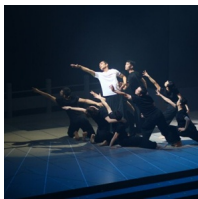


## Understanding the Power of the Mind: Part I of the Repentance Series

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation  
Thursday, 28 July 2011 00:00

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### [ [Master's Teachings](#) ]

**Editor's note:** *Deeply concerned about the state of our world today—a world facing the crises of climate change, environmental degradation, instability and unrest, and eroding of moral values—Dharma Master Cheng Yen has appealed to her followers to engage in the practice of repentance. Though the collective problems of today's world seem beyond the control of ordinary individuals, the Master tells us that each of us in fact contribute to the problem in many different ways; that is why we need to return to our own heart and mind, and deeply reflect. (The repentance practice is introduced [here](#).)* Below is Part I of the Master's teachings on repentance, drawn from her talks to Tzu Chi volunteers. In Part I, the Master speaks about the power of the mind. Because the thoughts in our mind determine our actions, in order to repent, we need to first understand the nature of our mind and become aware of how it can lead us to make mistakes.

Our mind is very powerful; with one thought, we conjure up many things. The Buddha describes the mind as a dexterous artist. With a stroke of his brush, the artist can paint all sorts of things, bringing to life the image in his mind. Whatever comes into his mind, he paints. The mind can create anything and everything. This is how we create our world.

The land around us was once a wilderness. Yet, according to the plans in their minds, people developed this land, building on it. Isn't this an example of the mind being like an artist, creating different scenes in the world? All that we have around us are products of the human mind.

Yet, our minds are hardly ever at peace, resting in contentment. Instead, driven by our desires, we continually conjure up new plans to create more and more projects, never satisfied. With all our never-ending pursuits, we create chaos in our minds and lose ourselves.

When our minds are chaotic, our actions become wrong, and such actions create many problems. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that we recognize the importance of having right thoughts and taking good care of our mind.

If we are able to take good care of our mind, we can be like a Buddha. If we do not look after it, we may become like an animal, without wisdom. In Buddhism, we speak of the ten realms of existence: heaven and hell, the realms of humans, animals, hungry ghosts and asuras, as well as the realms of the sravakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas. The first six are unenlightened realms; the latter four are enlightened. Depending on the direction of our thoughts, we can experience any of the ten realms. With a compassionate, wise thought, in that moment, we can be in an enlightened realm. With a greedy, stingy thought, we can be in an unenlightened one. Therefore, whether we are like a Buddha or an animal all depends on whether the thoughts in our mind are wholesome or unwholesome. It all depends on the direction or nature of our thoughts; that is why we must take good care of our mind.

### **The origin of good and evil**

In life, we all do both good and evil. In Buddhism, we say that good and evil are empty in nature because they do not intrinsically exist—they arise as a product of causes and conditions. For example, as our senses make contact with the external environment, temptation arises and we do something we shouldn't. If our senses had not encountered the conditions, temptation would not have arisen, and we would not have carried out the wrong action. It is due to the encounter of our sense organs with the external environment that we come to do either good or evil. This "encounter" also includes our encounters with people. If we do not come in contact with people, for instance, what unpleasantness would arise between us and others?

But whether we do good or evil depends on what thoughts we have in our mind. For example, in our relations with others, we can choose whether to be generous and giving or petty and competitive. We can choose to work with others for the collective good or to be in opposition with others for self-interest. It all depends on the direction of our thoughts.

We need to understand that what we do creates causes and conditions, and we will eventually reap the consequences. All people, no matter rich or poor, clever or simple-minded, undergo karmic retribution. No one is above this natural law.

This message is in fact not difficult to understand. It shows us the importance of taking care of our thoughts and guarding our mind.

### **Creating unwholesome causes**

Through our deeds, our words, and our thoughts, we create a lot of wrongdoing without being aware of it. Thus, we sow karmic seeds, and the conditions we experience now are their fruits. For example, we may encounter people who do not like us; this is because we have somehow formed negative karmic affinities with them sometime in the past. When we created the cause, we were unaware; in fact we have created many unwholesome causes unawares. But, if we can begin to be aware, we can make changes.

The following illuminates some common ways we create unwholesome causes.

#### ***Lost in the past or future***

Our minds also often run wild with fantasies, but fulfilling them is like chasing a rainbow. For example, we think about things beyond our reach or want to do things that are in fact beyond us. These all constitute deluded thinking. Thinking about the past or the future doesn't help us. When we do so, we often lose touch with the present moment. What is most important is to take hold of this moment and put into action our resolutions.

#### ***Our senses***

We commit wrongdoings as a result of our six sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. This is because when these senses encounter the external environment, we react. Temptation can arise as well as other unwholesome states of mind. Acting on these, we then do

things that are wrong. As a result, we create a lot of afflictions and troubles for ourselves. But, if we are mindful and aware, we can avoid this. This is the meaning of taking good care of our mind.

### ***Different kinds of attachments***

In reaction to external circumstances, we develop many attachments. These attachments can take the form of desire or craving, but there is also attachment to views or notions. For instance, we may become upset with someone over a small matter. Because of our personality, we cannot just let it go. In our spiritual practice, however, we should cultivate a broad and pure heart towards others—a heart that is tolerant, forgiving, and not petty. If we cannot do this, we will always be getting into conflicts with others. We should learn to recognize that external circumstances are separate from our inner state of mind. Instead of getting caught up in external circumstances, we should be mindful of this separateness and take care not to let our mind get attached or tainted by it.

### ***The vicious cycle***

If we do not take good care of our mind, we will develop more and more inner impurities and delusions. It will then become harder for us to cultivate ourselves and engage in spiritual practice. Our unwholesome habits will get in the way, causing us to react to people with a petty mind and accumulate more wrong actions.

In Buddhism, we speak of the ten unwholesome acts of the body, speech, and mind. With the body, we can commit killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. In our speech, we do wrong by speaking abusively, telling lies, using insincere flattery, or gossiping and bearing tales to create division and conflict. In our mind, we give rise to greed, anger, and ignorance.

If we are not mindful, we will habitually carry out these ten unwholesome acts. As we do so, we accumulate more and more afflictions, which cause us to carry out further wrong actions. We not only tire ourselves out in the process, but also taint our hearts, making our minds more deluded. It's a vicious cycle. So, we truly need to be mindful and take good care of our heart and mind.

### **Reflections**

Our mind is truly powerful; it can create heaven or hell for us and lead us to do good or evil. Therefore, if we wish to avoid mistakes, we will need to become more aware of our thoughts and the direction of our mind.

We have already made many mistakes, and that is why we need to repent. Repenting is not only about realizing our errors and being remorseful for them. We also need to make a fresh start and not repeat the mistakes. Because our mind determines our actions and the arising of an unwholesome thought can lead us astray, to truly begin anew, we will need to take good care of our heart and mind always.

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From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks  
Compiled into English by the Jing Si Abode English Editorial Team