

Aspects of Impermanence

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Learning from the Dead

Dr. Yutang Lin

I

*As I walk in the cemetery,
I read the tombstones one by one;
Although only a few lines each,
To a careful eye they tell many stories.*

II

*All the things that we worry about, fight for or accomplish,
In the end are reduced to two dates of birth and death!
When we live we are separated by status and households;
When we die we come here to lie down side by side.*

III

*The dead are my real teachers;
They teach me through their eternal silence!
A walk through the cemetery simply dissipates all my worries.
The dead cleanse my mind by the vivid example of their
existence!*

IV

*Suddenly I see that life could end at any moment!
Once I realize that I am so close to death I am instantly
free in life.
Why bother to criticize or fight with others?
Let me just be pure in mind and enjoy living!*

V

*Anyone we come across is sure to be
With us for only this moment!
Let us be kind to each other
And make life a merry-go-round!*

VI

*May all who are lost in the sorrows and worries of life,
Wake up to the fact of the closeness of death!
Once you see impermanence face to face,
You will enjoy peace and freedom for life!*



Keeping a "Record of Impermanence"

Dr. Yutang Lin

On February 10, 1988 it occurred to me that keeping a record of the names of all those deceased people whom I had met in person would help awaken in me a keen sense of impermanence. To a full-time Buddhist practitioner like me it would be very beneficial. I found a small blue-covered 1987 daily notebook in my drawer, so I made use of this unused but out-dated notebook. On the first page I entitled it A Record of Impermanence and in the daily blank I filled in names that I remembered.

As I put down each name, past events began to emerge in my mind one by one. There were some whose names were no longer remembered, so instead I put down a name for the relationship; some whose names were unknown to me, so I put down a brief description; and some even passed away before they were named. Some I met only once; some I was with for years. Some whose death came as a surprise from thousands of miles away; while others' were a gradual daily face-to-face good-bye. Some died of sudden illness; while others died of lingering sickness. Some committed suicide

because of difficulty in school; while others because of an unhappy marriage. Some were murdered by business partners; while others were killed by romantic competitors. Some died in the womb; some died in infancy; some died a teenager, like a flower in bud; some died suddenly in their prime years; some died in the snare of old age and sickness; some died in the quietness of a long and peaceful life. At age forty-one I alone had witnessed such a vast variety of cases of impermanence.

Facing the fact of impermanence and considering that every moment there are thousands of people passing away, I intuitively realized the futility of worldly arguments and competitions. How I wished to use such a transient and precious life-time to offer some positive contributions to the world.

I put this Record of Impermanence, with its pages open, on the altar near the lotus seat of Green Tara--a transformation of the great compassionate Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Guan Yin). I lit an incense stick and prayed that these deceased ones would be blessed by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, especially by the Green Tara, and thereby attain liberation from the sufferings of transmigration.

That night, just before I fell asleep, as my thoughts had quieted down, suddenly I sensed that I had held a subtle delusive thought in the past that death was not my problem. Such a delusive thought might well be present in the minds of many of us without our realizing its presence. After all, death seems to be so distant from the reality of our on-going daily life. Earlier that day I came to face the concrete cases of impermanence and thereby unintentionally shattered the delusive thought I had carried. Delusive thoughts are hiding deep down in our consciousness and obscuring our perspectives, hence they are hardly recognizable. Only at the moment of their shattering can we get a fleeting glimpse of them.

Immediately following this intuitive realization came another: At the moment of death we are to separate from everything in the world. This may be obvious to anyone who reflects on death; nevertheless, I had never had such an awareness arising from the depth of my mind. We need to practice being detached from all things lest we suffer at the end. Otherwise, as we look back, at the moment of death, we will realize that our lives have been infested with worries and quarrels over insignificant trivialities. What a waste it is! Whenever I am entangled by sorrows in my mind I would think: If this is the final moment of my life and I am entangled

by these matters, would my life be worthwhile? Such a reflection usually pulls me right out from my sorrows, and the sky looks blue and sunny again!

The next morning I discovered that the incense stick I had lit and offered for my prayer, although completely burned, remained whole with its body turning in a recurving way and its head pointing toward the right hand of the statue of Green Tara. Her right hand extends downward with an open palm, signifying her salvation activities. I took a picture of it and the photo is reprinted at the end of this article. In this photo the blue cover of my Record of Impermanence can be seen at the seat of the Green Tara. To me, this inspiring occurrence indicated Buddha's compassionate blessing in answer to my prayers for the deceased ones, and approval of the practice of keeping a Record of Impermanence.

Since that day I have continued to keep my records of impermanence. Whenever people ask me to do Powa (a Buddhist tantric practice to transfer the consciousness of deceased ones to the Pureland of Buddha) I also enter the name of the deceased in my book. Although I had not met all of them in person, by doing Powa for them I established a wonderful Dharma connection. Besides, Powa is for the benefit of the deceased ones, and naturally reminds us of the reality of

impermanence, of its immediacy and unpredictability. (By the way, sometimes when I did Powa for deceased people, I saw them appear before me.) Some of the names in the record were entered sporadically later because only then they sparked my memory. This shows that although impermanence of life is a reality, nevertheless, in our normal daily life it is very easy for us to neglect and forget about it. The practice of keeping a Record of Impermanence would constantly remind us of the reality of impermanence, lest we indulge ourselves in insignificant worldly pursuits and suffer from resulting turmoil. It would help safeguard the purity and freshness of our minds so that wholesome ideas would sprout and grow into kindness and compassionate activities.

To learn arithmetic thoroughly we should not only be able to do exercises in the book but also be able to apply it to real-life situations. Keeping a Record of Impermanence is not only to practice Buddha's teaching of being mindful of impermanence but also to connect the teaching with our personal experiences to benefit us on a down-to-earth level. Only by unifying the theoretical with the practical can we actually receive the essence of Buddha's teachings. Since the cases of impermanence that we put into writing are ones that we have actually witnessed, been personally involved in,

and even suffered for, they have tremendous impact on us and carry with them supreme power of persuasion. My awakening to the presence of delusive thoughts in me is a good example of the effectiveness of this practice.

There are many practices of impermanence in Buddhism. For example, meditations on death (to meditate on the certainty of death's arrival, the unpredictability of the time of death, one's helplessness and loneliness at the moment of death, etc.), observation of the changing scene of our mental activities, chanting Buddha's name near someone who is passing away, and visiting cemeteries to pray for the dead. Keeping a record of impermanence can be an easy but helpful addition to the other practices. This record is to be placed on the altar so that the deceased ones are under the blessing of Buddha and thereby we may practice an act of great compassion. As we write down the names, we do not distinguish between friends or foes, family members or acquaintances; therefore, it is also a practice of equal-love-for-all.

I hope that everyone who reads this article will adopt this practice and thereby share its effective benefits.

Originally written in Chinese

on April 4, 1988
Chin-Ming Festival, the Chinese Memorial Day
translated on May 8, 1992
both in El Cerrito, CA, U.S.A.

This Impermanent Instant

Yutang Lin

*It is plain to see that this instant is impermanent;
To maintain such awakening is indeed difficult.
Thoroughly let all things go to be free of worries;
Life is better lived with mind clean and refreshed.*

Comment:

Practicing impermanence and yet still keeping thoughts of tomorrow, that would not be precise enough. This instant is impermanent. Any moment could be the time to depart, and one is ready to leave. Only then has one gone through reflection on life and death, and has made a choice on what to live for and what to die for. Buddhists could set as the perpetual goal of life and death the realization of enlightenment for all sentient beings. When one is awakened to the impermanence of this instant, then all worries just have to be let go, and mind becomes clean and refreshed. That would be ideal for carrying out Dharma activities and living a peaceful life.

Written in Chinese and translated on April 6, 2001
El Cerrito, California

Impermanence as the Teacher

Yutang Lin

*Reporting names of deceased for Powa service,
Recurring tides impact the mind upon sighting.
A solemn respect arises, facing life and death.
Sorrow lingers, learning of so much suffering.*

Comment:

In order to help deceased beings, reports containing tragic news or names of deceased beings come to me daily to request for Powa service. Most of them come in emails; the rest are faxes, phone calls and letters. A few Buddhists do this regularly as a practice to cultivate their appreciation of impermanence and compassion. Daily I receive such information, after so many years there naturally arises a feeling of solemn respect as if I were facing my own life and death. When constantly facing so many sentient beings with so many varieties of deaths and causes of their departure, who could not feeling deep sadness for endless suffering of sentient beings?

To learn more about taking Impermanence as the

teacher, please read my short essay, "Keeping a Record of Impermanence," and poem, "Learning from the Dead."

Written in Chinese on April 17, 2001

Translated on April 18, 2001

El Cerrito, California

Going along with Impermanence

Yutang Lin

*Reality being impermanent one had better go along.
Waves and tides rush to the shore one after another.
Regarding all equally the mind stays open and clear.
Universal caring renders the sentiment pure and deep.*

Comment:

Reality is impermanent; why not go along with it? Attachment amounts to suffering; difficult to renounce only due to self. Face and accept all equally; mind would remain clear. Caring universally would render the sentiment pure and deep.

Written in Chinese on June 5, 2001

Translated on June 6, 2001

El Cerrito, California

Unaware of Impermanence

Yutang Lin

*Merits and practices, even though alluded to,
Always postponed after earning money more.
How could life be arranged at will by anyone?
Use any spare moment at present for practice!*

Comment:

Once I overheard Buddhist friends chatting, even though they alluded to practices and accumulation of merits several times, their main concern was on gaining wealth, and thought of Dharma practices as matters to be taken care of only after they are free from financial worries. The fundamental teaching of Buddhism is that all are impermanent. How matters would turn out to be, when one will die, and how one would end up to be, all these are beyond anyones control. Buddhist friends who wanted to wait till retirement to concentrate on Dharma practice are either dead or hindered by relationships, environment, sickness or senility from doing any serious practice. If one really understands the teaching on impermanence, one should at least devote some time for a practice session everyday.

Written in Chinese on February 24, 2002

Translated on March 9, 2002
El Cerrito, California

Impermanence at this Instant

Yutang Lin

*Impermanence thoroughly grasped, no expecting.
Beyond this instant, all are sustained by thoughts.
Clouds and fogs of thoughts once all blown away,
All spatial and temporal sectors melt into oneness.*

Comment:

Solid learning of the Dharma is rooted in a keen realization of the significance of Impermanence. The slightest traces of expectation indicate lack of thorough grasping of this teaching. Instantaneously shifting from life into death without any hesitation or lingering, only such a state of mind is inductive to cultivation of pure and wholesome Bodhicitta. Anything beyond this instant is established by thoughts sustained in one's mind. Clear all delusive thoughts, then one will gradually experience the oneness of all that includes all spatial and temporal sectors concurrently.

Written in Chinese and translated on September 23, 2002
El Cerrito, California

This Impermanent Moment

Yutang Lin

*At any instant one might die, why need to fight?
Causal matters are beyond control; don't worry!
Constantly care for universal suffering of beings;
Guidance of clarity would ultimately be helpful!*

Comment:

Usually people's awareness of impermanence does not include a keen sense that at any instant one might pass away. If one could maintain such a sharp awareness of impermanence, then one would not have the leisure or interest to engage in meaningless fighting or arguing. It is difficult to renounce completely cares about oneself; that is because one could not see clearly that sentient beings have no control over the evolution of their situations. In reality, such self-centered worries are inconsequential.

Once the above views are comprehended, and one escapes from under the dominance of self-centeredness, then one should reflect constantly on all sufferings of all sentient beings. From the resulting clarity of mind

one would naturally and spontaneously issue speeches and activities that are in accordance with awakening and liberation. Only such deeds would ultimately be beneficial to all beings.

Written in Chinese and translated on June 8, 2003
El Cerrito, California

Aspects of Impermanence

A Talk Given in Mandarin by Dr. Yutang Lin

on July 25, 2004 at Malin Buddhist Studies Center, Melaka, Malaysia

Tape Recorded and Transcribed by Upasaka Jyh Ching How,

Revised by Dr. Lin

Based on the above Chinese Transcript, Written in English by Dr. Lin

The topic is "Aspects of Impermanence"; that means we are going to investigate the various aspects of the concept of Impermanence as taught in Buddhism. Impermanence is a fundamental concept in Buddhist teachings. There was a Tibetan patriarch by the name of Milarepa, and he used to say that Impermanence is the gate through which to enter Dharma. His meaning in saying so should have been that, in order to understand Buddhist teachings thoroughly, one needs to have, first of all, a profound appreciation of the significance of Impermanence, and only then could one significantly engage in the practice of Dharma. We will discuss this topic in the sequential order of "Views, Practices, Activities, and then Fruits." First, let's consider Impermanence as views. When we talk about this concept of Impermanence I want to bring up first another even more fundamental concept, namely, Dharma basically is teaching us to see what the real

situations are. Basically, Dharma is teaching us that, in order to solve problems, one needs to first recognize what the real situations are. This point is essentially different from authoritarian teachings that demand submissive conformity. In cases of authoritarian doctrines, when the theories are invalid or submission is forced upon, all sorts of problems would ensue. The truthful nature of Dharma is such that, it emphasizes that, for something to be correct, we need to let all examine what the real situations are. Therefore, in Buddhism, even though on the one hand we emphasize following the footsteps of Buddha, and yet on the other hand it also teaches that one should rely on the universal teachings instead of relying on persons. In other words, it is a matter of truth. When people have different views what do we rely on? We rely on recognizing the real situation, and this is the goal for us to follow.

Once the above principle is understood, then when we talk about Impermanence the basic meaning is not to urge you that you always need to look at things from the point of view of Impermanence. For example, right now things are fine in your life but Buddhism purposely wants you to think ahead of the sufferings of birth, senility, illness and death. Basically it is not like this at all. The real significance is only to point out to all what

the reality of life and world is. In this sense, when we talk about Impermanence, we are just reminding people that all things will change, sooner or later. What then would be the significance of pointing this out? It is to remind people that, whatever you thought of or your views are, could at any moment become not in conformity with the real situations. Hence, it is only to remind one that one needs to remain constantly alert in realizing that reality could possibly not stay the same as one thinks it to be. Therefore, one needs to think of more possibilities to adjust to the possible changes. Basically the significance of pointing out Impermanence should be only like this.

Nevertheless, when we talk about Impermanence in Buddhist discourses we tend to lean toward presenting it as an antidotal concept. For example, when someone is sick, then medications or treatments are given to help cure the illness. When someone is in poor health, then he or she is urged to do exercises or go on special diet so as to remedy the situation. Similarly, in Buddhism when we talk about Impermanence we tend to offer it as a remedial concept to help cure our problems. This is because each and every one of us has more or less sorrows, worries, prejudices, attachments, insistence, and in addition, among people there are many kinds of conflicts. How to solve all such problems? According to

Buddhist teachings the root of the problems lies in each one's grasping to his or her views, and the individual views vary and are mostly based on self-centered interests. Such variations are due to different perspectives or selfish greed. Consequently, there are many problems. Aiming at curing such unhealthy states of human affairs and intending to free people from such prejudicial states, Impermanence is taught as a remedy. People are reminded that such prejudicial and selfish practices would not prevail, nor would they bring about lasting peace and prosperity. The reasons being, if you act like that and others do the same, then conflict and fighting are inevitable. As a result, whenever something comes up, people just fight but could not solve the problems. Instead, people should open their minds to realize that the problems may be resolved in many possible ways, and the solution does not lie in how any particular one could have the lion's share, but in joint and impartial sharing of interests. People should share the common understanding that we all have similar needs, and only when we endeavor toward a harmonious solution will the result be good for all of us in the long run. Nevertheless, people are usually under the fixation of current interests to the extent that any lessening of their grasping would seem impossible. Therefore, the teachings need to point out that, whatever you thought to be graspable is in reality

ungraspable. Even your dear life could not be grasped for sure. One would not even know when anything would happen! Furthermore, the important point here is that, Impermanence is taught not as a scare tactic but a matter of fact. In daily news we noticed that some events happened here and some incidents occurred there; even at the very instant right before those occurrences how could we know that things are going to turn out like that? When such matters would fall upon us, we had no ideas. Among our friends and relatives, now and then this one encountered this kind of problem and that one encountered that sort of difficulty. Indeed, the real situation is that, no matter how much you hoped or prayed for, there is no guarantee at all; at any minute things could go wrong!

The only thing that would guarantee that we all would have peace and happiness is the clear understanding that only when all are living in relationships that are mutually supportive and considerate can benefits be assured. Nevertheless, this is something in theory. In daily life changes are always slow to take place, and one would return to one's old patterns of haggling and fighting. What should we do under such circumstances? What we had discussed so far are only theoretical views. We had learned that when Dharma teaches us about Impermanence the point is for us to look at real

situations, instead of to remain circling within the sphere of our wishful planning. Simply look back three years and you would realize that many forethoughts then were completely mistaken. Once we had learned the concept of Impermanence, we could use it as an antidote to release our habitual and variegated grasping. Each one of us has certain prejudices and partialities that are results of grasping, and knowing Impermanence could help free us from prejudices and partialities. As I talked about all this in theory, it might sound easy. Later as soon as you step out this hall, you would probably forget about all this talk because in your daily life you have your interests and views that you would not relinquish. So, how could one manage for the notion of Impermanence to gradually imbue one's mind to the extent that when some things come up one would really handle it from the point of view of Impermanence? In other words, you would then be capable of handling matters in a more realistic manner. How could one cultivate this? Some would say that one need to think often about how much sentient beings are suffering, and how ephemeral human lives are, etc. Such thoughts are indeed helpful; nevertheless, people are forgetful. Even matters that caused much suffering, as soon as they are over, people would soon forget much about them. Therefore, one needs to adopt some practices to cultivate one's sense and appreciation of Impermanence.

Many years ago I designed a very good practice that I have been doing since then. It is to keep a "Record of Impermanence." Whenever we talked about Impermanence it was just a very abstract concept. Even though daily on television and in newspapers there are reports of many incidents and many sudden deaths, since we had no acquaintance with those people, to us they are merely words or images, and hence the impressions could not be profound. Now in keeping a "Record of Impermanence" I began to put down the names or descriptions of all deceased persons that I had actually met, even though it was just a brief encounter. That night, after I began to do this, as I was lying down to sleep suddenly I felt that death would come to my turn. When I did not feel that death was so real, it used to be felt like it was only others' matter and no thought ever occurred to me that death would also come my way. And then another thought arose, that all would have to be given up upon death. If one is not used to this reality, how difficult would it be for one to face it upon death, especially considering the fact that it will not be up to the dying one to decide. There was an inspirational occurrence related to this practice. That night, after I had put down as many names of deceased ones as I could remember, I placed the notebook in front of the statue of Green Tara, a transformation of

Guan Yin, on my altar, and then I lit an incense stick to pray for the deceased. The next morning I found the whole incense stick burned but unbroken, and furthermore, it wound toward the right hand of Green Tara that is in the gesture of giving salvation to sentient beings. The burned incense stick remained so for days. I wrote a report on this practice and the inspirational event with a photo attached there to show it to people, with the hope that people would realize that this is a helpful and effective practice that could enable one to realize that Impermanence is as close to one as the breathing in and out. A few years later, a Buddhist of Chinese descent in Indonesia downloaded this report from our website, www.yogichen.org, and read it on his computer screen. Right then he suddenly smelled sandalwood incense even though none was burned nearby. He was moved by this inspirational experience to have translated the report into Indonesian. This Indonesian version is also posted at our website now. I hope that this inspirational incident would also help you realize that this practice is really a significant one.

Besides the method mentioned above another way to realize Impermanence is to become acquainted with death. Strictly speaking, Impermanence does not apply only to death, but to us humans life and death is the matter of greatest concern, hence realizing death could

imbue the alertness of Impermanence into our daily life. Since I live near a cemetery I used to take a walk there while chanting the holy name of Amitabha Buddha. In America cemeteries are as beautiful as parks. While strolling there I would go from tomb to tomb to take a closer look at the tombstones. What would be the benefit of so doing? Usually when I came out from the cemetery after about forty-minute stroll, I would feel much lighter inside. Why was it like this? Because usually we are constantly preoccupied with personal worries, just as the Chinese proverb goes, "Every family has a Sutra that is difficult to recite," and it is also seemingly endless. Nevertheless, when you read the tombstones, "Born on such and such a day, month and year, Died on such and such a day, month and year," you realize that so many matters in life that seemed so important, in the end would just vanish into void, and only these two lines would remain for some indefinite time. Sometimes you would see only one date on a tombstone, it could signify a stillbirth or a life lasted no more than a day. Even though there were only two lines, many stories could be inferred from them. After I strolled there daily for over four months, I wrote my reflections and sentiments into poems and entitled them "Learning from the Dead." These poems are all related to Impermanence, and I hope that you would read them. They are also posted at our website.

Whenever you have the opportunity to visit a cemetery, on the one hand you should recite the holy name of Amitabha Buddha or Guan Yin so as to establish Dharma connection for the deceased there, and on the other hand you should read some tombstones there, and it would be helpful to you. You would realize that so many things that you used to deem as of great importance are indeed of no consequences. As one looks back at life from the juncture of life and death it would be easier to attain certain awakening; otherwise, one would tend to haggle all the time over minor matters. If all your life is spent over minor matters, what would be the significance of such a life? It does not make much sense. If you could reflect on life as if from the juncture of life and death, then it would become possible for you to try not to waste this life; how much time is still left, no one knows. The tiny bit of remaining time, if you could use it to accomplish a few things that is beneficial to others and yourself, then this life could become meaningful. Otherwise, it will be just eating and sleeping, and there would be no peace and happiness inside.

Some people would seem to be having no problems on the surface but are actually suffering from chronic depression because they could not find meaning for life

and a goal for sincere efforts. If we could realize that all of us are about the same in that we all have many worries and much suffering, and then look at things with such understanding and attempt to find solutions, then the subsequent lives would be meaningful and not wasted. The greatness of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas lies in their teaching us a road to liberation from sufferings and worries. Following such a path we would be able to help sentient beings to some extent, attain peace and happiness of mind, and help others to attain the same.

Between practicing Buddhist teachings and engaging in usual charitable services there is a fundamental and distant difference. Cultivating oneself to become a good person through charitable services is of course superb; nevertheless, there is no end to such services because new problems would keep arising. Even if one could provide for and meet all worldly needs of others, that would still be no guarantee for their happiness. No matter how hard you have tried, what could be attained would remain very limited. And yet, if you comprehended the Buddhist teachings and practiced accordingly, then you would gradually attain peace of mind, and feel the spiritual strength that naturally arises from an open mind. Furthermore, then you could teach others about the Dharma and its practices, and thereby gradually help others to find peace and spiritual

strength. Even more important than these is that, after long-term devotion and sincere practice one would then realize the reality of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; it is not just a system of theories or teachings based on memorized theories. Gradually one would comprehend that Impermanence is a fundamental concept that does not mean that, since nothing can be grasped so we can act in whatever way that we like. The correct meaning is that, as one realized there is nothing that is graspable, and hence ceased grasping, then one would be liberated from the preoccupation with one's self. Ordinarily we are constantly grasping on many tiny things; when one could stop grasping one would gradually experience the purity of mind. Just as a while back before this talk started the assembly were chanting Amitabha in a state of purity, when such purity grows deep and strong it would be possible to return to limitless oneness. In other words, in our ordinary experiences what we understand through our sensual organs are full of distinctions, and so we make and are used to distinctions of countries, families and individuals. Nevertheless, when one's mind has been thoroughly purified through Dharma practices one would then realize that all such distinctions were consequences of grasping and attachment. When grasping had ceased one would experience a state that is indescribable and limitless. Such a limitless state is not a void. How do

we know this? For advanced practitioners now and then it is possible to know about matters that happened in distant past or will happen in the future. This shows transcendence over Time, as we usually understood it. Sometimes when people encountered difficulties of all sorts they would ask advanced practitioners to help through prayers, granting of blessings, and other Dharma activities to generate merits. Such blessings would work even though the recipients were total strangers in distant places. This shows transcendence over Space, as we usually understood it. In life there are many matters that have no satisfactory solutions. Illness in the hands of physicians need not be cured, and could turn worse. When one is at the juncture of, as a Chinese proverb goes, "Calling Heaven without response and calling Earth without effects" prayers could help. For example, when people encounter the presence of ghosts, how could one solve such a problem? The fundamental solution to such problems is to deliver such beings from Samsara to Buddha's Pureland through Dharma practices. Then the problem would be no more. Ghosts are also in suffering, and as long as such suffering found no relief they tried to get human beings to help; that is why they bother people. Why is it that such problems will be resolved only when merits are accumulated on their behalves? That is because only what Dharma taught can ultimately solve such

fundamental problems that we had no idea of how to handle. Do not think that what Dharma could help is only limited to problems of ghosts. Some people were in intensive care units, and their friends or relatives who knew me would contact me and asked me to pray for them. Even though they were total strangers to me, all I needed were their names and a brief description of their problems, and then the prayers would yield immediate help that they could sense on their side, even though they were on another continent. Thus, they would spread the information to their friends and relatives, and then when they had other problems, they would call me for help through prayers again. This demonstrated that when Dharma practice is well done the limitless oneness realized is not an ineffectual void, but instead a state of complete freedom from artificial concepts such that the strength of prayer would render help, beyond spatial and temporal limits, to others. Such help is not due to the power of any individual human being but expressions of transcendental powers of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. When praying for the benefit of others with a pure mind such a function would arise. Any one could do this; Dharma is truth, and hence no one could have monopoly over it. One just needs to engage in Dharma practices for long time with pure mind, free from any considerations and regardless of human relationships, but just pray for all equally, then

gradually the effects will become obvious.

Next we will talk about Activities, i.e., after we had trained ourselves in the practices mentioned above how to apply Impermanence in daily life activities so that the actions and inaction are in congruence with the teachings on Impermanence. For example, before I came to give this talk, I did not prepare a transcript. A few months earlier they asked me to offer a few topics for my coming talks in Malaysia, so I thought about it and offered a few. Do you think that I could still remember what I wanted to say then? But then, for such an important matter, why didn't I prepare a lecture in writing? This is because I am practicing Impermanence in all my activities. Any moment I am ready to go and face the situation as I am, without carrying a backpack. To let go of grasping, one need to let go of theories as well. I just tell you what is in my mind, no need to arrange some kind of sayings. This is how I live. The words you are listening to are pouring out naturally from my mind; besides these there is no other thoughts or planning. The framework of "Views, Practices, Activities, and then Fruits" for this talk came to my mind after dinner tonight while I was in the restroom of the restaurant. For one who is really living in accordance with Dharma a Dharma talk is just an outpouring of what one really knows and actually does.

This is applying Impermanence in daily life. Of course, it is not true that everyone can do like this at once. Nevertheless, you could dwell on this and consider how to apply Impermanence in your daily life. For example, before you left home you were thinking about bring this and bring that with you, but once you were outside you then realized that you had forgotten to bring this or that. Similarly, when you die it could very well like this. Hence, you need to be ready to be without anything. When nothing could indeed be brought along, what are you preparing?

To prepare for the juncture of life and death the only things that are helpful are Dharma practices such as chanting Buddha's name and Dharma services done in our daily life now. When you had done these things in your life then at the time of death you would feel much relaxed. Key to Dharma practices is purity of mind. Bodhicitta is most important. Bodhicitta, in a few words, is to wish all sentient beings to attain full enlightenment sooner. To advance on the path to enlightenment one's intentions should stem from Bodhicitta at all times. One should not constantly limit one's intentions around a small circle of matters such as, I wish my son to be so and so, I wish my daughter to be such and such, etc. When you think of all sentient beings, all these relatives or friends are naturally

included, and even you yourself is included. You should realize that all sentient beings include those you dislike, or harmed by you, or imperceptible to your senses, and are of all varieties. You regard them with the understanding that all are basically the same, as sentient beings with sorrows and in suffering, and that all wish to escape suffering and attain lasting happiness. From such a perspective you wish them full enlightenment and ultimate liberation from suffering. Such a wish goes beyond worldly wishes that might aim at the resolution of certain problems but could not prevent them from recurring or other problems from forthcoming. Furthermore, we wish all to attain full enlightenment sooner. "Sooner" is where our efforts in Dharma practices and services apply to. We do not stop at merely wishing full enlightenment to all beings; instead we make all efforts with the hope that thereby sentient beings would reach full enlightenment sooner. Therefore, whatever helps sentient beings need in making progress in Dharma we would try to provide at our best. Consequently, with Bodhicitta we have a goal in life to live for. If you can persevere in Dharma practices and services with a pure mind and solid activities, gradually you will experience the benefits. You would no longer be bothered by trivial matters and unable to escape from sorrowful worries. You would gradually realize that, as life goes on, sooner or later

each and every one would run into some difficulties. When someone encounters problems, the only ones that could really help out are those that did not in the first place contribute to those entanglements in worldly haggling. Only those that had transcended worldly entanglements could give guidance and inspire the suffering ones, and render substantial help through prayers. Therefore, when you devote yourself to Dharma practices and services you are on the path of true love for all beings that would have the opportunity to run into contact with you.

Finally, what would be the Fruits of Impermanence? Phenomena indeed are constantly evolving and could not be grasped as absolutely substantial. Seeing this, there are no real problems. Comprehending Impermanence thoroughly, life and death are also very natural. Just as a river is constantly flowing, which drop are you going to grasp? Each one of us is like a drip or a grain of sand in the river flow, what do you want to grasp? It is just a flowing; where are the problems? Conforming to Impermanence thoroughly in mind and action, the fruit attained is liberation. Right now you are grasping to this, grasping to that, grasping to something in all matters, and hence you encounter problems in all matters. This is unsatisfactory, that is also unsatisfactory; this I dislike, that I could not be

satisfied. But if you could enlarge your views and open your mind, then you would feel that this is fine and that is also fine. To others there are all sorts of problems, but to one that finds them not objectionable, there are simply no problems.

Written in Chinese on September 9, 2004

Translated on October 6, 2004

El Cerrito, California

Impermanence as Objective Truth

Yutang Lin

*Factual phenomena are impermanent, constantly flowing.
Opportune situations hard to keep, watch adverse turns.
In predicament seek escape, wishing to disentangle nets.
Just follow causal endeavors to transcend transmigration.*

Comment:

A fundamental tenet of Buddhist teachings is to view all things as impermanent. Usually when this is expounded on emphasizes tend to lean toward the eventually unavoidable arrival of sufferings of senility, illness and death, and therefore causing people to feel that the teachings on impermanence seem to carry tendency of pessimism and passivism. In fact, the key point of Buddhist teachings on impermanence is to remind people to realize that it is an objective truth. If it is objectively appreciated, then not only would one have in view possible adverse turns during opportune circumstances but also seek opportunities and paths to escape while stuck in predicaments. Therefore, Buddhist teachings on impermanence also carry fully the implication that one should actively seek ultimate

liberation in order to transcend the sufferings of transmigration.

As to paths of liberation, they could not deviate from practices that are based on compliance with the causal laws and constitute endeavors in reduction of negative karma, accumulation of meritorious deeds, and cultivation of selfless wisdom and compassion. Thus, Buddhist views and practices are all based on insight and realization of objective phenomena. This is a point that all Buddhists should have as a fundamental and right recognition of what the nature of Dharma is.

It would be beneficial to read this work along with my recent work, "Aspects of Impermanence."

Written in Chinese on September 7, 2004

Translated on September 16, 2004

El Cerrito, California

Self-grasping Impermanent

Yutang Lin

*Since Self is void, self-grasping is also vacuous.
Its teasing play, nonetheless, remains incessant.
Upon careful reflection it takes shape indefinite.
Whenever recognized that's the moment to rest.*

Comment:

Buddha revealed that in reality there is no Self; inferring from this, self-grasping is also vacuous. As one's mind could not renounce grasping, grasping, even though vain, would constantly play a role. Upon careful observation of one's own self-grasping it is obvious that often there are many changes and evolutions. In order to cultivate renunciation of grasping one should realize that grasping is impermanent. (In other words, there is no one definite thing that is the grasping to renounce.) Under certain circumstances through attachment to forms grasping arises. Upon awareness of presence of grasping enlarge one's view and mind to leave it.

Written in Chinese on May 6, 2005

Translated on May 8, 2005

El Cerrito, California

Root of Realizing Impermanence

Yutang Lin

Root of realizing impermanence is renunciation of grasping. In the absence of artificial maneuvers it is originally at ease. Looking ahead and reflecting back are both mental diseases. Responding spontaneously one realizes harmony in oneness.

Comment:

A disciple asked, "Wherein lies the root of impermanence? It is not easy to grasp it."

When impermanence is keenly and genuinely realized there is no longer anything that matters. To practice on impermanence so as to gain realization of impermanence, the root lies in renunciation of one's grasping at all levels. Recollecting the past or worrying ahead is an extra activity that brings on incessant self-disturbances. A practitioner flows through situations without intentions and responds spontaneously; thus, realization of the original harmony of all phenomena might gradually be attained.

Written in Chinese and translated on March 6, 2006
El Cerrito, California

Impermanence: A Buddhist View of Life

A Public Lecture Sponsored by The Religion

Department and The East Asian Studies Program 8 p.m. May 14,

1991 Northen Auditorium Washington and Lee University

Lexington, Virginia U.S.A.

Dr. Yutang Lin

Introduction

Professor Minor Lee Rogers

The Religion Department

It is very nice to see you all here this evening. I guess if I really understood the subject for tonight I would take out my well-prepared introduction, tear it up, and just speak naturally. But there are some things I want you to know about our speaker tonight and how he came to be invited to Washington and Lee University.

In January of 1990, my wife Ann and I were members of a small group making a trip to Buddhist sites in Nepal and Northeast India: Lumbini, the place where the Buddha was born; Bodhgaya where he reached Enlightenment; Sarnath, very near Benares (Varanasi) on the Ganges, where he preached his first sermon; and

then Kushinagar, the place where he died or, as the Buddhists would say, realized Nirvana. We met the members of our party at the Vajra Hotel in Kathmandu, the capital of the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal. It was a very interesting group. There were some twelve of us: two physicians, a clinical psychologist, an artist, a professor of philosophy, an ACLU lawyer, an experienced trekker and a junior in college who was on a sort of mid-winter independent study. We came for many reasons and we all shared an interest in the Buddhist tradition.

But it was another member of our group who caught my attention. He really seemed to know why he was there--purposeful, concentrated, connected and expressed devotion. He seemed to really know what to do, and when we visited a stupa or place where relics were enshrined he would circumambulate the stupas. He offered alms to the monks. He knew when to light candles and burn incense at the appropriate moments. Clearly, for him, this was a pilgrimage. Especially striking was his care with words and his actions. We soon began to notice changes in the behavior of his roommate, Clint, the fun-loving college junior. Clint would ask him question after question, and Clint even made it to breakfast on some mornings. We soon came to realize our good fortune in having with us a genuine

disciple of the Buddha who could put the teaching in terms we could understand. His every word and action was grounded in practice. Naturally I wanted him to come to Washington and Lee to meet our students, our faculties, and members of the community. I guess at first it was the sort of Southern hospitality when I said, "Well, you really must come to Washington and Lee sometime," and we left it at that. Then when I got back in the Fall, I realized that we really wanted him to come; and so he has come and we thank you for gathering this evening.

Yutang Lin is a native of Taiwan. He received his B.A. in philosophy from the National Taiwan University which, I understand, is the top university in Taiwan, in 1969. He received his Ph.D. in Logic and the Methodology of Science from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1983. I am told that, on the day he received his degree in logic, he gave away all his logic books to the libraries at Berkeley, and became a full-time practitioner of the Buddhist way. I guess, my debt to him is that he has helped me to see that practice is the key component of the Buddhist path, and it is not reading libraries full of books. He will speak for forty-five or fifty minutes, and then we will have some time for questions. We welcome Dr. Lin!

Impermanence: A Buddhist View of Life

Dr. Yutang Lin

Thank you. I sense that Minor is a little bit nervous, so let us talk about something else first. What I am wearing is a traditional Chinese robe which is considered formal wear. It was passed down to me from my teacher, Yogi C. M. Chen, who passed away in 1987. This is a common Chinese hat called a "watermelon hat" because it is shaped like half a watermelon. It is not very common now, but my teacher used to wear this kind of hat so it has become part of my religious formal wear.

Earlier today Professor Rogers asked me: "Do you want to bring the notes along with you?" He was referring to an outline of this lecture that I had sent him months ago. I replied, "When I talk I don't need that; what you see is what you get!" (laughter from the audience) Well, actually, it does not mean that I did not prepare for this lecture. I have already given it mentally to myself more than ten times. Nevertheless, I did not want to write it down because had I prepared it that way, then when I came here I would not be thinking through the topic. I would be simply reciting a written speech. I would not

be really facing the topic as I am; what I would be presenting is what I thought about at an earlier time. Besides, what would happen if I lost the notes or forgot to bring them with me? Then I would be very nervous trying to remember what I should say. Furthermore, after I return home and compare the notes with what I have said, I would probably have many regrets. (laughter from the audience) But when you want to ground practice in Impermanence, you try to learn to do without, you go on with what you have and what you are. So now, as I am talking about this topic, I am just revealing to you what is going on in my mind. I am not thinking, in a sense, and I am working on this topic anew, right at this moment. Now let us all think through this talk together.

What do I mean by "impermanence"? We have some ordinary understanding. For example, when one of Professor Rogers' former students heard that we were going to talk about impermanence, he said, "Oh, of course, it is a short thing; life is so short!" What else do we know about impermanence? We know that things are changing, however, in order for our society to keep functioning, we have to assume some constancy. We have an institute called Washington and Lee University. The faculty members are changing and the students are changing, but we use our concepts to keep the institute

going, to preserve the culture, to conduct our activities. So what do I mean by "impermanence"? Do I want to destroy all this? No. Besides, I have shown that it doesn't mean that, then, one cannot function. See, I am still capable of coming here to give you a talk, although I have rooted my practice in this notion of impermanence.

Before I continue it might be better to talk first about what Buddhism is all about; then we can understand better why Buddhism emphasizes impermanence. To some extent we know what impermanence means already, but then what is the need for Buddhists to adopt it as a basic teaching of their religion? So, first of all, we need to know that what Buddha tried to give us is not some kind of view. Although he did point out that certain views were wrong and taught Right Views, the final goal is not just a system of concepts.

Sakyamuni came from a very good background--he was a prince; he did not have any of the problems that ordinary people had. Nevertheless, he had chances to face the realities of life: once he saw someone who was sick; once he saw someone who was senile and having difficulty moving; and then once he met a corpse, and he even needed to ask, "What is this, what is this?" From all this he learned that there is such a thing as

suffering in life, so he started to worry. He asked, "What is the use of the throne if I finally have to face this? How can I escape from this?" Consequently, he gave up everything, the kingdom, the family..., and went into the forest to follow religious persons. He thought that maybe in that way he could escape from these problems, so he followed them, and the religious persons taught him some practices. One type was punishment of the body; he followed that practice to such an extent that once he became so weak that when he took a bath in a river, he almost drowned. The religious persons also told him to practice meditation and he was very good at it; soon he had achieved what they told him to be the final thing, but still he sensed that this was not the solution.

Finally, he realized that the way is not through punishing your body. Through continued efforts he discovered what was still wrong when he achieved what those teachers had taught him to be the ultimate; but then he thought that there was no way he could convey what he had discovered at that time to people because it was too subtle. Besides, although people don't know the truth, they are not lacking in anything. What did he discover at that time? At that time he experienced complete freedom from concepts.

You see, as human beings, at that time they also had languages; that means they also used concepts. We grow up in certain cultures and have certain sets of values; we have our definite ways of looking at life and treating each other. How can we escape from all this? What is wrong with all this? The problem is that once you start to use concepts, at first they are just tools used to communicate and pass on knowledge, but because we use them so often, the concepts begin to control us. For example, why do we have so many tensions? One main source of our problems is our strong sense of self-awareness; our thinking is very self-centered. We are constantly reflecting on ourselves and there seems to be no escape. We always worry about certain things and our thoughts run in circles. We care so much about certain things that we cannot go beyond them. We have fixed views, and when we come into contact with any situation we do not handle it as it is, but handle it as we think it is. How can we escape from this kind of self-centeredness?

At the time Buddha realized the freedom of Limitless-Oneness, it was too difficult to express because, in modern terminology, our self-centeredness is rooted in our sub-consciousness. There is something there but you don't know where. You cannot find it, and there is no way to capture it unless you find yourself in a

situation and it comes up--then you know, oh, I have something like this--I have this anger, I have this greed. Before it shows up, you don't even know it is there. How can you escape from this? Furthermore, what the Buddha achieved then was not getting anything. He was just free from those things. So in that sense, no one is lacking anything, and there is nothing to give you. We should be aware that, after all, all preachings are just talks. The Buddha's experience, in some sense, is as something that we would never be able to achieve--how could we dig out something when we don't even know where it is? At the request of the heavenly beings and out of his compassion, Buddha started to try to show people how to reach the freedom of Limitless-Oneness. In so doing he communicated with people and thus made use of concepts.

Up to now, you see, it has already been more than 2500 years, and different people have received the teachings. What they received has been from books and from what other people have said, and again each one perceived it based on his concepts, and developed it as he understood it and as he experienced it. Consequently, due to the limited capacities of individual Buddhists, there are many, many schools in Buddhism; the Tripitaka, a collection of all Sutras and Sastras, consists of thousands of volumes. Who has the time to figure out

what is really going on in such vast literature? Nevertheless, I am a practitioner, so I need to be able to say it; otherwise, what am I practicing? What I am trying to do now is to present my insight as to what Buddha was trying to teach. Of course what I can say is, still again, just words to convey concepts. You won't get the real thing from this, nevertheless, this kind of concept, if you put it into practice, will gradually bring you to Buddha's experience. How do you know? Because if you practice, you will gradually sense the freedom. You see, what I am doing now -- I don't come with the prepared notes.

So, the fundamental concept is that everything is, in fact, a Limitless-Oneness. In traditional Buddhism, some will say, "Oh, you cannot even talk about one, because the moment you say one, then you have to be able to define it, and then there are already two (the one defined and the one defining)." So I say it is a Limitless-Oneness. If you are a logician, you will say, "Isn't that kind of contradictory? On the one hand, there is one; you have a definition of a certain one there, and then you break up the boundary by 'limitless.'" Nevertheless, such a dilemma is inevitable in conceptual approaches to understand this experience. Then you have to consider everything. We had war with Iraq, but first, before we say, "How can you believe in

such a notion, in the face of such a reality that we have wars?" let us try to understand the concept that all are actually one. When I say "all," I am not just limiting to the beings, the living ones that have feelings, but everything. So that means no limits, no distinction, and also it means that when you try to get away from the concepts, there are no limits. Okay, how can we believe such a notion? I will give you examples.

For example, something happened today at lunch. Professor Rogers, a student named Clark, and I were having lunch together to discuss Clark's paper. Clark said he needed to see a doctor later today because for two weeks he had felt numbness from the left knee down. As soon as I heard this, I cared about him, and I sensed at once that this part (pointing at my left leg about one inch above the ankle) of his body was blocked inside, and I sensed something here (pointing to a point on my lower back) in my body, without feeling pain. So I told him, "Well, Clark, this is what I sense: You have two problems, there and there." He said, "Yes, I also have pain here (the point on the lower back)." So, without telling him, during lunch I prayed for him. After lunch what I sensed was that it was no longer like that, but still this part (lower leg) had a thin layer inside surrounding the bone. I don't know what his X-ray results will be, (laughter from the audience) but

now I am telling you, so later we can check with Clark. Then when I went back to Morris house (the guest house on campus), I was still thinking about him. Then I sensed that there were four things shaped like hooks holding on to the leg bone. Then I sensed that there was a line on his left sole and I thought he had better massage his sole along that line. It would help him. We have to wait until we meet Clark to find out whether it will work. There are other cases like this. I am not claiming that I have power to heal or anything. It happened naturally and I did not intend to do anything like this. I believe that this is the result of practicing in the direction of achieving the Limitless-Oneness.

Once a friend's wife went back to Hong Kong and I didn't know what she was going to do over there, but then I saw in my dream that she was releasing turtles. When she came back to the United States, I checked with her. My dream occurred only a few hours after she did that. (This is a Buddhist practice of saving lives; we purchase the turtles from the market, and then release them back to their natural habitat.) There is no way to explain that, but if you remember the concept I was talking about, a Limitless-Oneness, then it is very easy to understand. Actually, it is like public information; it is there in the air. (laughter from the audience) Since we are accustomed to thinking that it is never possible for

us to see beyond our normal senses, we notice only what we see on the TV, what we read in books, and we ignore these kinds of subtle messages that are blurred by ordinary perceptions. We are accustomed to always thinking only about me, myself, my wife, my children, my, my, ... Always just everything that is related to me, and nothing else. Then you lose the ability that is natural to all of us.

However, why have I had such extrasensory experiences, even though I did not intend it? I understand the theory and I put it into practice. What the practice does is to help you reduce your conceptualization. Then it comes naturally. Of course, it is never proved; but those are true experiences. So, at least, this concept of Limitless-Oneness is worth considering.

Now, in the light of this, let us go back to examining the notion of impermanence. The traditional teaching would say, first of all, we are bound to die and there is no escape. This, of course, we all know. Furthermore, it is a very sad thing, very difficult to accept. Why do we bother to bring it up? Why not continue to live in the way we usually do, i.e., avoid talking about death; and when it happens, try to make it look pretty and pass it over as soon as possible. Nevertheless, in order to free

ourselves from our preconceptions and attachments, we need to be aware of this fact and to reflect on our preparedness for it. Can we really handle it well?

Of course, death is just the final part of life--why do we want to spend time looking at it now? It will become a problem just at the moment of death and it will be over in an instant, so why do we have to look at it now? It is simply because if you look at it now then you will have a chance to look back and reflect on your life, even though you may not really be close to the end. You will have a chance to reevaluate your life--have I lived a truly significant life? am I doing things that I really want to do, or am I doing them just because I need clothing and food? Is human life really just working for survival?

It would be like a vaccination, you take a shot in advance so that when the disease comes, you are well prepared.

The other aspect of this is that usually we just think from our self-centered point of view, and consequently we never have a chance to get out of this circle of my this and my that to reflect upon it.

The second point about impermanence of life is that we

do not know when life will come to an end. We always make plans: "Oh, this semester I am going to do this, and next semester I am going to do that." Have you ever stopped to think -- What if today is the last day of my life? How would I have lived today? It would be very, very different. Many things that you are worrying about and many things that you are fighting for become nothing. Besides, if you don't reflect upon this, all of your life will be wasted with things that are, in the final analysis, just nothing. Hence, it is so very important to think about it in this way. This is not just talk; unexpected death happens all the time. Several months ago a famous basketball player dropped dead on the basketball court. If he had known that he was so close to death, I think he would not have risked his life.

Finally, the third point about impermanence of life is for us to understand what counts at that time. Usually we think in terms of fame, money and other worldly things, but at the moment of death none of these things really count; there is nothing we can take with us. The only thing that we have to face at that moment, and it comes naturally, it simply falls upon us, is--What are our regrets, and what have we done to help others? Have I really cared for others? This is what counts. This is the only thing that counts. If you want to have peace at that moment, this is the only thing that can give you peace,

and nothing else can!

Besides, when we reflect upon all of these three points related to impermanence, then we will sense how lonely each one of us really is. Each one of us has to face death alone and no one can face it for us. All of us have the same situation, so what shall we do? We don't know when it will be our time to go. What happens after someone passes away in an accident? All those who are close to that person say, "Oh, I wish I had done that;" "Oh, I wish I had said that." So we have to appreciate whatever others are doing for us, because whenever someone is doing something for us he cannot be helping anyone else. Once we realize that life is so fragile and impermanent, then we can appreciate others' help much more. Besides, we will realize at once that all those small fights were nonsense.

Forgive each other! Love each other! Have empathy for others! Many times no one else knows our real situation, so we should be generous to one another. Don't be so critical of others. How much do we know about others? We, indeed, do not know the reasons for what they are doing. When we stop criticizing others what will we gain? We will regain our innocence. Our natural innocence will return. We will be able to live our lives as pure, innocent and happy children. I think

this is what is meant by the saying from the Bible that children can easily get to heaven. We can have heaven here, if only we know how to live our lives.

You know, when I was working on this topic mentally, indeed I thought of many other things. Once I really face you, those other thoughts just become logician's pursuits; and the intellectual things evaporate. It doesn't matter that you can see this concept from so many angles; what is essential is what I have just said from the bottom of my heart. These are things that will really help your life, and that is what counts.

Now we still have some time, so I would like to talk more about the Limitless-Oneness. Well, suppose that this is the real thing to guide us, then how can we act in accordance with it? It is completely opposite to what we are accustomed to. We are always holding on to something, and yet now I am talking about a limitless thing. How can we approach that? Indeed there are two principles that can guide us to approach the Limitless-Oneness. They are two aspects of the same thing, but when we talk we are limited by language; hence we need to consider both the active aspect and the inactive aspect. The principle of the inactive aspect is to let go of our attachments and let go of our prejudices. Don't be so sure of our views and judgements; be more tolerant.

The principle of the active aspect is to open ourselves up. To open up intellectually when we handle a situation, we no longer think that ours is the only way that works; there may be many, many ways and hence we should be flexible. Emotionally we also need to open up! Don't always care for just a few relatives and friends. Each one of them can go at any time. If you care only for these few, what happens when they all go? You would have no reason to live, and so you are doomed to misery. That is not the right way to live your life. Open your love to all! Each one may go, but there will always be others for you to care for and to help. Also, it is very important to do this kind of practice, because you will become happier. Besides, only through this kind of practice will you gradually sense the Oneness of all and spiritually grow up.

Only after you have the sense of Oneness can you serve other people well, because previously you always had a sense of "self." Even when you can sacrifice yourself for others, you cannot do it naturally. You would say to yourself, "Oh, I am doing this good deed, I am a good Christian, and I will have my reward in Heaven." You cannot do it naturally, like children who do not know about rewards, nor about what is good or bad, but simply love small animals, play with them and care for them. That is real happiness--to be so good, so pure that

you don't know you are good.

We need to learn how to apply these principles in our daily lives. It is an art. No one can tell us what is the best way to do this or that, because no one else is in our shoes. Once we know these principles and we try to apply them to our lives, then when something happens we say, "Oh, I want to open up; I want to apply these principles to the situation." However, what do we do when life is peaceful and no difficult situation arises? Is there something that we can do so that we can still grow in this way? Yes, we need to adopt some spiritual practice. It is just as some of us jog, some of us swim, hike, etc., to maintain our health, mentally and spiritually we also need exercises and nutritious food. There are ways that can help us.

A simple way is to practice chanting. In Buddhism, one learns to repeat a mantra that consists of certain sounds but does not necessarily have any meaning, or the name of a Buddha, e.g., "Amitabha." For Christians, I think you can try just repeating "Jesus" or the Prayer of Jesus: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," which is in the orthodox Christian tradition.

Why do we want to do this? The reason is very simple, you see, because each one of us has only so much

energy, but we are accustomed to using the energy on only certain things that are related to ourselves. Furthermore, we are so accustomed to doing this that we have no escape from this situation. Even when we are tired due to such entanglements, we still cannot sleep because of their heavy burden on us. We say to ourselves, "Now, let me forget this!" and yet, even at that moment we are still tied up with it. We are still reacting to it. The way to escape from our sorrows is to adopt a practice so that our energy will gradually flow toward something that is not related to what we have been accustomed to. The moment our energy can flow completely in the new direction is the moment we become free. The question that would follow is--will this build us a new fence? No. Why not? Because the phrase that you are chanting, when it is a mantra, has no meaning and hence no conceptualization. When it is the name of a Buddha, e.g., "Amitabha," it means, on the one hand, infinite light that means limitlessness in space, and on the other hand, infinite life that means limitlessness in time. Thus, the basic structure of our universe has been broken up and there is nothing that you can hold on to, and you will be free from concepts. However, you may still object and say, "You have told us the meaning of "Amitabha." When we chant it, aren't we still holding on to this one concept?" No, that will not be the case in the end. When you repeat it only ten

times or one hundred times, the meaning is there. However, after you have repeated it millions of times over many years, what will it mean then? It will become just that sound; it will return to its original purity. The same thing is true for the Prayer of Jesus. So, this is a way to escape from our self-centeredness.

It does not follow that chanting will stifle us so that for the rest of our lives we know only this one thing. Quite the contrary, it is a practice to open us up; even when no situation arises for us to apply the principles of openness and no attachment, we can still grow spiritually. It will help us because the moment we are chanting we are giving up our attachment to what we have been accustomed to and thereby at the same time we become more open. You will sense the opening up of your awareness and the ease and relaxation that comes with it, if you really adopt this practice and do it daily.

If you jog daily, then you will notice the improvement in your fitness and health. Similarly, you will sense the relaxation and peace that comes as a result of the daily chanting practice. Besides, when situations in life arise, we try to apply these principles. In this way we can still go on living a normal life but it will be a better and happier one because now, even though we are still using

our judgements as to what is a better thing to do, it is no longer just for ourselves, but rather for all involved. That is the difference. Hence, adopting a chanting practice will not destroy our rationality.

I think this is all that I want to say. If you have questions, you are welcome to bring them up and we will discuss them.

Question: If life is a Limitless-Oneness, then is that on the outside Limitless-Oneness?

Answer: I did not say that life is a Limitless-Oneness. I said everything is Limitless-Oneness.

Question: Then the environment and life will be considered as part of Oneness. Then, if one person reaches Buddhahood, would not that affect the entire Oneness?

Answer: Yes and no. (laughter from the audience) I say "yes" because then there is one more person that will selflessly serve everyone. Of course, that makes a difference. Also there is another level that I was talking about -- there are supernatural things that do occur which science cannot explain. When one reaches Buddhahood he is in Oneness. What we normally think

of as being very far, to him there would be no distance. He can help others right away, beyond the limits of time and space. On the other hand, why did I answer "no"? Since most of us are blinded by our own conceptions, we are still fighting with one another here. Although we are not away from this Oneness, we don't know how to make use of being one-with-all. So, in that sense, Buddha can help us only through preaching, trying to persuade us to do some practice so that gradually we will see the truth ourselves. Before we have really changed, it would seem as if Buddha has not affected us.

Besides, to him there is no problem. Why? We think of this as a problem or that as a problem due to our conceptualizations. Buddha is already free from being bothered by concepts. This does not mean that he cannot make use of concepts. He understands our problems, furthermore, he sees the aspect that we do not see that has no problems. Nonetheless, I do not expect you to really understand this because it is beyond normal understanding, and can only be understood through practice.

Question: What does he do in Nirvana, what are his responsibilities?

Answer: Your question arises from your concept of Nirvana. You think of it as something static. Actually what is Nirvana? It is just a concept. This kind of concept is used to design something to help you out of the conceptual bounds; same with the concept of impermanence. When you study Buddhism, they say you should not hold on to one side. If that is the teaching, then why do we hold on to impermanence? Isn't this concept also one-sided?

Question: You said one will have compassion for all, but how?

Answer: I pray for everyone that I know to have problems. Every time I watch television and see an accident that happened, then I do Powa, a Buddhist Tantric practice, to help those who died in the accident.

Question: Would not then your compassion be limited only to the deceased?

Answer: The compassion is limitless, that means we pray for all beings all the time. However, when you encounter a special situation you respond to it by offering a special prayer. It does not follow that you have preference for these few people. It is just that when you know of an event you naturally respond to it.

It is independent of who they are and what relation they have to me, and that is where the limitless compassion comes in. It is not because they are related to me in any way; it is just because I know they have a problem that I pray for them.

Question: To whom or what is our prayer addressed?

Answer: Usually the answer is just "Buddha," but what is Buddha? Buddha is that Limitless-Oneness. So it is like this: We are all one, so we are asking all to help this particular part of the whole. When I have a cut on my left hand, the right hand will put medication on it. In this sense you can even say that you are praying to yourself, but it is only in this sense. This Oneness cannot be defined by the usual notion of a "self" because it is limitless, and hence indefinable. The example of your right hand helping the cut on your left hand might help you understand it better.

Question: So there is only one goal of Buddhism and that is to bring the entire Oneness to nothing?

Answer: No. I was saying that once you sense Oneness, then you can selflessly serve other people. Furthermore, in Buddhism "Emptiness (Sunyata)" does not mean nothingness.

Question: Well, I am saying that the life on earth is not necessarily bad. There are old people who do not feel sufferings. They have a good time in their lives and are grateful for their lives, and to die and be reborn is not a terrible thing for them.

Answer: Yes, that is true. Nevertheless, first of all, those happy moments will not last forever.

Comment from the Audience: However, those are special moments, and if they lasted continuously then they would not be special.

Answer: Right. However, you see, they think that in their next life they will be just as lucky, but there is no assurance. Besides, if you have the openness of Limitless-Oneness, then you will immediately enjoy life much, much more than what you think you are enjoying now. Maybe you feel happy because you can forget about what is happening in the rest of the world, then you say, "Oh, I enjoy it." Would it not be better if you could enjoy it in the openness of Limitless-Oneness? It is a matter of quality.

Comment from the Audience: I mean, we might consider being human a finer quality than being a dog,

but many dogs are happy.

Answer: First of all, we actually do not know this. (laughter from the audience) Secondly, when we talk about breaking of concepts we no longer think that dogs are inferior. When you are free from concepts, it is Oneness and Equality.

Question: Are there other practices for breaking concepts that you can tell us?

Answer: There are many. However, the problem is how many of us have the readiness to really go into those practices. For example, meditation is one practice, and if you want to do this, you will have to follow someone who has experience. At least you have to follow the sutras which are believed to be the record of Buddha's teachings and Buddha is one who really had the experience. If you read the sutras carefully, you will notice that when they talk about meditation, for example, in the Eight-Fold Noble Path, the Right Meditation comes last.

What comes before that? First you have to learn the Right View; you have to adjust your thinking to the Right View so that it becomes Right Thinking; you have to watch your speech and activities so that they are

proper; and your livelihood should be maintained by honest dealings. There are so many things you have to do first before you can sit down and meditate. Why? When you are so busy with your daily life and have so many worries, can you simply sit down and say, "Let me stop thinking for thirty minutes." No way! You will just sit down to concentrate on your worries because you are not really ready to do meditation.

If you read teachings on meditation practices in the sutras, you will find that even for the most simple practice, they always say that, when this person has given up the world and goes into seclusion, then he sits down and does this practice. Nowadays people just copy the latter part of the teaching and ignore the first paragraph that contains the necessary preliminaries. They want to jump into meditation even though they are far from being ready for it. It could even be dangerous! If you are already practicing meditation, that is of course better than no practice at all. However, you still need to work on the necessary preliminaries.

Chanting is not dangerous because you are not trying to eradicate the old self all at once. Instead you are just stealing energy from it a little bit at a time, and the result is always simply how much has been accumulated on this side and how much is still left on that side,

which is slow but safe. Besides, it is the only practice that most of us can do. How many of us can give up everything in order to do a spiritual practice? Almost no one can. You want to go on as you are. You have your duties and relationships. So what do you do now? Practice a little because it will at least help you relax in the busy world.

Chanting on your own is very safe for an additional reason. Some people might tell you that certain practices will achieve this or that, so come and follow me, give me money and form a big organization. This kind of situation will not happen if you simply practice chanting on your own. You just stay home and do your own practice. Later when you sense that it is something worth doing, then you will do more on your own. No one can fool you in this way. Furthermore, it will not prevent you from adopting advanced practices later when you become more mature in choosing a teacher.

Even if it does not produce as many good results as I have said, at least it is a practice of concentration that is very useful in our daily lives. To do anything, you have to be able to concentrate. Even if you think of the practice of chanting just as a practice for concentration, it is still very worthwhile for you to try.

Question: Are we all responsible for the war? People got bombed in Kuwait; are we all responsible for that?

Answer: Well, to go into this will take too much time, so briefly, yes, because the basic concept is cause and effect and we are all related as one society.

Before we go on with the questions and answers, I want to add one more thing. It is about the notion of Limitless-Oneness. From the Buddhist point of view, what is really important is just that unspeakable experience, and it is unspeakable because it is beyond concepts. All speech involves concepts. Therefore, even the notion of Limitless-Oneness is again just a concept trying to show you how to approach that experience. Therefore, in the end you just get rid of this notion of Limitless-Oneness. Do not be bound by the thought that you have to remember this Limitless-Oneness. Go beyond that! That is why Buddhism is so good. It helps you come out, but it does not capture you again. Buddha's teachings are like a raft that we use to get across the ocean of sorrows. Nevertheless, when crossing the ocean on a boat, before we reach the other shore, we do not jump from the boat but hold on to it; similarly, before we attain Enlightenment we need to follow the teachings of Buddha and do daily practices.

Question: Is it not that all forms and all experiences arise at Enlightenment?

Answer: What do you mean they all arise? When you reach that stage even the notions of space and time are no longer operative. So, there is no such thing as past, present and future; there is no such thing as arising and ceasing. That is what the Heart Sutra talks about -- no this and no that.

Question: Is that just nowness with all these?

Answer: No. Nowness is still a concept within time. Even time is gone.

Question: The eternal now is ...

(laughter from the audience)

Answer: The point is not to try to capture it because whatever you capture would not be it. Why? It is something so big, how can it be something that you can capture? It is the whole universe. Are you trying to use a concept to capture the whole universe?

Question: I think the heart of Christian teaching is "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Has

it simply expressed, Sir, what you thought?

Answer: That is splendid! That is Oneness; however in Christianity the difficulty from the theoretical point of view is that, although you talk about God as everywhere, all the time, infinite, when it comes to the final result, it is said that you will go to heaven and always remain a subject of the Lord. The relationship will always remain as that of a master and his people. When you have that concept it is very difficult to reach real Oneness. That is the difficult part.

That is why in many religions, as in Islam, they say God is love, oneness and everything, but then they distinguish between followers and non-followers and conclude that followers should fight the non-followers.

Buddhists think the basic problem is that we are bound by concepts, so we do not hold on to the concepts and do not fight. We even say that when you have to face an enemy, you should think of the occasion as a chance to improve yourself. The enemy is your teacher. He is teaching you how to handle adverse situations. Just change your concept; then your enemy becomes your teacher, and you do not have to fight.

Besides, Buddhism is so flexible and adaptable that it

does not say that if your enemies want to kill you, just let them do it. No. In the Mahaparinirvana Sutra there is a section entitled "Vajra Body" that says that in order to preserve the teaching and defend the preacher in case somebody is going to destroy the teaching, you can fight in defense and even kill the enemy. On the whole, the basic attitude of Buddhism is non-violence and working out peaceful solutions when possible. Nevertheless, there are cases of emergencies. For example, if this is the only person who has the real experience and can give us guidance or this is the only copy of a Sutra left, with the presence of this person or Sutra, many people can be benefited. If this is destroyed, many people will suffer and who knows when this kind of teaching will be discovered again. In that kind of urgent situation, kill! It is absolutely not for any personal considerations. Its justification lies in the magnitude of the loss, and it is justified only in that case.

There is no real contradiction in these teachings if only you can understand that the view really stems from such a universal point. Of course it may happen that someone would misuse such teachings and do evil in their name. As a result, those people would lose the chance to attain real liberation. When compared with what Buddha has experienced whatever they try to get is nothing. Those

people who misapply the teachings are indeed punishing themselves already.

Question: Could you please explain a little bit more about prayer, praying for someone? Because there is confusion in my mind about what it is that you would be praying for, if there is no concept, say, health or ...

Answer: When we say "freedom from concepts," that is the final thing. Even after you have reached that, it does not mean that you cannot use concepts. The problem we have now is not so much that we use concepts but rather that in our usage we are bound by them. We do not know how to go about without them. We, instead of being the master, have become slaves of our language, of our concepts, although they are man-made. You think of something and then you worry about this and that and hence become a slave to your thoughts. That is what we try to become free from. When you have full control of the situation, i.e., you can think through things without being overwhelmed and remain free from being prejudiced, then why not use concepts? So, using concepts we can pray for others. Besides, when you are praying for others, then you are using concepts to practice reaching out; you are no longer limited to just this little self.

Question: Can you explain the meaning of "unborn"?

Answer: Well, that is just one of the conceptual tools to counteract your preconceptions. It is never something that you should try to really hold on to. You think, "Oh, I have got the key!" Please do not be fooled by words. No matter how well it is presented, it is still just a concept.

Question: But what is the basic idea of "unborn"?

Answer: Well, the teachings contained in the sutras are trying to guide us toward the experience of Limitless-Oneness. Therefore they have to devise concepts, and one of those concepts, originally in Sanskrit is called "Sunyata." It is then translated into Chinese as "Kong." "Kong" has several meanings. When it is translated into English, the popular meaning of "emptiness" is used. Consequently the common English readers just look at the word "emptiness" and think that Buddhism is saying that everything does not exist. No, it does not say that. It is foolish to look at this guy here and say, "No, he is not here." (laughter from the audience) How can that be the teaching of a great religion?

The real meaning that is the result of philosophical analyses is that there is nothing that has an absolutely

independent existence. To understand this concept of absolutely independent existence would require a lengthy discussion. That is what I try to avoid by using the simple words "Limitless-Oneness." Those discussions can be understood only by people who have some familiarity with philosophical discussions. That is too difficult for ordinary people, so instead I use terms that we all have some understanding of. In the philosophical sense what is meant by "unborn"? It means that, since there is nothing that has an absolutely independent existence, there is nothing being created or destroyed in the absolute sense, and therefore nothing is born: that is the meaning of "unborn."

Question: You said that Buddhism approves of war under certain circumstances, right? I think, in a way, all nations do that; instead, we do not think about it that way. How do you compare the Buddhist reason for going to war with the Christian reason for going to war?

Answer: In practical terms, there is probably no way to really distinguish between them because when people make decisions they are always limited. Besides, they say one thing but what they really have in mind may be something else. The point is that at least intellectually we know that there is an important and fundamental difference. In the Christian teaching there is a final

concept of God that, in a sense, is limited. There is always the subject and object distinction and hence theoretically there is no way to reach Oneness. Only Buddhism offers that possibility. When you bring it down to earth, maybe there is no way to distinguish between the two religions except in superficial ways. Nevertheless, for those who are sincere about reaching the goal, the difference is very, very big. According to the Buddhist understanding, that difference is where the true freedom lies, and that is the point where Sakyamuni Buddha went beyond the Hindu teachings.

Comment from the Audience: I think it is said generally that religion is the greatest cause of war.

Answer: How many wars have been caused by Buddhism?

(laughter from the audience)

Question: How does a person in your position support yourself?

(laughter from the audience)

Answer: In general, practitioners, i.e., monks, nuns or lay persons who devote their lives to Buddhist practice

are supported by the faithful or relatives. In my case, it is my parents and wife who are supporting my livelihood.

Concluding Remarks by Professor Rogers: What you say is always fresh and surprising. Thank you very much!

(loud and long applause from the audience)

After the talk about one-fifth of the more than one hundred persons in the audience came up to Dr. Lin to express their appreciation.

Teaching in One Phrase

Yutang Lin

Disciple Yao En (Medicine Guru Buddha's Grace)
asked

Is there a phrase that can guide one on the path till full
enlightenment

Replied

Realizing impermanence

Comprehending impermanence

 Easier to let go of grasping

Feeling impermanence

 One turned to practice Dharma diligently

Realizing impermanence

It is possible to comprehend selflessness

 Free from grasping

 Free from self-centeredness

 And practicing Dharma diligently

 Mind naturally becomes clear and open

 And hence readily merging into original purity

Impermanence is not only the entrance to the Buddha

path

But also a bright lamp shining upon the practice path
And even more so a realization of full enlightenment

Note:

The Dharma name Yao En was given because the
disciple asked for refuge right after a fire puja to
Medicine Guru Buddha had been performed.

Written in Chinese and translated on September 26,
2012
El Cerrito, California

My Bodhicitta Vows

(May be Used for Dedication of Merits)

Dr. Yutang Lin

1. May virtuous gurus remain with us and those departed return soon!
2. May perverse views and violence soon become extinct, and Dharma spread without hindrance!
3. May all beings proceed diligently on the path toward Buddhahood and achieve the goal before death!
4. May the Great Compassion flourish in all beings and never regress until they reach perfect Buddhahood!
5. May the Great Wisdom thrive in all beings and never regress until they reach perfect Buddhahood!

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