

## *Bodhidharma's Two Entries and Four Practices*

**T**here is an important work attributed to Bodhidharma called *The Two Entries and Four Practices*, in which he details more explicitly what sentient beings must do to realize their true nature. The "two entries" are entry through principle and entry through practice. Entry through principle means directly seeing the first principle, or original nature, without relying on words, descriptions, concepts, experience, or any thinking process. Entry through practice refers to the gradual training of the mind.

Bodhidharma describes entry through principle as follows: "Leaving behind the false, return to the true; make no discriminations between self and others. In contemplation, one's mind should be stable and unmoving, like a wall." This may sound like the direct, easy path to enlightenment, but it is in fact the most difficult. If we think of Bodhidharma's own enlightenment as an entry through principle, then we would have to say that it only came after a lifetime of practice, culminating in his nine years of meditation facing a wall in a cave on Mount Song. Actually, the method used to accomplish entry through principle

is precisely this phrase, "One's mind should be stable and unmoving, like a wall." This does not mean that the mind is blank; on the contrary, it is alert and clear, illuminating everything with awareness and responding with compassion. This is ideal, and it is the state of mind referred to in entry through principle.

The second entry to attaining realization is through practice, of which there are four: accepting karmic retribution, adapting to conditions, no seeking, and union with the Dharma. Each practice is progressively more advanced, and therefore, they should be followed in order.

The first practice, "accepting karmic retribution," involves recognizing the effects of karma and cause and consequence. Karma is a Sanskrit term that translates literally as action". When we carry out an action, a karmic force remains that leads to a consequence in the future, whether in the present existence, or in a future one. The karmic effect of a particular action is not permanently fixed, because the continual performance of new actions modifies the karmic force accordingly, but in all cases, there is a cause-and-consequence relationship, and the consequence will be similar in nature to the cause. Therefore, when we face adversity, we should

understand that we are receiving the karmic retribution from countless previous actions in countless previous lives. When we pay back some of our debt, we should feel happy that we have the capacity to do so. If we have this perspective, then when misfortunes arise, we will be tranquil and without resentment. We will not suffer from disturbing emotions or be discouraged or depressed. This is an important practice.

Karma, or cause and consequence, has to be understood and applied in conjunction with the Buddhist concept of causes and conditions. The coming together of causes and conditions makes it possible for things to happen. We cannot and should not run away from our responsibilities and the retribution caused by our karma. But we should try to improve our conditions and karma. If things can be improved, we must try to make them better. If they can't be changed, then we should accept them with equanimity as karmic retribution.

It might be easy to confuse the principle of causes and conditions with that of cause and consequence. In fact, the two principles are intimately connected with each other, and it is difficult to talk about one without mentioning the other. From the standpoint of cause and consequence, we can say that the earlier event

is the cause and the later event is the consequence. One event leads to the next. A cause, however, cannot lead to a consequence by itself. Something else must occur, must come together with the cause, to lead to a consequence. This coming together of events and factors is referred to as causes and conditions. A man and woman together do not automatically lead to children. Other factors must come together in order for the cause (parents) to lead to the consequence (children). Parents, children, and the other factors involved are all considered causes and conditions.

Causes and conditions can also be thought of as "dharmas", a Sanskrit term referring to all phenomena, whether physical or mental. This meaning is distinct from "Dharma"-with a capital D-which refers to the teachings of the Buddha, and the methods and principles of practice. However, even the teachings of the Buddha and the methods of practice are themselves phenomena, or dharmas.

In any case, the condition (one dharma) that intersects with a cause (another dharma) must have itself been caused by something else, and so on and so on, infinitely in all directions throughout space and time. All phenomena arise because of causes and conditions. Any phenomenon that arises is itself a

consequence of a previous cause and arose because of the coming together of causes and conditions. This leads to the concept of conditioned arising, also known as dependent origination, which means that all phenomena, or dharmas, no matter when or where they occur, are interconnected.

Since all dharmas are the consequences of causes and conditions, their arising is conditional. This includes not only arising and appearing but also perishing and disappearing. A person being born is a phenomenon, and a person dying is a phenomenon; a bubble forming is a phenomenon, and a bubble bursting is a phenomenon; a thought appearing is a phenomenon, and a thought disappearing is a phenomenon. All dharmas arise and perish because of causes and conditions.

The second of the four practices recommended by Bodhidharma is "adapting to conditions". It also requires an understanding of causes and conditions. Adapting to conditions means that we should do our best within the constraints of our environment. If our circumstances are fortunate or something good happens to us, we should not get overly excited. Good fortune, like bad, is the result of karmic retribution. Why should we feel excited when we are

only enjoying the fruits of our own labor? It is like withdrawing money from our own bank accounts. By the same token, we should not be overly proud, because good fortune, like bad, is the result of many causes and conditions coming together. How can we take credit for our accomplishments, when they depend so much on the good will of others, on the sacrifices of our parents, on the circumstances of history? The practice of adapting to conditions means that you accept your karma, or cause and consequence, without being overly joyful, self-satisfied, or disappointed.

Accepting karmic retribution and adapting to conditions are very helpful practices in daily life. They allow us to improve our conditions and karma and maintain a positive attitude toward life. They help us enjoy equanimity in the face of changing circumstances, improve our behavior, and keep our relationships harmonious. These teachings of Bodhidharma are not hard to understand, and any ordinary person can make use of them. If we can apply them in daily circumstances, we will fulfill our responsibilities and we will make the best of our opportunities. In this way, life will be more meaningful.

The third of Bodhidharma's four practices is "no seeking". There is a Chinese saying that "people

raise children to help them in old age, and people accumulate food in case of famine". Today, people in the West may not raise children just to support them in old age, but people probably still accumulate food, or wealth, in case of hardship. This attitude is not the attitude of no seeking. In the practice of no seeking, we continually, diligently engage in useful activity, yet we have no thought that this activity is for our personal gain now or in the future. We do not look for personal benefits. This is not easy, and it is a higher level of practice than the second practice. In fact, in order to completely avoid self-centered activity, we must make the difficult step of realizing that the self does not exist.

What we commonly think of as the self is an illusion. It is nothing in itself at all but a name we give to our continuous interaction with the environment. We constantly see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think, and it is this cascade of sensations, perceptions, and judgments, thought after thought, that we identify as the self.

To say that the self is an illusion, however, is not to say that the self is a hallucination. The self is not a mirage. We say that the self is illusory because it is not a stable entity but, rather, a series of events that are forever changing in response to a constantly changing

environment. The self is not a thing that stays the same, and as such, we say that the self is an illusion. For the same reason, all phenomena are considered illusions; that is, all phenomena are selfless. All things change from moment to moment, evolving and transforming into something else. The self, therefore, is a false existence ceaselessly interacting with a false environment.

The practice of no seeking is an advanced practice because it is the practice of no-self. While it is normal for people to begin to learn and practice Buddhism for their own benefit, eventually, through practice, their self-centeredness falls away. They find themselves busy because others need their help, and they provide what is needed. Such a person no longer even thinks about attaining enlightenment.

When you have ceased to be concerned about your own attainment, then you are enlightened. Otherwise there will always be subtle, wandering thoughts and attachment to the desire to do something for yourself. If you want to free yourself from all worldly vexations and suffering and if you desire liberation, you are still attached to your self. It is only when you have no concern about your own enlightenment that you can truly be enlightened. The practice of no seeking is the



practice of this enlightened state.

The fourth of Bodhidharma's practices, "union with the Dharma" , is a basic tenet of Buddhism that all phenomena are impermanent and do not have an intrinsic self. In the practice of union with the Dharma, we try to personally experience this impermanence and selflessness through direct contemplation of emptiness. This is the highest practice of Chan, and it leads to the highest attainment. It is the practice that allows us to reach the point of "entry through principle" that we talked about earlier.

But where does a practitioner begin? Different Buddhist sects employ many methods of practice that can be used by beginners, such as reading the scriptures, making vows, doing prostrations, mindfulness, and meditating on the breath. These methods all help us to go from scattered mind, which is confused, emotional, and unstable, to a mental state that is tranquil and in harmony with our environment. The very first thing we should do is relax the body and mind. If we can relax, we will be healthier and more stable and will relate to others more harmoniously.

There is a Buddhist householder who comes to the Chan Center who is very nervous. His nervousness makes other people feel nervous. When he talks to

you, his body is tense, as if he is about to attack you or defend himself. People react to this kind of behavior; it disturbs them. When I told him to relax his body, he responded in a tense, forced voice, "I am already relaxed!" He is constantly fearful and insecure, and because of the problems these feelings cause, he came to the Chan Center seeking help. He wanted to learn meditation, so I taught him to gradually relax his body and then his mind. If we cannot relax, there is no way we can meditate; and if we cannot meditate, the practice of no seeking is completely impossible. This man was impatient and thought that if he got enlightened all his problems would disappear. He said to me, "Master, I do not want anything; I just want the method to get enlightened quickly. Give me the method as soon as possible." I answered, "Such a method has not been invented. If I could invent a guaranteed, speedy method of enlightenment, I could probably sell it for quite a lot of money."

Now I have invented the following method, and I offer it free of charge to whomever wishes to learn. The method is to relax your body and mind. It is easy and simple. Do not ask whether it can lead you to enlightenment. First you should be able to relax, and later we can talk about enlightenment. Close your

eyes, lean back in your chair, and relax your muscles. Completely relax your eyes. It is very important that your eyelids be relaxed and do not move. There should not be any tension around your eyeballs. Do not apply any force or tension anywhere. Relax your facial muscles, shoulders, and arms. Relax your abdomen and put your hands in your lap. If you feel the weight of your body, it should be at your seat. Do not think of anything. If thoughts come, recognize them and pay attention to the inhaling and exhaling of your breath through your nostrils. Ignore what other people are doing. Concentrate on your practice, forget about your body, and relax. Do not entertain doubts about whether what you are doing is useful.

The principle of this method is to relax-to be natural and clear. Keep each session short, but practice frequently. In the beginning, each session should be ten minutes or less, gradually working your way up to twenty to thirty minutes if you can do it without too much discomfort. If you do it longer, you will probably feel restless or fall asleep. You can use this method a few times a day; it will refresh your body and mind and eliminate some of the confusion in your daily life. Gradually you will gain the stability of body and mind that makes it possible to, eventually, enter the gate of Chan.