

Fostering Meaningful Bonds through Study Groups

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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In a panel of Tzu Chi commissioners and Tzu Cheng Faith Corps officers from central Taiwan, Master Cheng Yen emphasized the importance of study groups. They are called "study groups" because everyone gathers together each week to study materials like the Lotus Sutra and share individual reflections on doing Tzu Chi work.

As Master Cheng Yen said, one must practice, experience and deeply contemplate the meaning of "spiritual cultivation". Some people misinterpret the term, thinking that the only means to spiritual cultivation is to be an ascetic and live in a temple doing chants every day. Others believe that spiritual cultivation is simply about cultivating one's own moral character, meditating to develop mindfulness and correcting one's own behavior.

In fact, this type of practice is not enough. True cultivation involves learning from others and teaching others as much as learning about oneself. This is why we say "We realize true enlightenment when we can enlighten ourselves and all beings."

If we have an excellent moral character when we are alone, does it guarantee we can stay the same when we are with others and live in harmony with other people? Just cultivating oneself but being unable to accept and inspire others indeed means that we are still far from true spiritual cultivation.

One can have proper conduct and live properly but still have conflicts with others because there are things one does or says that offend others. Only if someone cultivates himself to the point that he can live in harmony with others can he said to be cultivated. To practice staying in harmony with others and at the same time inspire others, we should really treasure the opportunity of group study sessions.

Community practice reveals progress in Path to Enlightenment



The reason behind paying respect to the Buddha during study sessions is to learn to express deep respect. To respect is to be polite. Without politeness, how can we express the religion's true meaning and values?

Furthermore, by participating in these study sessions, all involved have a chance to meet, share their experiences and express their feelings. The spirit of Buddhism is to "spread Great Love and nurture long-lasting relationships". This can only be realized in a community of people. Otherwise, if one remains in solitude, how can Great Love and long-lasting relationships to be nurtured?

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Besides, spiritual cultivation is about training the heart. If one avoids other people, one cannot do this training. Interpersonal exchange gives the opportunity for self-cultivation. Because of this, practicing together is an opportunity to learn to be tolerant and live in harmony with one another. "When we broaden our mind, our heart will not be distorted even if we hear something disagreeable. If it becomes distorted, that means it still has imperfections." Hence, the place for spiritual cultivation is living in the community. Only when we face the situations will we realize how much we have progressed on the Path to Enlightenment.

Master Cheng Yen said: "I vowed to promote Tzu Chi's four missions and many people responded because we have fostered great bonds in our past lives. Similarly, many people separated by thousands of miles can come together and feel like a family because we fostered good affinity with one another in the past. This is karma. Do not overlook it. Life comes and goes, depending on karma. One's fortune or misfortune is also decided by karma. If nothing ever goes smoothly, this is because we have not fostered good affinity with others. If we can foster good affinity with others, everything will be smooth. This is a karmic blessing."

"One must understand the importance of karma because karma follows us closely like our shadow. This is the truth."

"The different karmic bonds we fostered in past lives are shown as karmic fruits that allow us to meet certain people in this lifetime. Meanwhile any karmic fruit that is ripe in this lifetime will influence the type of karmic seed that we are going to plant. In this way, karma is everlasting. I hope that everyone will make use of this study group to strengthen rapport and build understanding with one another. It will be a waste to let this karmic bond pass. We are each other's companion on the same Dharma path, with the same determination and the same intentions. As we already have such a profound spiritual exchange, why not go even deeper and foster even stronger bonds? Everyone here is on the path to create blessings and cultivate wisdom in the society. Now we have a unique chance to interact and help one another on this Dharma path. This is something we should treasure and be grateful for!"

Article by Master Cheng Yen's teachings on June 5, 1997
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