

Cleaning Our Inner Hearts

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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[[Master's Teachings](#)]

In life, we often make mistakes. But when we do, we are reluctant to admit it, afraid that people will think negatively of us when they find out. We try to cover up our mistakes, and may even lie about them.

Sometimes, our mistakes affect other people, and we end up hurting them. But we often respond by not admitting it and denying our involvement or mistake. People therefore become angry with us. A knot of resentment forms in their hearts. But in our hearts too, a knot also forms. If we do not do anything to untie this knot, such as by apologizing or making amends, this knot will always remain in our hearts. At the end of this lifetime, we even bring it with us into our next life.

This inner knot brings us afflictions and suffering. But even more so, by not untying these knots and not being honest about our mistakes, we continue to act in the same way—repeating our mistakes, reinforcing our unwholesome tendencies, and accumulating ever more impurities in our hearts.

Our hearts are like a glass bottle containing dirty water. To clean a bottle, we have to pour out the dirty water first. To cleanse our hearts, we need to repent the wrongs we have done, internally and through action. We can do this by expressing sincere remorse to the people we have hurt. This helps to untie the knots in both their hearts and ours. Once we truly repent in such a way, the impurity is gone. We will also be less likely to make the same mistake again.

A glass bottle, once cleaned, can be used to store pure water. In the same way, after repenting and cleansing, our hearts can now take in the Dharma. By replacing the impurities inside with Dharma, we become a better person.

There is a story about Shakyamuni Buddha teaching this to his disciple, Rahula. Rahula was the Buddha's son, whom the Buddha had brought to the monastic community to become a novice. One of the Buddha's foremost disciples, Shariputra, was given the charge of teaching the young boy.

Little Rahula lived with the monks and learned the Buddha's teachings, but he was very naughty. When people came to the monastery to see the Buddha and asked him if the Buddha was available, he would give them the wrong answer. When the Buddha was at the monastery, he would tell people that the Buddha was away. When the Buddha was away, he would tell them they could find the Buddha in the monastery. It amused him to see people going to the monastery, only to find out the Buddha was not there. He had no real malicious intentions. He was just being naughty and thought it all great fun.

As the other monks learned about this, they tried to tell Rahula what he was doing was wrong.

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They asked him to stop, but being naughty, Rahula continued nonetheless. The other monks cared about him and were concerned that if he continued this habit of lying to people, it would become very problematic when he grew up. So, they told the Buddha.

Learning of this, the Buddha called Rahula to him. At the time, the Buddha had just returned to the monastery, so he told Rahula to bring him a basin of water to wash his feet. After washing his feet in the basin, the Buddha ask him, "Rahula, is the water in the basin drinkable?" Rahula replied, "No, this water is dirty and isn't drinkable." The Buddha then told Rahula to pour out the dirty water and bring him the empty basin. When Rahula did so, the Buddha suddenly kicked the basin, overturning it. Startled, Rahula became scared that he had done something wrong. The Buddha then told the boy to pour water into the basin. "But the basin is overturned. I cannot pour water in unless I turn it over," he said.

"You, Rahula, are like this overturned basin," said the Buddha. "You started out with a pure and clean heart, like the clean water in the basin. But why do you like to lie to people? When you tell lies, your heart becomes tainted and dirty, like the dirty water. For the basin to hold clean water again, you have to turn it over and clean it. You need to deeply repent, Rahula. Do you understand?" Hearing this, Rahula lowered his head and reflected upon his behavior. He realized how wrongly he had acted, and from then on, changed his ways.

In spiritual cultivation, we need to do the same. When we open our hearts to repent and change, we can clean out the impurities in our hearts and become a better person.

Compiled into English by the Jing Si Abode English Editorial Team