

## Faith is the Source of the Path

Good morning, everyone! This is today's Dharma Espresso on "faith is the source of the Path".

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Exactly 35 years ago, the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua gave a dharma talk that greatly impressed me. I still remember it clearly. He said, "The Avatamsaka Sutra is a long sutra, ranks first among all the sutras, and talks about the completeness of the bodhisattva path. When I heard that, I felt curious, inspired, and eager to cultivate and to learn. He went on encouraging us, "You all should learn the Avatamsaka Sutra until you can master it."

My Chinese was not yet good at that time, so I only listened to the translation. The Venerable Master said that Chapter 12 of the Avatamsaka Sutra summarizes the entire sutra. Whoever wants to cultivate the bodhisattva path must understand, follow, memorize Chapter 12, and use it as a guide. Those days, I didn't know anything about Chapter 12, so I asked a monk next to me. He told me Chapter 12 is the Worthy Leader. That was how I found out that the Worthy Leader is Chapter 12. Before I became a monk, many of my elder dharma brothers told me that they had often heard about this chapter from the Venerable Master who used it to encourage his disciples to bring forth the bodhisattva mind. After that, I found it so interesting that I resolved to memorize it, and it took me a few weeks to learn it by heart.

The Worthy Leader includes two volumes called the High Volume and the Low Volume. It's longer than usual, but I found it very interesting and the writing very beautiful. In the end, I decided to internalize it. Hence, every day, after my routine of eating lunch, bowing to the Buddha, returning from the Buddha Hall to Tathagata Monastery, passing by Great Compassion House with a square courtyard, I would recite this entire chapter mentally while walking around the courtyard. In the beginning, it took me 45 minutes to finish reciting since it was difficult to recite while walking. Gradually, I could do it faster, and finish reciting it in 15 to 20 minutes. Eventually, I could internalize it. I followed that routine daily for 6 to 8 months, walking after lunch, reciting and internalizing it to the point that I was able to read this chapter forward, backward, diagonally, or horizontally, in all directions. Perhaps I couldn't do that with the other chapters. Chinese book pages are read from right to left, but I could read this chapter from left to right. It might not make sense when it is read, but I knew the exact position of each character. I assimilated this chapter with great interest. After reciting it, I drew illustrations and copied it. In my sleep, I also dreamed of the different states and stories from The Worthy Leader.

I wrote commentaries for this chapter twice. The first time was during my retreat in 2000 when I wrote long explanations and finished them within two weeks. A few years ago, I revised my commentaries, making them shorter without illustrations.

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The more I wrote and studied The Worthy Leader, the more I realized how true what my Master said about it: It is the quintessence of the Avatamsaka Sutra. It mentions the highest realm of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas: the ten states of Samadhi. In addition, it also mentions the most basic realm of beginning practitioners: faith cultivation.

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The most famous line which everyone knows when you say it in a dharma assembly for Buddhists is: “*Faith is the source of the Path and the mother of merit and virtue; it nurtures and grows all good things.*” I had heard it when I was a teenager, not many years later when I started to study it. What does that line mean? “*Faith is the source of the Path.*” In Chinese, the word 源 *yuán* (*nguyên* in Vietnamese, *source* in English) is very difficult to explain. It doesn't really mean source or origin. It comes from I-Ching (The Book of Changes), and is one of the four characteristics of the first hexagram 乾 *qián* (Càn, Heaven): 元亨利貞 *yuán hēng lì zhēn* (*nguyên, hanh, lợi, trinh* - originating, penetrating, advantageous, pure). *Yuán* means perfect, complete, total, indivisible, and cannot be cut or trimmed. It is a state of no time and space, yet encompassing time and space. It is the state before our parents gave birth to us, when we haven't started to think or talk, when we haven't existed. It is the most perfect character or word to describe the Buddha nature. Thus, the *source of the Path* implies that faith is the Buddha nature. That's the amazing thing about the wording, helping us understand that faith is not the origin, but the Buddha nature. Faith also gives birth to *merit and virtue* and nurtures all good dharmas, all good things.

The first time I read that line and the commentary of Venerable Ching Liang (the fourth patriarch of the Avatamsaka School), I was in tears. I cried because I felt the greatness of the sutra and the miracle of that phrase, with a word that entered deeply into my mind and held my life closely with the phrase *the source of the Path*. How do we attain the Path? It turns out that it is faith. This faith is amazing. Whether something exists or not, we still have faith. What is this faith? It's the transcending beyond being stuck in duality such as good-bad, right-wrong.

Sometimes getting stuck in duality is being stuck in the past, unable to be in the present. We get stuck in a painful memory or being hurt by someone. We feel we've been victimized, so we have to revenge, retaliate, get this, or do that until we think it's fair. That thought imprisons us, makes us get stuck and feel that we are always wounded, broken, awful, and lousy. That is the feeling of the ego, the cry of the self. That cry is a clever strategy, feigning pain and humiliation, preventing us from recognizing that we are perfect, non-dualistic, that we are *the source*, and we are *the source of the Path*. The past is terrible; it holds us tight.

We sometimes have the preconceived idea, “I'm ugly. My mother and my friends said I'm ugly.” That ugliness stays in our mind, making us unable to return to *the source of the Path* and become *the source of the Path*. Thus, our faith needs to be strong enough for us to go beyond being stuck. In our life, we get stuck in the past, about the future, and we also get stuck in our self concept, our own suffering, in the prejudice that we have been harmed, defeated, we're not pretty, we're ugly, we're this and that. Everything is about our ego, about this face of ours. The more we grudge, the more we imprison ourselves in suffering. Everything makes us feel that it is impossible for us to be perfect, to be the *source* or the Buddha nature.

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There was a poem written by a Jew when he was in a Nazi concentration camp. In this wonderful poem about faith, he wrote:

*“I believe in the sun even when it is not shining;  
I believe in love even when I feel it not;  
I believe in God even when he is silent.”*

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I believe in the sun even when the cloud covers it up. It doesn't matter that I can't see the sun then because I know it's there. I believe in love although I have no one to love. Love doesn't exist only when I have someone to love. Love is always true. I believe in God even though he never answers my prayers. Just like us believing in Kuan Yin Bodhisattva, we bow and pray to her, but did she ever appear to say she'd grant us our wishes? No, she was silent but it doesn't mean that she does not exist. We suffer when we don't believe that she exists or that God exists or that there is love. We don't believe in love because we don't love anyone. We don't believe in the sun because we're in the dark night or under a cloudy sky, unable to see the sun, so we say the sun doesn't exist.

Because of that kind of attitude, scientists often get stuck. If they can't prove something, they don't believe it. The knowledge of science is rational and very limited. Rationality cannot embrace the transrational or pre-rational state. In other words, we get stuck in rationality, yet we're haughty, thinking that our rational and scientific mind is the best. We forget that the brain of rationality is only a small part in the overall consciousness of a person, not to mention the consciousness of the Buddha. The Buddha's consciousness is even more holistic, and like our human consciousness, covers both the rational and irrational realms as well as the subconscious and superconscious realms.

Thus, when I read the words by that Jew, I was really touched, thinking that we oftentimes forget the inherent beauty. We forget that God, Buddha, and bodhisattvas are always present around us. We pay too much attention to ourselves, only run after small things, and let go of beauty, eternity, and greatness. In the Shurangama Sutra, the Buddha said, “Dear disciples, why do you let go of the immense ocean and only hold a little sea bubble?”

So today, perhaps we should awaken the faith in the divine beings and know that we are perfect.

Thank you for listening. May you have a lovely day.

**Dharma Master Heng Chang**

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