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BUDDHA-DHARMA PURE AND SIMPLE 佛法真義

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BUDDHA-DHARMA PURE AND SIMPLE

佛法真義



A 21st Century Guide to Buddhist Teachings

Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Buddha-Dharma
Pure and Simple
佛法真義



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About Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Venerable Master Hsing Yun was born in Jiangsu Province, China in 1927. He studied at various renowned Buddhist institutions such as Qixia Vinaya College and Jiaoshan Buddhist College.

Soon after his arrival in Taiwan in 1949, he became the chief editor of *Human Life*, a Buddhist magazine. In 1952, his efforts in establishing Buddhist Chanting Association strengthened the foundation for his subsequent endeavors in the promotion of the Dharma. Venerable Master founded Fo Guang Shan Monastery in 1967, with the primary goal of promoting Humanistic Buddhism through Buddhist education, culture, charity, and propagation of the Dharma. Since then, close to three hundred branch temples have been established in major cities around the world. He has also set up art galleries, libraries, publishing houses, bookstores, mobile clinics, Buddhist colleges, and universities including: University of the West, Fo Guang University, Nanhua University, Nan Tien Institute, and Guang Ming College. In 1977, the Fo Guang Tripitaka Editorial Board was formed to compile the *Fo Guang Buddhist Canon* and the *Fo Guang Dictionary of Buddhism*. Many other works on Buddhism have also been published.

Venerable Master Hsing Yun has dedicated his life to propagating Humanistic Buddhism. As a global citizen, he continues to foster “joy and harmony,” “oneness and coexistence,” “respect and tolerance,” and “equality and peace” throughout the world. When he founded the Buddha’s Light International Association in 1991 and was elected president of its world headquarters, he became closer to realizing the ideal of having “the Buddha’s light shining throughout the three thousand realms, and the Dharma water flowing across the five continents.”

Translator's Introduction

The third installment of *Buddha-Dharma: Pure and Simple* opens with an existential question, “Who am I?” But this question is far from a philosophical musing. It is a self-examination for all Buddhists: Who are you as a Buddhist? What is your responsibility as a Buddhist? This question echoes throughout the book in guiding readers to elevate themselves from a devotee of Buddhism to a practitioner, and ultimately, a propagator of Buddhism.

If you were to read the book from the last article, you will meet the answer to the question “Who am I?”—I am a buddha. In accepting that you are a buddha, you are building faith in yourself to be a more wholesome, compassionate, and virtuous practitioner.

But the book takes on a more sobering tone when Venerable Master Hsing Yun guides us to reflect earnestly on what it means to be a Buddhist: we are responsible for passing down the legacy of the Buddha and his teachings. If Buddhists do not think of passing down this legacy as their duty, then what would become of Buddhism? Through discussions on how Buddhist masters of old passed down the legacy to their disciples, and the persecutions and calamities that had befallen Buddhism throughout its 2600-year history, Venerable Master hopes to ignite within us the solemn duty of a Buddhist practitioner.

Either starting from the question or the answer, the third installment presents a more serious tone on what it means to be a Buddhist. Humanistic Buddhism is not just about benefiting or seeking enlightenment for oneself—it is also about benefiting and helping others so that all could strive on the path to enlightenment.

Editorial Team
November 2020

Preface

The metaphors of three birds flying in the sky and three animals crossing the river have frequently been used, in the Buddhist sutras, to depict the notions of distance and depth perceived differently by different beings. Though the concept of distance within the vast sky is inherently non-existent, at the flap of their wings, an eagle, a pigeon, and a sparrow would span distances ranging from tens of miles to only a couple of miles, and merely a few yards depending on their varying abilities. As a result, the idea of distance is very different to these three birds.

In the same way, when an elephant, a horse, and a rabbit cross the river, the elephant's enormous body enables it to tread across the riverbed and reach the far shore without difficulty, while the horse and rabbit, unable to reach the bottom of the river, will struggle as they swim across the river.

The Buddha-Dharma is like the deep ocean or the vast sky. While people may hold opinions on the differences in levels, there is no saying who is right or wrong, because different levels of faith and spiritual aptitude mean different levels of knowledge. There is no need to think highly of oneself. Which one are you when crossing the river? The elephant? The horse? Or the rabbit? Which one are you in the sky? The eagle? The pigeon? Or the sparrow? One must constantly self-evaluate.

The Buddha's teaching is kind, compassionate, wise, and equal. However, how can we know we have truly understood the profundity of the teaching?

If one wants to know the length of a fabric or the weight of an object, one must measure or weigh it. Similarly, we need to measure and weigh the Dharma we think we have understood to know the depth of our faith. Otherwise, we are like a kindergartener who forcefully claims to be a university student, revealing our ignorance to everyone.

Is it possible for today's Buddhists to explain the true meaning of Buddhism without going against the original intents of the Buddha? For example, the concept of heaven and hell is to encourage people to transcend and not regress in their spiritual cultivation. However, some ignorantly use the concept of hell to inflict fear upon devotees. Why not use the goodness of heaven as encouragement for the people?

There is also the issue of being grateful for the contribution and support devotees give to Buddhism. Often people say, "Amitabha Buddha will be grateful for your contributions." Why are we asking Amitabha Buddha to help us express our gratitude? How can we push this responsibility away? Are we not the ones who should repay this kindness and contribution?

Suffering, the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, is a concept that should motivate us to endure hardships, to be hardworking, to train ourselves through austerities because adversity makes us stronger and better. Even a student needs to undergo a decade of education to achieve success and recognition. Hence, suffering makes our lives more meaningful. As the saying goes, "Out of the worst of the worst pains emerges the best of the best people."

Buddhists today, however, often exclaim, "Suffering! Suffering! Live no more! Pass away now! Pray to pass away now!" This is

not the reason why the Buddha expounded the truth of suffering. By properly understanding suffering, it pushes us to transcend and be liberated from it. Have these people not been giving the wrong interpretations?

For thousands of years, people think the Buddhist term “emptiness” or the saying “the four elements are empty” means that nothing exists, that there is nothing to possess, and that everything is empty. As Dharma propagators, how can we elevate people’s faith with this nihilistic and ignorant kind of view?

Emptiness is meant to be constructive; with emptiness comes existence. For example, where would you sleep if there are no empty rooms? Where would you work if there is no empty desktop to work on? Where would you build a house if there is no empty land? Where would you put your money if your pockets are not empty? How could you survive if your stomach is not empty? Emptiness is so good, so wonderful! So why explain emptiness as nihilism? Emptiness is meant to be full of action, potential, and success.

The same goes for the concept of impermanence. Impermanence is wonderful because it means that nothing is fixed; we can thus change, improve, and transcend. Situations can become better, more wholesome, and beautiful. So why make it sound like everything in this world is coming to an end when we explain impermanence? Why make people feel so hopeless? Impermanence is a beacon of hope for Buddhists to learn about the Middle Way. We have failed to attain the true meaning of Buddhism and thereby misunderstood the intentions of the Buddha. Thus, we must research and restore the true meaning of these Buddhist teachings, and propagate them.

For over two thousand years, the Buddha has carried the indignity

of those who have been propagating deviant and false views, going against his intents, teaching the Dharma through misunderstanding, superstition, and skewed perspectives, all done in his name.

Take the practice of giving as an example. Sometimes, giving others a phrase, a smile, or a service are all acts of giving. However, today's Buddhism explains giving in terms of a monetary donation. The practice of giving does not only mean we ask others to give, but we should be the ones who are willing to let go and offer.

Upholding precepts is another cultivation on the path of learning Buddhism. However, it is usually spoken from the perspective of telling others to uphold and follow. What about our actions, minds, and speech? Are they following with the Dharma? If we do not have a painful sense of remorse, how can we improve as Buddhists?

In *An Inspiration to Give Rise to the Bodhi Mind*, Venerable Sheng'an said, "The main gate for entering the Path is to first give rise to aspirations." To give rise to aspirations means to have right faith and right view. Simply put, the way to practice Buddhism is to cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity, the Four Means of Embracing, and the Six Paramitas. However, today, we teach devotees that the practice of the Six Paramitas consists only of offering incense and venerating in the temple, believing that the act of donation can eradicate calamities. Therefore, Huineng the Sixth Patriarch admonished in the "Gatha of Formlessness," "Attaining buddhahood does not come from giving money." However, how many Buddhists have ever taken in the Sixth Patriarch's teachings?

We need to raise the issue of correcting erroneous views about Buddhism so that the true meaning of the Buddha will not be lost, and enhance deeper and proper understanding of the Buddha's

original intents. Take the practice of life-releasing as an example. To hold a life-releasing ceremony, they first must catch fish and birds, and who knows how many lives were killed in the process? So, for those who hold a life-releasing ceremony for longevity, how can they live a long life?

There are also people without the right understanding of the law of cause and effect, thinking that becoming vegetarians makes them healthy, or praying to the Buddha leads to the acquirement of wealth and fortune. This would be going against the law of cause and effect. There are relative causes and effects for the accumulation of wealth, health, and faith. How can we expect to harvest beans when we planted melons?

Some people deceive with deeds such as acquiring good fortune by being the first to strike the bell or offer incense on Chinese New Year, turning these activities into superstitions that are not in accord with the Dharma. These people do not understand that the sound of the bell is only to alert us to do good, and the burning of incense is an act of offering to the Buddha and should not be done for profit. Moreover, various practices of fortune-telling focus only on praying for wishes to be fulfilled, instead of focusing on Buddhist cultivation. How can these acts be in accord with cause and effect?

What about the geomantic principle of feng shui? Everything has its own principle. For example, there are principles for social interaction, principles for relationships, and principles of material objects. Of course, the geographical environment has its principle. However, geomancy should not only be about searching for the best feng shui for good luck. If your living environment has good air circulation, is hygienic, is balanced with an open view, then it

is already in the best geomantic position. Just look at Xuankong Temple (lit. Hanging Temple) in Shanxi, Mainland China. Do you think the location can be deciphered with geomancy?

Buddhism talks about the Eight Groups of Heavenly Beings. Where is heaven? What are the eight groups? We can describe them as different ethnic groups, instead of heavenly gods and armies.

It is said that the Buddha was born from the right flank of his mother. Did anyone witness this? Why attach so many far-fetched legends to the Buddha? What about the Buddhist Councils? There are always people with ulterior motives that include apocryphal sutras and commentary into the Buddhist canon, all under the name of the Buddha.

Buddhism has always been mocked as a polytheistic religion because of the many bodhisattvas and arhats who exist. Moreover, most of these figures are only mentioned in the sutras and are not real historical figures. Those with historical references such as Nagarjuna, Asanga, and Vasubandhu are truly acknowledged. For those with no historical references, who were their parents? Where did they grow up? We need not deny them. Rather, we can consider them as manifestations of the Buddha.

Why not place the focus of the faith on the Buddha instead? Why the need for so many deities such as the god of wealth, god of the city, god of the hearth, goddess of birth, and the god of love? We say that gods created humans, but humans also created gods. Buddhism differs from other religions in that the Buddha was an awakened human being. He had a historical background, he truly was a human being, and not a god or goddess that arose from imagination or hearsay. Therefore, the Buddha is the greatest awakened one. Why

do Buddhists not return to the Buddha his original face?

Hapless Buddha! For two thousand years, he has been shrouded with the coat of superstition and obscured by the masks of deities and ghosts by the so-called devotees. It is a great pity that the Buddha should lose his original identity.

For example, Buddhism talks about the Four Immeasurable Vows so that we can make vows and practice them. But today, Buddhists only talk the talk, they dare not walk the walk. If no one practices, what use is there for the Four Universal Vows?

Another example is that the Buddha taught the Six Paramitas so that we understand these as the ways to practice the Bodhisattva Path. The paramitas of generosity, precept, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and prajna wisdom are practices of delivering self and others. However, monastics today hold others to the standard of the Six Paramitas, yet they themselves do not give. They wish only to receive. Resultantly, the devotees are the ones who get delivered, while we are still stuck on the other shore. What to do? Monastics go through the teachings of the Buddha for the sake of finding ways to receive gains and benefits. The development of this type of perverse thinking and action can only be subject to the future ruling of the law of cause and effect. There is no law today that ensures the Buddha's teaching is exercised according to his original intents.

The foremost practice in this world is the Noble Eightfold Path. In the past, foreigners from the Western regions tried to explain the Noble Eightfold Path, hence the coining of the term *húshuō bādào*.¹ However, this term has become an insult for people talking nonsense. How can we answer to the people from the Western regions?

Between the Sui and Tang Dynasty, some young practitioners studied with eminent Buddhist masters. For a time, they either studied under Chan Master Mazu in Jiangxi, or Chan Master Xiqian in Hunan. The term “roaming Jianghu”² refers to their deeds of traveling and learning. However, such a meaningful term has come to mean vagabonds performing their monkey tricks. Who will be the one to correct this?

In Buddhism, we also see sutras such as the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra* and *Srimaladevi Simhanada Sutra*. Are Layman Vimalakirti and Lady Srimala not lay Dharma teachers? Why do we think that the Age of Declining Dharma is near when lay professors and devotees are teaching the Dharma? This obstructs many outstanding Buddhists from propagating Buddhism. Does fault not lie with those who keep promoting these kinds of deviant sayings?

Another example is the term “eternal life.” Originally, this Buddhist term means that life does not end in death but continues in the cycle of samsara. However, when Christians promoted that believers will have eternal life, Buddhists were afraid to use this term. Another term is “savior.” The Buddha truly is a savior, for he came to this world to deliver all beings. However, because Christianity proclaimed Jesus Christ the savior, Buddhism was afraid to call the Buddha a savior. Such beautiful terms are adopted by other religions, while the Buddha becomes associated with improper faiths, miraculous and ghostly incidents, as well as deviant thoughts and views.

The Vinaya notes that should a person “handle alcohol, one will be reborn without hands for five hundred lifetimes.” How can such a serious punishment exist? Which eminent master established

this precept? This person did not understand the original intents of the Buddha and chronicled such a deviant saying due to improper understanding and lack of common sense. Moreover, on the issue of the Ten Sramanera Precepts, research should be conducted on how many Buddhist elders truly uphold them. These precepts cannot even be fully upheld by senior monks, how can we expect newly tonsured sramaneras to uphold them? Is this not nonsensical?

On the term the “Eight Garudharmas,” from my understanding, the Buddha promoted equality, as can be seen in the saying, “When beings of the four castes leave the householder’s life, they all together join the Sakya clan.” So, how can there be Eight Garudharmas that promote gender inequality? Which eminent master established these precepts and makes people uphold them in the name of the Buddha? In Buddhism, taking refuge shows the spirit of democracy and upholding the Five Precepts signifies freedom. The Buddha advocated equality among the Four Groups of Disciples. Why not combine the wonderful Dharma with today’s universal values of freedom, democracy, and equality?

In the Buddhist sphere of today, numerous people claim this or that are the words of the Buddha. However, were they truly spoken by the Buddha? On the contrary, how can we claim that this and that were not spoken by the Buddha? Whatever the Buddha did say and do, we will practice it as the Dharma teaching. We now advise others to practice as the Buddha did, to learn from the Buddha, to be a buddha, to believe that “I am buddha.” However, we must be careful not to wrong the Buddha and use his name to instruct while still clinging to our attachments and deviant views. Such actions shall bring serious consequences.

Today's Buddhists have become volunteers for Buddhism. They offer to protect their faith. They embrace Buddhism. But, what has Buddhism given to these devotees in return?

Once, when I was presiding over a Taking Refuge and Five Precepts Ceremony, a devotee refused to take the precepts out of fear of taking the precept of no lying. It was because he had heard about the story of a Chan Master who was reborn as a fox for five hundred lifetimes from having claimed that great practitioners are “not subjected to karma” when he had meant that they too were “subjected to karma.” This devotee was terrified that he might lie. I believe that when other Buddhists hear of his reason, they would dissuade him from taking the precepts.

Instead of worrying about lying, one can choose to practice Right Speech. Once there was a Buddhist who owned a textile store, and when customers wanted to buy a piece of cloth, they would ask,

“How much for a foot of fabric?”

“Five dollars.”

“Does the color fade?”

To sell the cloth, he would lie and say, “No, it doesn't.”

Later, I suggested that he could say, “The five-dollar fabric fades easily, but the eight-dollar one does not.” Due to the honorable reputation he gained from being honest, his business boomed, which allowed him to build an establishment. Dharma brings goodness to all. My only concern is, why do people not positively explain Buddhism so devotees can receive the benefit of the Dharma?

Buddha-Dharma: Pure and Simple is a series of nearly 300 topics that address my understanding of the subjects that I encounter daily. The problems confronted by Buddhism lie deeper. I just hope there

are determined people who will reassess Buddhism as a whole, and return to Buddhism its original meaning so that the true teachings of the Buddha can pervade in this world.

Certainly, as Buddhism spread, it has evolved according to the cultures, languages, traditions, people, and climates of different geographical regions. Thus, skillful means required to enhance the process of dissemination have certainly become a matter of fact.

In Chinese Buddhism, only succeeding generations of Chan Masters still possessed some Right View and understood some of the Dharma. Few people continue to research and propagate the true Dharma that other schools taught—for example, Dependent Origination and the Middle Path as taught by the Three Treatise School. As the saying goes, “Deviant faiths arise when right faith declines.” I intend for this book to be a catalyst for all to think outside the box. Should any ideas presented in this book sound incomplete, I sincerely apologize. My humble hope is only that it mirrors the intentions of the Buddha so that all may reassess the true meaning of the Buddha-Dharma. I am grateful and humble to accept any understanding and comments that reflect my intentions.

Hsing yun

May 2016

Founder’s Quarters, Fo Guang Shan

Who Am I?



The average person seldom asks, “Who am I?” Suppose you were to ask this question to yourself now, how would you answer?

“I am a parent.”

“I am a child.”

“I am a teacher.”

“I am a student.”

It is difficult to provide this question with a definitive answer, as we can only describe ourselves mostly through our identities, status, or roles. But the correct answer should be, “I am a buddha!”

When the Buddha attained enlightenment on the Diamond Throne, he proclaimed, “All sentient beings possess the wisdom and virtues of a tathagata.” In other words, everyone possesses buddha-nature. Since we are neither animals nor hungry ghosts, who are you if not a buddha? Evidently, we are human beings who possess buddha-nature. As such, we should aspire to be buddhas.

If you can recognize and believe that you are a buddha, then you have to ask yourself, “Do I have the prajna wisdom of the Buddha? Am I as magnanimous as the Buddha? Can I endure painstaking endeavors as patiently as the Buddha? Do I possess the unconditional loving-kindness and universal compassion of the Buddha?”

Since you have acknowledged that you are a buddha, then you need to take the Buddha as your role model and shoulder the

Buddha's responsibilities as your own. As the saying goes, "The rise and fall of the nation concern everyone." Hence, does the rise and fall of Buddhism not concern all Buddha's disciples?

"Who am I?" By continuously asking this question, we understand to hold ourselves accountable and to shoulder responsibilities with a sense of mission. For example, as a citizen, it is necessary to be patriotic. As a Buddhist, it is essential to love one's faith. As the head of a household, it is crucial to be responsible for a family's daily expenses. As a friend, it is imperative to be honest and trustworthy. As a recipient of daily necessities provided by people from all trades and professions, it is vital to give back to society.

Likewise, when we reply, "I am a buddha," we should practice as the Buddha did—not only for our self-awakening but for the benefit and awakening of sentient beings in all circumstances.

The *Agamas* offer many accounts of the Buddha's practices of working for the benefit of others every day. For example, the Buddha carried his father's coffin and expounded the Dharma to his mother. He sewed the clothes of his disciples who were ill and took care of them. Moreover, the Buddha taught kings how benevolent rulers should prosper their country. He taught women how to live an upright and virtuous life, and devotees how to live righteously.

Furthermore, upon meeting Nidhi the dung sweeper during an alms-round, the Buddha taught him the Dharma regardless of his low social status and enabled him to attain enlightenment. Upon meeting playful children, the Buddha accepted their offerings of sand and pebbles, thus fulfilling the causes and conditions for the future King Asoka to build eighty-four thousand stupas around India. Upon receiving offerings from devotees, the Buddha expounded the wondrous Dharma that resolved their queries and removed their afflictions.

The desire of receiving material donations, instead of offering the Dharma to people, has led to various unsanctioned malpractices within monasteries and is the most substantial cause for the decline of Buddhism today. On the other hand, Buddhism can prosper and thrive if every individual can consider the question, “Who am I?” When people shoulder the responsibility to propagate the Dharma and embody the Buddha’s compassion and wisdom—as exemplified by the saying, “I am a buddha”—they become manifestations of the Buddha pervading this world for generations to come. As such, is it not a matter of time when sentient beings would find the joy of the Dharma and Chan?



*I sensed the Buddha
to have been right beside me.
All along, when the Buddha
was within my heart, he was with me.*

— “Buddha, Where Are You?”

Buddha, Where Are You?



Dear Buddha, where are you?

Upon renouncing at age twelve, I spent days and nights in sincere prostration, hoping the Buddha would manifest before me. I would often recount the deeds of the Buddha. When writing *The Biography of Sakyamuni Buddha*, I even tried my best to experience the way the Buddha spoke, acted, taught, thought, and lived in this world. Many a time I wept as I wrote, moved by the thought of the Buddha's loving-kindness, compassion, and painstaking efforts.

When the opportunity to travel abroad and propagate the Dharma arose, I often found myself peering out the airplane window, glimpsing at the white clouds that dotted the blue skies and thinking, "Buddha, if only you could reveal a trace of yourself in the sky!" Sometimes, as I traveled by sea, I would ponder, "Buddha, if only you could reveal a trace of yourself on the waters!"

I have visited India eight times in the past forty years. I would always linger and contemplate beneath the bodhi tree of the Buddha's enlightenment, at Kushinagar the site of the Buddha's parinirvana, as well as next to the platform where the Buddha taught at Vulture Peak. How I yearned and sought for sacred inklings of what the Buddha was like. On my first visit to the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya, I was struck by a feeling, "Let me die here!" Perhaps if I were to die in this place, I could accompany the Buddha. Likewise, when I saw

the golden reclining Buddha at the Kushinagar Myanmar Buddhist Temple, I not only circumambulated and prostrated but found it hard to leave.

Yet, I had never seen the Buddha, nor had he ever spoken to me. It was not until the last twenty years that I stopped searching for the Buddha and asking where he was. What was the reason? I sensed the Buddha to have been right beside me. The Buddha had always accompanied me, even when I was walking or eating. All along, when the Buddha was within my heart, he was with me. As such, I vowed to shoulder responsibility as exemplified by the phrase, “I am a buddha!”

Keeping in mind “I am a buddha,” serves as a personal reminder when dealing with interpersonal relationships and various circumstances. For example, when speaking with others, I remind myself to speak words of kindness and compassion like the Buddha. When I see sentient beings who are timid, I remind myself to think as they do, and give them faith and hope just like the Buddha.

When presiding over refuge ceremonies, I would ask devotees, “Do you dare to say ‘I am a buddha?’”

Upon their affirmative answers, I would instruct, “When you return home, do not quarrel with your spouse. If it should happen, remind yourself, ‘I am now a buddha. How can I quarrel and yell at people?’

“If you like to smoke or drink, remind yourself when the urge arises, ‘I am now a buddha. Do buddhas smoke or drink?’ Naturally, you will refrain from smoking or drinking. In this way, your life is transformed by acknowledging ‘I am a buddha.’”

With the Buddha in our hearts, we “wake up with the Buddha every morning, and fall asleep with the Buddha every evening.” In other words, we are always accompanied by the Buddha at our sides. With this in mind, we are then able to see the world of the Buddha, to

hear the sounds of the Buddha, to smell the fragrance of precepts, and taste the wondrous flavor of delighting in Chan. Moreover, our minds will also be able to connect with the bliss of the Buddha's pure land. Naturally, our body, speech, and mind will be able to exemplify the Buddha's kindness and compassion. When we merge with the Buddha within our body and mind, we, too, gradually grow into buddhas.

For decades, I had searched high and low for the Buddha but had never found him. It was when I turned back that I realized—the Buddha had always been in my heart.



*My advice for young people would be to find
role models to emulate, and bear in mind their teachings.*

Moreover, they should practice accordingly.

— “Idolization ”

Idolization



Buddhists are often criticized as idol worshippers—a misunderstanding I have strong opinions about. As human beings, we have a basic need to seek out role models whom we respect, and to find examples of people whom we can imitate and follow. This is exemplified by the Confucian saying, “Emulate the sages upon seeing one.”

Without role models, we would not have anyone to learn from. Role models come in different forms; they can be admired for their appearance or the values they represent. In other words, everyone has a role model of some sort. If not, who would we look up to?

With the above in mind, idolization can be said to be a concept shared by all. For example, suppose if someone were to step on a photo of your parents. Of course, you would be furious.

“How dare you insult my family,” you would say.

“It’s just a piece of paper. What’s the problem?”

“That’s my father and mother you’re stepping on!”

From this, we can see that although the photo is only an object, it is representative of one’s family.

This same concept can even be seen in Christianity which condemns idolatry. If the image of Christ or the cross were to be vandalized, it would be considered blasphemy.

Let us consider another example that can be illustrated through

a piece of fabric. If made into a pair of shoes, it should be worn as footwear. But if made into a hat, then it should be worn on the head. It would most certainly be unacceptable to wear shoes as hats. Now, suppose that this piece of fabric was made into a national flag. People would be willing to sacrifice their lives for it because it is no longer just a piece of fabric or a flag—it has become symbolic of a country and its people. These examples can all be said to be forms of idolization.

Back when I was studying in the Buddhist college, I often heard my seniors discussing stories of eminent monastics such as Masters Taixu, Hongyi, Yuanying, and Xuyun. Though I had never met them, I was so inspired that I could feel their presence before my eyes. Because of this, I never dared to be indulgent or negligent throughout my life. By incorporating bits and pieces of these masters' lives, I understood which path I should follow for my own. As can be seen, idolizing virtuous role models is a crucial part of one's moral development. My advice for young people would be to find role models to emulate—to have at least fifty virtuous and knowledgeable people to learn from—and bear in mind their teachings. Moreover, they should practice accordingly.

Nevertheless, though Buddhism obliges people's need for idolization by encouraging its use during the worldly stages of practice, the concept does not exist in teachings regarding the ultimate truth. Just as a boat is needed to cross a river, it should not be carried along on foot after reaching the shore.

For instance, Chan Master Danxia Tianran of the Tang Dynasty once took a wooden buddha statue from the shrine on a wintry day and burned it. The monastery disciplinarian was furious upon witnessing the sight.

“You wretch!” he rebuked. “How could you burn the image of the

buddha to warm yourself?”

“I am not warming myself,” replied Danxia. “I am trying to get buddha relics!”

“Nonsense! How can you get relics from a wooden buddha?”

“Since this is only a piece of wood and cannot yield any relics, I shall burn more to warm myself!”

For Danxia, the Dharma body of the Buddha pervaded the entirety of the universe. In contrast, the disciplinarian who tried to safeguard the statue had yet to realize the true nature of the Buddha. It was Danxia who truly understood the Buddha.

In short, when Buddhists prostrate to buddha images, it is not an act of blind idolization but a process of connecting with the Buddha through expedient means. Moving beyond the external appearances, the act is to establish a role model within our hearts, to help inspire and spark our determination. The process of prostrating and venerating assists in solidifying our faith, so that we have a spiritual refuge and protection. It enables us to transcend feelings of selfishness to one of magnanimity. Therefore, idolization is a process of learning. It is a transformation of inner strength that allows right mindfulness. In this way, it empowers us to continuously contemplate and progress on the path of practice.



*The Dharma was what the Buddha relied on
to achieve buddhahood and what he proceeded
to teach to sentient beings.*

*Consequently, as long as one practices
according to the Dharma,
buddhahood will inevitably be achieved one day.*

— “Taking Refuge”

Taking Refuge



Taking refuge is the first step in entering the gateway of the Buddha's teachings. But in whom do we take refuge? In the Triple Gem: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The average person takes gold and silver to be precious gems, while Buddhists regard the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—the founder, teachings, and propagators of Buddhism—to be the gems of faith.

Of the Triple Gem, the Dharma is considered to be the most honorable. The Buddha has repeatedly mentioned in numerous sutras, that the Triple Gem is not esteemed because of him. Rather, all buddhas rely on the Dharma to attain buddhahood. Without the Dharma, how can there be buddhas? Therefore, the Dharma is the most revered and the most important aspect of the Triple Gem. The Buddha did not deify or elevate himself through apotheosis. For both human beings and buddhas alike, the Truth is foremost and the basis of practice.

The Dharma comprises teachings on the Truth, such as the Three Dharma Seals, Four Noble Truths, and the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. It even includes teachings on remorse, gratitude, appreciation, building affinities, generosity, equality, loving-kindness, compassion, and prajna wisdom. Enlightenment was only possible for the Buddha because he achieved these practices. This is why the Buddha instructed us as thus: to hold the Dharma as the most honored

and treasured of the Triple Gem. The Dharma was what the Buddha relied on to achieve buddhahood and what he proceeded to teach to sentient beings. Consequently, as long as one practices according to the Dharma, buddhahood will inevitably be achieved one day.

Who is the buddha? This is a question that pertains to everyone. The saying, “rely on the self, rely on the Dharma, and rely on nothing else,” indicates that the objects of our refuge should be none other than ourselves and the Dharma. To take refuge in oneself is to rely on one’s potential to become a buddha. Everyone has the buddha-nature within. As long as we have faith in ourselves, and recognize our fundamental nature of buddhahood, we are freed from the restraints of divine power.

To take refuge in the Dharma is to rely on the Truth. In other words, it is to rely on the teachings and not on individual teachers. As such, we prevent being blindsided by emotions, interpersonal relationships, or gossip. Taking refuge in the Dharma enables us to view the world with equality by perceiving all phenomena as such. Even if buddhahood is not achieved, we will still have cultivated a mind of equality and will have transcended worldly opposition and conflicts.

One does not take refuge to venerate a specific master, but to establish and affirm one’s faith in the Buddha’s teachings by formally becoming a Buddhist of correct faith. Therefore, Sakyamuni Buddha is the fundamental teacher in which one takes refuge in. A monastic who claims to be the object of refuge or a master to be revered in a refuge ceremony is oblivious to the Buddha-Dharma and ineligible to teach.

The presiding master of a refuge ceremony merely acts as a witness to the disciples who are taking refuge—similar to the witness in a wedding ceremony or the signing of a contract. Therefore, how

can they claim the participants as their disciples or followers? These delusions of arrogance and boastfulness are inappropriate!

Moreover, “taking refuge” should be viewed from the ultimate meaning of the Buddha’s teachings. It is mainly to take refuge in oneself, in one’s intrinsic buddha-nature, a sacredness exemplified by the saying, “I am a buddha.” It also means to take refuge in the Dharma—the Truth characterized by equality and the middle path of dependent origination. True Buddha-Dharma teaches the coming together of myriad conditions and the equality of all things. Hence, taking refuge in the Triple Gem is, in fact, taking refuge in oneself and the Truth, and nothing else.

As early as two thousand years ago, the Buddha has already said, “All sentient beings possess the buddha nature.” Such an ideology matches today’s spirits of freedom, democracy, and equality and is rarely found in the teachings of other religions. This groundbreaking statement not only elevates the importance of each believer but also helps all beings to find their way out. As the Buddha taught, “Rely on the self, rely on the Dharma, and rely on nothing else;” each person is their own mentor. Is this not a sufficient explanation of the significance of believing, practicing, and taking refuge in the Buddha-Dharma?



*Using the simile of the mind as a field,
Humanistic Buddhism advocates cultivating the land
through an “aspiration for self-betterment,”
plowing through the “aspiration for the transcendental,”
and sowing seeds through the
“aspiration for the bodhi mind.”*

— “Stages of Aspiration”

Stages of Aspiration



An Inspiration to Give Rise to the Bodhi Mind begins with the following proclamation by Master Sheng'an: "The most supreme amongst the essential elements to entering the Way is the making of vows; the making of vows is foremost in the extensive and important tasks of cultivation." As such, Buddhist practitioners who have understood and acknowledged the importance of aspiration seek its actualization. The efficacy and level of one's faith can be inferred from the depth of one's aspirations.

In other words, aspiration emphasizes one's faith and resolve within Buddhism, so that our goals are realized through the serving of others and benefiting the multitude. The mind can be likened to a garden or a field, by which it is developed through aspiration; by cultivating what we have sowed, we are bound to reap an abundant harvest. With aspiration, those who are prone to laziness become diligent. Likewise, for those who are ignorant, aspiration means to make an additional effort. In the process of cultivating wisdom—as well as the development of faith, understanding, and practice—the more extensive and resolute one's aspiration and vows are, the greater one's accomplishments will be.

1. Aspiration for Self-Betterment

Aspiration comes in many stages and forms. Those who wish

for wealth and honor—within reason, of course—can work towards the “aspiration for self-betterment.” Buddhism does not teach the rejection of worldly wealth or reputation. Rather, it teaches us to further our aspirations and build affinities with our attained fame and fortune, so that we develop boundless merit for the future.

2. Aspiration for the Transcendental

However, the few who are disinterested in worldly riches—seeking the lofty ideal of a life away from fame and fortune—can choose monastic life and work towards the “aspiration for the transcendental.” In this way, one is even more capable of renunciation and transcendence. Without a doubt, if bhiksus and bhiksunis have renounced with this aspiration in mind, they will easily be able to enter the path of the Buddha’s teachings.

3. Aspiration for the Bodhi Mind

True Buddha-Dharma does not discriminate between lay or monastic disciples; both need to work towards the “aspiration for the bodhi mind.” What is bodhi? It is the state of striving upwards for buddhahood, but also turning back to liberate sentient beings.

Initiating the bodhi mind means being willing to learn from those who are more advanced than ourselves. It is to walk in the footsteps of the Buddha, one at a time. Moreover, it means to uphold the teachings of the Buddha, and strive to propagate them.

The bodhi mind is what enables one to participate in this-worldly endeavors with a transcendental attitude. It emphasizes respect for others, and “the wish that all beings be relieved from suffering without seeking personal peace and happiness.” Only those who are willing to sacrifice and serve others are called true bodhisattvas, true initiators of the bodhi mind, and true disciples of the Buddha.

If the Buddha were here today, he could give disciples tests to determine their stages of cultivation. During the Buddha's time, it was the Buddha who determined who has attained the stage of bodhisattva or arhat. Today, the establishment of a cultivation sequence allows for modern Buddhists to adhere and gauge one's resolve. The aspiration for self-betterment, the aspiration for the transcendental, and the aspiration for the bodhi mind—these are steps along the gradual progress from human livelihood to that of buddhahood. They are also the general tenor of what Humanistic Buddhism proposes: the bodhi mind as one's intent, and the bodhisattva path as one's practice.

To put it simply using the simile of the mind as a field, Humanistic Buddhism advocates cultivating the land through an “aspiration for self-betterment,” plowing through the “aspiration for the transcendental,” and sowing seeds through the “aspiration for the bodhi mind.” We should develop the treasures of loving-kindness, compassion, wisdom, faith, strength, and remorse. We should aspire to treat others with loving-kindness and compassion, as well as cultivate with diligence. We should aspire to transform our habitual tendencies, as well as to reduce our afflictions. No matter the situation, with resolve comes strength; with aspiration comes the transformation of one's world perspective. As a result, the “aspiration for the bodhi mind” is something to be heeded and actualized.



*Giving should be done in accordance
with the Buddha-Dharma.*

It should not bring suffering or affliction to oneself.

— “Understanding Generosity”

Understanding Generosity



“Generosity” as mentioned in sutras means to give. For example, providing people with money and material goods as emergency relief is to be generous in the giving of wealth. Providing people with guidance to enhance their understanding and wisdom is to be generous in the giving of the Dharma. Providing people with solace so they are relieved from fear is to be generous in the giving of fearlessness. In other words, there are three kinds of generosity: the giving of wealth, the giving of Dharma, and the giving of fearlessness.

Some people may wonder: will the merits of serving, giving others, and helping others really be ours? Or would it be other people’s? Such thoughts of differentiation should not be held! Merits gained from wholesome actions are equally shared by all who are involved. Dividing it between self and others gives rise to discriminatory thinking, limiting one’s merits and virtue.

Even so, it is important to note that giving should be done in accordance with the Buddha-Dharma. It should not bring suffering or affliction to oneself. In other words, we should not feel pained, afflicted, or regretful when giving. Neither should we give for the sake of enhancing one’s reputation or with the expectations of receiving something in return. Our only wish should be to share what we have

with others—this is what is meant by true generosity.

Among the many examples of generosity in Buddhist sutras, there are a few that stand out as being significantly difficult—for example, the stories of sacrificing body and flesh to feed eagles and tigers.³ Some people might think: why not just kill them instead of feeding them our flesh and sacrificing our lives?

Is there not an old saying, “Killing a poisonous snake equals the merit of being a vegetarian for three years?” People ordinarily think of animals like eagles and tigers as threats to human life. However, practitioners view this matter differently. From the perspective of the tigers and eagles, human beings are the ones that are pests who threaten their lives. As can be seen, treating others as being opposite of ourselves brings people further away from the Buddha’s teachings.

There is a quote from the Buddhist sutras: “Wish for all beings to be relieved from suffering, without seeking personal peace and happiness.” This teaching describes the highest state of generosity and giving. Is it not precious to give for the sole purpose of eliminating the suffering of others, and not for personal gain?

Still, some people find learning the Dharma to be too difficult, thinking that it teaches to give away everything to the extent of sacrificing one’s life. But in actuality, accomplishing the first part of the saying—the “wish for all beings to be relieved from suffering”—is sufficient enough. It is improper to harm oneself in the process of giving to others as Buddhist teachings advocate the awakening, liberation, and benefit of *both* self and others.

Of course, people vary in their stages of faith. It is also acceptable to change the quote into “wish for all beings to be relieved from suffering *while* seeking personal peace and happiness.” There is

nothing wrong with this. Nonetheless, when a person says that all they seek is for others to be relieved from suffering, it can be said that their faith and generosity has been elevated. It can be likened to the Buddhist metaphors of three birds flying in the sky and three animals crossing the river. The truth—represented by the vast sky and the river—remains the same, while the distance or depth is perceived differently depending on each animal.⁴

Therefore, all levels of cultivation are acceptable, whether it is with form or without form, with attachment or without attachment. Some people say that “chanting Amitabha Buddha’s name with a scattered mind achieves nothing, even if shouted until hoarse.” This expression is undue because it is better to chant with a scattered mind than to not chant at all. No cultivation is done in vain, for everything has its causes and effects; all wholesome deeds have favorable outcomes. Consequently, it is important not to skew towards difficulty or passiveness in our understanding of the Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha expounded the Dharma to inspire, teach, and benefit all beings. As such, it should bring joy to all.



*It is time to advocate a new perspective
towards filial piety.*

*Parents should also be appealed to
respect their children as well.*

— “Filial Piety”

Filial Piety



The Chinese have a saying, “Lust is the worst of all that is unwholesome, while filial piety is the foremost amongst all that is wholesome.” In the context of today’s civilized society, this phrase deserves some reevaluation. Intimacy is a natural part of life. As such, numerous descriptions and idioms eulogizing marital love can be found throughout history.

So why would lust be considered the worst of all that is unwholesome? Without this “unwholesome deed,” would the human race not be extinct? Therefore, Buddhist teachings presented today should not erode normal and ethical relationships between people. The Buddhist teaching of “not forsaking a single dharma” means that all dharmas are one and inter-related. Even marital relationships were properly addressed by the Buddha. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to change the saying “lust is the worst of all that is unwholesome” to “sexual misconduct is the worst of all that is unwholesome.” Proper marital relationships are advocated by the Buddha, while sexual misconduct, on the other hand, is unacceptable even to society.

Inappropriate relations such as incest are indeed profoundly immoral. Polygamy and extra-marital relationships are also considered

unwholesome and improper. Such practices should be eradicated and abolished. On the other hand, proper and wholesome relationships should be supported, for they are just as valid as the idea “filial piety is the foremost amongst all that is wholesome.”

It is also natural and proper for children to take care of their parents, particularly in their old age so that they lack nothing in life. But in Buddhism, as noted by Master Lianchi (1523–1615), this is considered only the most elementary level of filial piety. Above that would be to bring honor to one’s family; even greater would be to guide one’s parents towards practicing the Buddha’s teachings so that they avoid the suffering of samsara. This is what is considered the most superlative form of filial piety.

Since ancient times, filial piety has been considered the foremost virtue within the Chinese culture. Moreover, it has been imbued with the notion of obedience as well. The idea of “filial piety” is acceptable, but its concept of obedience needs to be reexamined because the harm it inflicts on children of Chinese descent is unparalleled.

For example, a young person’s aspiration to pursue a career away from home may be hindered or halted by the belief that “a son or daughter must always remain close to home until their parents’ passing-away.” Parental obeisance should not be used as a means to constraint a child’s life pursuits.

In terms of relationships, what should have been a natural unity of love could, unfortunately be obstructed by parental interference that forces two people without affinities to marry. Where, then, is the joy in life? Parents need to be understanding and open-minded, otherwise, their unreasonable and irrational behaviors enforced onto their children in the disguise of “filial piety” could compromise their

child's dreams and ambitions. Such harm can further cause collateral damage to the future cultural and workforce developments of a country.

Therefore, it is time to advocate a new perspective toward filial piety. Although it is a basic ethic inherent to Chinese culture and should be propagated, parents should also be appealed to respect their children as well. Children should be allowed autonomy when they come of age. Just as the saying goes, "let your children and their children find their own path," being open-minded and granting them the freedom to choose their future is an important lesson for modern-day parents.



*Always being the recipient of gifts given by others
is a sign of being impoverished at heart,
for the truly wealthy can pay it forward
by helping and giving to others.*

— “Repayment of Kindness”

Repayment of Kindness



The “repayment of kindness” is a virtue advocated in not only Chinese culture, but an idea that appears frequently in Buddhism as well.

Gratitude serves as the cornerstone of human ethics, as exemplified by the saying, “Repay the favor of a water drop with a whole fountain.” The willingness to return the kindness of others demonstrates remarkable inner strength and wealth in spirit. If a person is miserly at heart, how can they possibly find such an aspiration? Thus, those who can repay the kindness of others are said to be people with affection and righteousness. They are also considered by society to be good-natured and virtuous. On the other hand, selfish and self-absorbed people show a lack of sensitivity, morality, and gratitude. They are what the Buddha referred to as “non-human.”

We should seek to repay the kindness of our country, as it has protected us. We should seek to repay the kindness of our parents, as they have raised us. Additionally, the Triple Gem—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—have also bestowed their kindness in offering us spiritual solace, as well as peace of body and mind. Moreover, all living beings and people from every trade—scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants—have all helped us in some way and shown

their kindness to us.

Needless to say that the “repayment of kindness” is a normal part of human ethics and a wonderful cultural ideal. However, there is one particular Buddhist saying I do object to. Specifically, it is the response of monastics to the contributions of devotees—whether for temple construction, buddha images, sutra printing, or monastery-wide offerings: “As a result of your resolve, Amitabha Buddha will surely guide you to the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss in the future.”

This is quite strange. Why do we ask Amitabha Buddha to repay devotees who have donated to the temple and assisted us in our daily living, instead of doing it ourselves? I believe that we, as monastics, have taken the kindness of others for granted, shirking off the responsibility of returning their favor. Instead, we look to the buddhas to do so on our behalf. Therefore, I find the lack of gratitude and reciprocation through social service within Buddhist circles to be unreasonable.

The responsibility of repaying one’s kindness should be undertaken by all. As we enjoy the fruits of others’ labor and their assistance throughout our lives, we must know how to do the same in return. Only then are we able to repay their kindness.

Upon birth, we depend on our parents to care for us, and on the society to support us. Before graduating from university around the age of twenty, we readily enjoy the benefits of society without contributing much in return.

Despite this, some young people are still frequently dissatisfied with their parents. They are also dissatisfied with their teachers and with others within society. One cannot help but wonder how they

are not the slightest bit grateful when the community has bestowed upon these youths kindness as great as mountains. Is it reasonable to always find grievances and faults in everything?

In my opinion, the first step of character development is learning to repay the kindness of others. As children, we first learn how to repay the kindness of our parents by bringing them joy within the home. As we grow older, we can also express gratitude by being studious, helping our classmates and friends, and even by refraining from condemning our teachers. Even those who are successful became who they are today under the guidance of the teachers they once loathed, so why not be grateful?

Likewise, we should refrain from resentment towards society. For example, consider how news agencies deliver international headlines straight to our doors. Or think about how we enjoy extraordinary productions by performing artists without ever having to leave our homes. Does this not deserve our gratitude?

People who solely take from the world, yet are discontented and ignorant of their mutualistic relationship with others, are deficient and elitist in character. Even if successful enough to become high-ranking government officials or businessmen, they are bureaucratic and profiteering at best.

Every person in this world has shown us kindness in some way. For instance, statements from prominent political leaders of other countries may not have affected us directly, but it may indirectly benefit us economically or policy-wise.

Furthermore, our gratitude should even extend to those who are less fortunate and have received our help, for they provide us a chance to give back to society and to refine our character. As such, being

appreciative when giving to others is also a reciprocation of kindness.

Nowadays, people often seek to benefit themselves and expect the favor of others. However, always being the recipient of gifts given by others is a sign of being impoverished at heart, for the truly wealthy can pay it forward by helping and giving to others. In this context, the purpose of emphasizing the repayment of kindness is to highlight this fundamental principle in how we conduct ourselves. Such is the first step to cultivating a well-rounded character.

Never Disparage



Many Buddhist texts, such as the *Amitabha Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra*, mention a bodhisattva named Sadaparibhuta (“Never Disparaging”) Bodhisattva, who was often present when Sakyamuni Buddha expounded the Dharma.

Whomever Sadaparibhuta Bodhisattva met, he would always say, “I dare not belittle you because you will all become buddhas.” He deeply respected everyone, and never had any hints of arrogance or discrimination. Hence, he was called Sadaparibhuta—he who never disparages.

Are there any practitioners today who dares to call themselves “Never Disparaging?” Who dares to assert that they can never disparage anyone? Sentient beings in this world are filled with afflictions and bad habits, especially pride and jealousy. They fear that others are better than themselves. They worry that they will not be promoted, and are dismayed when not praised. Because of this, many people are unable to admire the accomplishments of others. Instead, they are full of themselves, to the point of being conceited and disdainful.

Even Buddhist practitioners who are unable to emulate the traits of other buddhas and bodhisattvas should aspire to learn from

Sadaparibhuta Bodhisattva's quality of "never disparaging others." This means not considering oneself as superior to sages, family members, and others in society. One shall not belittle the poor and needy, because they have the potential to develop themselves and have a bright future; it is just a matter of when the causes and conditions will arise.

For example, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398) was originally a young novice monk before becoming the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty. Many similar stories of the poor becoming millionaires through hard work and effort can be found throughout the world. Likewise, during the Buddha's time, the dimwitted Cudapanthaka was able to achieve enlightenment and arhatship through diligent cultivation. And Angulimala, originally hostile towards the Buddha, was eventually moved to change his ways and ordained as a monk.

There is no need to belittle anyone, for everyone has their own causes and conditions. Everyone is a flower that blooms in its own time. For instance, Zhu Maicheng (?–115 BCE) from the Han dynasty had a wife who left him in times of poverty, only to ask for a reunion after he was conferred titles of nobility. But the damage had been done and a broken heart is difficult to make complete again. Such is an illustration of what not to do.

Similarly, Su Qin (380–284 BCE) from the Warring States period had all the odds against him. His parents refused to acknowledge him as their son. His wife denied him as her husband. His sister-in-law refused to recognize him as a brother-in-law. Undeterred, he zealously studied *Taigong Bingfa*, a Chinese military classic, and traveled across the six kingdoms to convince them to ally against the state of Qin. Because of this, he was given the honor to wear robes

bearing the insignia of the six kingdoms. When he returned home with glory, his sister-in-law bowed down to the ground to welcome him.

Su Qin asked her, “My sister-in-law, you used to look down on me and ignore me. Why are you greeting me with utmost respect now?”

She replied, “You now have both fame and fortune.”

Su Qin lamented, “People in this world admire the superficial. Can one truly say fame and fortune are unimportant in life?”

In reality, most people only seek results without knowing to work at creating the right causes. Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, prioritize cultivation at the causal stage. They know that success is possible only through the complete cultivation of causes and conditions. To belittle them in the causal stage, we play no part in their success when conditions ripen.



*If everyone could take the
Song of Ten Practices and Cultivations
as a personal practice,
one is already building a personal
pure land here on earth.*

— “Song of the Ten Practices and Cultivations”

Song of the Ten Practices and Cultivations



To attain buddhahood, some Buddhists practice meditation or join meditation retreats, while others focus single-mindedly on chanting the Buddha’s name hoping to be reborn in the Western Pure Land. Some are passionate about learning the Dharma and often participate in Dharma talks, and others enjoy chanting and regularly attending Dharma services in temples. There are also Buddhists that go on pilgrimages, traveling far and wide to visit holy places undismayed by the troublesome and inconvenient journeys.

There are many ways of cultivation in Buddhism—all with the ultimate goal of attaining buddhahood, but rarely do people take cultivation as perfecting their own human character. Truthfully, the priority of cultivation is to become a better person. As the saying goes, “Buddhahood is attained the instant our characters are perfected.” Once human character is perfected, would buddhahood not be far behind?

In truth, cultivation is to be practiced in daily life. It is for this reason that Fo Guang Shan branch temples worldwide promote the “Song of the Ten Practices and Cultivations”:

Practice One: Don't be calculative.

Practice Two: Don't compare.

Practice Three: Be polite.

Practice Four: Always smile.

Practice Five: Don't worry about being disadvantaged.

Practice Six: Be honest and kind.

Practice Seven: Be carefree.

Practice Eight: Speak good words.

Practice Nine: Befriend honorable people.

Practice Ten: Everyone be the Buddha.

If everyone tries these ten practices,

*We shall live in the Buddha's Pure Land of joy
and carefreeness.*

The “Song of the Ten Practices and Cultivations” corresponds to the Dharma, and is also a way of propagating the Dharma through music. Oftentimes, traditional Buddhist liturgy and chanting are obscure in meaning and not clearly understood by people, let alone put into practice. However, this song promotes the Buddha-Dharma in a straightforward and simple manner, in a language that relates closely to daily life. It is easy to comprehend and put into practice.

The origin of the “Song of the Ten Practices and Cultivations” came from my mother when she visited Taiwan in her nineties. One day, to entertain her, I asked, “When we were little, do you remember what you told us to practice? Tell us again how we should practice!”

“Let me tell you how,” said my mother. “Practice one: do this... Practice two: do that...”

As she began to recount, my disciples listened and recorded what

she had said. They remarked that this “Song of the Ten Practices and Cultivations” contained Buddhist teachings that were easily understood even by those unfamiliar with Buddhism.

For instance:

“Practice One: Don’t be calculative.”

In other words, peace in body and mind and carefreeness come to those who are not overly finicky in interpersonal relationships.

Physical and mental peace is achievable when one is not calculative.

“Practice Two: Don’t compare.”

This is a reminder to refrain from the habit of constantly comparing ourselves to other people. Naturally in this way, unnecessary afflictions will not arise and develop.

“Practice Three: Be polite. Practice Four: Always smile.”

This means to be courteous. For example, it is important to show respect, tolerance, humility, and consideration when working with others. In addition, by taking time to greet people, asking how they are doing, and smiling, we will naturally be welcomed and accepted by others.

“Practice Five: Don’t worry about being disadvantaged.”

Being at a disadvantage is a blessing in disguise, for they are opportunities to develop virtue, as well as moments in which we improve and build our characters. As such, we should learn to accept the short end of the stick instead of always seeking out advantages

and looking for a bargain. The constant pursuit of personal gain is marked by greed, selfishness, and wishful thinking.

“Practice Six: Be honest and kind.”

Honesty and kindness are important values in conducting oneself, and are virtues essential to the development of culture and civilization. The two can elevate a person’s life.

“Practice Seven: Be carefree.”

Perhaps an even more important part of cultivation is to lessen our selfishness, attachments, greed, jealousy, and resentment. Only in this way can we be carefree and without affliction.

“Practice Eight: Speak good words.”

This line is a reminder to continually speak good words. It is to cultivate the practice of praising others, for good affinities are naturally developed in this way.

“Practice Nine: Befriend honorable people.”

Put simply, this means to keep ourselves in the company of virtuous people.

“Practice Ten: Everyone will be the Buddha.”

Though the steps outlined in the “Song of Ten Practices and Cultivations” do not lead immediately to the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, one’s pure land on earth is achieved the very moment it is taken as a personal practice.

The way is timeless, for enlightenment is found in the here and

now. The moment we are able to sense our development of morality and integrity through the “Song of the Ten Practices and Cultivation,” do our minds not also experience incomparable tranquility? This is the cultivational benefit that the song brings, which is timeless in its significance.



Responsibility should be taken up with courage.

*Adversity and grievances should be
overcome with fortitude,
and mistakes should be admitted with honesty.*

— “Solving Our Own Problems”

Solving Our Own Problems



Most people think only of their enjoyment when life is happy, fortuitous, and secure. It is only when faced with difficulties and responsibilities that they begin seeking others to help them. In truth, we are the ones who have to shoulder the ups and downs, joys, and sorrows in our lives. When people praise us, we accept it joyfully. When given a good opportunity, we welcome it gratefully. Likewise, when responsibility and adversity come our way, we must also have the courage to accept them. By doing so, the causes and conditions for wisdom and merit are thus accumulated. The courage to maintain responsibility naturally brings empowerment. On the other hand, success is hard to come by through shirking problems away and pushing it to others.

According to the Dharma, although buddhas and bodhisattvas provide guidance, protection, and empowerment, it is important to remember that we are still entirely responsible for the consequences of our wholesome and unwholesome actions. This is similar to how it is unacceptable to frame and incriminate others after committing murder or theft, or expect others to accept punishment on one's behalf. As the saying goes, "The heavens see every act of humankind." There is no escaping from the law of cause and effect. Therefore, we need

to be able to take responsibility for our actions, no matter if they are wholesome, unwholesome, good, or bad.

In other words, we bear the responsibility for the wholesome and unwholesome karma created through our body, speech, and mind. This includes physical actions such as killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. It also includes verbal transgressions such as false speech, abusive words, flattery, and divisive language. Moreover, we bear the consequences of our mental states of greed, hatred, and ignorance. As the saying goes, “You reap what you sow.” If we plant wholesome causes, we will, of course, harvest beneficial results. If we violate and infringe on the freedom of others, we are also the ones to bear our karmic retribution. Nobody can take our place.

Hence, responsibility should be taken up with courage. Adversity and grievances should be overcome with fortitude, and mistakes should be admitted with honesty. Upon making an error, take the blame by admitting that “it’s my mistake,” “it’s my fault,” or “I shouldn’t have done this.” When others hear our sincerity and remorse, they will naturally try to console and advise us. Moreover, they will also help us in resolving and minimizing the problem. In this way, we learn from our mistakes while continuing to grow and improve. Conversely, denying our mistakes, blaming others, and expecting others to intercede are all superficial actions, for we are still held accountable by the law of cause and effect.

In life, we can only rely on ourselves to resolve the problems we encounter. Consequently, do not think that there will be a lucky escape from our actions. Instead of running away from responsibility, shoulder it courageously and proceed to find solutions. As such, this is the way of the wise, and also the attitude needed when dealing with situations.

Be Your Own Mentor



This world of ours is based on relationships between people. Hence, it is called the “human world.” Extending from our direct families to more distant relationships such as friends and people at work—these are all people we have affinities with.

Within these interpersonal affinities, we find people who are willing to help us, and also people who require our help. We find virtuous people, but we are also bound to find some who are ill-mannered. Simply, every person requires assistance of some kind at some point in their life. That is why people seek out mentors in hopes of finding help.

So, who are our mentors? For example, people who help us find a job can be considered mentors. People who point out methods to success can be our mentors. People who help resolve our difficulties can also be mentors. But, in actuality, we do not need to go through painstaking efforts to seek outwards, for we are our closest mentors. So long as our character is wholesome—moral, benevolent, righteous, courteous, and patient—and we are willing to serve others while being diligent and frugal ourselves, people will naturally praise and accept us. In this way, are we not considered our own mentors?

On the other hand, if we conduct ourselves poorly—such as being

erratic, ill-tempered, or unreasonable—and refuse to create affinities with others, people will, of course, be reluctant to accept us. In this case, who would want to mentor us, even when we are looking for an adviser?

It is not easy to find a mentor who can help us in this world. It requires several good causes and conditions to chance upon such a person. The best way is to start by changing ourselves. Be polite to people. Treat others with compassion and patience. Be willing to be at a disadvantage in dealing with interpersonal relationships. Be generous when praising others. Touch people's hearts. Give by serving and helping others. By being capable of the above, we will not only find mentors wherever we go, but we become mentors to others as well.

To illustrate, a practitioner once asked, “We hold the chanting beads to chant ‘*Omitofo* (Amitabha Buddha).’ Then what does Amitabha Buddha chant when he holds the chanting beads?”

Amitabha Buddha also chants “*Omitofo*.” Why does he chant his own name? Because it is better to rely on oneself than on others!

Success does not fall from the sky, nor is it bestowed by anyone else. It is a result of perseverance and hard work. It is difficult to ask for help from people all the time, and praying to deities or buddhas may not always be useful. Only by assuming responsibilities on our own and honing our abilities, can we stand undeterred. Without this, no one—not even the Buddha—can help us. Therefore, we must be our own mentors.

Think Outside the Box



Some people put themselves in a constant state of restlessness as they fight over benefits, opinions, positions, or power. Such a life is surely unhappy and not carefree. Realistically, nothing in this world is perfect; flaws are unavoidable. How does one lead a carefree and contented life in a world of dissatisfaction? Here are four suggestions:

1. Allow others to be right and be willing to be wrong.

Disputes, arguments, and misunderstandings inevitably happen between people. Therefore, people must learn to resolve interpersonal problems in life.

Take the following story:

One day, Mr. Zhang asked Mr. Li, “Why is it that our family always argues and is unable to enjoy a single moment of peace and quiet, while your family is always harmonious and never seems to quarrel?”

“That’s because your family is always right, and my family is always wrong,” answered Mr. Li.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for example, if someone in your family breaks a cup, they wouldn’t think it’s their fault. Instead, they would immediately blame

others for misplacing the cup. To which, others would reply, ‘You’re the one who’s careless and broke the cup.’ This is why the arguments never stop.

“My family is the exact opposite. Everyone openly admits their errors. The person who broke the cup would immediately own up to the mistake, and the other person would also apologize for misplacing the cup. Since everyone in my family admits they are in the wrong, naturally, we enjoy a harmonious relationship.”

If everyone can be considerate and empathic by putting themselves in other people’s shoes, then conflicts and misunderstandings can be reconciled.

2. Allow others to be great and be willing to be small.

A person gains the respect of others through virtue and an honorable reputation, not by conceit and vanity. In Buddhism, there is a bodhisattva named Sadaparibhuta or “Never Disparaging.” To all who looked down upon him, the bodhisattva would reply, “I dare not belittle any of you, for you are all future buddhas.” By having this mentality of allowing others to be great and the willingness to be small, naturally, there will be no disputes.

For instance, in the story of the five fingers who argued over who is the best, they had not anticipated for the pinky to come out triumphant. Even though the pinky finger is the smallest, it is the closest to the buddhas and bodhisattvas when a person joins their palms in respect.⁵ As can be seen, people who long for greatness may not always achieve it. People who think themselves insignificant are not necessarily so, for the most admirable people are those who are patient, tolerant, and magnanimous.

3. Allow others to have and be willing to go without.

Numerous people hope to have more than others and care not if they go without. However, being the only person to have something that nobody else has might incite jealousy and bitterness—how could that possibly be happy?

To go “without” does not mean there is nothing. It means to be without limits, without measure, without exhaustibility, and without bounds. In contrast, “having” something also means having limits, having measure, having end, and having bounds.

For instance, gold is fought over for its value, and hence it is broken and melted down. Stones, on the other hand, remain intact as they are not as valuable. If we connect with the Dharma in terms of spirituality and morality, we realize that the things that are more valuable in life are without shape and form. Value is not determined by something’s appearance, but by how much it has meaning.

4. Allow others to be happy and be willing to suffer.

Seeking personal comfort and happiness at the expense of other people is the basis of worldly disputes. On the surface, those who give happiness to others may appear to be in positions of disadvantage. But in actuality, they are the ones who benefit. If we look at the world, there are numerous examples of people who can withstand the test of time like evergreen trees because of their ability to endure hardship. Conversely, short-sighted people who indulge in laxity, looking for quick fixes, are eliminated by the test of time because of an inability to handle changes that come their way.

To build harmonious interpersonal relationships, it is crucial to allow others to be right and be willing to be wrong. Moreover, it is

important to allow others to be great and be willing to be small. Allow others to have things and be willing to go without. Furthermore, allow others to be happy and be willing to suffer. By doing so, even with differing opinions or methods of doing things, people will still be able to coexist in harmony and peace.

A Step Back Is a Step Forward



Lining up and maintaining order have an important place in Buddhism. As recorded in the sutras, monastics begged for alms in an orderly fashion during the Buddha's time. Likewise, many similar and wonderful traditions can also be found in Chinese culture, such as the following guideline for one's conduct: "amicability, kindness, respectfulness, frugality, and endurance." Society and interpersonal relationships could be so harmonious and enjoyable if everyone were able to uphold these virtues.

But, it is a pity that these fine traditions are no longer practiced in the same way. For instance, there was a New Year's celebration stampede that occurred in 2014. The incident, which took place at Chen Yi Square along the Bund in Shanghai, resulted in thirty-six deaths and forty-nine injured.

As can be seen, people today push and shove to get what they want, and are unwilling to yield to others. Some people shove their way past police officers just to squeeze into a concert earlier than others. Some people break through security to take pictures or shake hands with celebrities. Because nobody wants to line up, even if there is a queue, there will always be somebody who tries to cut the line and refuses to follow instructions. How can society achieve equality and

stability without protocols or standards? As the call to revive Chinese culture grows today, virtues of humility and taking a step back should be reinforced and encouraged.

Lining up and humility are indispensable virtues and standards of a civilized society. For example, there is a park in Hawaii where it took only an old man and a child to maintain order in a crowd of thousands of people. Using only their fingers to direct traffic, they were able to keep the whole park orderly and quiet as everyone followed their signals. Conversely, in some countries, people do not follow any rules or discipline. Even if an area were to be roped off or a wall were to be built, people would still try to trespass.

Most people feel that there is something to be gained by rushing and pushing. However, what we see before us is only half of the world—there is another half behind us. The world before us is a narrow door. When everyone tries to get in by breaking their necks, no one is left unscathed. Suppose we were to take a step back into the world behind us that is disregarded by most people. Having this entire half of the world, would the ease and carefreeness not be incomparable?

There is a poem that goes:

*With my hands, I plant a field full of rice seedlings,
As I lower my head, I discover the sky in the water;
To purify the six sensory roots is truly the Way,
A step back is actually a step forward.*

A rice field can only be planted successfully by stepping backward. Therefore, there is a profound philosophy in the virtue of humility, for it broadens one's horizon.

By taking a step back, it allows room for improvement and harmonious interpersonal relationships. This world does not belong to any individual, but everyone. Therefore, no matter what we do, it is important to be humble and mindful of others at any given time and place. Only in this way will people accept us. This is especially important in a group, for peace and harmony is only achievable when people are willing to yield and show consideration to others.

The famous Chinese opera, *The General Makes Peace with the Grand Chancellor*, is an illustration of this exemplary act of humanity. It follows the story of General Lian Po's feelings of inferiority towards Grand Chancellor Lin Xiangru being awarded a higher rank. As a result, he vows to humiliate Lin Xiangru whenever they cross paths. But to keep the country united, Lin Xiangru avoids confrontation with Lian Po by enduring the ridicule of being called a coward. Realizing this, Lian Po personally visits Lin Xiangru and expresses his remorse by tying thorny branches to his back.

As such, do not take humility and yielding to others to be insignificant, for these are the virtues that contribute to personal growth and societal harmony. Therefore, in our revitalization and promotion of culture, the merits of lining up and "taking a step back" should be emphasized as well.



*“Where there is the Dharma, there is a way”
serves as a reminder to cultivate strengths of
faith, wisdom, meditative concentration,
and self-awareness within ourselves.*

— “Where There Is the Dharma, There Is a Way”

Where There Is the Dharma, There Is a Way



A devotee once asked me, “You often say that where there is the Dharma, there is a way. What are the Dharma and the way referring to?”

“Compassion, wisdom, tolerance, equality—as well as expedient and skillful means—are the Dharma,” I answered.

The renowned King Asoka of India (similar to China’s first emperor of the Qin dynasty) waged numerous battles across the country. Although he was victorious and his power extended across the land, people still hated him wherever he went. He knew he had yet to win over their hearts. Afterward, because of his conversion to Buddhism, Asoka transformed his way of ruling the kingdom to one of loving-kindness, compassion, and benevolence. As his subjects enjoyed peace and prosperity, Asoka became widely loved and respected for his virtues. Crowds of people even welcomed and cheered for Asoka on the streets during his travels. Touched by such a sight, Asoka said in praise, “Victory amassed through power is not true victory. The Dharma, however, can overcome everything. Only when the Dharma prevails is it a true victory!”

This is the spirit of equality and the selfless magnanimity of Buddhism. Only with selflessness can unwholesome desires and

cravings be overcome, and ultimate freedom of the body and mind be attained.

In the Chan school, there is a saying that goes, “In the presence of plum blossoms, the same moon outside the window is then different.” When the Buddha-Dharma is applied appropriately, one’s state of being will be elevated. “Where there is the Dharma, there is a way” mainly serves as a reminder to cultivate strengths of faith, wisdom, meditative concentration, and self-awareness within ourselves. By uncovering these Dharma treasures, we are naturally able to go anywhere with ease.

For example, many couples experience insecurity in their relationships and fear being cheated on. But if both partners can abstain from sexual misconduct as outlined in the Five Precepts, support one another with empathetic kind words, and remember their initial vows, then family harmony can be guaranteed.

Moreover, people hope for wealth, reputation, career, or harmony in their lives. In actuality, a good reputation comes from refraining from false speech and speaking good words. Wealth, contentment, and peace comes from being generous and not stealing.

In Buddhism, worldly phenomena are also known as afflictive phenomena because they are unable to be understood without the wisdom of the Dharma, even despite having abundant fortune or a loving family. As such, it is difficult to detach from the Five Desires and Six Sense Objects. Naturally, one’s state of being remains unelevated, drifting along with the flow of afflictions and creating actions that lead to continuous suffering. Conversely, learning and practicing the Buddha-Dharma allows us to perceive the nature of samsara and the truth of the world: dependent origination. In other

words, everything in this world arises and ceases in constant flux.

By perceiving the truth of life, we are then able to let go of attachments. As such, liberation from afflictions can be found. Motivation can be found despite dejection. Moreover, lethargy can be transformed into motivation. Hatred can be transformed into loving-kindness. “Where there is Dharma, there is a way”—this phrase signifies that when our minds are filled with the Dharma bliss of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, meditative concentration, and tranquility, we will not mire in the delusive happiness of the Five Desires. In this way, the ups and downs in life can be faced with a peaceful mind.

The Buddha-Dharma provides a wondrous way of life. Like a soldier fully equipped with ammunition, a person filled with Dharma joy is equipped with a tranquil mind. Consequently, it matters not whether they are in a prosperous or impoverished environment, whether they are faced with praise or ridicule, honored or defamed by others. In any situation, they can resolve and overcome difficulties with wisdom, and build a path filled with bright prospects in their lives.



*The Buddha has long told us that ailments
serve as inspirations for practitioners to cultivate
towards the path to enlightenment.*

*Therefore, illness should not be despised,
as they are contributory factors to one's practice.*

— “Befriending Illness”

Befriending Illness



Illness discriminates against no one, not even heroes and warriors. Everyone is more or less prone to illness. Nonetheless, I thought myself to be quite healthy when I was young. Even when I experienced toothaches or eye pain, I dared not tell anyone. As such, I came up with the idea that time would be the best cure.

This idea no longer worked for me as I grew older. After several experiences of starvation, I was diagnosed with diabetes around age forty. Since then, I have lived with diabetes for over fifty years, which is uncommon for most people today.

Diabetes itself is not fatal, but its related complications can affect the quality of life. While there are many dietary restrictions for diabetics, I had yet to follow the doctor's advice in reducing my intake of rice and noodles. Because there was nothing else left to eat, filling up my stomach and preventing hunger was more important than the issue of life and death.

Eventually, diabetes affected my vision, heart, and blood vessels. I underwent major heart surgery and twice suffered a stroke. Now in my nineties, I am old, handicapped, and inconvenienced when it comes to moving around. Fortunately, with the assistance of a wheelchair and my disciples, I can still joyfully carry on with my

daily activities. For example, I write calligraphy, give Dharma talks, converse with devotees, and meet with disciples. As a result, I now have a new idea—a new perspective in which to face illness—which is to befriend it.

Do not despise illness, for it will not disappear even if disliked. Do not disregard illness either, for it is impending when ignored. Doing so would be like facing an imminent flood without precautionary measures. Instead, I befriend my illness. Though I do not welcome it, I do not despise it either. When it comes, I regard it as a friend. In the end, I do not even take myself to be sick even when physically ill. It is as the *Heart Sutra* says, “The mind has neither worry nor obstruction. Without worry and obstruction, there is no fear.” By practicing this, we learn to be at ease in all circumstances and make peace with every encounter in life.

As I befriended my illnesses, hospital directors, attending physicians, and medical experts from renowned hospitals across Taiwan also became my friends and offered to treat me. Apart from allowing time to do the healing, my mindset and habit of befriending illness have allowed me to reach my nineties. Despite my weakening body, I do not think of it as suffering. Rather, I am very content with my life. I am grateful that my illnesses also treat me as their friend and we coexist in mutual respect without much trouble.

I have been asked, “As a Buddhist practitioner with the title ‘Venerable Master,’ why do you still suffer from so many illnesses?” In actuality, the Buddha has long told us that ailments serve as inspirations for practitioners to cultivate towards the path to enlightenment. Therefore, illness should not be despised, as they are contributory factors to one’s practice. When we befriend our illnesses, we learn to develop our worth and be our own mentors.

Austerities



“Suffering” is probably the most frequently encountered word for newcomers to Buddhism. People are ordinarily afraid of suffering, but in truth, experiences of suffering can be helpful and beneficial to one’s growth. Suffering allows us to temper ourselves. Suffering allows us to elevate ourselves. Suffering allows us to learn and transcend. As the saying goes, “The worst of times can bring out the best in people.” How can academic success be achieved without years of diligent study? How can a good performance on stage be given without years of previous training?

As such, anyone who wishes to be successful must undergo a certain period of arduous training. Learning itself is not suffering. By wholeheartedly immersing oneself, the process of learning can be a rather enjoyable experience. Likewise, spiritual cultivation, and even the practice of austerities, is not suffering either. It is what brings out the joy of Chan and the Dharma. True practitioners take suffering to be blissful, in which immeasurable joy is found.

For instance, some people find chanting the Buddha’s name a burdensome task, while others find it joyful. Some people find prostrating to the Buddha laborious, while others find it pleasant. Some people take the act of giving to be a kind of suffering, while

others delight in doing wholesome deeds. Some people think that treating others well and forming affinities to be a pain, while others think altruism is the basis of happiness. It all depends on how we define and look at suffering. By finding joy in the experience of suffering, using it as a lesson in cultivation and transcendence, one's faith will surely be elevated as a result.

Nevertheless, many ascetic practices existed in the past which were irrational. For example, some fire-worshippers believed burning and prostrating to fire by rivers to be cultivation. If this were true, then would not the sticks and grass be cultivating while they burn in the process? Other heretics thought immersing themselves in water was a form of cultivation. If so, does that mean fish and prawns are also great practitioners? Moreover, some ascetics believed that eating without the use of hands was a spiritual practice. In this case, would birds not be considered the best practitioners? Austerities like these are irrational.

Even today, the traditions of certain temples encourage erroneous ways of cultivation that do not benefit anyone but themselves. Some places teach that wearing rags and eating cold leftovers are considered practices of true cultivation. In truth, these acts do not benefit even oneself. What then is the daily cultivation of an enlightened practitioner? The state of enlightenment is no different from the norm. The sun, the moon, and interpersonal relationships remain the same as always. The state before enlightenment can be summed up through the following verse: "Not eating when it is time to eat, as the mind is preoccupied with a hundred things. Not sleeping when it is time to sleep, since the mind is bothered by a thousand concerns." The difference is that an enlightened person can eat when it is time to

eat and sleeps well when it is time to sleep. This is what is considered the best method of cultivation.

This is why the Buddha criticized the austerities practiced by the ninety-six Indian heterodox sects as being not in accordance with the Dharma. True practices of austerity are guided by teachings outlined by the Noble Eightfold Path and the middle path. It does not fall into extremes, nor does it subject people to discriminatory methods of external pain or pleasure. True cultivation is training the mind.

In the *Diamond Sutra*, it states “to give rise to a mind that does not abide in anything.” This phrase does not mean abandoning everything. Rather, it is an emphasis on the Buddhist teaching of taking the middle path. A practice that is too bitter can cause a person to be cold and unapproachable. On the other hand, it is easy to get lost in a practice that is too comfortable and joyful. Therefore, true Buddhist practice is neither too strenuous nor too placid. It is a path that is between suffering and bliss, and takes the ordinary mind as the way. Consequently, only practices that accord with a regulated lifestyle and the middle path can be considered Buddhist methods of cultivation.



*Do I qualify as a Buddhist monastic
with my austerity practice, loving-kindness,
compassion, patience, and wisdom?*

— “Eminent Masters Are Born from Austerities”

Eminent Masters Are Born from Austerities



A lay Buddhist is known as a devotee, for they are considered as ideal Buddhists if they are devoted to the faith, practice wholesome deeds, and form good affinities. On the other hand, Buddhist monastics are known as practitioners. A practitioner needs to fulfill the practices of austerities as a way to “perfect the three types of awakening and fulfill all virtues.” If austerities are not fulfilled, enlightenment is not easily attained.

Since ancient times, nearly all eminent masters have practiced austerities for at least eight to ten years. They often struggled with hunger, labor, adversities, and grievances, but emerged successful through these hardships.

Aside from austerities, they also practiced loving-kindness and compassion through serving the community and relieving others from suffering and calamities. Without great aspiration, they cannot give others affinity or joy. Without benefiting others, it means the depth of their cultivation cannot grow.

Furthermore, practitioners must also have great patience. Even in the face of adversity, bullying, suppression, injustice, or grievance, they must embrace it all willingly. Therefore, a practitioner’s fortitude and prajna wisdom should be higher than others. They

must perceive worldly phenomena with awareness and clarity, and be able to pick up and let go at ease. Moreover, they should not be calculative or competitive about their advantages and disadvantages; their only concern should be about morality and righteousness. Only practitioners with such a level of spiritual practice can become role models for others, and be remembered and praised as eminent masters.

Take Chan Master Fushan Fayuan of China as an example. Before he attained enlightenment, he heard about renowned Chan Master Guixing in the northern state of Ye. Consequently, Fayuan invited Chan Master Tianyi Yihuai and eight others to travel there and study under Guixing. They traveled during wintertime, and the weather was cold and snowing when they arrived. When Guixing saw them, he immediately scolded them and refused to provide them with accommodation. However, as none of them would leave, Guixing took a bucket of water and splashed it onto them.

They were left dripping wet and standing outside in the freezing weather. Some of the other students could bear it no longer and left in a fury—except for Fayuan and Yihuai, both of whom remained kneeling.

Guixing shouted again, “Why are you still here? Are you waiting for me to send you away with a stick?”

Fayuan answered sincerely, “We have traveled hundreds of miles to learn from you. How can a bucket of water or a stick send us away?”

Impressed with their answer, Guixing finally admitted them as his students.

Fayuan was then assigned work in the kitchen. One time, without prior notice, he used the oil and flour from the kitchen to cook five-flavored congee to offer to everyone in the monastery. Guixing was

extremely angry when he found out, and said to Fayuan, “You have stolen from the monastery for personal offering. Not only will you be punished according to the precepts, but you will also need to pay for the amount you took.”

After that, Fayuan received thirty strikes. His clothes, alms bowl, and sitting mat were confiscated and returned to the monastery, then he was expelled.

Although Fayuan was expelled, he refused to leave. Every night, he slept under the eaves of the monastery hallway. To repay his debt, he went out to chant the sutras to earn donations. When Guixing learned of this, he scolded Fayuan again, “These doors and hallways are properties of the monastic establishment. If you want to stay here, you need to pay rent to the monastery.”

Remaining unfazed, Fayuan continued to beg for alms and chant the sutras in town to earn donations. One day, Guixing announced to everyone in the monastery, “Fayuan is a true Dharma vessel for the practice of Chan.” Guixing then asked his attendant to invite Fayuan into the meditation hall. Before the assembly, Guixing handed over his robe and transferred the abbotship to Fayuan. From then on, Fayuan was referred to as Chan Master Fayuan Yuanjian.

Likewise, Milarepa, a Tibetan master, shared a similar experience when he took refuge under the great teacher Marpa to learn the Dharma. As a test, Marpa instructed Milarepa to construct a stone house on top of the eastern mountain. However, when the house was built halfway, Marpa ordered Milarepa to demolish it. This process of constructing and demolishing went on three times. By then, Milarepa’s back was bruised and wounded from carrying the building materials, and he was suffering from excruciating pain.

When Milarepa finally completed a building after constructing for days and nights, Marpa drove him away furiously and reprimanded, “Where are your offerings? Do you think building a house is sufficient?”

Milarepa was very despondent upon hearing this. For the sake of receiving the Dharma, he built houses and endured injuries to his back, but he was still scolded by his master.

Marpa’s wife consoled Milarepa and told him to pretend to leave. When Marpa heard of this, he instantly took out a whip and started flogging Milarepa.

“You ungrateful wretch!” he yelled. “Didn’t you offer your body, speech, and mind to me? Where do you think you are going?”

Just like this, Milarepa endured countless tempering, scolding, and beatings from his teacher, but he endured all the trials and tribulations. When Milarepa finally attained enlightenment, he and his teacher embraced each other in tears. Marpa knew from the beginning that Milarepa’s unique potential was rare. As the saying goes, “It takes a skilled hand to turn out a jade bracelet.” Without the process of tempering, how could there be a genuine vessel?

Therefore, to all practitioners of today—having learned about the experiences and conducts of these eminent masters, reflect upon this: “Do I qualify as a Buddhist monastic with my practice of austerities, loving-kindness, compassion, patience, and wisdom?”

Stick and Shout



The Chan School has some extraordinary ways of teaching. For instance, the master may not speak to the student for three or five years. Sometimes, the master strikes, kicks, or shouts at the student without reason. Other times, the master deliberately gives the student a hard time by being ruthless and refusing to teach when it is obviously possible to do so. Raising a brow, winking an eye, mocking, or scolding—these are all ways in which the teacher prompts the student to self-reflect and realize the teachings.

For example, Chan Master Niaoke had an attendant who had followed him for sixteen years. And yet Niaoke had never spoken a word of the Dharma to him. Finally, his attendant felt he had no choice but to leave.

Before departure, Niaoke asked, “Why are you leaving?”

“To learn the Dharma elsewhere,” the attendant replied. “I have served you for sixteen years, but you have never taught me Dharma.”

Niaoke then pulled out a strand of fiber from his clothes and asked, “Isn’t this the Dharma?”

“Oh!” exclaimed the attendant, and immediately attained realization.

Without sixteen years of training, even if the Chan Master were to

present an entire outfit, he would not be enlightened, let alone a single thread or a piece of cloth.

The Chan tradition is filled with anecdotes such as Deshan's stick and Linji's shouts. There is also Mazu's shout that deafened Baizhang for three days. And also gong'ans about receiving thirty strikes whether speaking or not. Students are expected to comprehend the insights of Chan through sticks and shouts, and dispel ignorance through a clap of thunder. Compared to today's education that emphasizes encouragement over punishment, is the education method by the Chan school appropriate? That would depend on the individual's aptitude.

According to the Chan School, those of higher aptitude can withstand the teaching method of sticks and shouts. Those of intermediate aptitude can be taught by common methods, whereas those of lower aptitude are difficult to teach even with courteous methods. The emphasis is not on the teaching method of hitting and shouting, but on understanding the aptitude of the students. This can be likened to examining soil quality when fields of the same size yield different quantities of crop.

Despite being put through hardship for decades by his teacher, the great Tibetan master Milarepa never gave up his training. When Milarepa finally attained enlightenment, both master and student embraced each other and wept. His teacher cried tears of joy, "Where else can I find an excellent student like you? When I see you suffer under my harsh training, my heart aches too. But finally, you are awakened." Such is the unique affinity between master and student.

Similarly, when Huineng the Sixth Patriarch visited the Fifth Patriarch, he labored for eight months without receiving any

teachings. However, he was enlightened when the time was ripe. Conversely, National Master Huizhong had an attendant who served him for thirty years. Despite Huizhong's compassionate teachings, the attendant lacked the aptitude and never attained enlightenment.

Therefore, the issue of Chan teaching methods depends largely on the student's skills and aptitude, not on the teachers. I believe that the teaching methods of Chan School still have its value in today's education system and should not be overgeneralized as merely sticks and shout, hitting and scolding. Such criticism is not befitting as it is not always the case. Ultimately, Chan teaching methods transcend all.



*For monastics,
material possessions should be few,
while understanding of Buddhist texts and teachings
should be ample.*

— “A Monastic’s Possessions”

A Monastic's Possessions



What belongings can a monastic have? Narrowly speaking, monastics are only allowed to have two-and-a-half catties of clothing. However, in a broader sense, monastics also have the entire universe as they embrace all Dharma realms within their minds. Therefore, what exactly can a monastic have?

Setting the theoretical argument aside and focusing on the practical, it is obvious that monastics today require a complete set of clothes. When an itinerant monastic wishes to lodge at a monastery, they bring not only themselves but their clothes as well. Monasteries will only accept those who possess three robes and an alms bowl, or sufficient winter gear.

Times have changed. For example, monastics today can use fountain pens or ballpoint pens for writing. While there are no restrictions regarding this in the precepts, one should still refrain from having too much and being wasteful. Likewise, monastics can even own watches for better time management. While monasteries in the past relied on bell and board signals to tell the time, today's society has changed and a monastery operating traditionally is rarely seen. As one has to be self-reliant in managing time, it is not a transgression to own a watch.

What about owning a car? The answer depends on the role and responsibility of the monastic. For instance, what is the purpose of owning a car? If it was for leisure and recreation then, of course, it is prohibited. However, if it was for Dharma propagation, then it is allowed.

In the past, bhiksus who practiced asceticism could only have eighteen possessions. They were:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Three robes | 2. Alms bowl |
| 3. Willow twigs (toothbrush) | 4. Soap |
| 5. Water container | 6. Sitting mat |
| 7. Walking staff | 8. Censer |
| 9. Incense box | 10. Water filter |
| 11. Hand towel | 12. Blade |
| 13. Flint | 14. Tweezers |
| 15. Folding seat | 16. Sutra and Vinaya scriptures |
| 17. Image of the Buddha | 18. Image of bodhisattvas |

Take the example of the walking staff. It was used as a tool for self-protection when itinerant monastics travel through remote areas and chance upon wild animals. Moreover, if monastics encountered animal carcasses along the way, they could use the walking staff to bury the creatures. Not only was it inappropriate to ignore these creatures, but it was also a chance to practice loving-kindness and compassion towards all beings.

Another example of an important—if not the most—possession for a monastic is the ordination certificate. It is an official proof of identity that monastics are required to show before being allowed to stay at a monastery.

No matter what kind of monastery one chooses to stay at, whether large or small, all its properties and valuables come from the offerings of devotees from the ten directions. They belong to the monastic establishment and the multitude, and should not be regarded as personal belongings. This is why monastics should limit their possessions and refrain from wanting luxury and wealth.

A Buddhist shrine can be majestically adorned, but a monastic should lead a frugal lifestyle and find joy in cultivation. For monastics, material possessions should be few, while understanding of Buddhist texts and teachings should be ample. Consequently, today's Buddhist monastics should decide wisely on what they should and should not possess.



*Is there a vast land spreading across your mind?
If there is, crops of all kinds would grow within.
Just go along with causes and conditions,
and you will discover that you will have without wanting.*

— “Having by Not Wanting”

Having by Not Wanting



“Not wanting” is a practice of not being greedy, attached, or overly desirous towards worldly possessions. Given that all phenomena have their causes and conditions, they take their natural course and cannot be forced in place. In other words, what is meant to be ours will come, what is not meant to be ours will not happen even if we insist. This is how interesting the ways of causes and conditions are!

For example, just as a farmer is about to water the vegetables he just planted, a gentle rain starts to fall. Are these causes and conditions not favorable? Or in another example, just as a Dharma teacher is looking for a venue to hold a Dharma talk, someone suddenly shows up to say they have a space that can be used. Are these causes and conditions not fortuitous? Even if one looked to book or borrow a venue, it does not necessarily guarantee that space would be available. However, with good affinities, everything will come together.

It can be likened to an unexpected gift presented by others. Even though it had not been sought after, it still has to be accepted upon the insistence of the gifter. How can it be rejected? As such, it is possible to “have without wanting.” Moreover, the importance of cultivating meritorious causes and conditions can also be seen. As long as we have a sincere wish to form affinities with others, and put in the effort

to sow seeds, we will eventually reap what has been planted.

“Having by not wanting” does not mean being greedy, nor does it mean pursuing things through underhanded means. Instead, it comes from an understanding that since everything has its causes and conditions, some things are meant to be ours while others are not. We often hear news of robbery or fraud occurring within society. More often than not, people are motivated to commit these crimes because of the craving to “have something.” Instead, they end up with “nothing” when punished by the law, so what was the use of pursuing it in the first place?

There is no need to be jealous of what others have. They have their causes and conditions, but we can also proactively cultivate our own affinities if we lack of them. How to do so? For instance, we can offer a bit of money if we have some upon seeing the poor. We can offer helpful information about job opportunities for unemployed people. With just a few words, we can resolve a person’s difficulties. These are all examples of giving others causes and conditions. As we keep giving, people will naturally repay the favor.

For this reason, I have advocated the Four Givings—give others faith, give others joy, give others hope, and give others convenience—as the Working Motto of Fo Guang Shan in its early days of establishment. In this way, I wish to encourage everyone to practice wholesome deeds for others and broadly form good affinities.

My life can be characterized by having by not wanting. Additionally, I also follow the philosophy of “having everything without having anything.” The two practices are the same. Nevertheless, how can a person have everything without having anything?

When speaking to monastics, particularly those in their youth, I

frequently mention the Philosophy of the Ten Withouts⁶. “Not having anything” is far greater than “having something.” This is because there is always a definite limit to existence or how much a person has, but on the other hand, emptiness—or what a person does not have—is infinite and immeasurable.

Furthermore, emptiness can give rise to existence. For example, a dry lake may be without aquatic life, but once it rains and fills the lake, fish will begin to appear. A plot of land may be unkempt, but when cultivated and sown with seeds, it will spring to life with flora. Nature and the universe, too, come into existence through causes and conditions.

Similarly, can your mind be likened to a body of water? If so, treasures of all kinds will naturally be found within. Is your heart likened to a vast plot of land? If so, crops of all kinds will naturally grow within. Follow the causes and conditions, and you will discover having is made possible by not wanting.



*Filial piety is something that can
be practiced by monastics as well.*

*The key to honoring one's parents as a monastic
is to cultivate well, contribute to Buddhism,
and be accomplished in one's practice.*

— “Monastics Are Without Families”

Monastics Are Without Families



It is common to hear people say, “Monastics are without families!” However, this phrase is easily misunderstood if not perceived in depth. For instance, there was once a monastic who inaptly wrote a letter to his family upon renunciation: “I am severing all ties with you, and will keep no contact under any circumstances even upon death!” In contrast, the Buddha cared for his family after his enlightenment. He returned to his hometown of Kapilivastu to teach the Dharma to his cousins, and again when his father passed away to carry his father’s coffin. The Buddha also traveled to Trayastrimsa Heaven to teach his mother the Dharma as an act of gratitude for giving birth to him. With so many expedient means and manifestations showing the Buddha’s care to the family, how can it be said that monastics abandon their family after renunciation?

The phrase, “monastics are without families,” mainly serves as a reminder that monastics should abide in the Dharma and take everywhere as their home. Their focus has shifted from familial and romantic relationships to letting go of attachments and transcending afflictions.

Although monastics practice world-transcending teachings, it is still their responsibility to guide their families to practice the

Dharma. How can they liberate all beings if they do not even liberate their family? Therefore, monastics should be even more filial to their parents, especially in old age. They cannot be disregarded and neglected just because one has renounced.

However, how does a monastic balance their spiritual practice and familial relationships? According to Master Lianchi (1532–1612), there are three levels of filial piety in Buddhism:

1. The elementary level is to look after and provide for one's parents.
2. The intermediate level is to bring honor to one's family and ancestors.
3. The highest level is to guide one's family towards faith and the path to buddhahood.

The first two levels are worldly forms of filial piety because they only last for the present lifetime. Though filled with filial harmony and reverence, a family will still inevitably experience suffering when separated in life and death. Though a family business may flourish and thrive in success, its fortune can still be easily destroyed overnight, for nothing stays permanent. Hence, the highest level of piety is to guide one's parents towards right faith and the development of bodhi wisdom, so that they are never reborn in the lower realms.

For example, my teacher Venerable Master Zhikai wrote a letter to my mother shortly after I renounced, thanking her for letting me be his disciple. The letter began with, "Dear wise family-in-law." Because of this, I realized that parents of Buddhist monastics can be likened to "in-laws" of the monastery. Although some families of Fo Guang Shan monastics were initially unhappy and could not understand their children's decision to renounce, the majority are now supportive of

their aspirations. Furthermore, they came to realize that the future was just as bright for their children through Buddhist undertakings in culture, education, and the arts.

Likewise, the parents' future also depends on the contributions of their monastic children to Buddhism. Monastics who diligently contribute to Buddhism will find their parents well-taken care of by the monastery. Conversely, those who are lazy and lethargic find no place in Buddhism, let alone for their parents.

Consequently, filial piety is something that can be practiced by monastics as well. The key to honoring one's parents as a monastic is to cultivate well, contribute to Buddhism, and be accomplished in one's practice. In this way, they are, by extent, parents of the entire monastic community and will be well looked after. In short, filial piety in Buddhism depends on the cultivation of each monastic. With diligent practice on the path, one's parents will naturally be taken care of.

Nevertheless, while monastics should be filial to their parents, they should neither be encumbered by familial relationships nor blur the line between family and monastery. For example, some temple authorities appoint their relatives to run the temple. It is a true pity to see the integrity of Buddhism ruined by such selfishness and greed, rather than to the benefit of all beings.



*The most important qualification for renunciation
is to have faith
and the disposition of a monastic.*

— “Age for Renunciation”

Age for Renunciation



What are the qualifications needed to become a monastic? In the past, some temples only allowed people to renounce after donating a sufficient amount of money, or after several years of hard labor. Sometimes, a temple had no choice but to ordain a noble who chose to renounce. Moreover, people who chose to renounce could come from all walks of life—even including robbers who had decided to turn over a new leaf, bankrupted businessmen with heavy debts, and disheartened lovers seeking to heal their broken hearts.

Of course, the backgrounds of people who renounce are all different. Some are old, while others are young. Some are men and some are women. Nevertheless, since many of these people had renounced without examination or probation, it is little wonder that the monastic community is a mixture of both the good and the bad.

In regards to renunciation, the *Maharatnakuta Sutra* lists the following four levels:

1. Renounced both physically and mentally
2. Renounced mentally but not physically
3. Renounced physically but not mentally (refers to people living in temples but with a mind still consumed by worldly affairs)
4. Neither physically nor mentally renounced (refers to people

without faith or regard for Buddhism)

In actuality, the most important qualification for renunciation is to have faith and the disposition of a monastic. First, one needs to have the aspiration to transcend and to let go of the Five Desires and Six Sense Objects. Additionally, one needs to be willing to broadly form good affinities and to benefit others through kindness and compassion. Or, one needs to have significant experience and understanding of the Buddha-Dharma, firm faith in the fundamental Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truth and Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, and the ability to practice both Chan and Pure Land. Renunciation is only meaningful when one has these qualities.

However, Buddhist monastic communities today often widely accept all those who wish to renounce without prior assessment or examination. This inevitably leads to a mixture of both good and bad people. In particular, some young children have renounced at the monastery because their parents were unable to raise them. Some seniors chose to renounce because they did not have children or anyone to depend on. As monasteries turn into children's homes and senior centers, the propagation of Buddhism is compromised. How then can Buddhism prosper under such circumstances?

As recorded in Buddhist texts, young children who have renounced are still expected to fulfill certain duties for the monastery, such as chasing crows away and making sure that the monastery compounds are clean. This is why they are called "crow-chasing sramaneras." There are also restrictions for seniors who have renounced above the age of sixty-five. They are only allowed to receive the precepts for sramaneras, and not those of bhiksus.

Even so, the renunciation system today lacks a rigorous assessment

of its candidates. Just as educational institutes in society generally require students to take entrance exams before accepting them, how can someone renounce without first being evaluated? If criteria for becoming a monastic are not set, how can the sangha possibly thrive?

Without established regulations or precepts regarding those who aspire to renounce, a handful of people without faith in Buddhism can masquerade as monastics, bringing trouble to the monastic community. As a result, some critics ridicule monastics as being “dependents of the Buddha,” “occupational monks,” or even “parasitic monks.” How sad and disappointing it is to think about this!



*The age of renunciation—
whether younger or older—
is insignificant.*

*What is important, however,
is a monastic's practice
after their renunciation.*

— “Renunciation in Youth or Adulthood”

Renunciation in Youth or Adulthood



Some people choose to renounce in their youth and others later in life. Is it better to become a monastic at a younger or older age? Actually, this question is not that important.

Joining the monastic order at a young age has its advantages and disadvantages. Similarly, renouncing later in life is not necessarily good or bad. Despite being older and having stronger habitual tendencies, people who renounce in their midlife are more experienced in dealing with interpersonal issues. In the sangha community, the number of people who have renounced as youths and adults is fairly divided.

Nonetheless, discrepancies in achievement are not caused by the age of renunciation. It is determined by how diligent a monastic is in their practice.

Throughout the history of the spread of Buddhism, youths are said to be of utmost importance. Irrespective of physical age, Buddhism emphasizes being a youthful bodhisattva—both at heart and in practice—for all.

For instance, unlike deities, buddhas and bodhisattvas are not depicted in images as having beards. This shows the importance of being youthful in mind and spirit, regardless of when a person

renounces in life. For both youth and adult renunciants alike, the way to becoming an upright disciple of the humanistic Buddha begins with practicing compassion and patience, as well as the aspiration to serve society.

Looking back in history, there are many precedents of eminent masters renouncing later in life. Notable examples include Master Lianchi (who became the first of the Four Masters of the Ming Dynasty), Chan Master Yongming Yanshou, and Chan Master Congjian of the Tang Dynasty. In modern times, Masters Hongyi and Xuyun also renounced in their middle age.

Likewise, the examples of monastics who had renounced in their teenage years are also countless. To name a few, there are Master Dao'an of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, Master Zhiyi of the Sui Dynasty, as well as Masters Jianzhen and Xuanzang of the Tang dynasty. Modern examples of accomplished monastics who had renounced as youths include Master Taixu, Venerable Zhenguang of Baoding, Venerable Xincheng of Zhenjiang, and Venerable Longxiang of Nanjing.

As can be seen, the age of renunciation—whether younger or older—is insignificant. What is important, however, is a monastic's practice after their renunciation. In my opinion, austerities should be practiced for at least the first ten years. This can be likened to the Chinese saying, "Persevere ten long years in one's studies despite hardships." When a monastic chooses to travel afterward and learn for a certain number of years, they will discover that their understanding of Buddhist schools and their respect for virtuous predecessors have increased as a result of their previous decade of practice. The first ten years of practicing austerities, compassion, and patience under the guidance of one's teachers are what develop monastic character.

Naturally, one's temperament, ideology, and understanding will not be the same.

Consequently, we should not be stingy with compliments towards people who have become monastics at a young age, nor should we look down on older people when they have renounced. In fact, was not Sakyamuni Buddha midway along his journey in life when he renounced? So, why then do people claim older renunciants cannot attain enlightenment?



*Chan associates desire neither materialistic
nor luxurious lifestyles.*

*They seek only to teach the Dharma
whenever and wherever
causes and conditions bring them.*

— “Chan Associates”

Chan Associates



In ancient China, it was common for monastics to travel and learn from various monasteries. Out of the many, those with ample experience in the meditation halls were addressed as “Chan associates⁷.” However, due to the dwindling number of meditation halls and an increase in the age of Chan monastics as well as their scarcity, Chan associates are now hardly seen. Even the term itself has slowly disappeared with time. When was the term “Chan associate” last heard?

The use of the term “Chan associate” is closely connected to the flourishing of Buddhism. It is only used as an honorific for eminent monastics who teach the Dharma and the practice of Chan accordingly through their actions and words. Living virtuously through simplicity and contentment, these “Chan associates” seek neither fame nor gain as their only intent is to guide and instruct younger generations. With this spirit in mind, some Chan associates sit in the meditation hall for decades, while others stay in thatched huts. Some spend their days in retreat, while others seek to benefit both self and others by traveling and learning.

For example, there is a Chan gong’an about an old monk drying mushrooms that clearly illustrates the state of mind of a Chan associate.

When the Japanese Zen Master Dogen was visiting a monastery in China, he came across an old monk in his eighties drying mushrooms in the hottest time of the day. Unable to bear the sight, Dogen tried to dissuade the old monk.

“Please, why are you exhausting yourself with such toil on a hot sunny day? Why take the trouble to dry the mushrooms yourself?” he asked.

The old monk stared at Dogen and replied, “If I don’t do it, who will?”

“But why pick the hottest time of the day?” Dogen tried again.

“If I don’t dry the mushrooms now, am I supposed to do it when the sun sets?”

This old monk is a typical example of a Chan associate: someone who cherishes every moment in their life and never uses others for their own end.

“Samantabhadra Bodhisattva’s Verse of Admonition,” commonly chanted as part of Buddhist liturgy, has the following reminder:

*The day has passed,
Our lives thus shortened,
Like fish running short of water,
For what do we rejoice?*

As such, Chan associates are vigilant of their actions at every moment up to the end of their lives. In other words, attachments and habitual tendencies must be fully eliminated before the profound significance of the “patriarch’s intention in coming from the west” can be understood.⁸

Eminent and elder monastics of today should emulate Chan associates of the past by letting go of fame, position, and wealth. They should propagate Buddhism in their spirit. By being the Chan associates of today, they continue to lead and support Buddhism, an important endeavor deserving of our gratitude.

These Chan associates desire neither materialistic nor luxurious lifestyles. Viewing fame and fortune as fleeting as passing clouds, they accumulate neither property nor wealth. Nor do they seek after abbacy, treating it as a hindrance to their cultivation. They seek only to teach the Dharma whenever and wherever causes and conditions bring them. Hopefully, Buddhism will see the appearance of more Chan associates across the world in the future, for they are whom we look up to and learn from—it would be a sign of prosperity for Buddhism indeed!



*The methods of cultivation are not limited to
not looking, not listening, or not speaking.*

*In Buddhism, the Six Sense Organs must cultivate
collectively by helping and cooperating with one another.*

— “Aligning the Eyes, Nose, and Chest”

Aligning the Eyes, Nose, and Chest



In the past, teachers in monasteries would instruct students not to be restless or distracted by looking, talking, and moving around. Students were taught to be mindful of their comportment when walking, sitting, standing, and sleeping. One way to be mindful of physical posture is by aligning the eyes, nose, and chest. The eyes should not be wide open or looking sideways, but gazing down like a bodhisattva. In other words, there is a line of symmetry starting from between the eyes, to the nose, and down to the chest. The head should not be tilted to either side, or it would not be in line with the nose and chest. This is akin to shooting, where a bullseye cannot be achieved without a good aim. Similarly, the eyes need to be aligned with the nose, for it to also align with the chest. This way of comportment—aligning the eyes, nose, and chest—is a way to be mindful of one’s conduct and a must-learn for all beginners.

Nevertheless in Buddhism, practice does not necessarily mean being rigid. It also involves being alert and observant of one’s surroundings. In other words, it means speaking and being expressive when it is needed. Moreover, Buddhism also teaches that “seeing” does not necessarily have to be visual, and that “listening” does not always have to be auditory. For example, even if our eyes are shut,

we can still make our way around using our mind. And, we can still recognize people even if we do not see them. We can know who they are just by their voices. Likewise in another example, even if our pillow falls off the bed while sleeping, we are still able to pick it up and place it back behind our heads without needing to look. As can be seen, seeing is not always through the eyes—it can also be done with the mind.

The eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind are the six organs that give rise to perception. Like six inhabitants of a village, each of the sense organs perform their respective functions under the leadership of the mind. The function of the Six Sense Organs is to pursue after the Six Sense Objects, which in turn gives rise to the Six Consciousnesses. Put simply, the Six Sense Organs, Six Sense Objects, and Six Consciousnesses are interconnected. By being able to use the Six Sense Organs interchangeably, everything comes together in perfect interfusion. As such, sound intensities can be discerned through physical appearance. And a person's appearance can be perceived by what they sound like.

Hence, the methods of cultivation are not limited to not looking, not listening, or not speaking. In Buddhism, the Six Sense Organs—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—must cultivate collectively by helping and cooperating with one another. As advocated in Confucianism:

*Look not at what is contrary to propriety,
Listen not to what is contrary to propriety;
Speak not what is contrary to propriety.*

Cultivation is about not looking, listening, speaking, or doing improper things. For example, the Six Sense Organs of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body should not be tainted with intoxicants such as drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol. If they can remain pure, then that will be considered cultivation.



*Why feed one's body to a single tiger
if it can be used to help many more sentient beings—
tigers included—when alive?*

— “Sacrificing Body and Flesh
to Feed Eagles and Tigers”

Sacrificing Body and Flesh to Feed Eagles and Tigers



To proclaim and praise the greatness of the Buddha during his practice as a bodhisattva, some Buddhists cite the example of the Buddha sacrificing his body and flesh to feed eagles and tigers in his causative stage of cultivation.⁹ However, this is an unwise action, and unbecoming to speak of the Buddha in such a way.

Because eagles are carnivorous animals, how would sacrificing a piece of flesh resolve their hunger? Likewise, why feed one's body to a single tiger if it can be used to help many more sentient beings—tigers included—when alive? Can a tiger be satiated just through one meal? Such ignorant actions do not provide the ultimate solution.

Indeed, the example of sacrificing one's body and flesh to feed eagles and tigers is recorded in Buddhist sutras. But, it is used to emphasize and illustrate the Buddha's compassion as well as the power of his vow to sacrifice for sentient beings. It would be misguided to accept that the Buddha really did the foolish act of sacrificing his body for eagles and tigers.

Sometimes, Dharma should be understood through "principle," which is the study of its meaning. Other times, Dharma should be studied through "form," which is the understanding of its appearances. It is important to distinguish between the two so that metaphors are

not taken literally. Otherwise, it would leave an incorrect impression of the Buddha being unwise.

For example, in one of the Buddha's past lives, as mentioned in the *Diamond Sutra*, he was a practitioner of patience. Even when dismembered by King Kalinga, he did not give rise to the slightest hatred or anger. Examples like this demonstrate the Buddha's willpower of not giving rise to anger under any circumstance or humiliation. When propagating the Dharma today, the use of pathos—appeals to emotion—needs to be balanced with logic and reason. The Buddha should not be overly deified or it becomes difficult to connect with him as a person. Doing so would be unfortunate, as it would diminish the sacred virtues of the Buddha, and present him as being apart from the human world.

Martyrdom



Patrick Henry, a Founding Father of the United States, once declared, “Give me liberty, or give me death!” Likewise, Hungarian poet Sandor Petofi wrote, “Liberty and love. These two I must have. For my love, I’ll sacrifice my life. For liberty, I’ll sacrifice my love.” In regards to liberty, Buddhism has always advocated freedom, that the Buddhist faith teaches liberation from dictatorship, authoritarianism, and divine will through developing self-confidence, self-respect, self-esteem, and self-autonomy. It is with this spirit that we say everything in this world can be given up for the sake of faith—for it represents the treasure, the hope, and the life we truly seek.

Many religious figures in this world have a spirit of martyrdom for their faith. The same applies to Buddhists. For example, to protest against the discriminatory policies imposed by Ngo Dinh Diem’s government in Vietnam—such as banning the Buddhist flag and the persecution of Buddhists—the Vietnamese master Thich Quang Duc immolated himself in 1963 to save Buddhism. In the end, not only was Ngo’s government overthrown, but it also cost him his life. As can be seen, a spirit of martyrdom can achieve its purpose.

Similarly, there were many eminent monks during China’s Cultural Revolution who showed their spirit of faith in protecting their

temples. When the Red Guards were about to burn Nanputuo Temple, several eminent masters hung themselves in the hallways, causing the frightened guards to flee. As a result, the temple was saved. One cannot help but admire those willing to risk their lives for their faith.

Many other eminent masters throughout history, such as those during the Taiping Rebellion¹⁰ and Four Great Persecutions of Buddhism¹¹, also had no hesitations in martyring themselves!

Once, during the Tang Dynasty, Emperor Taizong (598–649) requested the presence of elders from the Buddhist and Daoist traditions for a meal. To be invited to a feast by the emperor was considered a great honor. But because the emperor favored Daoism over Buddhism, the Buddhist monastics were seated at the very end of the table. One of them, Master Zhishi, thought this gesture derogatory towards Buddhists and protested. Under imperial rule, going against the emperor's orders was strictly forbidden, and yet Zhishi still made an effort to fight for the status of Buddhism despite the danger. As a result, the emperor was enraged and ordered corporal punishment for Zhishi.

Some Buddhists wonder whether Zhishi's effort was really worth the trouble. To fight for something while knowing nothing would be achieved was clearly asking for humiliation. But Master Zhishi, who narrowly escaped death, said, "My intention was neither competing for seats nor fighting for status and fame. I did this simply to let future generations of Buddhist disciples know that monastics existed in the Tang dynasty!" Simply put, martyrdom is the willingness to sacrifice anything for Buddhism—even one's own life.

Master Huike is another example worth mentioning. To show his sincerity in seeking the Dharma, Master Huike severed his arm to

seek instruction from Bodhidharma. It was an expression of what he was willing to do to seek the truth and attain peace of mind. There is also Bhiksuni Fazhen who cut off her arm to raise funds for the printing of Buddhist sutras and the circulation of the precious Dharma. This act deeply touched the hearts of many benefactors. Through their sponsorship, she was able to fulfill her vow and publish the *Zhaocheng Jin Buddhist Canon*.¹²

Furthermore, there are many examples from the past where Chinese and Indian monastics traveled across lands either to propagate or seek the Dharma. Countless people lost their lives as they journeyed through great mountains and rivers. For example, when Master Dharmodgata and his group of twenty-five travelers traversed over snowy mountains, they had to support themselves by digging holes into the mountainside with a stick. When they crossed raging rivers, they had to rely on ropes to get across. Sometimes, when a blustery wind blew someone away, they had to shout at one another, “Did you land safely?” Only five of them made it to India. The others lost their lives.

During the Buddha’s time, Maudgalyayana, foremost in supernatural powers, knew that he was unable to avoid his karmic retribution of being attacked and harmed by heretics. Yet, he was willing to be stoned to death and become an example of martyrdom.

Similarly, Purna requested that the Buddha allow him to go to the kingdom of Sunaparanta to propagate the Dharma. The Buddha said to him, “Purna, the people there are violent and have no regard for Buddhism. It is very dangerous for you to travel there!”

“That is all right,” Purna replied. “This is my aspiration and I am not afraid of their fury or violence.”

The Buddha then said, “You should know that they will verbally abuse you if you go there.”

“As long as they do not hit me, I don’t mind the verbal abuse.”

“And what if they do beat you?”

“As long as they do not end my life, I don’t mind the beating.”

“Then what if they really do kill you?”

“Oh Buddha,” said Purna at last. “Then it will be a great opportunity to offer my life to the truth and the Buddha. This is also my blessing!”

The Buddha was gladdened by his words and said, “Purna, you have a spirit of martyrdom for the truth. We will cheer for you and send you off to Sunaparanta to propagate the Dharma.”

The many Buddhists who were willing to lose their lives for the Dharma allowed Early Buddhism to spread to Myanmar, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Thailand, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam despite it being an era where travel was extremely difficult. Their sacrifice allowed Buddhism to flourish in these countries.

As the saying goes, “Life is dear but even dearer is faith.” If Buddhists today dare to embody this spirit of being willing to sacrifice their life for a cause, then Buddhism is sure to prosper.

Seven Admonishments



Ancient Chinese society had a list of regulations known as the Seven Grounds for Divorce, which allowed men to divorce their wives on one of these seven grounds: inability to produce a son, adultery, being unfilial towards one's parents-in-law, gossip-mongering, theft, extreme jealousy, or severe illness. On the other hand, men were not punished even if they indulged in food, drinking, extramarital affairs, or gambling.

As seen, women had a lower status in ancient society, while men were privileged in all situations. Such patriarchal ideology is extremely unjust. In today's society of gender equality, I believe that men should also adhere to the Seven Admonishments. Therefore, I initiated the "Purifying Human Minds: Seven Admonishments Campaign" in 1994 through the Buddha's Light International Association.

"Admonishment" carries the meaning of education and vigilance. They help people develop healthy lifestyles by serving as a constant reminder to refrain from harmful and unwholesome habits. The Seven Admonishments are:

1. Abstain from violence

Violence is not a solution to problems. However strong a person is, there is always someone stronger. As such, do not impulsively resort to violence, as it only results in hurting oneself and others—just like the proverbial expression, “Hoist with his own petard.”

2. Abstain from stealing

A gentleman’s pursuit of monetary gains is bound by ethics. Illegally possessing the belongings of others is considered taking what is not given—stealing. Ill-gotten wealth should not be held, even if it is gold, silver, or money.

3. Abstain from sexual misconduct

In Buddhism, humans are described as sentient beings. When love and affection are expressed sensibly and conform with precepts, families will be protected and harmonious, thus contributing to the stability of society. On the other hand, if such feelings are conducted inappropriately, at an inappropriate time or place, it is like being a moth to the flame—diving into mortal danger. Therefore, everyone should be vigilant.

4. Abstain from coarse language

People naturally feel uncomfortable when their bodies are dirty. Likewise, foul language causes others to feel uncomfortable and distance themselves.

As the saying goes, “Speech without anger generates wonderful fragrances.” By praising and speaking good words to others, good affinities will be developed.

5. Abstain from alcohol abuse

Alcohol intoxicates. For instance, many traffic accidents are caused by driving under the influence. Caution should be taken because drinking not only affects physical and mental health, it can even damage a country and make a mess of a situation.

6. Abstain from gambling

Nine out of ten gamblers lose. Some people have lost all of their possessions, properties, and even lives because of gambling. It is a risk not worth taking because the losses strongly outweigh the gains. Thus, one must be cautious.

7. Abstain from smoking and drugs

Smoking and drug abuse eat away one's life. These intoxicants not only ruin physical health, but cost one's reputation, money, relationship, and ultimately—one's future.

The Seven Admonishments are the basic guidelines of conducting oneself, the root of social stability, and the foundation of a country. The Seven Admonishments campaign is a timeless appeal to the self-reformation of purifying one's mind and eliminating defilements. It is hoped that it will instill a stream of positive energy in individuals, families, and society. "When the mind is pure, the land is pure"—when everyone is purified physically and mentally, the land we live in will naturally be one of peace and happiness.



*Whether monastic or laity,
we must realize that survival is impossible
alone or apart from a community.
As we need the multitude,
we need to be respectful and tolerant towards others.*

— “I Am Among the Multitude”

I Am Among the Multitude



Every person has a unique personality. And everyone experiences emotions such as joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness. However, people who are overly willful and unable to regulate their emotions often come across as being offensive, disconnected, or antagonistic to the rest of the community. Because others dislike their presence, they become alienated, abandoned, and criticized. This is a true pity!

If only people understood the importance of others within the community. For example, without supplies from people of all trades and professions, how can we obtain clothing, food, housing, and transportation? Suppose we are alone without parents, teachers, friends, or relatives, who will cook for us? Who will help take care of our home?

Within the Buddhist sutras, solitary hells are listed among descriptions of the Eighteen Stages of Hell. Likewise, being isolated and apart from people can often feel as if physically in hell. Feeling angry and at odds with others, engaging in erratic volatile behavior, being antisocial and uncommunicative—would that experience not be reminiscent of hell?

This is why the sangha, as established by the great Buddha, upholds the values of harmony and community. The sangha is respectable only

when it is amiable and observes the Six Points of Reverent Harmony. When the Buddha's aunt made two sets of robes as an offering to him, the Buddha said, "I shall accept one, and offer the second one to another person. As I am only one among the multitude, one set of robes is sufficient."

Whether monastic or laity, we must realize that survival is impossible alone or apart from a community. As the saying goes, "I am among the multitude; among the multitude there I am." As we need the multitude, we need to be respectful and tolerant towards others. Moreover, we must serve the community and allow people to accept us.

We are part of the community, and the community is a part of us. To illustrate, the multitude can be likened to a bouquet or an orchard, in that it offers variety and beauty. The lone flower or the single fruit pales in comparison. Similarly, the flame from a single matchstick is negligible when juxtaposed with the burning blaze generated by a pile of firewood. Likewise, fingers by themselves do not have much strength, but they have great power when gathered together as a fist.

Only when we are within the multitude do we have community and friends. To be accepted by others, we should begin by having a heart that cares for all living beings, taking ourselves to be "among the multitude," and being harmonious with others.

Keep People in Mind



In 1989, my mother came to Los Angeles for a short stay. This allowed me to pay respect to her and fulfill my duties as a son.

During this time, I gave a Buddhist lecture on the *Diamond Sutra* at Hsi Lai Temple. I was not aware that my 90-year-old mother had been listening in the back row. The entrance ticket cost sixty dollars, and I wondered if she paid for it.

After the Dharma talk, I went to pay respect to my mother as usual before going to bed. When she saw me, she immediately said, “Look at you, you don’t know how to teach the Dharma even to this day.”

I was startled. I was almost seventy and had propagated the Dharma for decades. Why was my mother faulting my ability to teach the Dharma?

But at the same time, I also wondered what an illiterate elderly woman with little knowledge of the Dharma would know about giving talks on sutras. Curious, I asked, “How am I not good at teaching the Dharma?”

“In your talk, you discussed ‘no notion of self’ and ‘no notion of others’ before so many devotees. It is fine to teach ‘no notion of self,’ because it means we should not be calculative, attached, or selfish. But how could you teach ‘no notion of others?’ We should always

treat others with respect and friendliness, as well as praise and help them. How could you say that there's no notion of others? How could you teach the Dharma with such an arrogant and prideful attitude? You have no care for people in your heart and have your nose up in the air.”

I realized she had misunderstood my discussion on the elimination of the Four Notions—self, others, sentient beings, and longevity—in the *Diamond Sutra*. The Buddhist teaching of eliminating the Four Notions and eradicating unwholesomeness means to sever all that is unskillful and not in accordance with the Dharma. The Dharma often emphasizes that a dichotomous view of “self and other” gives rise to attachments and discriminatory thinking. To eradicate the attachment to self and others, the notion of self and the notion of others must first be eliminated.

But, as I thought deeper, I realized my mother's words made sense: we should not put ourselves on a pedestal in our social interactions, nor should we be grandiose when talking about Dharma of not having notions of self and other.

It is given that we should learn to be humble and eliminate our self-attachment and afflictions. At the same time, we should also respect, embrace, care, serve, and help others. The first practice—no notion of the self—is easy to understand, but the second practice—no notion of others—requires further explanation.

Society is formed on the very basis of people and emphasizes human relations. As others serve as our supporting conditions, how can we survive in this world by ourselves? Our daily necessities depend on the efforts of people, including scholars, farmers, artisans, builders, and merchants. We acquire knowledge of the world from

teachers and friends. We rely on friends from all walks of life to navigate through society. As a result, we should care for all people from the bottom of our hearts. It is only because of others that we can live a peaceful and carefree life.

My mother spoke from a humanistic perspective instead of philosophizing the Buddha-Dharma into something metaphysical or abstract. Our lives should have humanity as its premise. We should care about the suffering and happiness of other people—including the issues of poverty and wealth as well as what they have and lack. Their successes and difficulties in career and life also concern us, and we should be available to serve others.

A traditional saying goes, “The Buddha is in our minds.” So then, can the Buddha be in our minds? Consequently, we should seek to keep people in mind, as they have the buddha nature! If we can keep people in mind, don’t we also become closer to the sages? If we can keep kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity in mind, do they not become part of us as well? If we have the great bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, Ksitigarbha, and Samantabhadra in mind, are we not also learning from their spirit and emulating their virtues of compassion, wisdom, vow, and practice as well?

With principle and the Dharma as our faith, we should not expect instant accomplishment. Nor should we chant “no notion of self, others, sentient beings, and longevity” like a slogan while continuing habits of selfishness, attachment, greed, and ignorance. If we still think of everything possessively—for example, *my* family, *my* relatives, *my* children, *my* money, *my* house, or *my* possessions—how are we expected to eliminate the notion of self, let alone the notion of others?

Therefore, the first step in practicing Buddhism is to lessen self-attachment by eradicating greed, hatred, and ignorance. Gradually, we grow to eliminate our arrogance, criticism, exclusion, and jealousy towards others. We also come to see people not as hindrances, but as conditions that help us. As such, would it not be wonderful if we can provide favorable causes and conditions for others as well?

The journey of faith in Humanistic Buddhism starts from the human and culminates in the buddha. Theoretically, we are all buddhas, but we still must cultivate to reach that goal. Hence, it is imperative to emphasize the building of harmonious, genial, and peaceful interpersonal relationships.

The highest state is achieved when we have the Buddha in mind because we are one with the Buddha. This is the sacredness of Buddhism. Furthermore, it is when there is no longer differentiation between self and others, for we have regarded others like ourselves and kept them in our minds. Is this not the morality and ethics that new practitioners of Humanistic Buddhism should espouse?

Give Others Causes and Conditions



The phrase “giving others causes and conditions” represents one of the most beautiful teachings of the Buddha. Dependent origination was what the Buddha realized when he attained awakening. Since then, the Buddha clearly explained that everything in this world arises from causes and conditions; nothing can be successful or made possible without it. That is why most Buddhists understand the importance of developing affinities with others when buddhahood is yet to be achieved. The best way to do so is by giving others causes and conditions. A person who gives others causes and conditions is sure to be reciprocated in the same way. This can be likened to the following imagery: a person who shouts “I love you” in a valley will certainly be echoed with “I love you” in return.

The Buddhist perspective on causes and conditions has influenced Chinese society for thousands of years. There is a Chinese saying:

*With causes and conditions,
people will meet even thousands of miles apart.
Without causes and conditions,
people will not meet even if next to each other.*

From this, the understanding of causes and conditions can be seen, as well as the importance of broadly forming good affinities with others.

The idea of forming affinities exceeds what is understood by common knowledge. It is also beyond merely a catchphrase, for everything around us is related to causes and conditions. Each one of us relies on causes and conditions to survive in this world. A single person's strength is insufficient and limited. Consequently, the practice of giving people causes and conditions, as well as broadly forming affinities naturally expands what can be accomplished.

But the thing is, most people only know to seek causes and conditions from others. These thoughts are characterized by selfishness and attachment, as well as an incorrect interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. In Buddhism, there is a saying of "transforming one's conditions," which most people take to mean as asking for donations. However, what it truly means is to be the ones offering favorable conditions to people first. For example, we can offer others a kind word, guidance, or even a helping hand. By doing so, we will also have favorable conditions in return.

For instance, some people are highly-educated, yet unable to accomplish much in life. Some less educated people grow to be highly successful. This is a matter of causes and conditions. Some people are highly skilled, but cannot seem to accomplish anything—this is due to a lack of conditions. Others who are not necessarily as skilled end up achieving great things—this is the result of having sufficient conditions.

As the saying goes, "A person who respects others will surely be respected in return." In other words, people who speak good words

to others will have good words reciprocated to them in return. As such, there is no better method of cultivation in this world than to give others causes and conditions. This is because most afflictions and conflicts arise from an unwillingness to compromise and inability to foster harmonious relationships. The giving of wholesome causes and conditions to others allows our lives not to be disrupted by unwholesome ones.

Therefore, anyone who has faith and is capable, competent, and kind-hearted is urged to actualize this teaching of the Buddha. Be sure to lend others a helping hand and assist them in developing favorable conditions, regardless of their nationality or ethnicity. Develop wholesome affinities not for oneself, but more for others.

There is no need to be afraid of being used by others or sharing things, because everyone is interconnected and coexists in a web of causes and conditions. Therefore, a person who gives to others is, in fact, giving to themselves. Helping others is the same as helping oneself. Cultivating advantageous conditions for others is to also cultivate conditions for oneself. Like seeds sown in a field, results will eventually come to fruition, sometimes even yielding unexpected surprises.



*Each one of us should seek out ways
to be useful to others,
for life has purpose only when there is use to it.
The value of life lies not in its existence,
but in its ability to be utilized by others.*

— “Being Used by Others Shows One’s True Worth”

Being Used by Others Shows One's True Worth



“Being used by others shows one’s true worth”—this phrase, given to me by Professor Tang Yixuan in a discussion after his class at the Buddhist college, is an unconventional view and saying that wholly expresses my philosophy on life.

Most people do not like to be disadvantaged. They do not like to get the short end of the stick or be used by others. But I think being used by others can also be a way to build affinities with people. Humans exist interconnectedly in a web of causes and conditions; therefore, do not be afraid to be used by others, or share things with people. Giving and helping others is actually giving and helping oneself.

A glamorous mansion has no value if it is built in the middle of a road and causes inconvenience to others. It will only be demolished. On the other hand, a pile of dried grass is valued as burning fuel for cooking, so it is cherished. Since ancient times, loyal ministers are valuable assets to the country. They are not resentful even though they might be dishonored or wronged, vowing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the country. They bend all their efforts to their tasks and spare no effort until death puts an end.

In the early days of Fo Guang Shan, students of the Buddhist

college took communal chores as a way to train their bodies and minds. Some visitors would remark, "I can't believe these poor students are being used by the temple for labor." However, a student replied joyfully, "We take these chores as our spiritual cultivation!" These two dissimilar views of the same event show the differences in people's value systems.

Likewise, to give convenience to devotees visiting Fo Guang Shan, the Pilgrim's Lodge was established to provide food and lodging. But oftentimes, travel agencies would only donate a few dollars after bringing in dozens of diners. The staff members were indignant and kept reporting to me of such incidents. I consoled them that being taken advantage of was also a way to broadly form good affinities with many people.

In my opinion, each one of us should seek out ways to be useful to others, for life has purpose only when there is use for it. The value of life lies not in its existence, but in its ability to be utilized by others. For example, horses and cattle are valued for their ability to carry heavy loads and assist humankind. Moreover, even a bowl of water can have value, for it can be used to nourish blossoming flowers.

Furthermore, take organ donation as an example. The donation of a cornea brings light to others. The donation of a heart gives another person vitality. The donation of bone marrow can be likened to the river of life flowing from one person into another. Organ donation not only continues the recipient's life but also the life of the donor.

People who aspire to help others continue to maximize their values of life, even well beyond their deaths. On the other hand, people who are afraid of being used do not have much meaning in their lives, even when alive. Therefore, we should try to be of use to others. What is

the meaning of life if lived without truly being alive?

As people depend on causes and conditions to survive in this world, the strength of only an individual is limited. As such, being useful to others is a way to form good affinities. The greater one's affinities, the greater one's accomplishments. Chances to form affinities with others should not be overlooked, for they develop interpersonal connections and lead to the causes and conditions that result in success.



*The first step in cultivation is
to be able to distinguish
wholesome from unwholesome,
right from wrong, good from the bad.*

— “Not Going Against the Will of Others”

Not Going Against the Will of Others



There are many things worth discussing about Subhuti, the interlocutor in the *Diamond Sutra*—particularly his deeds. For example, he begged only from the rich on his alms rounds, for he believed that the poor could hardly manage to provide for themselves, why add to their burden? However, Mahakasyapa, foremost in ascetic practice, did the exact opposite. He believed that the rich were already enjoying the merits of generosity from their past lives, so why gild the lily? Therefore, he begged from the poor and refused to accept offerings from the rich.

When the Buddha heard of their extreme behaviors, he called for an assembly and said, “Begging only from the rich or only the poor are actions from a biased mind. The Buddha-Dharma should be founded on equality. Even though the world is filled with discriminations, our minds should settle on the Dharma of equality to benefit both self and others.”

Additionally, it was in Subhuti’s personality to not go against people’s will—another issue that needs to be examined. Generally speaking, he did whatever was requested of him. For example, he did not stand if asked to sit and did not sit if asked to stand. If asked to squat or sleep, he did as requested. In short, he never acted contrary

to the wishes of others. No matter what people asked of him, he did it.

In this case, if asked to steal or kill, should the request be obliged? Simply following people's wishes, without differentiating between right and wrong, wholesome and unwholesome, good and bad—is this still considered a proper way of cultivation? Should this behavior be encouraged?

Subhuti may be foremost in understanding emptiness, but emptiness does not mean that there is no right and wrong in phenomena. Emptiness does not mean to be without dignity, nor does it mean to be foolish. In emptiness, there is wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, cause and effect, as well as rules and guidelines.

The first step in cultivation is to be able to distinguish wholesome from unwholesome, right from wrong, good from the bad. Simply following in suit of Subhuti's practice without understanding whether something is true or false, righteous or deviant, is considered foolish and cannot be called cultivation.

Eliminating Calamity and Hindrances



Throughout the thousand of years that Buddhism has spread, there have been numerous people who believe in, chant, and prostrate to the Buddha to eliminate calamity and hindrances. Were their wishes fulfilled? Quite unlikely.

Buddhist teachings are about cause and effect relationships. For example, we can go to a field and pray, “Oh field! Please grow some seedlings for me!” But nothing will grow if seeds are not planted. Without the cause of sowing seeds, how can there be a resultant harvest?

We can also go to a forest and pray, “Oh forest! Grow some trees and flowers for me!” Nothing will grow either. The same principle applies: wishes can only be fulfilled when in accord with the law of cause and effect.

Suppose we require water, we can command the earth, “Oh earth! Open up a river that flows right before my house!” This is also impossible. Without a cause, how can there be an effect?

The Buddha’s teachings need to be practiced to eliminate calamities and hindrances. For example, if we wish for longevity, we must first abstain from killing. Only with the cause of refraining from killing can there be the effect of longevity. If we wish for wealth, we

must first abstain from corruption and refrain from infringing upon the property of others. If we wish for a harmonious and peaceful family, we must neither engage in sexual misconduct nor should we violate the physical rights and reputation of others. Moreover, we should not encroach on the peace of other people's families. Only in this way can our own families begin to be truly harmonious.

Additionally, if we wish to be respected, we must not slander others, cause trouble by spreading rumors, or speak false and divisive words. If we wish to be healthy, we should begin by abstaining from drugs and alcohol, for good health and wisdom is only possible by not harming the body and mind.

Hence, seeking to receive blessings from buddhas and bodhisattvas without having the proper causes does not accord with the Buddha-Dharma. Certainly, we can prostrate, chant, and pray to the Buddha for protection in eliminating calamities and hindrances, but we still must practice the path of the Buddha. Actualizing the Dharma through the Three Acts of Goodness and Four Givings, broadly forming good affinities with others, and aspiring to serve others—these wholesome deeds are all causes that will eventually come to fruition as wholesome effects. Conversely, if unwholesome causes are sown instead of wholesome ones, then the outcome would, of course, be unfavorable. In this case, even buddhas and bodhisattvas cannot be of much help.

Dharma Is Our Home



When meeting people, we usually ask, “How should I call you? Where do you live?”

So, where do people live today? In this human world, of course. But where in this world do people dwell? More often than not, in troubles and afflictions, and the illusions of wealth, romance, fame, and benefits. Like the blind wandering without a sense of direction, or a lone boat drifting aimlessly on the ocean, people are often unable to find a true place to abide. As such, life feels unsettling and sorrowful. This kind of life is bound to be frightening and filled with vexation. It can feel hopeless or futile. As can be seen, the brevity of human life is generally wasted on illusory afflictions.

In Buddhism, there is an expression, “Dharma abode,” which means to take the Dharma as one’s home. In other words, the Buddha-Dharma provides a place for the body and mind—one filled with peace, joy, and ease. If we can take the Buddha’s teachings as our home and abide in the truth, what is there to be afflicted about?

For example, as taught by the Buddha, loving-kindness and compassion are without enemies. Would this not be peaceful and secure to abide in? Likewise, if we abide in joy and equanimity by serving others joyfully, people will naturally accept us instead of

excluding us no matter where we go. In this way, do we not foster affinities and find welcome everywhere?

Similarly, when we abide in the Four Means of Embracing, Six Paramitas, the cultivations of Chan and Pure Land, as well as in the teachings of the Buddha, we are protected by the truth and guided by morality. When our lives are filled with loving-kindness and compassion, people know us to be kind-hearted. When we are joyful and equanimous, people hold us in good opinion. Moreover, when we can uphold and practice the Five Precepts and Ten Wholesome Deeds, we accumulate merits for a better future.

Additionally, when we uphold the Six Paramitas—the way of bodhisattva practice—we can liberate and awaken both self and others. We can also abide in the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. Or perhaps in the Ten Precepts as mentioned in the *Sutra of Queen Srimala of the Lion's Roar*. In short, if we were to take all of these Buddha's teachings as our abode, they become the home in which we reside: joy without disaster or calamity, peace without fear or sorrow. Within this home, life is full of ease and liberation.

In conclusion, we as people yearn for a place to call home in this world. Yet, some vagrants wander their whole lives without knowing where their homes are. Some people's lives are full of uncertainty, not knowing what the future holds or where to go. For this reason, we proclaim to the world about the Dharma abode—the Buddha-Dharma is where we should reside and our home sweet home. By taking the Dharma as our abode, we will find ourselves more transcending, elevated, peaceful, and at ease. Wouldn't this be wonderful?

Every Day Is a Good Day



Since ancient times, Chinese people have attributed one's fortunes and misfortunes to geomancy, feng shui, time, and location. As a result, many customs have developed around this belief, such as the practice of referring to auspicious dates and locations when planning funerals. Or taking into account the position of doors and furniture when it comes to buying property, moving homes, opening shops, or taking up a new office. However, being overly superstitious and attached to these man-made traditions is sure to bring disenchantment and frustration.

During the Buddha's time, there was a young man named Singala, who believed that venerating the six directions would bring longevity and wealth if done every morning after cleansing the body. Using this as an opportunity for teaching, the Buddha instructed that geomancy should be built upon the principles of ethics, the universe, the Dharma, and the mind. With sincerity, self-awareness, and a settled mind, "every day is a good day, and every place is a good place." Because one's field of merit is not apart from the mind, all circumstances—no matter the time and place—are favorable.

Let us illustrate with the following example: the doors of residential and commercial properties on the same street all face

the same direction, and yet, some make a fortune while others go bankrupt. Some are successful, while others fail. As can be seen, the determining factor is not feng shui, but the differences in business operation and customer service.

Take another instance where two people are sitting across each other. One person's left is the other's right, and one's front is the other's rear. So which side is the true right, and which is the true left? Which is the front and which is the rear?

Moreover, consider the number of weddings, divorces, celebrations, and funerals that occur in a day. Though married on the same auspicious day, some couples remain happily married, while others sadly part ways. The most important factor is not the date, but how a person develops interpersonal relationships and affinities. An advantageous time and location are not to be sought externally, for it is a wholesome heart that brings favorable circumstances.

Everything in this world has its own set of principles. For example, celestial bodies follow the principles of heaven. People observe the principles of humanity. Physical matters abide by the principles of physics. Feelings arise according to emotional principles. And thoughts arise as per the principles of the mind. Of course, geomancy and feng shui also have their set of principles based on knowledge of the natural world, geographical and astronomical orientation, and how they affect people.

Though geomancy and feng shui have their theories, they are still not the ultimate truth. Therefore, Buddhism advocates avoiding superstition, including geomancy and feng shui. According to Buddhist teaching on the law of cause and effect, a person's fortunes and misfortunes are not the results of geomantic influences, but

wholesome and unwholesome karma.

When I was constructing Fo Guang Shan, someone once advised me, “The geologic structure of this forest is not good, and the feng shui is also bad. Also, the Gaoping River flows right in front of the hill, which means it’s going to wash away all the money in the future.”

I told him, “I think the flowing river is good. It signifies that the Dharma water will flow eternally.”

After the construction of Fo Guang Shang was completed, someone else commented, “What a fortuitous place this is! You must be good at feng shui to pick out this place.”

Honestly, what would I know about feng shui? This bamboo-overgrown land was purchased to resolve a couple’s financial difficulty, thereby saving their lives. Coincidentally, we also happened to be looking for an inexpensive land to establish a school. Fo Guang Shan was built for the reason of fostering talent for Buddhism. Feng shui is, after all, a creation of the mind.

Most geomancy masters believe that the optimal geographical arrangement is to follow the Four Symbols: the Vermilion Bird in the front, the Black Tortoise in the back, the Azure Dragon on the left, and the White Tiger on the right.¹³ Put simply, it means to have beautiful scenery in the front, mountains at the back, rivers flowing on the left, and open roads on the right. In modern terms, the best living environment can be summarized into four points:

1. Good ventilation in all directions without blockage.
2. Sunshine and natural lighting for coziness and cleanliness.
3. An open and wide view for an elevated state of mind.
4. Smooth and clear walkways for ease of accessibility.

I believe the best locations are ones that meet the above-mentioned

conditions and allow people to live with more convenience, happiness, and comfort. In Buddhism, it is believed that “every day is a good day, any time is a good time, and everywhere is a good place.” As long as one can bring convenience and happiness to all, every day can be considered the most auspicious. In other words, the true master of feng shui lies within the mind. When one cultivates wholesome thoughts and upstanding conduct—as well as relinquishes attachment and superstition—happiness and peace can be found every day and in every place.

Shine Your Light



Mahayana sutras almost always begin with a passage describing the Buddha emitting light before he begins to teach. For instance, the *Diamond Sutra* opens with:

At one time, when came the time to eat, the World-Honored One donned his robe, carried his alms bowl, and entered Sravasti to beg for alms in an orderly manner. After returning to his place, having partaken of the food, he put away his alms bowl, washed his feet, and sat down on his mat...

Though a seemingly ordinary occasion, this opening of the text reveals the Buddha's way of practice and how he shines his light. How is this so?

This simple procedure of alms-begging embodies the great light of prajna wisdom with which the Buddha illuminates the world. Light radiates from the Buddha's hands when he dons his robe and carries his bowl. Light emanates from the Buddha's eyes when he enters Sravasti to beg for alms in an orderly fashion and meets everyone. Light issues from the Buddha's mouth when he puts away his robe and alms bowl after partaking of the alms. Light exudes from the Buddha's soles as he washes his feet. Having sat down, the Buddha's

entire body is wrapped in a circle of light. In other words, no matter the action—be it walking, standing, sitting, or reclining—the Buddha shines with the light of Truth.

Likewise, during the Buddha's time, a bhiksu named Dravya Mallaputra was in charge of receiving guests of the monastery. No matter how early in the morning or late at night, he was always there to guide monks to their lodgings by carrying a lantern to illuminate the way. After decades of merit from his dedication, Dravya Mallaputra developed the ability to light the way with his illuminating finger. Thereafter, the use of a lantern to show the way was no longer needed.

Similarly, there was also a novice monk known as “Fragrant Mouth” for he had never spoken false or harsh words his whole life. Moreover, he always used kind and benevolent words. Eventually, he developed a breath that was fragrant, clean, and completely without rancidness. This is how he received his name and how he illuminates the world through speech.

In actuality, whether the Buddha or other people shine with light is not of paramount importance. What really matters is whether we can let our light shine. Every one of us has the buddha-nature and the ability to shine forth like the Buddha. We have only forgotten our intrinsic light and seek it externally. For example, by praising others with good words, we brighten the day with our speech. When we see goodness in all people and things around us, our eyes radiate with light. When we listen to the Buddha-Dharma attentively, mindfully, and skillfully, we are illuminated through listening. When we smile and are free from anger, our faces have a natural glow. When we have the qualities of compassion, wisdom, and purity within us, our hearts emanate with light. As long as we can shine forth at all times, there

will be no space for darkness and affliction.

The Buddha also taught us four ways to shine our light:

1. The offering of candles and lamps are tangible ways of expelling darkness with light. However, by offering the gift of Dharma such as truth, knowledge, and wisdom, we illuminate the way for those who are lost in delusion and ignorance.
2. Through extensive offerings, constant learning from the buddhas, repenting all unwholesome karmas, and protecting the Dharma when the teachings of the Buddha are in decline. We become beacons of light that prevent people from being led astray by heretical teachings.
3. By encouraging friends or family members when they are despondent or conducting themselves mistakenly. By guiding them in a positive and proactive direction, we become beacons that light up the way in the dark moments of life.
4. Being sincere when working with others is to also shine our light upon people.

The light of a single candle can instantly dispel the darkness that has prevailed for a thousand years. No matter how long we have lived in ignorance and delusion, the truth and the path forward are revealed the moment our minds are illuminated by the Buddha-Dharma. People shrouded by ignorance and afflictions are likened to “lanterns coated with black lacquer” as described by the Chan school. For this reason, we should not merely look outward—to the sun, lamp, or fire—for light. Neither should we be enticed by the illusions of light from heretical teachings. It is imperative for us to discover our luminous nature within so that we can illuminate the world through our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The radiance from

our minds when we reveal our luminous intrinsic nature and prajna wisdom by alighting the lamp of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity, shines upon not only ourselves but others as well.

The presence of light in this world is like a lighthouse that calls sailors home. It is also like a streetlight in a dark alley that shines the way home for later travelers. By illuminating our inner light, we can shine a bright light upon others. Only then is life truly of infinite value and meaning.

Auspiciousness



A Chinese saying goes, “All wholesome teachings in this world are delivered in Buddhism.” To name a few, the Buddha taught the Three Dharma Seals, Four Noble Truths, Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, Noble Eightfold Path, Four Bases of Mindfulness, and Five Contemplations. All of these teachings serve as guidance on the ways of the world, the human mind, and life. In this way, we understand how to purify our thoughts and remove afflictions. We know how to resolve the problems we encounter. Moreover, we also recognize how to continuously develop and deepen our virtue, integrity, and wisdom—all of which lead to the perfection of life itself.

The Buddha’s guidance on the goals of life, his teachings on the ways of purifying the mind and eradicating afflictions, can be found throughout countless sutras and commentaries. This even includes how to inspire joy, faith, and betterment in others through uplifting words. For example, most people hope to have smooth, safe, and auspicious journeys in life. For this reason, the Buddha taught numerous ways on how to live an auspicious life in the *Mangala Sutra*:

To stay clear of ignorant people and be acquainted with wise ones instead; to respect virtuous ones makes one the most auspicious.

To be dutiful to one's parents, and love as well as protect one's wife and children; to pursue a livelihood without inflicting harm on others makes one the most auspicious.

Abstain from unwholesome actions, self-discipline and refrain from drinking; to be steadfast makes one the most auspicious.

To be respectful, humble, content, and grateful; to be able to instantly hear the Dharma makes one the most auspicious.

To lead a regulated and pure life, and realize the Eightfold Noble Paths; to attain nirvana makes one the most auspicious.

To have a mind that remains unmoved by the Eight Winds, and to be free from worries and defilements; to remain tranquil and trouble-free makes one the most auspicious.

Auspiciousness means to be without tragedy or disaster, with all moments and all conditions being favorable. Who would not wish for an auspicious life? This is reflected in the many words of blessing

inspired from the Buddhist sutras, such as: “May you be auspicious for twelve periods a day¹⁴,” “May you be auspicious day and night,” and “May everything be auspicious for you.” In other words, when every hour and every minute in life is auspicious, calamities and afflictions do not arise.

The ancient Indians measured time by dividing daytime into three periods: morning, midday, and afternoon. Similarly, they also divided nighttime into three periods: evening, late-night, and early morning. Together, these make up the time divisions of an entire day—hence the saying “auspiciousness across the six periods of the day.” Put simply in modern terms, it means to have a prosperous, perfect, and peaceful day, in which all twenty-four hours are filled with joy and ease.

Auspiciousness is something that is wished for by everyone. For instance, when ministers paid respect to the emperor during China’s imperial era, they would also bid him, “Auspicious greetings!” In vernacular, it means “Good day!” If we can greet everyone we come across in this way, no matter friend or foe, then auspiciousness is bound to pervade all parts of the world.

Lastly, auspiciousness also carries the meaning of being perfectly complete. Understanding this phrase to be a blessing and empowerment from the Buddha, it is for this reason that the Buddha’s Light International Association encourages people to wish one another “auspicious greetings” upon meeting. Furthermore, in face of today’s turbulent society, I also advocate for “auspicious coexistence.” As all forms of life on earth are interconnected, we need to learn to coexist with one another. Only in this way can auspiciousness and peace be achieved.

If interpersonal relationships are auspicious, then everyone would likewise be auspicious. And when all sentient beings in this world enjoy auspiciousness throughout all hours of the day, would it not mean that the Buddha-Dharma has also pervaded our human world?

Joy



In my experience, Buddhists can be grim in expression and miserable, often exclaiming, “Suffering! Life is full of suffering!” At the time, I was surprised by such perspectives. Why do these people moan about suffering instead of creating joy in their lives? Why fill themselves with negative ideas and emotions by thinking that they are living in “the *Saha World*¹⁵,” “the world of five turbidities¹⁶,” “the burning house of the Three Realms¹⁷,” or “the boundless sea of suffering”?

However, life does not need to be this way. We are the ones who create our own afflictions, worries, joy, and happiness. The mind is like a factory whose products depend on our capability and creativity. An ill-operated factory always expels black smoke and polluted water, while one that is well-operated produces high-quality products worthy of market competition.

As for myself, though I was born in turmoil and grew up in adversity, my life is one of joy. Despite growing up in times of hardship, I trained myself to be patient and enduring. Instead of sorrow and misery, I was filled with happiness. I joyfully live each day, and even help others such as devotees and youths to find optimism and positivity. At Fo Guang Shan, every day is like a new year celebration

in that people are free from melancholy, pessimism, and negativity.

In life, a person can be without any skills, but cannot be without the ability to create joy. If not, imagine how useless life would be. I advocate joy because the ability to create joy is vital to our life and cultivation. One of the working creeds of Fo Guang Shan is to “give others joy,” and it is also my personal vow to bring happiness and the joy of Chan to the world.

Other than contentment and happiness, Buddhism aims to bring sentient beings joy through the Buddha-Dharma, so that the human world becomes a joyous place where everyone can break free from the shackles of afflictions and live their lives replete with hope.

I hope that Buddhists—including bhiksus and bhiksunis—see life as being characterized by joy, instead of sorrow and suffering. We need not wait to be reborn in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss; we should aim to establish a pure land on earth in the present moment. The moment we shoulder our responsibilities, practice contemplation, give rise to aspirations, and develop our acceptance towards the world, we need not be in opposition with life. When we can transform suffering into happiness, and worry into joy, we need not recoil even when faced with anxiety and difficulty.

Hence, Buddhists should be encouraged to create joy and happiness. Only then will the Buddhist faith have its value. Only then can the value of one’s life emerge after learning about and having faith in the Buddha’s teachings. As such, it is my sincere hope that everyone in this world can be filled with joy and happiness.

Pick Up and Let Go with Perfect Ease



As my eyesight has weakened in the last ten to twenty years, it has become difficult for me to read or even watch television. Besides from giving lectures and narrating articles, the most important activity for me is writing One-Stroke Calligraphy.

The term “One-Stroke Calligraphy” came about when my eyesight began to deteriorate because if I were to write two, three, or four characters, it would all have to be finished in one stroke. Otherwise, I would not know where to place my brush on the paper again. Apart from relying on my blurry eyesight, the power of the mind is most essential in completing a piece of calligraphy in a single brushstroke. Hence, I named it “One-Stroke Calligraphy.”

Since the beginning of writing One-Stroke Calligraphy, I am deeply grateful for the praise and encouragement given by people from all walks of life. It has greatly increased my confidence in calligraphy writing.

People often ask me what I like to write. Of course, my favorite pieces are all related to the Dharma. For example: “Never Forget One’s Initial Aspirations,” “Be an Unexpected Friend,” “Forging Ahead in Doing What is Right,” and “Kind Intentions for Others.” However, my most favorite words to write are the two words: “Let

Go.”

Whenever I write “Let Go,” there would be someone who says, “This is too pessimistic. Why must we always let go?”

I think people who say this have yet to understand the meaning of letting go. Because without “picking up,” it is difficult to know how to let go. To illustrate, it is important to pick up a suitcase and pack travel necessities when embarking on a trip. But, upon returning home, is it still apt to continue carrying luggage around the living room or kitchen? How can this possibly bring happiness? Suppose the suitcase was “let go” of, would that not bring freedom and ease?

As can be seen, the Dharma teaches us not only to let go but also how to pick up as well. When it is time to pick it up, you must pick it up; when it is time to let it go, you must let it go. Picking it up means to shoulder responsibilities, dedicate yourself, and do your best. If you cannot pick up your spirits, nothing will be accomplished.

Would not the inability to let go while facing obstacles and adversity in life—such as in interpersonal relationships or one’s career—only compound one’s afflictions? How would being agitated be of any help? An important Buddhist teaching is to know how to let go after picking something up and when to pick up after having let go.

I once told this story to those who refused to let go:

There was a young man who accidentally slipped down a valley while climbing a mountain. Fortunately, he clung onto a tree vine in time and did not fall to his death. Trembling, he glanced up at the sheer cliffs above, and down at the bottomless pits below.

He shouted desperately, “Save me, Buddha! Save me, Buddha!”

The Buddha really did appear, and the young man pleaded to the Buddha to save him.

“I will save you,” said the Buddha. “But I’m afraid you won’t listen to me.”

“Why wouldn’t I listen to you in this crucial moment?” replied the young man.

“Well, please let go of your hands now,” said the Buddha.

When the young man heard this, he immediately thought he would fall to his death if he were to let go. Instead of letting go, he tightened his grip.

The Buddha sighed, “How can I save you if you refuse to let go?”

As can be seen, practicing how to let go is an important aspect of life. When we stop being calculative and comparing with regards to others, are we not learning to let go? Are we not at ease when we free ourselves from the shackles of fame, money, greed, hatred, and ignorance? For people who are unable to let go, Buddhist practice can be said to be difficult. But Buddhist practice can be easy as well. As long as we can let go, no one is capable of making our lives problematic.

As most people have difficulty in knowing how to let go, I have decided to write “Pick Up and Let Go with Perfect Ease” in my calligraphy instead. It serves as a reminder that we should pick up when it is time to pick up and let go when it is time to let go. It is painful to continue holding on to things that should be let go of. It is burdensome to carry unnecessary baggage. Picking up and letting go with perfect ease—such is the best practice of Buddhism.



*In Buddhism, “indestructible diamond”
refers not to worldly phenomena,
but the indestructible nature of
the Dharma body and the truth.*

— “Indestructible Diamond”

Indestructible Diamond



The *Diamond Sutra* is one of the greatest Buddhist texts. Whenever it is taught, people would explain that “diamond is an indestructible material that can destroy anything while remaining undestroyed.” Claiming that diamonds are the only indestructible thing in the world is barely acceptable. However, some even go as far as to claim that the physical body can be as indestructible as a diamond when their spiritual cultivation reaches a certain level.¹⁸

When such explanations and claims are told, would anyone that truly understands the Buddha-Dharma believe it to be true? Is it correct? From the perspective of world-transcending Dharma, everyone possesses an intrinsic buddha nature—also referred to as true thusness, intrinsic nature, Dharma body, and true reality. As it is transcendental and unconditioned, it will never cease. However, from a worldly perspective, all conditioned phenomena in this world arise and cease according to causes and conditions. Therefore, they cannot be considered indestructible.

Let us reexamine the claim that the body can be as indestructible as a diamond. If a diamond is considered as a conditioned phenomenon, then how come it is undestroyable when it can destroy all others? If it is an unconditioned phenomenon, then is it not contradictory that a

diamond is compared to the physical body? Where is an undecaying body to be found in this world?

This kind of illogical and self-contradicting claim is similar to that illustrated in the following story:

Once, there was a weapon vendor who sold both spears and shields. He showed his spears and claimed, “My spears are so sharp they can pierce through anything no matter how solid it is.”

He then showed his shields and said, “My shields are so sturdy that nothing can pierce through them no matter how sharp they may be.”

A passerby laughed upon hearing the vendor’s claims, “All I need to do is to pierce your shield with your spear!”

Self-contradicting sayings like “indestructible diamond” have frequently been used in Buddhism in the past. However, as scientific and academic research advances, and as the education level of the general population increases, people will pay closer attention to the wording of expressions. Although language certainly can be used metaphorically to clarify and express one’s thoughts, Dharma propagators should be more aware of their rhetoric when teaching.

Describing the diamond as indestructible only means that it is stronger and more durable than most materials. In truth, nothing in the world is indestructible. Aiming to have an indestructible body can be considered a deviant view and statement, for it is contrary to the Buddhist truth of impermanence. Describing the physical bodies of eminent masters as indestructible merely means that they last for a longer time. Eventually, their remains will also perish in time.

The only thing that is indestructible is the formless and fundamental essence of life, which ebbs and flows cyclically. It can be likened to

the weather, which changes between warm and cold. It can also be likened to the cycle of time, which transitions between day and night. It is improbable to only have a day without night, and only warmth without cold.

Worldly phenomena are relative to one another and never absolute, for the unconditioned can only be found in transcendental Dharma. From a transcendental perspective, there is neither arising nor ceasing, neither coming nor going. However, from a worldly perspective, all phenomena come into existence through dependent arising. Naturally, they will cease when causes and conditions disperse. With the impermanence and changes brought about, how can there be birth without death? How can there be its essence and attributes without its functions?

In Buddhism, “indestructible diamond” refers not to worldly phenomena, but the indestructible nature of the Dharma body and the truth. In this way, teachers of the Dharma perhaps ought to be more cautious, so as not to contradict the wisdom of Buddhist teachings with worldly foolishness.



*The value of a person's life depends
on the position they have set themselves upon,
the effort they have given in the pursuit of their goals,
and the accomplishments they have achieved.*

— “What Is the Value of Life?”

What Is the Value of Life?



What is the value of life? Some laborers earn only a few hundred dollars after toiling for a whole day, while some entrepreneurs rake in tens of thousands of dollars with a few words. Can a person's value be judged solely through their income?

Once, a disciple asked his master, "What is the value of life?"

The master did not answer, as this was not a simple question. Determined to get an answer, the disciple often asked his master the same question, "What is the value of life?"

One day, the master gave a translucent stone to the disciple and instructed him to offer it for bidding at the market without actually selling it.

At the market, someone yelled, "I bid ten dollars!"

"Fifty dollars!" said another.

"Two hundred dollars!"

When the disciple returned to the temple in the evening, he said to his master happily, "Master! Can you believe it? Someone bid two hundred dollars for this stone."

The master responded, "Oh, is that so!"

The next day the master told the disciple to take the stone to a department store and only ask for bids again. Upon arriving at the

department store, the disciple presented the stone to the shoppers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, look at this bright, polished stone! Do you want to buy this beautiful, crystal-clear stone? Name your price.”

The shoppers examined the stone and began bidding.

“A thousand dollars!”

“No,” said the disciple, shaking his head.

“Five thousand!”

“Ten thousand!”

“Twenty thousand!”

And that was the highest bid.

When the disciple returned, he told his master, “Incredible! Someone bid twenty thousand dollars at the department store today.”

Again, the master remained indifferent and did not comment.

A few days later, the master told the disciple to take the stone to a jewelry exposition and again ask for bids.

“Dear jewelers,” said the disciple at the exposition. “This stone is like a diamond. Do you like it? Name your price.”

The jewelers peered at the stone and began bidding.

“Two hundred thousand!”

“Five hundred thousand!”

“Two million!”

“Ten million!”

The disciple was shocked that someone would bid ten million dollars for the stone, and hastily went back and told his master.

The master finally spoke, “Oh, my disciple! You often ask me what is the value of life. This stone can go up to two hundred dollars in a market and twenty thousand dollars in the department store. But in the eyes of jewelers, it values ten million dollars. Its value changes

depending on the location and people's expertise.”

Every person has their own values, which leads to the pursuit of different aspirations and goals. The value of a person's life depends on the position they have set themselves upon, the effort they have given in the pursuit of their goals, and of course, the accomplishments they have achieved. If a person's character, morality, and faith are easily bought with money, then their life can be said to be only worth that amount of money. Similarly, if a person's ideology, beliefs, and principles are easily swayed by romantic relationships, then their life can be said to have been seduced away by romance.

In Chinese chess, the chariot, horse, and cannon are often considered to be the most powerful and valuable pieces. However, sometimes the winning or losing of a game falls on the tiny pawn. Therefore, its value cannot be underestimated. Value is not based on temporary worth; it should include future prospects. Furthermore, value is not determined by superficial appearances; it should also include inner potential. So then, what is the value of life? Some people build a virtuous and successful life, while others spend their days in uneventful ordinariness. Just like the translucent stone, the value of life changes depending on its context.



*Those who are skilled at managing time
view it on a spiritual level.*

*Conversely, those who do not know how to manage time
are constrained by the ticking clock,
thus limiting the capacity of their life.*

— “Infinite Life”

Infinite Life



Some say, “Rare it is for life to reach seventy.” Others say, “Life only begins at seventy.” In Buddhism however, life is not perceived in this way. Life is like a circle, which is without beginning or end. In other words, life is beginningless and endless.

Once, there was a wealthy man who requested Zen Master Ryokan to conduct a prayer for longevity on his sixtieth birthday.

The Zen Master asked him, “How much longer would you like to live?”

The wealthy man thought about it and replied, “Another twenty years.”

“You’re already sixty,” Zen Master Ryokan replied. “You’ll only be eighty in another twenty years. That’s too few.”

“Well, one hundred years old then.”

“Even so, you’re only adding another forty years. It will pass by quickly.”

The man said, “Don’t tell me I can wish for a hundred and twenty years?”

“You have already lived for sixty years. An additional sixty years is only a hundred and twenty years—that’s just twice your age. It’s not a big deal!”

“So how many years can I wish for?”

“Why not wish for ‘infinite life’ then!” replied Zen Master Ryokan.

How long exactly should one live? A person’s life is not measured solely by physical life expectancy, but the longevity of one’s undertakings, words, contributions, morality, and faith. If we can imbue our spirit, wisdom, and contributions into limitless time and space, then we can be said to live an infinite life and radiate infinite light like Amitabha Buddha.

Once, a devotee asked Chan Master Zhaozhou, “How should I be mindful at all times?”

Chan Master Zhaozhou replied, “You are one who is frantically governed by time, while I am one who makes use of time skillfully. Which ‘time’ are you talking about?”

I advocate the philosophy of “a life worth three hundred years,” but how is it possible for a person to live to three hundred years old? Looking back upon my life, I dedicated myself to society and never took a day off—not even on holidays or weekends—after graduating from the Buddhist college at the age of twenty. My daily schedule is filled with Dharma talks and classes, meetings with guests, and recording Dharma lectures from morning till night. Moreover, I fully utilize every second to work, write, or read, even when walking, waiting between classes, or traveling by car, train, or airplane.

Cherishing time is an investment in life because life should not be spent in vain. Those who are skilled at managing time view it on a spiritual level, for they travel freely across Dharma realms and manifest the time of their life within the boundless universe. Conversely, those who do not know how to manage time are constrained by the ticking clock, thus limiting the capacity of their life.

Living a life that is worth three hundred years is only a momentary ideal when compared with the immeasurable and boundless profundity of the Buddha-Dharma. We can learn from Amitabha Buddha's infinite life and infinite light by merging our limited individual lifespan into the whole of the universe. Through imparting our service, broadly forming good affinities, and benefiting society, our spirit will last through the ages, which is akin to an infinite life.



*Apart from this physical abode,
the wise also seek a spiritual home—
a place that nourishes one's Dharma body
through the cultivation of wisdom.*

— “We Need Three Homes”

We Need Three Homes



Living in this world, everyone needs a place to stay and feel safe: a home. A person would be considered a vagrant if they were without a home. That being so, most people—unless solitary and destitute—have homes and families, such as parents, spouses, children, and siblings.

When the narrow definition of family is expanded, it can even include the families of our in-laws, uncles and aunts, and siblings. Our friends can also be regarded as a family. In brief, everyone has a family and home of some sort, regardless of one's occupational, social, or economic status. As the saying goes, "Whether a house is made of silver or gold, it is still not as good as one's humble abode." As can be seen, home is a place of warmth, protection, shelter, and safety.

For travelers, the thought of "returning home" is a joyful one. A home needs to be harmonious, peaceful, and genial so that people feel a sense of closeness, mutual respect, and belonging upon their return. Even if a person has been misunderstood by others, they know they will be understood at home. Moreover, families can forgive and tolerate each other's flaws and shortcomings, which is what makes the home so precious.

This home is an abode for one's physical body. Even if we leave during the day, it is a place where we can return for the night. However, it only serves as a place that provides daily necessities and a location where relatives and friends congregate. Apart from this physical abode, the wise also seek a spiritual home—a place that nourishes one's Dharma body through the cultivation of wisdom.

What is a spiritual abode? It is a place of faith where one develops confidence, compassion, and morality, as well as how to conduct oneself with integrity. This second home—the spiritual abode—can be likened to a gas station where we can recharge spiritually and be fulfilled. It can also be likened to a school that increases our knowledge and skills. Furthermore, it can be likened to a department store that offers a wide variety of Dharma treasures.

A person experiences continuous growth as a result of having a spiritual home of faith, morality, and wisdom. For example, one learns to do good deeds, speak good words, and think good thoughts. One cultivates generosity, precepts, patience, and meditative concentration. One develops faith in the Buddha—not only by praying and prostrating but by practicing the Buddha's path. With enough cultivation and mastery, one advances from this spiritual home and reaches the highest goal, which represents our third home.

Whether this home is heaven or the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss depends on one's causes and conditions. The merits accumulated in one's spiritual home is the investment that nourishes and aids one to migrate to one's third home—the home of liberation. This ideal land is one's true home, where both the body and mind can abide in the joy of Chan and Dharma.

That is why everyone needs three homes.

Never Forget One's Initial Aspirations



Two of the renowned phrases I often quote in my Dharma talks are “Never forget one’s initial aspiration” from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, and “Be an unexpected friend” from the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra*. What I mean by this is that you must remember your beginner’s mind, the mind which made you believe and learn from the Buddha, the mind that sparked your determination to practice and follow the Buddha’s way, that spark of aspiration which was driven by boundless courage and confidence without a doubt. This is what’s most important in our cultivation.

However, a step into Buddhism does not lead straight to heaven. One still needs to take great pains to practice, study and train. However, once faced with demands from people, temple work, and various needs, one becomes disheartened and thinks, “If only I knew earlier that renunciation and following the Buddha’s Way were going to be so difficult, I wouldn’t even start! I could be enjoying life, freedom, and a pay cheque in the outside world.” Hence, many quit halfway, disrobe, and return to a secular life. This is forgetting the initial aspiration and is a great pity indeed.

I often encourage young people not to forget their initial aspirations and regress from their decision. Forgetting one’s initial

aspiration is akin to soldiers deserting their posts and the only outcome is execution. Furthermore, this saying is not only applicable to monastics, for every word spoken by the Buddha was intended to enlighten sentient beings to elevate and transcend.

For example, why would a married couple file for divorce after being married for only a year or two? If they could recall the early days of romantic pursuit and the first time they fell in love with each other would they proceed with the divorce?

Couples wishing to have children pray to the Buddha and deities, hoping that Guanyin Bodhisattva or the Goddess of Childbirth could grant them a child. However, once they have children, they find the children difficult to raise and begin regretting their decision. They think of their children as debtors bringing much trouble. Forgetting their original wish these couples lost their strength and gave up on their initial aspiration.

One can learn from Sudhana in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. On hearing the phrase, “never forget your initial aspiration,” he upheld it wholeheartedly as he journeyed toward enlightenment studying under fifty-three teachers.

For example, by never forgetting the familial ties, one would still fulfill duties as children, even if their parents treat them badly. By never forgetting affinity in friendship, even when one is being lied to and taken advantage of by friends, one would choose to tolerate, forgive and let go, for there is no point holding a grudge or ruminating over a lost friendship.

Some people share friendships so close they become blood brothers and formed communities and alliances. When there is profit to be gained, everyone is a friend; but when help is needed, these

very friends would turn away from each other and break up their friendship. To forgo loyalty and the initial affinity so readily and casually is a lack of human character and integrity. How would such people qualify to follow the Buddha's step?

Sometimes, people go as far as blaming friends for not inviting them or paying them with the utmost respect. One would say, "You didn't invite me," or "You didn't tell me," as justifications.

This is a wrong way of thinking. If one is a bodhisattva, then one should remember that bodhisattvas are "unprompted friends." Bodhisattvas extend a helping hand and do what they can when knowing their friends are in trouble. Hence, true friends provide help without requiring an invitation. Friends that demand formalities before agreeing to help are not true friends.

It is a pity that most people say, "never forget your initial aspiration" in a casual or half-hearted manner, instead of putting it into practice. If one does not put it into practice, then no matter whether one has practiced Buddhism for ten, twenty, or thirty years, that time would have passed in vain. If one practices loving-kindness, compassion, and patience, and perseveres in spite of hardship by never forgetting one's initial aspiration, would they need to worry about not being on the path of the Buddha?



*Only by integrating faith in daily life
and living under the guidance of the Buddha-Dharma,
and only by practicing the path of the Buddha
with initiative and awareness at all times
can we benefit from the Buddha's teachings
and allow Buddhism to stay rooted in the human world.*

— “Practice the Buddha’s Way”

Practice the Buddha's Way



In the past, most Buddhists would readily assert their faith in the Buddha. And yet, many were unable to give a definite answer when asked, “What is Buddhism?” In this way, some people resorted to praying and prostrating to the Buddha when facing hardship. Others chanted the Buddha’s name and studied the Buddha’s teachings to subdue delusive thoughts and actions. However, there is something much more significant than prostrating, praying, or having faith alone—that is “practicing the Buddha’s path.”

The practice of the Buddha’s path is to actualize and uphold the Buddha’s teachings accordingly in all aspects of daily life—whether walking, standing, sleeping, or reclining. It is the ability to act on one’s own initiative and to be aware of whether one’s actions are pure or not, at any given moment. Moreover, it is the development of one’s true potential using the buddha mind. Generally speaking, Buddhists are referred to as “practitioners,” which serves as a reminder to practice and cultivate according to the Dharma. In other words, it means to act per the Buddha’s teachings and actions—such as the qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, selflessness, patience, and equality. Hence, a true practitioner not only learns from the Buddha but *practices* the way of the Buddha. Accomplishment is

only possible through practicing day by day, moment by moment. It does not come by merely knowing the method and casting it aside.

Buddhist sutras begin with the phrase, “Thus have I heard,” and end with the exhortation to “believe, accept, and uphold the Dharma”—which represents the practice of the Buddha’s path. As a result, Buddhist sayings—such as “equal emphasis on understanding and practice” and “dual cultivation of merit and wisdom”—all indicate the insufficiency of only investigating Buddhist doctrine. The Buddha-Dharma has to be experienced and verified in daily life through personal practice, to integrate it with one’s body and mind. Only then can it be sustenance and of use.

I visited a temple in Beitou about forty or fifty years ago, for reasons not recalled, with many devotees praying inside. Not long after I entered, I saw that Cao Zhong-zhi, the former chairman of OAK (a Taiwan distributor of Australian milk powder), had arrived as well.

His wife, a devout Buddhist, ran up to me as soon as she spotted me. “Venerable Master! My husband is here,” she said. “Please quickly tell him to prostrate to the Buddha.”

Back then, it was a difficult feat to ask respectable entrepreneurs wearing business suits to lay prostrations to the Buddha. With a sudden spark of inspiration, I replied, “Mr. Cao does not need to prostrate to the Buddha. Just practicing the path of the Buddha will suffice.”

Mr. Cao was astute and promptly agreed, “Venerable Master is right. I don’t necessarily have to prostrate to the Buddha. I only need to practice the Buddha’s way.”

With these words, Mr. Cao fully dedicated himself to charitable

works and social welfare. For instance, he founded Taiwan Lifeline International, a crisis hotline that has brought hope to many people in need. He established the Cao Zhong Zhi Foundation, offering scholarships to financially challenged students. Additionally, he has donated nearly a million wheelchairs to people in need across the world, and over a thousand million of dollars to disaster relief. When praised by others for his generosity, he always replied, “Chanting is not as good as listening to the sutras, and listening is not as good as teaching. But even teaching is not as good as actualization. I am merely practicing the Buddha’s way.”

As such, I advocate “practicing the Buddha’s way” to elevate Buddhist faith, in hopes that people can incorporate the Buddha-Dharma into daily life. For instance, the Buddha teaches us to be kind and compassionate, which includes refraining from carelessly harming living beings. The Buddha also teaches us to be patient, which includes refraining from lashing out at others in anger. Moreover, the Buddha also teaches us to broadly form good affinities, which includes refraining from being selfish and acting only out of self-interest. Only by integrating faith in daily life and living under the guidance of the Buddha-Dharma, and only by practicing the path of the Buddha with initiative and awareness at all times—whether walking, standing, sleeping, or reclining—can we benefit from the Buddha’s teachings and allow Buddhism to stay rooted in the human world.



*It is common to see Buddhist elders
to not only refuse to pass down the baton
but strike a blow against the younger generation with it.*

This is truly a pity!

— “Legacy”

Legacy



Though the Buddhist population is large, there is an underlying problem: not understanding the importance of passing down legacy. As the Chinese saying goes, “Wealth rarely lasts three generations.” It is often easier to make money than to pass it down. For instance, there are siblings who quarrel over the quality and quantity of their inheritance, fighting to a standstill and tearing apart even the most successful families. Therefore, it is crucial to know how to pass down one’s legacy, whether it is tangible or intangible.

Some abbots and elders of Buddhist monasteries today refuse to step down and hold on to their posts until death. In the end, arguments between their disciples over the position result in the monastery’s decline. Similarly, parents with many children that fail to plan their wills beforehand may cause inheritance disputes upon their passing. Can such families continue to prosper and live in peace?

Therefore, an old saying goes, “Children will be alright on their own, do not labor for them.” It is smarter to pass down virtues to one’s children and leave wealth to society instead. For example, the wise use their wealth to establish public trust funds. Because we receive from society, it is only right to give back. Furthermore, children must rely on themselves in order to be truly successful. Merely passing

wealth to them only encourages idleness and reaping without sowing, setting them up for setbacks sooner or later.

In addition, Buddhism talks about Dharma transmission, succession, and legacy. As the Chinese saying goes, “As in the Yangtze River, the waves behind ride on the ones before, so the new generation excels the old.” One should understand the importance of passing down the baton so that the legacy of Buddhism continues.

When Sakyamuni Buddha held up a flower at the Vulture Peak Assembly in India and Mahakasyapa responded with a smile, the Buddha transmitted to him the Dharma on “the wondrous mind of nirvana and the formlessness of reality.” Mahakasyapa then passed this to Ananda who in turn passed it down generation to generation.

The twenty-eighth patriarch, Bodhidharma, crossed the river to come to the East on a bundle of reeds. He then transmitted the Dharma to Huike, who passed down the legacy to Buddhist masters one generation after another. Because of this legacy, Chan was able to eventually develop into five schools and seven sects.

In the early days of Chan transmission, the patriarch’s robe and alms bowl were the tokens of legacy. As time went by, disciples of the same Chan school began fighting with one another for these symbolic objects. For this reason, upon passing his robe and alms bowl to Huineng the Sixth Patriarch, Hongren the Fifth Patriarch instructed him to discontinue its transmission. The inferior aptitudes of sentient beings forced what was once an excellent system to a halt. As can be seen, the decline of Buddhism is not without reason.

Buddhists should bear in mind the Buddha’s compassion and wisdom. Those who are appointed as abbots or abbesses should have a set period of incumbency, and should pass down their positions

upon completion of term instead of causing disputes by waiting till their death. The same is applicable to devotees: savings should be used for public benefit and contributions to society when one is still alive.

Suppose every individual in the current Buddhist population of a few hundred million were to each donate ten to twenty dollars—or contribute a portion of their legacies, then Buddhist-founded universities, newspapers, scholarships, and funds for disaster relief could all be easily established. Of course, this is something that requires wisdom and resolve.

Even so, it is common to see Buddhist elders to not only refuse to pass down the baton, but strike a blow against the younger generation with it. Such is a true pity!



*Nirvana is achievable in this world
although it is a supramundane state.*

*It is a state of non-self, but that does not mean
it is found only after death.*

Nirvana is a state of enlightenment.

— “Great Nirvana”

Great Nirvana



The unsurpassed perfect enlightenment attained by Sakyamuni Buddha while seated on the diamond throne beneath the bodhi tree is known as “nirvana.” Nirvana encompasses the meaning of perfection. Upon his attainment, the Buddha became perfectly complete in wisdom and realization. He had completely fulfilled the awakening of self, the awakening of others, and the awakening of perfected conduct.

Nirvana also carries the meanings of cessation, quiescence, coolness, peace, subtlety, and auspiciousness. It is the complete eradication of greed, hatred, ignorance, and afflictions. Its essence is not bound by the dichotomy of worldly dharmas, for it transcends the afflictions that arise from being entangled by phenomena—birth and death, poverty and wealth, wisdom and ignorance—as well as notions of self, others, sentient beings, and longevity.

The state of nirvana, as attained by the Buddha, has neither birth nor death. It neither arises nor ceases. It is a state without dichotomies, where there is no notion of self and others. In other words, the Buddha has achieved transcendental liberation.

Its meaning can be summed up through the Four Virtues of Nirvana:

1. Permanence: an unchanging state that stays as fresh as the moment of enlightenment.
2. Bliss: a state of ultimate tranquility and joy that is unshaken by worldly affairs.
3. Self: a state of formlessness in which attachment to the self is eradicated.
4. Purity: an unconditioned state that is without defilement.

However, the contemporary usage of the word “nirvana” has skewed and distorted its original meaning. There are instances of people describing the deceased as having “attained great nirvana.” They mistakenly think that nirvana is equivalent to death and leaving the world.

Sectarian Buddhism explains nirvana as a state where all afflictions have been extinguished. It is further categorized into two kinds: nirvana with remainder and nirvana without remainder.

The Consciousness-Only School, on the other hand, categorizes it into four kinds: pure intrinsic nirvana, nirvana with remainder, nirvana without remainder, and non-abiding nirvana.

Nonetheless, even with the diversity in explanations by the various schools of Buddhism, nirvana is achievable in this world although it is a supramundane state. It is a state of non-self, but that does not mean it is found only after death. Nirvana is a state of enlightenment. Sacred and transcendental, it is a state of neither arising nor ceasing.

I Am a Buddha



“I am a buddha” is a phrase that is neither arrogant nor boastful, but a teaching expounded by the Buddha. When the Buddha attained enlightenment, he proclaimed, “All sentient beings possess buddha nature.” This is a reminder to accept and believe in oneself, as well as to have faith in one’s potential to attain buddhahood.

For example, in the Buddhist tradition, bhiksus and bhiksunis make the following vow during the Triple Platform Full Ordination Ceremony: “I, a bodhisattva, seek full ordination today from the bodhisattva Sila Upadhyaya (Ordination Preceptor)...” After having acknowledged one’s bodhisattvahood, one should also recognize the Buddha’s teaching that everyone has the buddha nature. We should thus step up to the spirit as expressed by the phrase: “I am a buddha.”

For example, consider the following Chan gong’an:

Once, a devotee asked a Chan Master, “What is a buddha?”

The Chan Master replied, “You will not believe it even if I tell you!”

“Master!” said the devotee. “How can I not believe your words?”

“All right, since you are willing to believe me, I will tell you: you are a buddha!”

Astonished, the devotee asked, “I am a buddha? Why didn’t I

know it?”

“Because you do not dare to bear the responsibility!” replied the Chan Master.

Likewise, many Buddhists dare not admit that they are buddhas. In a similar gong’an:

Chan Master Farong was unable to bring himself to sit at a seat with the word “buddha” written on it. In response, Chan Master Daoxin laughed at him and asked, “Do you still have ‘this’ with you?”¹⁴

Or another example:

National Master Huizhong shouted, “Buddha! Buddha!”

His attendant looked at him in puzzlement. “Who are you calling?”

“I’m calling you! Why won’t you acknowledge it?” replied the National Master.

One time, a devotee saw that I was writing calligraphy and requested a piece to serve as her motto. For her, I wrote: “I am a Buddha.” She said in astonishment, “Master, I dare not accept this!”

After this incident, whenever I presided over a Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem Ceremony, I would ask devotees to say, “I am a buddha!” Initially, they could only bring themselves to say it faintly without much power. But after giving them some encouraging words, I would ask them to repeat it once again. They were then able to affirm this loudly and clearly.

Subsequently, I would continue to explain: since we are buddhas, can we hit or yell at others? Do buddhas drink beer and smoke cigarettes? Life is thus different by being able to admit “I am a buddha.” For example, since we are buddhas, we should strive to be kind and compassionate. Since we are buddhas, we should strive

to benefit all beings. “I am a buddha” is a phrase with significance. It serves as a motivation to believe in ourselves and aspire to make vows to improve and develop ourselves.

Out of an understanding of the Buddha and that Buddhism is about equality, I encourage everyone to recognize that they are buddhas. There have been buddhas of the past. There are buddhas of the present. And there will be buddhas of the future. As Sadaparibhuta Bodhisattva said in the *Lotus Sutra*, “I dare not belittle any of you, for you all are future buddhas.”

Though we may take ourselves to be good and wholesome people—and others may have praised us for being wise, philosophical, amazing, capable, or benevolent—we still do not dare say we are buddhas. However, although we may be human beings, every person has the potential to attain buddhahood. In other words, buddhas are enlightened human beings. A person attains buddhahood once the human character is perfected. As such, the Buddha explicitly explained that all sentient beings can become buddhas. So, why not recognize the buddhahood in ourselves by saying, “I am a buddha”?

Notes

Preface

1. 胡說八道 (húshuō bā dào). This idiom now refers to when someone is talking nonsense. This term comprises of 胡, a term for people of the Western regions; 說 say; 八道 the Noble Eightfold Path.
2. 走江湖 (zǒu jiāng hú). A portmanteau of the two Chinese provinces *Jiangxi* (江西) and *Hunan* (湖南), where Chan Master Mazu Daoyi (馬祖道一; 709-788) and Chan Master Shitou Xiqian (石頭希遷; 700-790) resided respectively. 走 (to walk) 江湖 refers to the time when Chan practitioners would travel back and forth Jiangxi and Hunan to learn from the two masters.

Chapter 6: Understanding Generosity

3. Refer to Chapter 27, “Sacrificing Body and Flesh to Feed Eagles and Tigers,” for further elaboration on this phrase.
4. When three birds (eagle, pigeon, and sparrow) fly in the sky and three animals (elephant, horse, and rabbit) cross the river, the height and depth they reach are different. However, the sky and river remain the same. These metaphors describe how the Buddha teaches the Dharma differently, according to people’s aptitudes. While people also vary in their levels of attainment, the essence of the Buddha’s teachings remains the same. Refer to the Preface for further elaboration on this phrase.

Chapter 13: Think Outside the Box

5. One day, the five fingers were discussing who was the greatest. The thumb claimed the title because it grants a mark of greatness when showing thumbs-up. The index finger said it was used to taste food and point directions, so it was the best. The middle finger boasted it was the greatest, being longest and placed in the center. The fourth said it was adorned with precious rings and jewels, so it was the best. Only the small finger remained quiet. When asked why, it said, “I am neither the tallest nor the best, but when people pray, I am nearest to the Buddha.”

Chapter 21: Having by Not Wanting

6. The ten practices as covered in the Philosophy of the Ten Withouts are: (1) Being wealthy without material riches (無財之富); (2) Having without seeking (無求之有); (3) Having compassion without being overly-sentimental (無情之慈); (4) Being joyful without desires (無欲之樂); (5) Taking everywhere to be home without dwelling anywhere (無住之家); (6) Being content even without a comfortable place (無安之處); (7) Being in a multitude without attaching to others (無人之眾); (8) Having a mind without regrets (無悔之心); (9) Developing wisdom without resorting to cleverness (無聰之慧); (10) Doing things without being credited (無功之事).

Chapter 25: Chan Associates

7. Chan associate is a translation of the Chinese 禪和子 (chán hé zǐ)
8. “What is the Patriarch’s intention in coming from the west?” is a famous and commonly-used Chan gong’an question. This question contemplates the reason why Bodhidharma, the first Chinese Chan patriarch, traveled from India to China. Should this question be fully understood, enlightenment is at hand.

Chapter 27: Sacrificing Body and Flesh to Feed Eagles and Tigers

9. These two stories concern the Buddha’s past lives as a practicing bodhisattva. (a) Sacrificing flesh to feed the eagle: King Sibi was a compassionate ruler who vowed to protect all sentient beings. One day, Sibi saw an eagle hunting a pigeon. Sibi saved the pigeon, but the eagle said, “I am very hungry. Now that you have the pigeon, what am I to eat?” Sibi replied, “I will cut off my flesh in compensation for the weight of the pigeon.” A set of scales was brought, the pigeon at one end and Sibi’s flesh the other. But, no matter how much flesh he cut off, the scales never balanced. Finally, he realized his life was equal to that of the pigeon, and put himself on the scale. This was a trial from the heavenly beings to test Sibi’s resolve in being a bodhisattva. (b) Sacrificing body to feed tigers: One day, Prince Sattva was in the forest with his brothers. They chanced upon a starving tigress and her cubs. Sattva asked his brothers to find food for the tigress as he kept watch. But the tigress was so hungry she was about to devour her cubs.

Unable to bear this, Sattva lay next to the tigress in place of the cubs. However, the tigress did not devour him, and Sattva realized she was too weak to even move. Resolving to save the tigress and her cubs, Sattva threw himself down a cliff. The tigress gained strength after drinking his blood, and the tigers' lives were saved through Sattva's sacrifice.

Chapter 28: Martyrdom

10. The Taiping Rebellion was a massive rebellion or civil war that was waged in China from 1850 to 1864 between the established Qing dynasty and the theocratic Taiping Heavenly Kingdom.
11. The Four Great Persecutions perpetrated by Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei (408-452), Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou (543-578), Emperor Wuzong of Tang (814-846), and Emperor Shizong of Later Zhou (921-959).
12. The end of the Song Dynasty (960-1279) was ravaged by wars. Bhiksuni Fazhen, a pious Buddhist, saw that the wars halted the production of Buddhist sutras, and so the public could not access the Dharma. Instead of relying on royal patronage, she raised funds from the people to compile and carve a Buddhist canon. To show her firm resolve, she cut off her arm before the people and vowed she would see through to the end of the Buddhist canon. The people were moved by her and raised enough funds till the completion of the *Zhaocheng Jin Buddhist Canon*, thirty years later.

Chapter 37: Every Day Is a Good Day

13. The Four Symbols are four Chinese mythological creatures viewed as the guardians of the four cardinal directions.

Chapter 39: Auspiciousness

14. The ancient Chinese measured time by dividing a day into twelve periods (each period about equal to two hours).

Chapter 40: Joy

15. In Buddhism, this world that we lived in is known as the *Saha World*. *Saha* is a Sanskrit word that means endurance, for although this world is tormented by suffering, human beings have the power to endure it.
16. According to the *Amitabha Sutra*, the *Saha World* degenerates in five ways: (1) degeneration of kalpa; (2) degeneration of view; (3) degeneration of affliction; (4) degeneration of sentient beings; (5) degeneration of life-span.
17. In Buddhist cosmology, sentient beings are reborn in the Three Realms: (1) realm of desire; (2) realm of form; (3) realm of formlessness. According to the *Lotus Sutra*, “The turmoil of the three realms is like a burning house, for they are filled with a host of sufferings that are terrible and frightening to behold.” Only by attaining nirvana can sentient beings be liberated from the Three Realms.

Chapter 42: Indestructible Diamond

18. There are eminent masters whose physical body remains intact after their passing. These full-body relics are also known as indestructible bodies.

Chapter 50: I Am a Buddha

19. One day, the Fourth Patriarch Daoxin visited Chan Master Farong. When Farong welcomed Daoxin to a hut with animal footprints around it, Daoxin raised his arms as if frightened. Farong chided, “Do you still have ‘this’ with you?” When Farong left the hut for a moment, Daoxin wrote “buddha” on his seat. Upon seeing the word, Farong could not bring himself to sit and Daoxin laughed, “Do you still have ‘this’ with you?” Realizing that he has not attained a pure mind, Farong implored Daoxin to teach him the Dharma.

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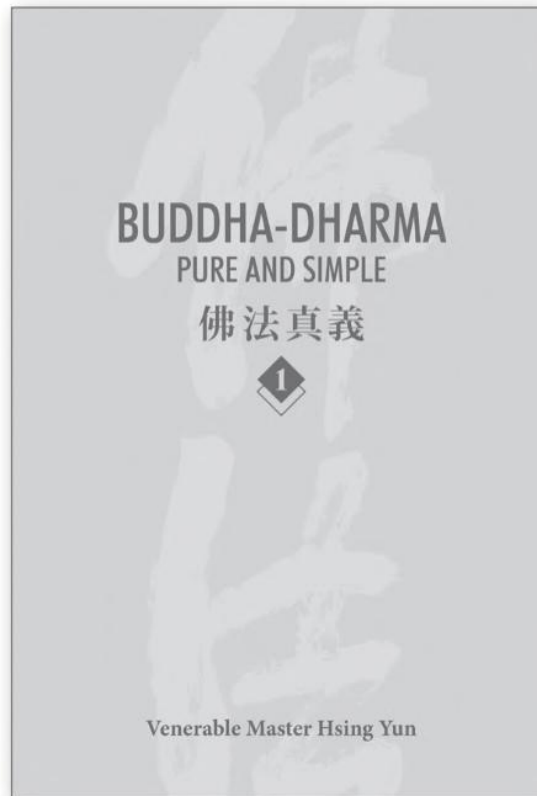
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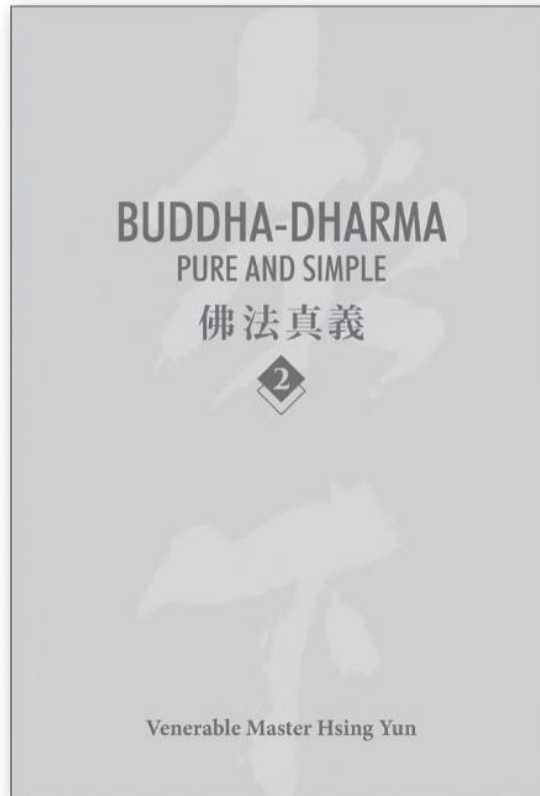
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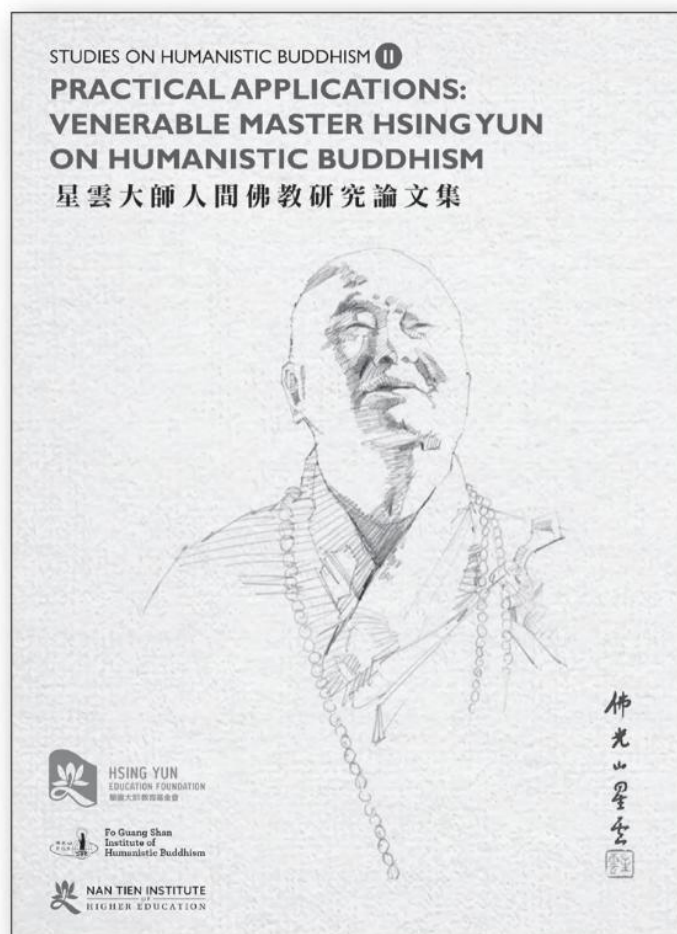
Buddha-Dharma: Pure and Simple 1

The first installment of *Buddha-Dharma: Pure and Simple* contains 52 articles on the topics of faith and doctrine, laying the foundation for readers to learn and practice in the Buddha's footsteps. Moreover, it also serves as an inspiration for practitioners to strive for buddhahood and believe that "I am a buddha."



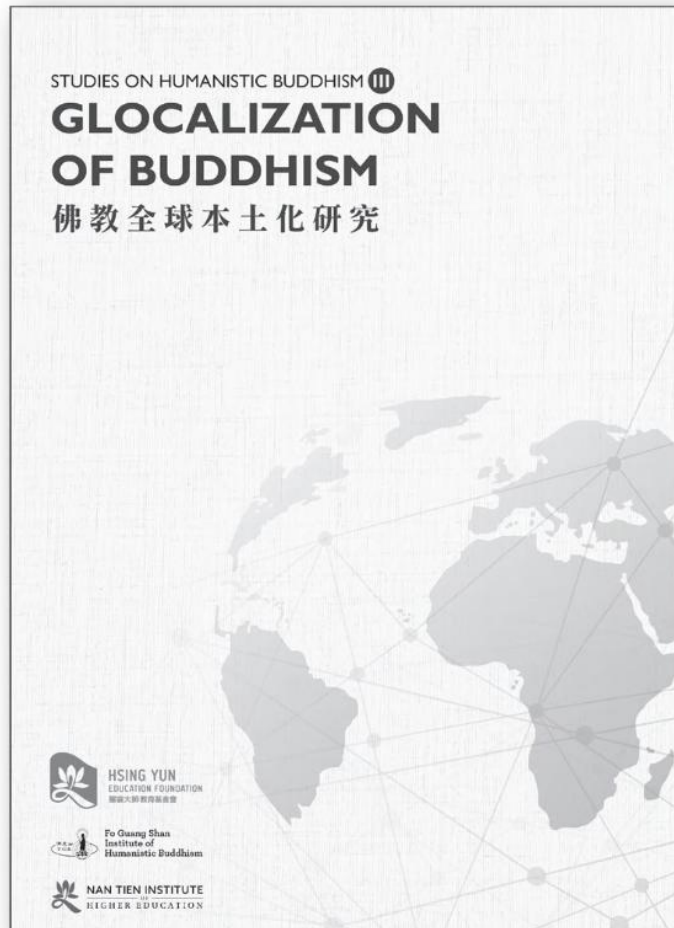
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Studies on Humanistic Buddhism is a journal focused on academic articles related to Humanistic Buddhism that have been translated from Chinese by a worldwide team of volunteer translators, editors, and proofreaders. It is the result of a unique project involving more than 30 volunteers in 7 countries. Led by the Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism and managed by the Humanistic Buddhism Centre of Nan Tien Institute of Higher Learning, this worldwide team worked collaboratively using an online workflow with a cloud-based glossary.



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慈悲喜捨遍法界
惜福結緣利人天
禪淨戒行平等忍
慚愧感恩大願心

星全



May kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity pervade all worlds;
May we cherish and build affinities to benefit all beings;
May Chan, Pure Land, and Precepts inspire equality and patience;
May our humility and gratitude give rise to great vows.

Rely on the self
Rely on the Dharma
Rely on nothing else

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