the peace, happiness and joyfulness. Sometimes, we defy all means to get them.

ESCAPING TRAPS WISELY

All of us also have the golden age of happiness, memory, pride, meaningful life and that sweet period of life still exists and does not disappear with us although it belongs to the past. Everything has to pass. When we confront the bitter taste, we feel very uncomfortable because we do not like the bitter taste but it still exists. There are some sweet tastes which are created by wrong methods. Anyone who does not know how to create sweet tastes by using the right method will bear the consequences of the bitter taste. And that bitter taste is the valuable opportunity for us to overcome.

Living in the waterways, you used to have the opportunity to know this situation. If we pour one liter of petrol on the water surface where the school of fish are swimming in their peaceful and happy environment, we see that these fishes begin to struggle to survive. Some fishes jump to the surface water to take the air to liberate the asphyxia. Due to negative effects of the spread of oil, they do not have the way to escape. But there are some fishes which are more intelligent, have drastic belief and methods. They do not jump or stand motionless but they find the way to escape. They swim strongly far away to the place where there is no spread of oil, and have the opportunity to renew their environment.

These spreads of oil are the environments called the errant world, the world of resentment, debt, mishap; which we will have the rhythm of heart stop when we remember it.

Therefore, we have to escape it like the fish which want to live in happiness with the substances of oxygen to swim to the peaceful place. That peaceful place is the innovation which originates from the heart.

The second time we were in the United States in 2005, we visited one new pagoda which had just been built at the horse stable. In previous years, this place was the racecourse where many runners had to go to hospital because this place had the convexo-concave surfaces. Hence, the boss of that racecourse lost prestige and as no runner came to play there, he had sold it. But, he could not find a buyer for ten years. At last, there was a Venerable who bought it. After buying the horse stable, that Venerable built a pagoda. Every week, there are on an average 400-600 people who come to that place to cultivate on Sunday. One place used to be the happiness spot for the horse-race and there were also accidents. With this visible change, thirty to forty rooms for nursing horses had become the thirty to forty rooms having the substance of spirit, morality and happiness.

There is nothing which is meaningless in this life. We can imagine that our past errant life should be discarded, but we should never have inferiority complex. Because we live with the existent values. We have to believe that we have the potential to renew and that potential is very strong like the awareness of the change from a horse stable to a pagoda.

The place of errant world originated from our wrong heart and our wrong determination. The change is like the situation which we switch the breaker on, and changed our awareness

and our life. We should never feel inferiority complex, we should not believe in our fate because there is no fate. All of us are the architects of our happiness and misery. Hence, we have to be the people receiving directly the responsibility of our good or bad actions. Therefore, if there are some bad things, some unpleasant things, some unhappiness happening in our life, we should not run away from them.

We have to bravely confront it like a penance to renew, only then we can overcome it.

Now we shall read the last poem from 20-year-old boy, full of his emotional confidence.

*“At 20 years old, I am a vagrant
Daring to tattoo and fighting if I hate anyone
Want to become the swashbuckler in errant world
At last, everything had turned to dust and ashes”.*

This feeling is very popular. If he hates anyone, he will not express it to that person, but he behaves with scimitars, daggers, broken glass and weapons. Because he would have difficulty in surviving with the people who live in the errant life.

In some situations of the society, traps can induce us to become the people like above. These are the people who can stand pains. But these pains are bitter tastes which are due to the lack of the third psychological process which the Buddhist Sutra taught about the escape. We should allow ourselves to be the victim of misfortune. Therefore, we are forced to renew.

In the third sentence of the poem is the confidence, which is really respected. That is “Want to become the swashbuckler in errant world”. In Chinese literature, the word “swashbuckler” means a good man. Wanting to become a swashbuckler, he has to be a good person in the world. But in the martial arts of China, they said that if we see the possibility of good deeds but do nothing then we are not heroes, swashbucklers or good people. The meaning of swashbuckler is like this. Therefore, if he misunderstands the meaning of “swashbuckler”, he will become the hoodlum in the errant world. Therefore, many people come to lose everything. Because resentment in errant life can happen instantly.

ERRANT LIFE IS SHORT

According to social statistics of the magazine about prisons in the United States, most hoodlums in the errant world have the life expectancy of about 40 years. Many people begin to live in the errant world at the age of 12 to 13. Within 20 years to 40 years old, they have a lot of resentment. In the past they killed other people, and then are killed by others. In the errant world, the strong people are the people who can kill others. That strength is not good. That strength is the pain, is the mistake. The imputation of responsibility about causality is manifested by the moral punishment, which makes us become restless, uncomfortable and haggard. To become the swashbuckler, we have to be the good people.

We used to visit some people who finished serving their sentence. Seeing their wives and their children, we feel deep anguish. Sometimes, they behave very well with their juniors

“say one is one, say two is two”. They may not keep any money in some illegal affairs. They give all of illegal money for their juniors because of their promises for their juniors to be loyal so that they can become the swashbuckler. That is the mistake.

Firstly, the swashbuckler must be the person who can bring happiness for his relatives, his beloved ones.

If the man used to have a wife, he has to look after the happiness of his wife by material means. While the wives of these hoodlums do not have clothes to wear, rice to eat and their children are ill, weep and moan the whole day and do not have money to go to school. Their mother is old and loses health. They become the swashbuckler with the people whose actions are evil; so the swashbuckling is meaningless.

Therefore, we really hope with a deep sympathy that you should think the real meaning of swashbuckling so that you can become the person whose every action is told or remembered with the pride and without regret. Then that swashbuckling can have the real depth.

You should not think that you have to be rich to do the swashbuckling work. When you have the heart, then you will have the doors, the methods and the success. The problem is that you have to suffer great hardship. If there is no hardship, there is no success. The rougher the road is to walk, the more the success you have. Therefore, if you want to have the quick result without investing a lot then that result does not have the future. At last he mistakes to become the swashbuckler but he is actually the person who does not have anything.

Buddhism also has one more profound sentence: “*There is no situation of losing everything*”. If we know to show repentance to renew, our fame will be bright. Do you remember the poem in the lecture “*Turn Around and There is the Shore*” talking about the life of one chief of bandits, Angulimala, and in the end of his life how he became the real swashbuckler? He had become the poet. He composed one profound poem:

*“Anyone uses good deeds
To obliterate cruel karmas
Will be brilliant in this life
Like the moon escaping the clouds”*

For him, the errant world is the cloudy cover. Although the moon is very bright like it is on this mid-autumn night, we still cannot see its light. Only good deeds with real swashbuckling value -- which are in line with morals, conscience and legal system -- can obliterate all cruel karma, misfortunes of the past, which we did in our life because we misunderstood or had a superficial knowledge, or were seduced or fell in the traps or were incited, inhibited or wanted to take revenge then, and became the victim. Therefore, we can still renew and that innovation is like the moon escaping the clouds.

YOUR LIFE CAN BE CHANGED

In history, there are some people who laid down their weapons to become the Buddha immediately. We believe that all of you also have the potential as the Buddha said: “*That enlightened potential exists in all of us in every minute*”

of our life... the bitter tastes are the sleepy Buddha". Now we have the task to awaken that sleepy Buddha to let our mind become an enlightened Buddha.

The meaning of the word "Buddha" is not so sublime, it means the awakened. It looks like an action while we are sleeping with wide open eyes. The enlightenment is the open eyes. We usually open our eyes at least one time every day. After sleeping hours at night, we have to open our eyes to do our housework. Some people also have a quick nap after lunch. If we have a nervous breakdown and weak health, we can take 2-3 sleeps besides the nap after lunch each day. Nobody can survive and live happily only with health, sleep, eating, wearing and enjoyment, they have to work. But to do this, we have to be very enlightened, by using our eyes.

The Buddha is the person who is very enlightened in his awareness, his actions, his work, his judgment, his good deeds, his sacrifice, his values, his advantages. We hope that all of you will awaken your sleepy Buddha then you can change your errant world and give up this errant life. The errant life has two contents: the first content is the errant personality and the second content is the errant action. Errant life, according to the bad meaning which some boys and girls confide to us by anonymous letters, is the world which does not have the road to return and has a very short life-span.

Our determination is very important, as the people usually say that "*a miss is as good as a mile*". And in fact, a little wrong action and morality can destroy the whole life. The

author of this poem said that he had escaped death two times and that fright made the rhythm of his heart stop.

There are many people who cannot escape death, as the social statistics reveal. The life expectancy of the people in the errant world is 40 years, while the life expectancy of human beings today is 70 years. Some developed countries like the United States and Japan immensely support their citizens. The life expectancy of people in these countries is 80 years and there are also some people living for more than 112 years.

To have a long life and have good deeds, we have to realise that the fate of our errant actions will never leave us. Although the Buddhism said that there is no fate, no destiny and there are only actions happening and if we want to change them we have to change our awareness. But the fate of misfortune which we must experience is the thing which cannot be escaped. Experiencing it, then we can only renew.

We need to overcome the stormy winds and waves of life. When we turn around, the first thing we want is to see the shore. In fact, there is a distance between the action of turning around and the shore. That distance which is shortened more or less, quickly or slowly, depends on your goodwill. If we are swimming in the Cuu Long river, Tien river or Hau river with the strong water flow, we have to take 3 or 4 hours. But if we cannot swim or we are not expert in swimming, maybe we cannot reach the shore and we can be drowned or be taken with a cramp in the mid river.

Therefore, in the errant life it is not enough to turn around. In Buddhism there is also one sentence: “*If we do not*

do any bad deeds, it is not sure for us to be good people". Because these people are only not punished by legal system. If we want to turn around towards the happy world we have to do the good deeds. According to the Buddha, the change of karma is not caused by the prayers or the favour of the deities or the God because these people are not real. Only we ourselves with our action can determine our fate. Goodness or badness is created by us. So we should not blame the God. We have to control ourselves and take the responsibility of our actions. Then, this turning around becomes the process to change and renew. Every bad action will leave the bad trace which will not be lost.

If we throw one ball to the wall, we realise that it will rebound. If our force is 20N or equal to 20-30kg, the rebound of this ball is the same as our force. Any action which we perform will have good or bad, negative or positive reactions and every time when we remember it, we can feel proud or unpleasant. As the person wants to turn around towards the peaceful shore, he has to do good deeds which can make him happy. He should not let them make his rhythm of heart stop few times.

TURNING AROUND FOR A NEW LIFE

Therefore, the process of turning around is all about renewing. This involves many concrete actions. We know that the longevity of hoodlums is about 30-40 years maximum. That is the pain. There are some hoodlums who are lisp, have weak cerebral veins, are ill, paralytic and cannot walk. Ms. Phúc Bô, who was very notorious in the North of Vietnam

and was mentioned on the newspapers many times in the past, is the lisp and limping kind with her pains as we met her accidentally.

We know that she has the inner pains that two of her sons became the hoodlums who are more notorious than her. When she was ill, her sons did not take care of her but they stole things in her house to have the money for buying heroin and enjoy it. In the past, Ms. Phúc Bỗ used to roar so that all of hoodlums must be silent and follow her orders like the chief of bandits in the underworld but now she has to implore her sons with sweet words. The person can be very tough with others but this person will be feel weak and be polite to her relatives, her beloved. That is the retribution of karma, and now two of her sons mistreat, beat and insult her. When she goes to Quán Sứ pagoda, she confides to us and some monks here that *“I hope to have the better final months and years of my life, although I cannot walk normally and my brain has encephalomalacia. I cannot control my emotion so that I easily cry or smile. I hope that I can overcome my karma”*.

We suggest that she should not be so pessimistic because it cannot lead to her situation becoming better. The first thing, she has to renew herself and renew by her awareness. Furthermore, awareness is not enough and she must have some concrete actions. She can write the story about her life. The life which is called *“The half useless life”* by one famous writer. There are some people in the errant world having the whole useless life until they die then many people still curse and condemn them.

In the samsara (world) we cannot escape the responsibility of our karma. Although you believe in one religion or not, you can think that there is no karma, good or bad people because after we die, we only have two metres of ground, one coffin which the lucky people have, someone burn incense while the unlucky do not. That wrong thought will make us not to take responsibility of our actions in the past, now or in the future.

In fact, we see that when we throw one ball to the wall, that ball does not stand still but it bounces out of that wall. And it can cause us pain, by hitting chest, our eyes or even our bladder. It also affects other people. And these effects will affect the happiness of society, and leave other effects. It does not only lead to one result. Therefore, you should write the story about your life with your compunction. And we suggest her to write one compunctious sentence at the end of the story like "*The whole life of compunction does not still pay all of debt*".

This is the truth but we do not want to make you feel disappointed that "*The life to return to the bank is too long*". Only few hours, few days or few years we can turn around. The effort will bring success. Why we say that we cannot pay all of debt because our actions in the past are still applicable. When we lay down our weapon it means we only reduce the bad actions, and accept responsibility towards morality and legal system. We do not transform it. We have to do a series of good deeds and the confidence at the end of our life is very important.

If we do not dare to do this work, we can write about our whole life which the inexperienced people in the errant world do not know, and can become the victim, and with them we have to share our karma, our responsibility with these people. Writing these confidences is the way to help other people -- who want to be happy and rich by unfair means and without making real efforts – so that they can learn and don't have to pay a very high price. Before ending, we will read one poem of a person who began to succeed in the work of turning around the shore, and overcame the most difficult period in his life:

*Living in prison looks like living in hotels
Four walls bury my youth
No parents do not feel pitying
Taking a wrong step, parent! please forgive me!
At that time, I fail in my duty for my parents
Tramping about through thick and thin but there is no future
The splendour disappear in a jiffy
Remembering the sunlight in the afternoon
I feel very regretfully
Wish my parents forgive my mistakes
I am so immature that I do not understand my father's love
I am so stupid that I do not realise my mother's love
Now I do not see the morning sunlight
Now I do not hear the lullaby
In the prison, my ear is full of compunction*

*Burying my youth in my stupidity
At that place, only having the heart of my parents
Consoling me in my inconsolable misfortune
I will give up two words "errant life"
The law please forgive the people like me".*

That is a very profound poem of one person who does not have the future, longevity, happiness on his road. Before ending our lecture, we will to read two more sentences from another person:

*"The blood flows uninterruptedly into the heart
Errant steps have tired pains".*

The Good Path of Happiness Awaits You

When you feel tired with the errant steps, we as well as your parents, your brothers, sisters, relatives want you to stop your errant steps. Only when we bravely stop these errant steps by our lucid awareness, our life will not be stormy. And before us is the happiness with the bright morning star. That morning star and as well as the moonlight of this mid-autumn night are real phenomenon. When we stop the errant life, we will enjoy the moon with its happiness.

We sincerely thank you for listening and wish all of you will really have the meaningful mid-autumn with your family, like the important amnesty on the important days of Vietnam.

CHANGING DESTINY



A Dhamma Talk given to 2000 Jail Inmates at K.20 prison, Chau Binh village, Giong Trom district, Ben Tre province on January 29, 2008.

Transcribed by Chan Tri and Dieu Tinh, and translated by Luu Ngoc Anh.

AMNESTY AS RESULT OF PRACTICE

We are so glad to hear from Senior lieutenant-colonel Phùng Văn Yến that the quantity of prisoners who are amnestied in 2007 is more than previous years. It proves that your efforts are full of positive trends and can open a new way in your lives.

The need of refreshing the life is essential but most of you are amnestied earlier. It proves that your efforts of inclining to the good have had positive results. Today, besides regular gifts such as instant noodles, jam, sugar and some necessities which are from sincere hearts, there is the presence of sponsors. When we enjoy performances of artists coming from Ho Chi Minh City, firstly we are living in a very new atmosphere – the atmosphere of spring, listening to good songs which help us lessen sorrows, sufferings, homesickness, missing families. Their performances help us to have a new feeling. When we enjoy cake and jam, we enjoy a new taste but we rarely have it in eating and drinking everyday.

We are also glad to know that you continue to practice one day of vegetarianism and meditation so that your mind and body are tranquil and free. That is the art of refreshing the life for everybody. Refreshing the life is always present besides us and in our lives. We may realize it or may not pay attention to it. Refreshing the life doesn't mean that we die and then we are back to life again. With the same body, name, social role, relationships, personality, habits in action and thinking, the movement of our karma is changed positively. Karmic transformation is the way to refresh the life.

You have public labour everyday. If a person does hard

work during a week without changing clothing, how do you feel about this? Maybe we don't dare to go close to her/him because of bad odour. Therefore, in spite of tiredness, we often have a bath and change new clothes after a working day. Physical refreshment makes our mind comfortable. Pass too far physical needs such as food, clothing, everyday activities, need of refreshing the life is very important. We begin to have a new life to make joys for ourselves from positive efforts. From these efforts we are amnestied, and then the reunion with your relatives make you feel that your efforts are very worthy.

THE TASTE OF FREEDOM

Buddha mentioned three psychological steps in human life. The concept of psychology which Buddha used is very simple; including three couples of words: Sweet taste, bitter taste and taste of freedom. Sweet taste symbolizes the period or mode of living in which we have full happiness, affection and peacefulness in the reunion of family. We gain all best things but most of sweet tastes do not exist long in our life. Some are very dangerous, like flies die easily in honey, so we can lose our future if we follow such sweet tastes. Therefore, the nature of refreshing the life and its necessary demand is not to find sweet tastes which make us tired after we enjoy.

Bitter taste often appears when sweet taste has not been influential in our life any more. It makes us very tired and regretful about everything which does not happen, like a secondary and direct response when we lose sweet taste because of a seduction, a mistake or a carelessness and we must live to suffer patiently in a bad circumstance as a result. If that bitter

taste is a necessary result of enjoying sweet taste in wrong method, the time to spend it is very long. It can be 10 years, 20 years, 30 years, or even during life.

In the period of spending bitter taste, Buddha teaches that we shouldn't be discouraged because this psychological state cannot help us to solve any problem. But from bitter taste we often have a strong urge to rescue from circumstances, or best efforts to end the period of spending bitter taste. That is an indispensable causal rule in life.

When we realize clearly sweet taste, bitter taste and taste of rescue, we can understand thoroughly about nature of life, human feelings and relationships in social life. Although there are about 180 people who don't have relatives, but we will have many new relations at this place. Sometimes we meet Buddhist charitable organizations, everybody always consider each other as relatives although we don't have any blood-relationship. This helps us to reduce loneliness positively.

We need to remember to manage to gain best taste of rescue in order to end bitter taste. The more we work well, practise well, live well, the more we end bitter taste. So the standard of refreshing the life is to change or to die. This standard is very strong and impressive because we are placed in front of a choice. If we don't change habits, don't go for perfect life, don't refresh awareness, aren't optimistic, don't have active spirit to find long valuable happiness, our life is equated with the death – a death in suffering, standstill and obstacle.

When we set up such standards, we should face bitter tastes instead of fleeing them like a tortoise which always

withdraw its head and four limbs into the shell. During the time the tortoise flees, it feels safe because bigger animals and storms in life can not hurt it. But when it pokes its head out of the shell and go ahead, all difficulties are still waiting for it. So if we don't face difficulties to manage to overcome, our fleeing is not a solution. In other words, it can be a very big standstill which we need to pay attention.

So nature of life exists in two contents. Firstly, we need to direct to the quality of life. A life which has good quality is not one in which there is a big house full of physical means, but one in which we live happily and suitably to rule of social morals, and we have joy in the reunion of family, have affection and interdependence with other people. Such life is the quality and material of a happy life for all people, not for only the rich. If we change our life trend, we will still have good quality and material of life in any circumstance. Therefore we shouldn't have any complex, but we should replace this complex with efforts in order to have happiness in life.

EFFORT TO RENEW ONE'S LIFE

Maybe all of you have not yet forgotten the story of Angulimala (Pāli: "*Garland of fingers*") which we shared year ago. Angulimala, a famous terrorist, had brought to his sentence 99 dead bodies, so he sowed sufferings in 99 families. This story has not finished yet.

Next part of it is his impressive effort to refresh his life. He returned to a Vihara and practised a religious life as Buddha's instruction. Face of a murderer and character of a terrorist

now were replaced with the face and the character of an indulgent and virtuous person. He really had a complete new life.

When the King heard that Angulimala was sheltering in the Vihara, he went there immediately with his team of cavalryman and best Generals. The King's purpose was to suggest Buddha to hand over Angulimala. As entering the Vihara, the King met many monks. Among them, a monk was sweeping yard. He had a stately, impressive and respectable figure. The King came to greet him. Buddha asked all monks to sit besides him when he received the King and Generals. Angulimala sat next to Buddha.

After some proprieties, the King said: *"Please hand over Angulimala to me so that I will judge him in law"*. Buddha said: *"Your Majesty, you saw a monk who was sweeping yard when you entered here. That monk is Angulimala"*. The King was very surprised, he couldn't believe that the famous terrorist might become a virtuous person just in over half of a month. But he did not want to lose a chance to believe in the existence of magic.

The King said: *"If it is the fact, I hope to meet Angulimala as a monk"*. Buddha pointed at the monk sitting next to him. The King was very surprised once again, he couldn't believe his eyes and ears. Of course a murderer must pay retributive compensation in the law of India 26 centuries ago. But when the King realized that that murderer had refreshed his life, he gave up his purpose and went home.

The Vihara where Buddha lived was very large, so not

only the King but also all relatives of Angulimala's victims heard about his shelter. Many people expected to see the King's judgment of Angulimala. So the King had to go home through back gate to avoid a public demonstration. Every morning, Angulimala went to beg for food as Buddhistic tradition. Many people realized his face so they threw at him stones, tomato and rotten egg, some scolded and hit him mercilessly.

After becoming a Buddhist, Angulimala was named Non-violence which meant no harm to anybody. It's an important nature of the mercifulness. He did not respond and he accepted bad treats because they were result of murders he has committed. He received them delightedly so that all of gratitude and rancour, cause and effect were changed.

In this world, the sentence "*Plant melon will crop melon, plant bean will crop bean*" gives us exactly the relationship between cause and effect in real life. Plant melon can't crop bean, plant bean can't crop rice, plant rice can't crop house. We only have things we need when we change things which have equal value.

According to Buddhism, all actions we have done will not disappear, but if we know the way to refresh the life, our life will be changed. In the story, the change was the King's amnesty for Angulimala after he became a virtuous person under religious instruction of Buddha. This amnesty made causal structure to be changed too, Angulimala was free from death penalty although he still was treated badly by his victims' relatives. After a day going to beg for food,

Angulimala returned to Vihara in torn clothes, but monks were not surprised because the present cause and effect of Angulimala had been changed.

When we manage to refresh the life, the karma from all mistakes or wrong actions or even unjustness in the past will be untied completely. So the focus of refreshing the life is to refresh awareness, action, habit and quality of life. When we refresh something, we will change our life by the amnesty on important days. Don't think of a destiny or a disposition of fate. We can change everything if we have a sincere heart, an effort and a determination.

We can see Angulimala's obstacle at the beginning is the bank being too far ahead. Between the action of going back and the bank is the distance of a river, so we need to have skill and spirit and be brave to overcome. There are many swift-flowing rivers in our life, if we don't have enough skill, spirit and belief, we can sink as we are managing to go back to the bank. But we have an only choice, it is to overcome bad effects from mistakes which were made unintentionally or intentionally. So we must manage to swim in order to go back to the bank. It's the process of refreshing the life.

DON'T BLAME OTHERS FOR YOUR OWN PROBLEMS

In other words, Buddhism mentions moral standard of solution than meeting difficulties in problem. A person who meets difficulties right in problem usually feels complex. He/she always thinks that he/she doesn't have any chance to refresh the life because he/she will never be forgiven. We should believe that we will be forgiven if we make efforts

with sincere heart and belief. We should understand that although there are many obstacles ahead, we must make effort or we will die. Manage to refresh the life is the only choice. Relatives are missing and expecting you. Some of you don't be visited by relatives and haven't got money to pay legal costs. So you have to stay here for longer time. Therefore you must have good efforts to go back soon.

“Don't blame God when karma is clung to the body”.

The meaning of two lines of the poet Nguyen Du is influenced very much by Buddhistic philosophy. The karma which is clung to the body can be started by an unintention, loss of control, hatred. Therefore it will be wrong if we say that all people staying at such places are criminals. Some are criminals, but some are mistaken. So we should not be fearful or complain about destiny, but we should manage to refresh the life to find best long-term solution. Last time, we practised a meaningful song:

“We listen anything they say. Listen clearly, understand thoroughly, love much. Why we must be sad in a few days, then feelings fade. We go back and breathe deeply, sadness will disappear quickly”.

The philosophy is *“This word is sent away, that word is received, at last every thing won't be solved. Why we don't look back, breathe lightly and deeply”.* When thousands of people who are different from family, blood and character live with each other, of course conflicts will happen everyday. If we can not control ourselves when we meet conflict, we will be punished. So our amnesty will be difficult.

In the prayer, Buddha said that “*A fire of hatred will burn a forest of merit*”, it means a thoughtless action can make us to feel regretful forever. We must know to listen. Listening has three contents: listen clearly, understand thoroughly, love much. What is a clear listening? It’s a listening without blame, being angry and revengeful. It’s a listening with a fair-minded spirit and a merciful heart. We should try to understand our interlocutors’ feeling. In stead of being angry with them, we should help them to overcome their anger. In other words, human enemy is not human but the anger. Unwise actions are the enemy of humans. We should manage to make best efforts to transfer that negativeness. This is a thorough understanding.

From that, we can have a new attitude, that is love. “*Listen clearly, understand thoroughly, love much*” is an indispensable process of a person who has a great learning but no need to have any diploma. We don’t need to know any letter, but if we know to observe in the way of “*listen clearly, understand thoroughly, love much*”, we can become a Bodhisattva who can observe the soul of life. At that time, we can overcome sufferings very fast.

Please remember a sentence in the world: “*Don’t be angry with strangers*”. Many people are angry with even their relatives, such as their husband/wife and children. We usually hope that our relatives must behave in a certain way. When they don’t do as we hope, we get angry with them. Since we manage to refresh the life, we shouldn’t care that our interlocutor is a stranger or a relative, but

we should consider all people as human and behave kindly towards each other.

Buddha taught that if Buddhist monk let his hatred to rise, he should never feed it over one day. Nowadays, many people die because of some diseases which are influenced by the anger. So we shouldn't lengthen our anger. The anger makes us unwise and lose the beauty. We must practise to always have a smile on happy face, from that we can live peacefully and meaningfully.

Although a person is very rich and has a high position in society, but if he/she doesn't have any smile, does not breathe deeply, decrease suffering, he/she will not be happy. Therefore refreshing is a requirement for everybody. Everyday we have to refresh the life, more positively and more happily.

TRANSFORMING BY CHANGING HABITS

We are being on days of transition between the year of Pig and the year of Mouse. Maybe all of you know the character Zhū Bā Jiè (豬八戒) or Pigsy, who represents Pig.

His previous incarnation was a general in the zenith. His bad habit was drinking. One day, after drinking too much, he pretended to be lost in the palace of Moon. He was arrested because he dared to take liberties with the Moon. The God was very angry and wanted to behead him. In words of Tàishàng Lǎojūn (太上老君, the Most High Lord Laozi), the God gave him an amnesty by banishing him into the earth. Then he was born as an ugly shape with a mouth, a head and two ears of a pig, he lived in the way of a pig too.

His cause and effect went from the zenith to the earth. His life only changed after he became a disciple of a monk of Tang dynasty. During the journey to the west to seek Buddhist scriptures, most of dangers were caused by Zhū Bā Jiè because of his bad habits. At last, the monk of Tang dynasty educated him successfully.

So nature of the seed is not to be lost through words, actions and thought. It makes up our character. Conception of Buddhism doesn't accept destiny. This is a difference between Buddhism and other religions. Everything can be changed. The image of Zhū Bā Jiè was changed too. At the end of the film, Sūn Wūkōng (孫悟空) became Fight-victorious Buddha (鬪戰勝佛 Dòu Zhān Shèng Fó) and Zhū Bā Jiè became Cleanser of the Altars (淨壇使者 Jìng tán shi zhe). He received offerings of people to offer to Buddha. He helped people to sow their hands of affection in life.

We suggest you should do charity at least once a year. You can save only 100 vn dong or 500 vn dong, then you depend on prison warden to forward this money to a charitable organization. So you are sowing a hand of affection in life. If you have a sincere heart, you can do charity in any circumstance. Cleanser of the Altars is really the egg of Zhū Bā Jiè. He gave up all his bad habits in order to help other people to sow charitable and moral seeds in life and bring affection to everybody.

Refreshing the life means that we change a habit of receiving to a more exalted habit. That is the reason we are thankful to

the prison warden for accepting a vegetarian day for you. Vegetarianism helps us to reduce bad karma. While you are eating a vegetarian meal, you should not think that you are doing a blessing but you are saving life. So the material of affection appears when we love all kinds of animal without any reason. It will support us so much to free our karma.

Buddhist causal theory teaches us to refresh moral life by freeing karma. Freeing karma means that we sow positive seeds which are different completely with our present seeds. So nothing can make us to be disappointed as a complex. When we try to forget sufferings in the past and make efforts at the present, we will have a good present and a good future. Direct our eyes to the sun and wave to the moon. We think of day because we are afraid of night. We believe in happiness so that we don't want to be abandoned in suffering.

When your time in prison hasn't finished yet, you must be optimistic and try your best to transfer seeds of habit. Sometimes we should have a vegetarian day to reduce our karma. At that time, we widen our sincere heart, as a result transfer of karma will be done. On the occasion of the year of Mouse, we want to remind a Buddhist classic reference.

There is a sentence in prayer which is chanted everyday in Viharas. It is "*Both princess Yasodharā and her mother are unhurt*". This sentence originated from a killing and subject of this killing is mice. After Buddha became a monk, princess Yasodharā still kept her faithfulness during 6 years although many princes wanted to marry her legally. At that time, she was pregnant and this fetus didn't develop during 6 years. It

only developed step by step when Buddha reached the peak of Buddhist way. She bore a child who was named Rahula.

During the time she was pregnant, she was in doubt that she committed fornication with another man. The King decided to kill her in the fire. On the bale-fire, she took an oath that if she suffered an injustice, she would be freed from danger. Immediately, it rained and the fire dozed off. The King ordered to continue firing, there was another rain to stamp the fire out. So at third time, everybody believed that princess Yasodharā was really suffering an injustice.

This event was explained in the prayer by Buddha: *“Previous life of Rahula was as a pastor. He often caught mice and put them into something to confine them. He was very happy to do that. One day, he set a trap in a dump so mice must run into a cave. Then he filled up the cave with a big stone. Mice were dead after 6 days of no eating and drinking. He was very joyful and did not regret. As a result, he was put in his mother’s belly for 6 years”.*

Cause and effect bring the same nature between what we sow and what we reap. They identify with each other in spirit, but they don’t identify with each other in mass. After killing a person, if the murderer continues to stab the dead, the karma of murderer will increase ten times although there is only one unit of life. Because action of spirit is directly proportional to concrete action.

MOVING FROM SUFFERING TO HAPPINESS

If we want to transfer our life from suffering to happiness, we have to transfer our spirit first, and then our action will

happen naturally. The more we feel regretful, the more our karma is transferred soon. In the previous life, Rahula wasn't regretful so his karma was still present. Fortunately, he was child of crown prince Siddhartha, who became Buddha later, and princess Yasodharā, who was very virtuous. During 6 years he was a fetus, he had an effect from virtuousness. As a result, Rahula was very intelligent and he had a great personality later. Therefore, we must know to be regretful and to refresh ourselves so that we will have a great personality. Don't care what society and the public think of your past. Now we are new human so we feel peaceful and happy in our efforts. That is a belief which everybody needs to have.

We are so glad because most of you have changed well in taking vegetarian meals, practicing contemplation and praying to Buddha. These actions are not religious; they are an art and a culture. They are a psychological method to refresh the life. When we pray to Buddha, we should not pray for peacefulness and richness because it's very selfish. Buddha can not support us if we don't sow causal seeds and blessing.

In order to save our life, Buddha gives us the method and we are the agent, we refresh our life by positive actions. When we pray we should only focus on the sentence "*Glory to Buddha Amitabha*", not pray for anything. Breathe deeply and gently, don't remember suffering, hatred, enemy and unhappiness.

First, we are refreshing our health. When we pay attention to the title of Buddha, we will have no chance to think of bad things in life and our suffering will disappear very fast. That is the art of replacement. If you are not Buddhist, you can pray

to the title of your religion. We pray not for help, we pray for refreshing our feeling and to refresh our life.

Here, the environment is very good; it is suitable to practice contemplation. When we are in labor, we should focus on our breath so that our spirit is peaceful. On the contrary, if we remember our standstills while we are working, we will be too tired. Religious contemplation has a supportive function for our health and spirit; it will help us to refresh the life every day.

We are sure that you will have an ideal person in your life. It can be your father, your mother, or one of your relatives. You can look back on that ideal and hope to be equal or more.

Developing Ourselves with the Five Moral Principles

To refresh the life, we can choose an impressive personality and look back on it, and then we will become that personality right this moment, not in next life. According to Buddhism, there are no paradise and hell. We live well means that we have happiness in this life, so after we die we will be reborn as a human with all positive values. Therefore, a spiritual support is very necessary. Now please listen carefully with all your spirit, and then repeat it with your awareness and joy. We believe that your karma will be transferred and your suffering will be reduced if you practice exactly as we instruct. Please repeat after me and repeat loudly:

“My name is ..., from this time to the end of my life, I will keep the first moral principle that is not killing human. I’m aware

of suffering from killing, I take an oath to save life, have a part in set up the peace, protect the ecology. I promise I will do this oath”.

“My name is ..., from this time to the end of my life, I will keep the second moral principle that is not stealing. I’m aware of suffering from stealing; I take an oath to never steal anything from a needle or reel of thread to jewels. I promise I will take this oath”.

“My name is ..., from this time to the end of my life, I will keep the third moral principle that is never having adultery. I’m aware of suffering from adultery; I take an oath to live virtuously with one wife and one husband for familial happiness of other people and mine. I believe I will do this oath”.

“My name is ..., from this time to the end of my life, I will keep the fourth moral principle that is not telling a lie. I’m aware of suffering from swindle; I would like to say affectionate words, contribute my ideas, say knowledgeable words, say polite words, and not say swear-words. I promise I will do completely this moral principle”.

“My name is ..., from this time to the end of my life, I will keep the fifth moral principle that is not consuming toxins. I’m aware that wine and drug cause suffering, from this time to the end of my life I won’t sell and buy them, won’t use them, won’t be the accomplice with people who use them because I am aware that my health is the most important element”.

The first moral principle calls everybody to respect the life. Life is very precious. Natural calamity can take our physical things out but after that we can set them up again by our real efforts. But when a life is lost, we have no chance to find it out again. Therefore, we must protect the peace and

give affection to human, neither kill nor tell other people to kill, neither beat nor tell other people to beat, neither assault nor tell other people to assault.

The second moral principle teaches everybody a habit of respecting other people's possessiveness. We don't take anything without its owner's permission. Besides, we should help everybody as they need. When our hand brings affection to others, we can't take their happiness. We will realize that the origin of happiness is very easy to find, it is not in the heaven but it is in good actions which we do with our whole heart.

The third moral principle is to respect marital happiness in order to protect ourselves and society. Nowadays, the disease of HIV and AIDS takes out happiness of many people and leave in society and family a crisis of economy. So sexual relationships which are not right in moral rules of Buddhism will make everybody unhappy. Therefore we should choose a right companion for life so that we will not regret later.

The fourth moral principle is an announcement that we don't propagandize the truth, the fact or anything which we don't know. We must use well-chosen words in communication so that our prestige and value of personality will be increased more and more. Obscene words will dirty our mouth and everybody will have bad impression about us. Our words must be based on sincerity and solidarity, not on conflict and hatred. A threatening can bring suffering to everybody too because it is equal to three slaps.

The fifth moral principle is not using wine and drugs because they are the enemy of our health and life. Many men like

drinking than their wives and children while true happiness is the reunion of family. So we should transfer our personal habits so that our relatives will get happiness. Don't be too selfish. Moreover, we can lose our control because of these personal habits.

When we preserve five moral principles above, our life will be peaceful although not all people here are Buddhists. We must preserve them by all our awareness and belief. These five moral principles are the background for the practice of Buddhism. So if we do these well, we can have the same value with other noble people in life. Therefore, we have to have determination and believe that we can do it.

TAKING REFUGE IN THE TRIPLE GEM

It's very important to take spiritual refuges. Han Mac Tu, a Vietnamese well-known poet who died because of leprosy and suffering in love, had two lines in a poem:

*“You leave so a half of my soul is lost
And remaining half becomes clumsy”*

He thought that his happiness was the vault of heaven or a thing which was very round. When his lover left, his heaven of happiness was broken into two parts. A part was lost and could not be found, remaining part was useless because his soul had been clumsy already.

Adults always have a need for love. We love and respect our love. It will be a great happiness if we love a congenial companion. If we only meet lover from time to time, we will miss him/her very much. However, it's not sure that we will

be happy as meeting each other because sulks and sadness can make the distance wider.

According to Han Mac Tu, his dependence is the love. However, other people can think differently about the dependence. They can think that it is money, or promotion, or their parents, or patriotism, or love for people. It can be a service with a selfless spirit. All are called physical and sentimental dependences. Everybody should have a spiritual dependence although they are religious or not.

First of all, spiritual dependence is preserving five moral principles. It is a friend in our life. In Buddhist prayer, it was taught that a man should have two wives and a woman should have two husbands. The second wife or husband is the Buddha dhamma.

Now, please repeat after me a wish for taking refuge in the Triple Gem:

“My name is ... , from this time to the end of my life, I would like the Buddha to be my teacher in order to direct my life”.

Siddhartha Gautama is not only Buddha but many others. We can be disciple of people who have been enlightened because we can be enlightened too. The enlightenment brings happiness and peacefulness to us. Of course, to let Siddhartha Gautama to be our teacher doesn't mean to pray him to give us blessing. Blessing is made ourselves by our actions.

Now this is the second spiritual refuge:

“My name is ... , from this time to the end of my life, I would

like to let wisdom and compassion to be my teacher in order to direct my life”.

When we have intelligence, we live very seriously. Intelligence is above knowledge. Knowledge depends on books, education and experience while intelligence is way of life and awareness which is suitable to morals. Loving kindness and compassion help us to live meaningfully. When we take the oath that we let intelligence and mercifulness to be our teacher, our life will be changed. That is the first spiritual dependence.

Now we take the third spiritual refuge:

“My name is ... , from this time to the end of my life, I would like virtuous Sangha to be my teacher in order to direct my life”.

I share with you this because I want all of you to have happiness like breathing pure air here. Happiness is not a sublime thing which we must go to find. It is a thing which we can see with open eyes. It's similar to the image of air going into lungs when we breath. If we can enjoy it, it means we are living with it.

When we refresh the life in such way, it's sure that all our complex and suffering will not exist any longer. From that time, our life is completely new. To mark the day we become a new human, Buddhism often gives us a new name. I would like to give you a new name, it's Happy Root. Thank you very much because you feel happy with this name. It's not only my dream but also the dream of all of you and your relatives. I would like to stop here and wish you a peaceful and prosperous new year. Hope you soon have a reunion with your family in your new image.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Most Ven. Dr. Thich Nhat Tu was born in Saigon in 1969 and received full ordination in 1988. He is the Founder-president of Buddhism Today Foundation since 2000. He also made valuable contribution as an editorial member of Hue Quang Buddhist Encyclopedia (9 volumes, 1992-2007). He is an editorial member of the ongoing Vietnamese Tripitaka Translation project (of more than one hundred volumes).

He has authored more than seventy Vietnamese books on Buddhism and produced over two thousand VCDs on various dhamma topics. He is the Editor-in-chief and Publisher of the Vietnamese Tripitaka (the first edition in MP3 format), Buddhism Today Series (over two hundred books on Buddhism) and more than two hundred CD albums on Buddhist music.

He has traveled extensively around the world to give public Dharma talks to Vietnamese communities in Vietnam, America, Australia and Europe. Thousands of long-term prison inmates at K.20 Prison, Ben Tre, and Phu Son 4, Thai Nguyen city, under his guidance, have

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Ven. Dr. Thich Nhat Tu currently serves as Vice Rector of the Vietnam Buddhist University, Vice Chairman of the National Department of International Buddhist Affairs, Vice Chairman of the National Department of Dharma Propagation of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) and Editor-in-Chief of the Buddhism Today magazine in Vietnamese and Vietnam Buddhist University series.

On October 30, 2010 the Mahamakut Buddhist University, Thailand conferred on him the title of Doctor Honoris Causa in appreciation of his excellent contribution to Buddhist education, his works on Buddhist academic research and leadership in international Buddhist community.

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