

Cultivating a Wholesome Mind: The Four Right Efforts

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

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[[Master's Teachings](#)]

As an ordinary person, we give rise to all sorts of thoughts in our mind. They enter and exit our mind constantly. When we give rise to a kind thought, we may act on it and do a good deed to help others. When we give rise to an unwholesome thought, such as an angry one, we may say something mean to others. Our actions are greatly influenced by our thoughts.

Cultivating ourselves is about learning to actively do all the good we can and to refrain from doing anything bad. To do this, we will need to watch out for our thoughts. This is something we can do as we go about our daily life. For example, if at this moment, our mind is free of unwholesome thoughts, that's wonderful and we should take care to keep it that way, not letting any unwholesome ones take hold. If we find that we already have unwholesome thoughts, we should quickly transform our mindset. If our mind is in a wholesome state, full of kindness and goodness, we should help this kindness and goodness to grow by seizing the present to do what good we can. Once we've started a good thing, we should keep doing it. We need to practice diligently to nurture a mind of good thoughts and continue in our good thoughts, never losing them.

This practice is called the Four Right Efforts: to put a stop to unwholesome thoughts, to guard against new unwholesome thoughts, to bring forth wholesome thoughts, and to nurture our wholesome thoughts so they can grow and deepen. The Four Right Efforts are methods for cultivating a wholesome mind of good thoughts. Practicing them will help us stay on the right path.

Putting a Stop to Unwholesome Thoughts

The first of the Four Right Efforts tells us that when we detect unwholesome thoughts in our mind, we need to quickly transform our state of mind to put a stop to them. For example, when someone does something that displeases us and we get angry, that's an unwholesome thought. Or, when we get tempted by something and craving arises, that's also an unwholesome thought. If we can quickly change our mindset so that the unwholesome thoughts don't take hold, we can prevent ourselves from doing wrong things and creating negative karma.

What happens if we've already acted on our unwholesome thoughts, such as lashing out at someone in anger? We have to quickly catch ourselves, repent, and promise ourselves not to do it again. If we can catch ourselves doing something that is wrong, it's not too late to stop it and prevent ourselves from doing further harm.

It is better, however, to practice catching our unwholesome thoughts before we act on them, for they can lead us to do things that we end up seriously regretting. There is a story from China that shows this. In times past, there was a very poor couple. To make ends meet, the husband

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had to leave his hometown to find work, returning home only once a year for Chinese New Year.

One time, on his way home for the celebrations, he thought to bring back a gift to his wife. Though his earnings were meager, he thought that with it being New Year, it would be nice to have a gift to give instead of only bringing back his earnings. Passing through the marketplace, he decided to see what might make an appropriate gift. He saw a calligrapher writing couplets. The couplets were all auspicious words and good messages. Seeing him standing there, the calligrapher asked him if he wanted a couplet written for him.

"Yes, that would be a nice gift for my wife, but I don't know if she would understand these couplets you've written here," he said.

"A gift for your wife. How often do you return home during the year?" the calligrapher asked.

"I can only go home once a year," he replied.

"In that case, I can write a couplet for you."

"Before you do that, how much would it cost?" the man quickly asked.

"Since it's to be a gift for your wife, it will have to be of better quality. Five hundred taels it'll cost you." Doing a quick calculation, the man saw that it was one-third of the earnings he was bringing home. If he bought the couplet, would he bring home too little money?

Seeing his hesitation, the calligrapher said, "It may cost you 500 taels, but who knows, it may benefit your family for the rest of your lives."

"Let me see what couplet you have in mind," the man said. The calligrapher then began to write:

Think before taking steps forward
Think before taking steps back
When anger arises, beware
Putting off anger is most auspicious

"When you find yourself getting angry, you can quickly recite these verses to yourself," the calligrapher explained. The man, being simple and honest, found this quite meaningful and decided to buy the couplet. With that, he happily set off for home.

By the time he arrived home, it was quite late. The front door was already locked, and all the lights were out. Not wanting to disturb his wife, he quietly went around to the back of the house and let himself in. Setting down his bags, he lit a small oil lamp. It was not very bright, but with its light, he could see that his wife had already gone to bed and had let the mosquito net down around the bed.

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Just as he was about to approach the bed to greet her, his eyes fell upon two pairs of shoes by the bed. One pair was his wife's and the other was a pair of men's shoes. He couldn't believe that while he was working so hard away from home to earn money so that they could make ends meet, his wife was betraying him with another man. Enraged by her faithlessness, he grabbed a knife from the kitchen to confront the lovers.

Just as he was about to lift the mosquito net, the couplet he had bought suddenly came to his mind. "Think before taking steps forward, think before taking steps back. When anger arises, beware; putting off anger is most auspicious." With that, he paused and took a few steps back.

His movements woke his wife. Curious about why the oil lamp was burning, she lifted the mosquito net to have a look and spotted her husband. "Husband, you're home!" she called out. "What's wrong?" she asked, when she saw him just standing there, not moving.

The man was looking at the empty space next to his wife. Seeing it, he quickly hid the knife behind his back. Awkwardly, he replied, "Nothing, I was just afraid of waking you up. Why are there two pairs of shoes by the bed?"

With a huff, the wife said, "Well, you said you would be coming home, so I cooked a nice dinner for you. I was looking forward to our New Year reunion, but you didn't show up. So, I decided to set out your shoes by the bed, just so I can pretend that you had come back and I didn't pass the New Year all by myself."

Hearing that, the husband was filled with remorse and became very grateful for the couplet. Though it cost him one-third of his earnings, its simple message helped make him pause before going through with an action that would have ruined his life and destroyed his family.

From the story, we can see how important it is to put a stop to unwholesome thoughts so we do not act on them. By doing this, we can prevent ourselves from making mistakes that bring devastating consequences.

Guarding Against Unwholesome Thoughts

After we've put a stop to unwholesome thoughts, we have to take care to maintain this and guard against new unwholesome thoughts. As we go about our daily life, our mind can be thrown off balance by the people around us and the things we have to handle, causing anger, craving, and delusion to arise in our minds. If we keep our minds calm, centered, and peaceful, we won't so easily react. Also, if we are aware of the potential to get angry over people and matters and to become attached to external conditions that we like, we can watch out for it and guard against unwholesome thoughts. This is called looking after our heart and mind.

Why is it so important to prevent unwholesome thoughts? A tiny unwholesome thought may seem inconsequential. But if we let it arise and act on it, it can develop into a bad habit. Each time we do it, we create negative karma. Over time, we will build up a lot of negative karma, just as drops of water falling into a basin, over time, can cause the basin to overflow.

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Guarding against unwholesome thoughts, we can help give ourselves a better life. With our minds free of wrong thoughts, we won't end up doing things that lead to deep regret or even ruin our lives. It is like taking a road trip—if we watch the signs, follow traffic rules, and don't take the wrong exit, we can safely and quickly reach our destination.

Inviting In Wholesome Thoughts

In our daily life, it is not enough just to keep our minds free of unwholesome thoughts. We need to take this further and develop wholesome, good thoughts. When we hear inspiring stories about people caring for those in need or witness this ourselves, we can learn to do the same, starting by bringing forth kind, altruistic thoughts. To serve as a bodhisattva, we need to be active in developing wholesome thoughts, encouraging ourselves and others to do good.

Deepening Our Wholesome Thoughts

As we go about our day to day life, a wholesome thought may come to us, but we often just let it flicker by without paying it much mind. Or, we may dismiss the wholesome thought, feeling that the good deed we were thinking of doing is not worthwhile. "What good can it do?" we say to ourselves. Actually, no good deed is too small to matter. Furthermore, developing goodness is an important part of our spiritual cultivation. The way to start practicing goodness is by doing it bit by bit—doing whatever we can think of, no matter how little it is.

In the beginning, we may only do the good deeds that we are interested in. But if we can learn to give whatever kind of help is needed and do whatever the present conditions require, gradually we will be able to practice goodness deeply and become capable of so much good.

Besides nurturing wholesome thoughts, we also need to expand them, from caring for our family, friends, and neighbors, to concern for even more people. Our heart needs to become bigger and bigger, to embrace people who are strangers to us or who live far away.

In the United States, there is a Tzu Chi volunteer living in Chicago who is a medical doctor and a member of the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA). His wife suffers from Parkinson's Disease, so in order to attend to her needs, he always stays by her side, never traveling. When TIMA is holding a free clinic service in the local community, he brings his wife with him so he can both participate and look after her. His wife also does what she can to help out at the free clinic event.

One time, Tzu Chi was invited to participate in a free clinic event in New Orleans to serve people impacted by Hurricane Katrina. If he were to go, he would be serving hundreds if not thousands of patients. Seeing how meaningful such a contribution would be, his wife encouraged him to go. He was hesitant, however, because the trip required him to leave his wife for six or seven days. He felt he ought to stay and look after her. "I'm happy to serve in free clinics, but this one is too far away. I'll just take part in the ones in our community, which are more feasible," he told his wife.

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His wife, however, insisted that he go. If he stayed at home to take care of her, he would only be helping one person, but if he went to the free clinic, he would be able to help many, many people. She told him it was a perfect opportunity for him to learn to expand his heart; she did not want him to limit his love to only her or the patients in their local community. She wanted him to expand the "small love" he had for his family into "Great Love" for all people in need, wherever they may be. In the end, they arranged for his wife's sister to come stay with her for a few days, so he could go serve in New Orleans without leaving his wife unattended.

Learning to have Great Love is what we practice in learning the bodhisattva way. It is not enough just to be a good person who doesn't do any bad deeds and does the occasional good deed. The bodhisattva way is about caring for all people in the world—not just people around us or those we know. Having this aspiration to care for all living beings helps us to deepen our wholesome thoughts and our love.

The Four Right Efforts in Daily Life

In our day to day life, we need to self-reflect and always be aware of the state of our mind. Together, the Four Right Efforts are the practice that can help us to both do this and to cultivate a wholesome mind. By practicing it, we can focus our thoughts in the right direction and keep them from going astray. With this, we will be able to progress steadily on the path of spiritual cultivation.

This is why the Four Right Efforts serve as a foundation in our spiritual practice. Let us all be mindful and practice them diligently in our daily life.

From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks
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