

## **Eye of the Storm: Inner Peace in a Terrifying World**

Dear Venerables, Ladies & Gentlemen, Good evening!

Our English interpreter for today, Dr Weiwu Tan, told me earlier that he was very nervous and frightened, because today's topic is "Eye of the Storm" and storm is a rather dangerous place.

Storm is an environment of stress, terror and instability in which we often find ourselves. How can we help ourselves, our family members, each and everyone around us, and possibly everyone in this world to find the calm within the eye of the storm?

### **1. Religious Belief Brings Peace**

Ever since the incident of September 11, many people have been feeling very insecure. Yet is it only today, in these times and environment that there is fear, whereas the past was seen as being much more peaceful? Traditionally, every year Buddhists in China would pray, "May the Nation prosper and the people enjoy peace, May there be timely wind and rain". In other words, they pray for peace in the country and for its people to live a comfortable and happy life; wind will blow when wind is needed and rain will fall when rain is needed. However, be it in China or elsewhere in the world, there has never been an extended era without wars, natural disasters or human atrocities. Looking at history, almost every year there has been wars of varying magnitude, disasters in various parts of the world, and this year we even had a SARS epidemic. Remembering that more than ten years ago, people all over the world were terrified of AIDS, and even earlier than that, there was the discovery of cancer, with a very high mortality rate. Until now, the mortality rate due to high blood pressure and heart attack is still high, and added to these are the continuous incidents of car accidents, air and sea disasters.

During Christmas Eve every year, I have many Christian friends who pray and thank God for bringing peace to mankind. On the other hand, Buddhists often pray to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas for blessings and peace. Some people doubt the usefulness of religious beliefs, thinking that religion is a form of superstition, because those without peace are still not peaceful (even with their prayers). We have many religious leaders here today and regardless of whether you are Christian or Buddhist, may I ask, "Is it useful to pray for peace?"

Many of you have responded yes.

By praying with sincerity, having faith in the Buddha or God, and your belief that peace is attainable, you will no longer feel terrified and will indeed have peace. Moreover, after praying, not only will you feel peaceful, you will also affect the people around yourself. This is due to the strength of faith influencing others so that they will cease to be restless.

Once there was a man who was to attend a job interview. He was very nervous and came to me for help since only one out of ten candidates will be selected. I comforted him by saying, “Not only will I pray for you and bless you, I will also pray to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva to bless you so that you will pass the interview and get the job.” Due to his trust in me as well as his belief that Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva will bless him, and therefore good fortune will surely come, he prepared himself well and was not as nervous at the written test and the interview. It was a pleasant surprise when he got the job offer.

People live in an insecure environment. If there is religious belief, regardless of the religion, as long as one prays, peace is possible. Even though one may not gain absolute peace, one will still be more at peace compared to those who have no religious belief and do not pray. This is because without prayer and religious belief, when one is confronted with a terrifying situation, one will become frantic, just like a fly with its eyes covered by paste, unable to see anything, flies aimlessly, hitting against the wall and eventually killing itself. In a frantic state, there is no clarity in the mind. Even if the situation weren't really that dangerous, due to bewilderment and fear, it would become more dangerous. Therefore, if one is in an extremely dangerous situation, with prayer and faith, one's mind will be more calm and at peace. Then one will be able to find the means of survival and a way out; one will see hope and eventually get oneself out of danger.

In actual fact, Chan is a very simple matter. Buddhism or Chan can help us change from a confused state of mind into a settled state of mind and transform a settled state of mind into a mind of wisdom. In our living environment, unless one shuts oneself out and leads a solitary life, certain situations will arise as there will always be interaction amongst people and between people and the environment. Even if one shuts the door and lives by oneself, a fire may break out next door and one's house may also be burnt, or even torrential rain may cause flooding to one's residence. Chan practice is a useful method for not being affected by an emergency situation which may cause one to feel terrified and fearful of impending danger.

We all hope for peace. In fact if there is inner peace, then there will be external peace. If there is no inner peace, the body will not be healthy. In a frantic situation, one's words or deeds may cause problems for oneself as well as hassles to others, thereby easily creating a dangerous situation. If there is inner peace, then whatever needs to be done will be done, whatever needs to be dealt with will be dealt with. This is (aptly described by the Chinese proverb) “when there are invading troops, a general is sent to fight them; when there is a flood, the earth is used to block it”. That way danger will lessen and security will naturally increase. In a battle field the soldier who is more afraid of death will die quicker because in a frantic state, not knowing how to avoid the enemy, the soldier is liable to expose himself to the gunfire of the enemy without realising it. If the mind is settled and calm, the chances of survival in a battlefield will be comparatively higher.

## **2. React with Wisdom**

Now I'm going to teach a simple method of calming the mind, that of direct wisdom illustrated by the Sixth Chan Patriarch, Master Hui Neng as the method of sudden

enlightenment. That is, when facing any situation, deal with it by “do not think of wholesomeness, do not think of unwholesomeness”, in other words, do not think of it as good or not good. By facing whatever has happened without discriminating whether it is beneficial to the self or not, dangerous or safe, then at that very moment the mind will be calm: this is called wisdom.

Recently, a disciple in Taiwan rang me and said, “Master, I heard bad news, very unfavourable to you. It relates to a letter or an article that you wrote when you were young. Now this person wants to publish a book and it will be included in the book. This will cause you great harm. Should you send someone to plead him not to publish it?” I replied, “What was done has been done, the truth is that I have written it. If someone asked me why was it written in such a way, the answer is simple - I was ignorant then!” I do not consider how much loss or damage it will cause me, but rather I would admit that it was due to ignorance that I committed such an act at the time. As long as I don’t do it anymore, it would be fine. Can such an attitude be considered as wisdom?

When an emergency arises, simply face it, accept it and use available resources to deal with it, and then there will be no feeling of terror. If I have to be held responsible and because of that letter I have to be sentenced, then I will face it. Given my old age, I have not yet had the experience of being put in jail, it may not be a bad thing to give it a try! If the crime deserves beheading or being shot, I’m already 74 years old, I would die with no regrets. Of course, when a crisis appears, one must try all possible means to minimize the harm. This entails the application of wisdom. Simply being terrified and trying to avoid it are of no use, one must face it, accept it and use wisdom to deal with it. If the matter has been dealt with and still cannot be resolved, then accepting reality with calmness is the same as having dealt with it. A Taiwanese business entrepreneur who used to have assets worth over ten billion dollars, recently found he had more liabilities than assets as a number of his companies suddenly incurred losses. I asked him what he was going to do about his liabilities. He said, “Shifu, you told me to face it, accept it, deal with it, and if there is no way of dealing with it, just let it go. So I actually feel relieved now.” Of course, one does not need to have liabilities over assets to be considered as possessing wisdom. When there is no other way, to let go is the only way that one can continue living with courage.

### **3. Mindfulness of the Breath**

If one lacks wisdom in dealing with a crisis, when faced with confusion and fear, there are still two methods of Chan practice that one can use. The first is related to religious belief that we mentioned previously, that one can recite the name of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and Amitabha Buddha, or one can experience each inhalation and exhalation of the breath through the nostril. Usually in a frantic state, breathing will hasten and the heart will palpitate; the frantic state of the mind and hastened breathing are inter-related. Therefore, concentrate on feeling each inhalation and exhalation, and tell yourself: Breathing is my life and when there is breathing it means I’m still alive. Breathing is most precious, as for whatever crisis there may be, it will be dealt with after enjoying this breath. Otherwise, till death the feeling of breathing is still not known; when alive, the enjoyment of breathing has never been experienced. What a pity! So, let’s enjoy breathing for a moment. When inhaling, feel the coolness, and when exhaling, the warmth. Breathing is so wonderful! Learn to

enjoy breathing, experience breathing, then the mind will certainly calm down. After experiencing breathing a few times, the terrifying feeling will no longer be there, and one can face the situation and deal with it with a calm and sober mind. If the time is not that pressing, the brain and body can also be relaxed. The brain is relaxed mainly by relaxing the eye balls, after closing and relaxing the eyes, the brain will then be relaxed and the body muscles will also be relaxed. In such a relaxing state, the analytical power of the brain will be much clearer.

There was a layman whose son was involved in a car accident. The whole family was extremely worried, yet he went to do meditation. The family members scolded him, “The child had a car accident, and yet you sit there and meditate like a dead person”. He sat for a couple of minutes, after letting his mind calm down, he knew how to get his son out of such a dangerous situation. He made the right calls, contacted the right persons, found the right doctor, made the best decisions and saved the life of his son. This is staying calm in times of danger. To meditate and rest is actually calming down and clearing the mind and knowing what needs to be done.

#### **4. Thinking from a contrary perspective, acting in accordance with the flow of events**

In addition, the concept of “thinking from a contrary perspective, acting in accordance with the flow of events” can be applied to help ourselves.

“Thinking from a contrary perspective” is to think of a crisis as a turning point. When faced with a crisis, if one can deal with it wisely then such a crisis becomes an opportunity for us to grow. Not only will our wisdom increase; it will even provide an opportunity to increase our inner strength. Not having the courage to accept a crisis is the same as not being willing to be polished and tested. In such a case it will be difficult for us to grow and be strong. Have you heard of how lineage masters of Chan in China trained their students by scolding and hitting them with a wooden stick? Hence, there is the saying in Chan Tradition that it is from the tip of the Chan stick (also called incense board) that lineage masters are produced. If the Chan stick was well struck onto those who could bear it and those who should receive it, such striking will easily lead to enlightenment. Therefore, Chan Masters usually gained enlightenment through innumerable ordeals and hardships, rarely did they achieve enlightenment in ordinary situations.

“Acting in accordance with the flow of events” means to always look at the causes and conditions of everything. Since the conditions possessed by an individual are very limited as causal factors, external supporting conditions are needed. For instance, if many people need the successful completion of a task, then I will participate, give my best, contribute and make an effort to help achieving it. Acting in accordance with the flow of events does not mean a free ride on a boat. It means when many people need to take a boat but there is no boat, we take the initiative to encourage others to raise funds to buy a boat, or appeal to them to build a boat together and work actively towards realising this goal. “Acting in accordance with the flow of events” is to set sail following the direction of the wind and the flow of the water, and as a result, things can be accomplished with much less effort. It is the same when faced with a

crisis by thinking from a contrary perspective and acting in accordance with the flow of events, a crisis can become a turning point.

For example, between April and May this year, Taiwan was affected by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic which posed a huge crisis for a terrified community. However, for our organization, Dharma Drum Mountain, it provided a good opportunity to care for the society. Since everyone was afraid and terrified, I made this appeal, “At this time, service must be provided to those who are terrified of SARS and those who have contracted SARS. Being terrified is of no use. We must first consult medical experts on how to protect those who will be serving SARS patients, so that we are at least 90% confident that they will be well protected. Then our effort will be useful.” After equipping themselves with the necessary protective gear and precautionary measures, the emergency relief workers from Dharma Drum Mountain went to the affected areas to provide their services. None of our people contracted SARS, and the whole community was full of praise for Dharma Drum Mountain. This can also be taken as an example of “Thinking from a contrary perspective, acting in accordance with the flow of events”.

A lecture by Master Sheng Yen at the University of Columbia, Manhattan, New York, USA on 14 June, 2003, compiled by Yao Shi Zhuang