

Chapter 13

The Four Stages to Monitor Our Cultivation

In the process of learning Buddhism, not only should we study Buddhist philosophies, we must also learn methods of cultivation and the various stages throughout our cultivation of enlightenment. The *Flower Ornament Sutra* elucidates four stages in Buddhist learning. These are faith, understanding, practice, and realization.¹

Faith

The Buddhist faith is different from the Christian faith. Christian faith stresses the belief that God has created Earth, Heaven, and myriad things, and that he governs everything. Buddhist faith stresses cause and consequence and recognizes the existence of “intrinsic nature”. Buddhism simply asks people to have faith in themselves. Everyone has the capacity to attain Buddhahood and to be enlightened by seeing the truth of their own nature. We need to recognize our “intrinsic nature”, which is perfect but is often obstructed by our weaknesses. We need to be confident in our capacity to verify its existence through cultivation. If we can successfully eliminate all of our craving, aversion, and ignorance, we will be able to restore our intrinsic nature.

¹ 信, 解, 行, 証.

Understanding

It is commonly understood that everyone has the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong. Buddhism is fairly optimistic about human wisdom. Basic to Buddhist thought is the belief that all of us will be able to achieve enlightenment and thereby understand the truth of the universe and human life. Buddhism offers us a clear and concrete analysis of this understanding.

Practice

Once we have gained the true understanding of the Buddhist faith and the Buddha-Dharma, we will begin to apply what we have learned in our practice. Practice is based on correct understanding. The fundamental method of practice is to show compassion all the time.

Realization

Realization is the summation of our achievements. Once we are confident in our abilities, we will understand our responsibilities and will follow the Buddha's teachings to act and behave. Realization is very important. As long as we think and practice in accordance with the teaching of the sutras in our everyday life, we will attain realization.

For example: After realizing my ability to help promulgate Buddhist principles, I began to write this book and to share with interested readers my own experience. This is my "practice". If readers benefit from reading this book, then becomes part of my "realization".

Cultivation and Enlightenment

General cultivators recognize that the purpose of cultivation is to seek enlightenment. They may become stagnated at the level of thinking without seeing any breakthrough, even though they have worked hard for a long time. Such a plateau has the potential to shake their confidence, and to lead them to question whether or not they really have the capacity to attain enlightenment.

To address this issue, the author is inspired by one of Master Shengyan's articles, and would like to share some of its insight with readers. In *Questions and Answers on Buddhism*², Master Shengyan says:

During the practice of *chan*, we must avoid putting enlightenment as the sole target on mind by all means. We would become delusional by seeking for enlightenment but not getting it. Begging and waiting are delusion, attachment, clambering upon objects, and not letting go. Therefore, the true Zen master knows about enlightenment, but does not lust after the awakening condition. Enlightenment is a concept before cultivation, during which this concept must be cast off in order to benefit. Thus, a Zen cultivator focuses on process rather than purpose.

² Master Shengyan, *Questions and Answers on Buddhism* (Taipei: Fagu wenhua, 2007), 195-96.