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## *Editor's Note*

**T**his booklet is a dialogue between Master Sheng Yen and Jet Li on the topic of ignorance. The dialogue was conducted in September 2003 in Taipei City. It was moderated by Ms. Yeh Shushan, a television celebrity in Taiwan.

"Wu Ming," literally translated as "No Name," is the character played by Jet Li in the Hollywood film *Hero* (2002). The Chinese words also mean "not famous." Moreover, a homophone to "wu ming" is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit word "avidya" or "ignorance." In Buddhism, ignorance refers to the vexations that veil our intrinsic wisdom and compassion. Thus the title of this booklet is a play on the name of Jet Li's character in the film, notions of fame, and Buddhist ideas of ignorance and spiritual practice.

## ***Be Content, Be Grateful, and Be Liberated from Fame and Riches***

Ms. Yeh Shushan (mediator):

Let's invite Master Sheng Yen to explain the meanings of "Wu Ming" and "ignorance."

Master Sheng Yen (Master):

"Wu Ming" means "no name." We are born without names. Names and titles are false labels, symbols that don't necessarily represent who we are. So, to pursue fame is indeed foolish. If, however, everyone were called "Wu Ming" it would be very troublesome. Therefore we still need names, but we should think of them as false phenomena, as illusions.

"Wu ming" also means "ignorance," which refers to vexations. Lack of wisdom and compassion leads us to encase ourselves in vexations, causing harm to ourselves and others.

Mediator:

Jet, you are obviously a famous person, can you talk about your experience of fame?

Jet Li (Li):

Since I was little, my teachers and coaches have been saying, "You have to be famous, you have to work hard to become a champion." Later when I was in

the film industry, I found that I still had to work hard to be successful. So when I was young, the only goal that I strove for was to be successful and famous.

As I became older, I began to reflect on things. Indeed, as the Master has mentioned, fame is only a symbol. If we get tied down by this symbol and submerge ourselves in it, then we will be troubled by this for the rest of our lives. In particular for people like us in the entertainment industry, due to the attention of the media and the support of fans, one is unknowingly lifted to a very high social status and it is not easy to come down, to face failure and the scrutiny of the media.

After practicing Buddhism, it became very clear to me that there are always highs and lows in one's journey through life and that I should look at this impermanence with a relaxed attitude. Therefore, I happily wait for and face failure. This is not being passive or pessimistic. I am just not concerned with or attached to the result.

I always tell my friends that I am oscillating between heaven and hell all the time. Recently, for example, I went to Japan to promote a film. Being a movie star I was greeted with much hospitality. Yet when I returned to Shanghai, nobody came to receive

us at the airport. I just took a cab home with my wife and child. To me, I didn't feel there was any difference or that I was inconvenienced, I was happy all the same. This is the wisdom and strength that Buddhism has given me.

After I turned forty, my health and spirit was not the same as when I was twenty. I have come to fully appreciate the meaning of "a human existence and a healthy body is precious and rare." Now that I have financial stability, I have decided to devote more time to practice and spread the Dharma.

Master:

I would like to ask Jet Li a question. You just mentioned that you have financial stability so you will devote more time to spread the Dharma and study Buddhism. A lot of young people however have no fame and wealth. Should they still study Buddhism?

Li:

Growing up, teachers and parents kept telling us that only by studying hard would we become knowledgeable and have a promising future. They often use these values to judge your worth. As a result we are always comparing ourselves to others and blaming everyone and everything else for our problems. For instance, we may blame our parents for

not being wealthy enough or for not giving us the looks of a movie star.

The reality is that there is no intrinsic value to an object in itself. It is through labeling an object that we give it a value. Some people are happy with a few thousand dollars and others are still not happy with a few million. So what is true value? The important thing is how you value yourself in your mind.

When one is content within oneself, one is happy, and such happiness cannot be replaced by material things as it comes from within one's mind. If however I were not content, I would suffer until the day I die, complaining about how I didn't have fame, wealth and power. So when it comes to status and fame, we must use Buddhist wisdom to understand life values.

Master:

Jet Li made a very important point which is that we do not live for the sake of fame and wealth. One's happiness is not derived from how famous or wealthy one is but from contentment within one's mind. Contentment means one is happy regardless of what and how much one possesses, or even if one has no possessions. The important thing is to uplift one's own character. There is no need for Buddhists to reject fame and wealth, but without the Dharma, one will suffer

regardless of whether one is wealthy or not.

I lead a happy life. When I feel helpless or when I meet difficulty, I do not have the mindset that I am better or worse than others. I do not compare myself to others nor do I compare my present situation with my past or future. Instead I think to myself, "It's not that bad-I am still alive, I am still breathing." I also tell myself, "Things will sort themselves out. All things must pass."

As I have often said, when faced with a problem, just "face it, accept it, deal with it, and let go of it." The past is gone, the future has yet to come. I will do my best in whatever I can. If I can solve it, I'll do it. If I can't, I'll just accept it. This is how I approach life, therefore I am always happy.

Mediator:

We all know that we ought to be content and grateful and should live in the moment, but often we feel incapable of doing so, even though we may want to. Could you give us some concrete suggestions for practice?

Master:

Most people think practicing the Dharma means chanting the Buddha's name, reciting mantras, prostrating, discussing the Dharma and so on. Actually,

we only have to keep our minds upright without wavering, remain without greed and desire, and live consciously in the present moment. Then whatever we do is practicing the Dharma!

That's why practice is not just about external form, it is about experiencing with our minds. When the mind is clear and stable, behavior will not go astray. Not only will we be happy, others will also feel safe and secure. This is practice. If you help your wife and children be happy, you'll also be happy. This is also practice.

The mind must be clear and stable and not follow the changing external environment. That is to say, when a situation arises, your mind shouldn't be swayed immediately by your surroundings. The simplest method is to chant the Buddha's name or to recite a mantra. If however we use Chan, the most basic method is to observe the mind and the feelings of the body, such as the breath. When observing the breath, one should focus on the feeling of each breath as it passes in and out of the nostrils. When observing the mind, one should observe one's own sensations. One only needs to concentrate on one's bodily sensations and sensory input, and the mind will become settled.

Li:

Basically, I also practice Chan in everyday life. I



recite mantras or chant the Buddha's name when I am waiting at work, travelling on the plane or sitting in the car. This way, the same one hour passes by differently. By simply waiting, time seems to pass very slowly. However, by reciting mantras or chanting the Buddha's name, time passes very quickly. This is because the mind is calm and stable.

Sometimes looking at people, I can see all the emotions brought about by impermanence written on their faces. Impermanence is not only theory written in Buddhist scriptures. It's just that we have separated the study of Buddhism from our daily lives.

In reality, living is a form of practice and practice is a form of living. Buddhism is not separate from the world. One can find bits of Buddhist teachings in everyday life-it just depends on how you experience day-to-day life. Phenomena themselves do not change, they do not become better or worse. It is only one's emotions that waver between good and bad.

## ***Living in the Moment; Walking the Bodhisattva Path***

Mediator:

Although you come from different fields—one religion and one martial arts—you both need extraordinary determination to train and both of you have undergone long periods of training. Can you share some of your experiences with us?

Master:

I never had any training as such. Rather, I've remained determined not to give up on my initial ambition. Initial ambition means one's initial direction and goal in life.

My goal in life was set when I became a monk at fourteen. I have only one aim and that is to perform my duty as a monk properly. I never planned what sort of a monk I would become.

Everyone has their own blessings and karma. Part of it is blessings from past lives and part of it is the effort of one's present life in combination with surroundings and conditions. We cannot say right from the start that we expect ourselves to be able to reach this or do that. We should only think about how to face and deal with difficult situations such as hardships and temptations

of fame and riches. As a monk, I have to be wary of the temptations from the opposite sex. I see such temptations as a red warning sign, not to approach any further. Persistence is important.

Li:

I'm always changing. When I started practicing martial arts at the age of eight, I didn't understand what it was all about. My teacher said I was talented so I went and trained. The adults wanted me to win the championship, so I tried my best to become a champion. Afterwards, I found that the championship brought money and with money I could support my family, so I was happy.

When I started to make movies, I felt that martial arts were a part of the culture of China. Whatever one's religion, political ideals or skin color, everyone wants to be healthy, so I wanted to introduce martial arts to the world through my movies.

Upon reflection, I finally realized that merely exercising and building up the body could be harmful if we did not pay attention to solving the problems and vexations within our minds. I now believe that a beautiful mind is the most important thing. If you had a healthy mind and a notion of contentment, then your body, your family and society would all benefit.

Mediator:

Can you tell us more about the breakthroughs and experiences you had going from studying martial arts to studying Buddhism?

Li:

I was very young when I became the martial arts "All-Around" Champion in China. I had always thought to myself, "Martial arts have already been around for thousands of years, how can I become well-rounded?" So I went to different coaches to learn different kinds of martial arts. Every coach wanted me to learn from them for my entire life. Then I thought if I really had to learn everything, it would take me several lifetimes and even so it would be difficult. Therefore, I decided not to look for coaches anymore. I began to search within myself and tried to understand the theory of martial arts.

When talking about martial arts we naturally talk about yin and yang. To put it simply, yin and yang are opposites in our world. Then I applied the theory of yin and yang to my daily life and I began to grasp some basic understanding of the conflicts and vexations of mankind. So, before learning about Buddhism, I already knew how to look at things from other people's points of view. I became more open-minded, and this

has had a great influence on my life.

The major breakthrough was after I became a Buddhist. In 1997 I considered giving up acting to concentrate on practice and in-depth study of Buddhism. However, my master insisted that I should not retire. He hoped that I would continue to make movies and believed I had a great responsibility. I didn't know what that responsibility was. After studying Buddhism for five years and visiting many great masters, I honestly feel that my responsibility was to share my joy in the Dharma with others.

I have a happy family. As for my career, I can see clearly that upon the completion of every movie, it is always re-evaluated. Maybe it's good, maybe it's bad, or maybe it's just OK. I do not concern myself with the result but rather the process of movie making, so I can face the world happily every day. Buddhism has made a big change in my life.

Master:

A common misunderstanding of Buddhist practice is that one must take up monastic life, engage in rituals, and do sitting meditation all day long. Of course these are forms of practice, but in practice there is the path of liberation and the path of the bodhisattva.

The path of liberation refers to a practice that brings

an end to suffering and breaks free from worldly vexations. Such practice normally takes a long time in a secluded environment.

The bodhisattva path centers on generating the bodhi-mind, the altruistic intention to benefit sentient beings and achieve buddhahood. Practicing it with great compassion seems rather difficult because one has to control oneself when faced with temptations, stimulation, and confusion within the wider environment. To not be influenced by one's surroundings and instead influence one's surroundings is no easy task.

Take Jet Li for example. His master hopes that he will continue with his career. This can be thought of as taking up the bodhisattva path. The purpose of working in the movie industry is not for fame or wealth, but to tell others through one's influence that Buddhadharma can help them.

Buddhism is very good but it needs someone to spread it. Spreading Buddhadharma means setting an example by the way one conducts oneself. It is through our interactions with others that they understand the way we conduct our lives and the way we think. This is the best way to influence others, hence the proper way to spread the Dharma.

There aren't many Buddhists in mainland China at present. Jet Li is very influential in Asia, especially among the various Chinese communities. When Westerners watch his movies and know that he is a Buddhist, they will also be influenced. So, Jet, your task is to spread the Dharma to benefit others in the world.

Mediator:

At the same age of 40, Master Sheng Yen also made a major decision. Master, will you please share with us the decision you made and what your thoughts were at the time?

Master:

When I was thirty-nine I decided to further my studies in Japan. After I arrived I was prepared to return to Taiwan instantaneously as I did not have any financial support and could not work as a layman. After struggling for over a year, at the age of forty I completed my Masters Degree and was ready to return to Taiwan.

However, my adviser encouraged me, saying, "In the past, the Japanese had to cope with much hardship in seeking the Dharma from China. Now there are very few qualified monks in China so you must complete your study before you return. This way Chinese

Buddhism can be revived. If you continue your studies you will complete your Ph.D. in a short time. Don't worry about money or your livelihood. If there is absolutely no other way, I will accompany you to seek alms."

What he said still affects me deeply to this day. He said that in seeking food and shelter there is no bodhi-mind, but in cultivating bodhi-mind you will not have to worry about food and shelter.

Mediator:

The past is already gone and the future has yet to come. The present moment is most important. Jet, what is the one thing that you would like to do most at present?

Li:

The heroes of the past, as depicted in Chinese martial art films, knew everything and were capable of doing anything. They even used violence to counter violence. But I think a real hero should use non-violent methods to counter violence. This is a concept that I learned from Buddhism, and I've always wanted to express it in film. I know it is very difficult to implement such a concept in our society. In Buddhism there is a saying, "Chanting the Buddha's name with one mind," which can also be interpreted as "Doing



things with one mind." This is a reminder to us that whenever we are faced with a situation, we focus on what we're doing, with no need to contemplate the result. So I can only try my best and cannot expect every movie I make to express Buddhist concepts. I will make use of the opportunities I have in different parts of the world, at different events and media interviews to share with others how Buddhism has affected me.

Mediator:

Before we close, will you please tell the audience what you would like to say to them most?

Li:

Different people have different religious beliefs. I believe regardless of whether or not you are a Buddhist or even if you have no religious beliefs at all, the most important thing is to avoid doing evil deeds and to do good deeds. I think this is applicable in any society.

Master:

The most important thing in this talk today was hearing how Jet learned Buddhism, and how what he has learned has benefitted him. Learning Buddhism is not taking on superstitious beliefs, but learning ideas and methods to help ourselves and others. Helping oneself is called practice; helping others is called

spreading the Dharma. We are grateful to Jet Li for sharing his experiences with us, which has allowed us to approach Buddhism from a different angle and to find out what Buddhism is really about. This has been a very valuable and meaningful dialogue. Thank you.

## *Questions from the Audience*

Q:

What is the difference between a famous teacher and a great teacher? From the Mahayana perspective, is it that other than being famous, the person must have wisdom in order to provide more assistance to living beings?

Li:

From a Buddhist perspective, a teacher is very, very important. However, a famous teacher is just a label. In Buddhism, there are no such titles for famous teachers or men of great virtue; rather what is important is the heart to heart transmission between teacher and disciple. There is no need to be attached to the concept of a famous teacher, because he will not make you become a Buddha, he can only show you the spiritual path. We have to rely on our own effort to practice.

Take me for example: I came to see Master Sheng Yen because I had practiced for five years, and I needed to seek assistance from a wise teacher to tell me if I was following the right path. The Master can give me guidance and point out the things that I have done

correctly, as well as areas where I need to take note or make changes.

**Master:**

Seeking out famous or great teachers is a form of attachment. Do not believe that a famous person must be a brilliant person, nor believe that a brilliant person must be famous. Without karmic affinity, the idea that our actions bring about our present connection with people, even if a great teacher were right in front of you, you would pass right by. There is a saying, "The master brings you inside the door-the practice is up to you." A master cannot help you achieve your practice, be it the Buddhist esoteric school or exoteric school. Whatever you learn, it is very important to rely on your own effort. No matter how great the teacher is, if you don't work hard, it is useless.

**Q:**

For those who have just begun to learn Buddhism, how do they choose a wise teacher?

**Master:**

There are two situations. One is when a wise teacher chooses you, and one is when due to karma you run

across a wise teacher. If your karmic obstructions are great, then even if the wise teacher is right in front of you, you won't recognize him. If your karma is good, then you don't have to intentionally seek one out. The wise teacher will appear before you.

So how do we seek out a great teacher? The best thing is to cultivate wholesome relations with people and lessen our karmic obstructions. With less negative karma and more wholesome karma, the causes and conditions for meeting a teacher will naturally ripen. If we are always thinking of seeking a great teacher, we won't find one. At most we will only find a famous teacher. Even if we find one, it might not be useful at all.

Li:

I think before we start looking for a good teacher, it is important to have some understanding of Buddhist teachings, which we could gain by reading books on Buddhism. We can then utilize the knowledge to evaluate the teacher we meet, to see if his or her thoughts and actions are in accord with the Dharma. However, in the course of practice, a master will use different expedient means to teach us and to point out the direction of practice. If we misunderstand the

teachings, then the problem is not due to the teacher but ourselves.

Q:

What is the relationship between the spirit of martial arts and Buddhist practice?

Li:

All things start from a basic foundation. The highest state of martial arts is no form. If a beginner who wants to reach the state of no form in one step, everything will fall apart. Learning martial arts is like building a house. It must have a solid foundation. From your body you learn to understand your mental sensations. Once you have mastered your body, then when you practice your different martial art forms you will feel the entire universe encompassed in your chest. Your forms will come out of formlessness.

During the process, you cannot jump from the start to the finish in one go or you'll surely fall. It is the same in conducting ourselves in the world. We must start from the basics and learn to be a good person in society. Slowly we move on and read books, listen to others and learn to uplift our character.

## Master:

This is like what in Buddhism we call "form" and "formlessness," or emptiness. Emptiness is relative to form; they are inseparable. Emptiness in Buddhism is experienced in the context of form.

Formlessness or emptiness does not mean not seeing things that we see, not hearing things that we hear, or not having eaten the things we have eaten. It means that when we see, hear, smell, taste and touch, we know that whatever we experience is not permanent and constant, and that it exists because of other things. There is not separate independent existence. So where there is existence there is emptiness, and with existence one knows there is emptiness. This is called formlessness. This is the key to understanding ourselves, the world, and Buddhism.

## Mediator:

Hopefully through today's dialogue between Jet Li and Master Sheng Yen on the topic of "Wu Ming Exposes Ignorance," we can lessen our attachments a bit, open our minds, and become wiser. Let us give blessings to ourselves and others.