

Topic: Repenting for Karmic Faults

Background	1
Definition of Repentance	2
Repentance in Early Buddhism	2
The Hindrance of Regret	3
Repenting for Karmic Hindrances	3
Hindrances from Karmic Forces	3
Karmic Hindrance: Technical Meaning	4
Mahāyāna Repentance Teachings	4
Repenting to the Buddha or Monastics	4
Repenting to the Buddhas of the Ten Directions	5
Another Method to Repent for Past Deeds	5
Evolving Meaning of Repentance	6
Summary	6

Background

Understanding repentance from the Buddhist perspective requires understanding of:

- background information regarding the development of repentance practices in Buddhism and definitions of key concepts.
- the issue of ending cyclic existence and how this is linked to repentance.
- repentance practices.

In Early Buddhism (see table below), repentance was related to the training of morality. By the time of Mahāyāna Buddhism, “repentance for unwholesome karma” became various common practices that were observed regularly, even daily. Almost all of the Mahāyāna sūtras that emphasized faith would talk about eliminating the major karma of cyclic existence when discussing the practice of recollecting the buddhas.

Ven. Yinshun's Categorization of Indian Buddhism (5 th century BCE to 12 th century CE)		
Three Periods	Five Periods	Comments
Early Buddhism 5 th -1 st century BCE (Śrāvakayāna practice was dominant)	Original Buddhism	From Buddha's enlightenment to around 100 years after Buddha's passing.
	Sectarian Buddhism	Various Buddhist schools emerged as views on precepts/doctrines diverged.
Mahāyāna Buddhism 1 st century BCE-7 th century CE (Bodhisattva practice was popular)	Early Mahāyāna	Emergence of Mahāyāna teachings, which emphasized emptiness
	Later Mahāyāna (Middle Mahāyāna)	Mahāyāna teachings that emphasized consciousness only. Some call this period Middle Mahāyāna.
Esoteric Buddhism 7 th - 12 th century CE (Vajrayana practice was popular)	Esoteric Buddhism (Later Mahāyāna)	Merger with Brahmanic practices. Some call this period Later Mahāyāna.

Definition of Repentance

The Chinese word for repentance is 懺悔 (chàn huǐ).

懺 Chàn is the transcription of the Sanskrit word kṣama, which means “tolerance”. When someone has made a mistake, he or she asks the victim, whether an individual or group, for forgiveness and tolerance. This is the original and primary meaning of 懺 chàn.

悔 Huǐ is the translation of the Sanskrit word deśanā, which means “confession”. Having made a mistake, one should admit, confess and clearly state what errors or bad deeds they made. This is the meaning of 悔 huǐ.

In the *Samantabhadra Bodhisattva Sūtra* it says, “one should confess to the mistakes they have made and seek the victims' tolerance and forgiveness.”

Note: The Chinese word 悔 huǐ is also used to translate the Sanskrit word kaukr̥tya, which means to have regret for something one has done. There is wholesome and unwholesome regret. Any regret will unsettle the mind and obstruct meditation practices.

Repentance in Early Buddhism

“Monastic repentance” is the practice of repentance that monastics undertake. These practices have set procedures corresponding to the severity of the breach of monastic rules and so on. The Buddha used the Dharma to unite the monastics, that is, to bring renunciants together as a community and allow them to live a harmonious, happy and pure communal lifestyle. Here, the word Dharma includes doctrinal principle, truth, rules etc., but the focus from a practical sense is on the monastic code.

In Early Buddhism repentance helped practitioners to further their practice. If a monastic breaks the precepts, depending on the severity, monastic repentance may or may not be possible. Some severe breaches cannot be repented for, such as killing a human. Under such severe cases, the saṃgha member must disrobe and leave the community, this is similar to the death penalty. For the not so serious breaches of the rules, saṃgha members can follow the monastic repentance procedures and become rehabilitated. These procedures aim to provide opportunities for spiritual practitioners to recognise their faults and change for the better through repentance. The original intent of repentance in Early Buddhism is to maintain the purity of each practitioner and the saṃgha as a whole. This also reflects the true meaning of the Buddha-dharma, which is primarily to benefit humans in this world.

The Hindrance of Regret

Spiritual practitioners, both monastics and householders/lay devotees, are not perfect. We can and will make mistakes. When we make a mistake, we know deep down inside we have faults and we have regret towards those bad actions or thoughts etc. This regret will increase as time goes by and make it harder for us to establish peace in our mind and lives. This unease and inability to be at peace is a very real hindrance to our practice. Hence, the Buddha taught the practice of repentance. If we undertake repentance properly, sincerely and willingly, then it can help us to eliminate the mental hindrance of regret and restore peace and happiness. This is how repentance helps us progress in our spiritual practice.

Repenting for Karmic Hindrances

When we make mistakes or break the precepts, we should not hide it. Concealing our faults will bring disturbance to our mind and cause unease, which will hinder our spiritual practice and progression. When we admit and confess to our faults and seek forgiveness from others, this is repentance and it is a method to remove the hindrance of the unease in our minds. However, repentance does not delete the karmic force that our action created. Repentance helps us to remove the unease and guilt that comes with hiding our faults from others.

Hindrances from Karmic Forces

Many of the actions we carry out will create a karmic force. There are some deeds that are so severe that the karmic force created is referred to as a

hindrance. Three hindrances are technical terms: hindrances from defilements (*klesāvaraṇa*), hindrances from karma (*karmāvaraṇa*), and hindrances from results (*vipākāvaraṇa*). If one has any of these three hindrances, then although one hears the righteous Dharma and practices the spiritual path, one is unable to awaken to the truth and be free from defilements to attain liberation in this life.

Karmic Hindrance: Technical Meaning

In Early Buddhism, karmic hindrances refer to the five faults that bring the perpetrator immediate results (*ānantarya*), which is commonly referred to as the five extreme faults. The five extreme faults are (1) to kill one's own mother, (2) to kill one's own father, (3) to kill an arhat, (4) to create a schism in a harmonious saṃgha, and (5) to cause the Buddha to bleed out of evil intentions. Having committed any one of these extreme karma or faults in this life, upon death one cannot avoid the certainty of immediate rebirth in the most miserable hells, and therefore they are called the karmas that bring people immediate results.

Mahāyāna Repentance Teachings

Within the Mahāyāna teachings there is a group of texts that emphasize wisdom, such as the prajñā texts and consciousness-only texts. There is also another group of text that emphasize faith, and in these texts “repenting for karmic hindrances” has become a method of practice on the Buddha path. The repentance practice in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism does not only repent for the faults committed in this present life but also for the unwholesome karma committed in past lives since beginningless time.

Repenting to the Buddha or Monastics

When one becomes a Buddhist and vows to take refuge and uphold the five precepts, it is supposed to be a will that continues for the rest of this life. However, we are human and so may still make mistakes when our afflictions are too strong. In the saṃgha, we have formal repentance procedures. Lay Buddhist repentance is slightly different. Repentance for lay devotees do not really vary depending on the type of mistake. When the Buddha was alive, if a lay Buddhist wanted to repent, they would do so in front of the Buddha. Now-a-days, repentance by lay Buddhists can be performed in front of fully ordained saṃgha members. Repentance is incorporated into the procedure of taking refuge and the precepts. This is most obvious when taking the eight precepts.

Repenting to the Buddhas of the Ten Directions

The *Sūtra on the Dharma Mirror* says,

At a time when there is no buddha and no dharma teacher and one has no chance to meet the noble monastics, one should pay respects to all the buddhas of the ten directions [as repentance].

We can repent in front of the buddhas of the ten directions, by openly confessing our faults using these verses from *Verses on the Aspiration of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva*:

*For all the unwholesome karma I have already committed,
All arising from greed, hatred and ignorance,
All born out through bodily actions, language and thoughts,
I [now] confess to all [these faults].*

*With all the merits I have accumulated,
From paying respects, making offerings and confessing my faults [to the buddhas],
From appreciative joy in others' merits and requesting [dharma teachings],
All [these merits] I dedicate to [all beings for the attainment of unsurpassed] bodhi.*

Another Method to Repent for Past Deeds

In the *Sūtra on Repentance Taught for Śāriputra*, repentance is to confess to the buddhas of the ten directions. One first states their faults, which arise from greed, hatred and ignorance. Also, one states their ignorance of the Buddha, Dharma and saṃgha, as well as what was good and bad. Next, one openly confesses to the unwholesome karmas committed since beginningless time. The unwholesome karmas include:

1. Defaming the righteous Dharma and committing the five extreme faults.
2. Committing the ten unwholesome deeds, either committing them personally, directing others to commit them or delight in seeing others commit them.
3. Scolding, defaming, aggravating sentient beings, engaging in deceptive trade practices, as well as being unfilial to one's own parents.
4. Stealing objects from a stupa, stealing from the saṃgha, destroying Buddhist scriptures and regulations, disregarding or contravening a master and ācārya's (spiritual teacher) teachings.
5. Insulting noble practitioners of the three vehicles, verbally abusing a buddha with harmful intentions, and declaring the true teachings as false and that false teachings are true, which falls into the grave fault of defaming the righteous Dharma.

Repentance has an important meaning, which is, one hopes to “purify their karmic hindrances,” and “hopes that [the results] from past faults can be born out leniently in this present life.” Also, one hopes that in future they will not be reborn in the three evil destinies or into the eight difficulties and instead is able to be reborn in the human (or heavenly) realm and continue to learn and practice the Buddha’s teachings. The eight difficulties are (1) born in the hells; (2) born as a hungry ghost; (3) born as an animal; (4) born in the longevity heavens; (5) born in Uttarakuru (the northern continent where there is too much joy); (6) born deaf, blind or dumb; (7) having heretical beliefs; (8) born in a time with no buddha or dharma.

Evolving Meaning of Repentance

In Early Buddhism, the way to purify oneself of defilements in the mind and remove unwholesome karma relied on having faith in the Triple Gem, upholding the precepts (*poṣadha*), performing acts of generosity, cultivating concentration and so on. The intention of repentance was for Buddhist to repent for any unwholesome deeds created in this present life.

Repentance in the easy path of Mahāyāna Buddhism was for the unwholesome karma committed since beginningless time and there is the practice of repenting many times a day. This practice is similar to the purified form of a superstitious worldly practice of bathing in holy water.

Summary

Repentance is an important practice in Buddhism. The word repentance means to seek forgiveness and tolerance from others and to openly confess to one’s mistakes. Originally it was meant to help the saṃgha members overcome hindrances when they made a mistake in this life.

As the teachings on karma developed, Mahāyāna Buddhism also developed various practices of repentance to overcome hindrances from mistakes made in this life and also for the karmic hindrances we may have accumulated from endless past lives.

Repentance is not just saying sorry. Apart from admitting to the fault, it also requires us to undertake good deeds, uphold the precepts and so on. Therefore, repentance has the ceremonial aspect of seeking forgiveness and confessing, and it also has the ongoing aspect of changing our bad ways.