

Embarking on a New Path of Learning and Practice

I. From One-way to Two-way, from the Basics to the Profound

Traditional learning methods tend to be passive, while the learning program of Mindful Peace Academy advocates active learning. Like the evolution of the Internet, the early Internet was Web 1.0, where users gained information in a one-way fashion. When it entered Web 2.0, interaction among users was emphasized. Users were not only Internet readers but also its contributors. This two-way fashion has provided everyone with the right to speak and has greatly promoted people's willingness to surf the Internet. In Buddhism, the current teaching method of giving lectures to learners regularly is mostly a one-way approach. Learners may have acquired some knowledge about Buddhism, but they are not necessarily advantaged in mind cultivation, and their faith in the Path may even turn weaker. The knowledge learned cannot take effect continuously in their mind streams and become the transformative power of their life. Hence, the Three-Stage Program hopes to evolve its learning approach from passive learning to collaborative learning.

As a learning system, the Three-Stage Program was designed as a gradual and systematic learning curriculum, which continually allows learners to deepen and grow. Learning Buddha Dharma is a life journey from confusion to awakening. How many stages does this journey consist of? What should be done at each stage? If you are unclear about the various stops you shall go through, you may probably experience deviations and go astray during the journey. Some people are very diligent and study every day, but they are just like reading a primary school textbook repeatedly. What level will they reach after ten years? They will remain at the elementary school level even after thirty years of study like this. Their level may exceed that of an ordinary elementary school student, but there's no way they will reach the level of a graduate student. In other cases, people of elementary school level may be reading postgraduate textbooks. How can they possibly understand? They just thought they could. The concept of "understanding" is very flexible. Our current cognitive level determines the level of our understanding. As the ancients said, "Adolescent reading is like peeking at the moon through a gap. Middle-aged reading is like watching the moon in a garden, and old age reading is like enjoying the moon from a balcony." For a young man, reading books is like glancing at the moon through a gap; he can barely get a glimpse of the moon. In the middle age, reading books is like watching the moon from a courtyard; only part of the sky can be seen while the rest is blocked by the roof. In later years, reading, after accumulating rich life experiences, reading books is like watching the moon from a high platform and enjoying a limitless panoramic view.

The same is true for learning Buddha Dharma. As far as my personal experience is concerned, I have already grasped the contents I am talking about nowadays since the very beginning of my Buddha Dharma learning journey. However, after decades of study, I've found that these basic concepts are unavoidable. It's exactly what the ancient patriarchs and masters have said: "Buddha Dharma is plain and simple." What else is there besides such fundamental elements? The entire Tripitaka and the Twelve Divisions are derived from these classics and are different interpretations of such classics from various angles and levels. But the extent to which you understand these contents is completely different at each stage of the study. At the beginning, you may probably just get 3-5% of it. As you go deeper, you may get 10% or 20% of it. It's a gradual deepening process that cannot be accomplished overnight. The problem is that most people are overconfident. When they've got 5%, they think they already understand. And when they've got 10%, they think they know it all. But

what kind of understanding is this? If you continue to learn, you will find that your previous understanding is a pretty shallow one, not an in-depth understanding in the true sense. This is something that requires special attention--don't ever think that you've already got a thorough and satisfying understanding of the Dharma. Only in this way is continuous improvement possible.

II. The Attitude and Method of Learning and Practicing

The attitude of learning and practicing we advocate is “sincerity, earnestness and commitment”. Being **sincere** is to face the Dharma and the confusions of life with sincerity. Being **earnest** is to study a text repeatedly, contemplate it in depth, and share views with fellow learners weekly, enhancing the understanding of Dharma via group discussion. Being **committed** means to stop hopping around for different teachings, stay focused on the current subject, and study in depth. It also means following a systematic and gradual learning path, rather than wandering around in a window-shopping fashion and ultimately achieving disappointing results.

The learning method we advocate is “comprehension, acceptance, and application”. This is key to implementing Dharma in the mind. There are two common tendencies among most Buddhist practitioners. The first refers to those who have read heaps of classic sutras and treatises, who are good at lecturing, but know nothing on how to apply and integrate the Dharma into their life. The second refers to those who are busy practicing while holding no right views and knowing little about cultivating their mind. They practice blindly, just following their own feelings. In fact, holding the right view and applying the right mind is the most important in Buddhist practice. With the right view and the right application, practice happens every moment and everywhere in life. Drinking a cup of tea or having a meal are practices. Walking, standing, sitting, and lying down are practices. Dealing with people is also practice. I would say this is true practice. If practice is confined only to the cushion and separated from one's life, it is not true practice. How to hold the right views and develop the right mind? We should transpose the Dharma into our own attitude. This process must flow from comprehension to acceptance and further to application. Without comprehension, it is impossible to accept. Without acceptance, it is impossible to apply.

By following the Three-Stage Level 1 Program, learners who can study in strict accordance with the learning attitude and method, regardless of their foundation, can progress significantly. Conversely, if one never follows, he can make no progress, no matter how smart he is. With energy scattered, one might read a lot with little digestion and minimum application, not allowing the Dharma to take effect on one's mind. Therefore, we must first be diligent in self-study. We should repeatedly listen to the teaching and reflect on it. For each lecture, watch the video at least three times, observe whether the teaching holds true in real life, and take part in the group discussions. Participating in group discussions is also a process that benefits oneself and others. Sharing your own experience is an act of giving. When it benefits others, it becomes effective giving. From another perspective, sharing your learning is good training for yourself. It helps not only organize your thoughts but also encourages you to study further. We may have such experience about sharing: we seem to have gained a good understanding of certain contents but, upon expressing our views on them, we find that our comprehension is neither accurate nor certain. Hence, we cannot express ourselves in an orderly fashion nor without ambiguity. How can we solve this? Besides training how we express ourselves, listening to the Dharma repeatedly and engaging

in deep reflection are of greater significance. Furthermore, there is a rule for us to follow during sharing, which is to review our own weaknesses and appreciate the strengths of others. Through such a self-reviewing process, we can accomplish self-transformation. By appreciating the contribution of others, we can encourage each other and foster a conducive learning atmosphere.

To support everyone's learning, we have assigned facilitators and assistant facilitators for each class. Facilitators are selected from our most outstanding participants. They are first trained to become assistant facilitators, followed by a facilitator internship, and finally become a qualified facilitator. Although these facilitators may not have studied Buddhism longer than you, or they may not have a comprehensive knowledge of the Dharma, they are experienced and familiar with the study approach. At this point, they can guide you or accompany you in your learning journey. Of course, they are not perfect, but they are one step ahead of you on this path. Hopefully, you will also dedicate yourself to becoming a facilitator in the future. After you reap the benefits from learning the Dharma, you should share it with others so that more people can benefit. This is not only altruistic but also good for fostering our own growth, it is a win-win situation for teaching and learning.

III. An Effective Mode of Spreading Buddha Dharma

Over the past two decades, I have grown increasingly aware of how much Buddhism has universal and inestimable value to mankind. Today is a highly civilized era, as much as a highly ignorant one. There are so many delusions, worries, and wrong ideas making people's minds turbulent, frequently causing global disasters. So, what is the ultimate solution? When material development reaches a certain level, people find that their inner psychological problems are increasing. Without a healthy mind, no matter how much one has, there's no way he can be happy. In recent years, the number of patients with serious mental illnesses has increased globally. It is said that illnesses of the mind shall be cured by the mind itself. Since ancient times, the Buddha Dharma, also called the study of mind, has analyzed all varieties of mental activities in an extremely meticulous manner and provided a wealth of solutions to treat and find ways to adjust the mind. So, the western psychology community has begun to pay more and more attention to Buddhism. It borrowed heavily from Buddhism's teachings and meditative practices and achieved good results by applying these principles in building a disciplined approach in clinical settings. But as a whole, this is just a small step forward. If you compare the Dharma to a treasure, then what we are using now is only a tiny fraction of it, with much yet to be further explored.

I often sigh that Buddha Dharma is so profound, yet so few people know it. People often ask, why is Christianity so influential? In fact, it has much to do with the way it propagates. Take KFC and Coca-Cola, for instance: a chicken drumstick can be sold all over the world, and a bottle of Coca-Cola can be recognized everywhere in the world. The key lies in their successful way of marketing. Although the Dharma is broad and profound, if it lacks an effective, contemporary, and easy-to-replicate mode of communication, two extremes are likely to manifest. One is that the Dharma is too deep to understand, which may deter people from getting close to it. The other is that: the Dharma may be distorted at will, nearly degenerating into superstition. As an ancient sage says, the Way relies on people to spread. "People" here means every one of us, not just one person or two. People certainly have different capacities, big or small. Not everyone can interpret or spread Buddha Dharma. But,

with a sound mode of spreading, it should be said that everyone can find his own role and play his due part. The Three-Stage Program is not only a study of Buddha Dharma but also a practice of the Bodhi mind. So, everyone should cultivate awareness in passing the torch and guide more people to come closer to the wisdom of Buddha Dharma.

In the future, we will continue helping each other to unite our team with one heart and one mind. Today, it is not easy for people to speak honestly or openly with others. But in class, everyone can open their heart and be sincere with themselves, examining their own shortcomings. On the other hand, we shall be sincere with our fellow practitioners, learn to be on good terms with them, and help each other. So, this is a pure and wonderful team. What we should do is to practice the Three-Stage-Program and further promote it to benefit others.