

Freeing Ourselves from Habitual Tendencies

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

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[[Master's Teachings](#)]

On the spiritual path, repentance is an essential practice. Nonetheless, most of us tend to repent only when we have done something that causes major negative consequences. It is then that we reflect on our actions and resolve not to do the same again.

But there is something else that requires repentance—our habits. While major mistakes may make us reflect and repent, we often don't pay much attention to our habitual tendencies; the more subtle ones even escape our notice. In fact, we may even think of all these as "just the way we are".

These habitual tendencies, however, are what cause us to make mistakes and do wrong things. That is why it is so important to become aware of them and transform them if we are to make progress in our spiritual growth and awakening. Our habitual tendencies were acquired over lifetimes. In each lifetime, we experienced afflictions, resentments, and joys. As a result, we gradually accumulated likes, dislikes, and various preferences. These form our habitual tendencies. Spiritual cultivation is about eliminating the unwholesome tendencies.

It isn't only the people of today who have unwholesome habitual tendencies. In his day, Shakyamuni Buddha also had disciples with unwholesome habitual tendencies which caused them to lose sight of spiritual practice. One such disciple was Sundarananda, the Buddha's half-brother.

Before Sundarananda became a monk, he was a prince and enjoyed a life of pleasure and comfort. His was an indulged existence, full of beautiful women, material luxuries, and worldly amusements.

After the Buddha attained enlightenment, he wished to share universal truths with his kinsmen, so that they would not continue to live blindly in pursuit of transient pleasures. He went back to his country to expound the Dharma, upon which many members of the royal family decided to join his monastic order. One of them was Sundarananda.

Though Sundarananda left the royal life to follow the Buddha in spiritual practice, the change in lifestyle did not bring an immediate change in mentality. Accustomed to a life of luxury and comfort, he still preferred fine things even after becoming a monk. While other monks wore robes patched together from coarse cloth, Sundarananda wore fine robes of quality fabric. His alms bowl was a very elegant one, and when going out for alms, he enjoyed being noticed among the other monks. He would proudly tell people he met that he was the Buddha's half-brother.

As this was not the way a monk should conduct himself, the other monks told the Buddha about Sundarananda's behavior. When the Buddha learned of this, he called Sundarananda to him and asked him if he truly behaved as the other monks described. Sundarananda admitted as

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much.

The Buddha told Sundarananda, "Now that you are a monk, you should not behave so. This is not the way of spiritual cultivation. You ought to repent deeply, and from now on change completely in your behavior. Wear a patched robe like the other monks. When going for alms, go to the houses of the poor. You take pride in being my half-brother; so you ought to practice even more diligently than others."

The Buddha then advised Sundarananda to consider that all people die one day, whether rich or poor. The body is then buried in a graveyard, eventually becoming nothing but a pile of bones. The Buddha told Sundarananda to go to a graveyard and meditate on this. "If you mindfully contemplate this," the Buddha said, "you will be able to purify your heart."

Sundarananda took the Buddha's words to heart and began to practice in this way, leaving the monastery to cultivate on his own. Sometime later, Sundarananda returned to the Buddha. Attired in a patched robe, his entire demeanor had completely changed.

During his time away from the monastery, Sundarananda had diligently practiced day and night, his mind focused on only one thing—spiritual cultivation. He no longer thought about women or his former life of pleasure and comfort. When he ate, he did so moderately, without being picky about his food. Practicing in this way, his heart gradually became more and more pure. Over time, Sundarananda completely overcame his desire.

With such perseverance of practice, Sundarananda became the most spiritually enlightened among the monks who had come from a privileged background. Though his life as a prince had caused him to develop conceit and desire for material pleasures, after practicing as the Buddha taught, he was able to eliminate these unwholesome habitual tendencies.

From Sundarananda we can see that so long as we are mindful in our cultivation, it is possible to free ourselves from our habitual tendencies.

Compiled into English by the Jing Si Abode English Editorial Team