



Teachings in Chinese Buddhism

Selected Translations of Miao Yun



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Venerable Yin Shun's expertise and writings in Buddhism have been widely acknowledged by the Chinese Buddhists this century. The "Miao Yun Collection" written by the Venerable provides us with important information and a systematic approach to Buddhism, giving us a better insight and understanding of Buddhism. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Triple Gem, and hope that more people may benefit from the Venerable's writing.

In Australia, there are very few English books on Mahayana Buddhism. In order to introduce the Buddha's teachings to Westerners, members from the University of New South Wales Buddhist Society, the Sydney University Buddhist Society and the Hwa Tsang Monastery Inc. thought about translating the Mahayana sutras and texts, and chose Venerable Yin Shun's work as the choice of translation. The collection of this translation will be called "Selected Translations of Miao Yun Part I".

We have selected and translated eight articles from five books in the Third volume of the Miao Yun Collection; namely "The Dharma is the Saver of the World", "The Three Essentials in Practising the Teaching of the Buddha", "The Buddha lives in the world", "To investigate the Dharma according to the Teachings of the Buddha" and "My view on Religions". Some of these articles were translated before and were collected in the book "A Translation of Works by Venerable Yin Shun", published by the Mahaprajna Buddhist Society, Singapore.

We apologise for not being able to contact and consult the original translators but we have obtained the approval from the original publisher, Venerable Hao Zhong, and edited these articles in accordance with the interests of Western readers. To aid readers, we have chosen to translate according to the meaning instead of direct translation in some circumstances.

This is our first attempt in translation and it is possible some passages may seem difficult to understand. Your advice would be most appreciated. To ensure the consistency of the translated works and the original articles, and to ensure the fluency of the translation, we have repeated the process of editing and proofreading several times. We have also invited an Australian Buddhist, Mr. Kiddle to assist us in this aspect.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Venerable Tsang Hui for his guidance and encouragement, Mr. Khoo Cheang Jin for his design, and Mr. Mick Kiddle, Mr. Chai Gao Mao, Mr. Mok Chung, Mr. Lin Yang, Mr. Beng Tiong Tan and other members for assisting in the translation. We would also like to thank Venerable Xing Ying, Mr. Xu Yang Zhu and Mr. Guo Zhong Sheng for their proofreading and suggestions, and Mr Gregg Heathcote and Mr. Simon Paterson for refining the articles.

It is hoped that with the publication of this book, more Buddhists who are well versed in both English and Chinese will take the initiative to participate in tasks like this, so that more people may benefit from the work of Venerable Yin Shun and hopefully appreciate and practise Mahayana Buddhism.

Neng Rong, June 1995

Precious Suggestions

Venerable Tsang Hui,

I have received the select English translation of the “Miao Yun Collection” which you asked Mr. Li to hand to me. I am touched by the enthusiasm and efforts of yourself and many others involved in the translation of Buddhism. Before Venerable Yin Shun went to Singapore he instructed me to give the translations to some local expert on the translation of Buddhist texts into English, such as Mr. Xu Yang Zhu or Mr. Guo Zhong Shen etc., to get their opinion. They had suggested that the translations should be further smoothed by Western authors well versed in the literature. The language used should be free from the Chinese style making the translations more accessible to Westerners.

I understand that there may be some difficulties carrying out these suggestions, because you and others have already invested so much effort and time on this project. Therefore, the final decision regarding the suggestions is up to you, considering the practical conditions prevailing.

Thank you very much

Yours in Dhamma,
Venerable Xing Ying
95.4.12

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How I came to follow the Buddha's Path

As we travel the journey of life, we are bound to encounter darkness and many unexpected difficulties. However, darkness is not eternal and difficulties are sure to be overcome in the end. We who are born into the human realm must rely upon our human existence to progress towards a higher and brighter realm. We must preserve the health and harmony of our minds and bodies. We must be rational, warm and faithful, and not fall into empty despair. Thus, religious faith is necessary.

Anyone who has no faith or lack of faith in religion is easily frustrated and tends to reject themselves. They often reside in a state of melancholy and despair. Such a person may descend into a state of mind where he mistreats others, suffers severely from hysteria, or commits suicide. Human life which has become evil and corrupt is indeed fearful! This is especially so in these modern times. Human minds are forever pursuing greater riches and material assets. There is emptiness within their hearts. They lack purpose in life. Moral virtues too, have become more and more attenuated. Religion which sets out to heal the hearts of human being is clearly more needed today than ever before.

Let me explain how I came to have faith in Buddhism. In 1918, I began my religious search, and ended by choosing Buddhism. The final step was my entry into the monastic order. How did I come to choose Buddhism? Now that I try to put it into words, I find the choice hard to explain.

I was born and brought up in a peasant's family. Due to poverty, I had to give up my studies at an early age. However, I began to study Chinese medicine and the phrase "Medicine is the royal way to Immortality" led me to revere the Way of the Immortals. *Shen Nung's Materia Medica*, [and other Taoist classics such as the *Bao Pu Zi* (*Book of the Preservation of Solidarity Master*)], which refer to medicines beneficial for the prolongation of life and alchemy¹ excited my faith in the religion of the Way of the Immortals. In addition I sought after the esoteric "Arts of the Miraculous", such as divination by the dexterous arrangement of the Celestial Stems and Earthly Branches and by charms and spells.

I joined the Tong Shan Association in which I studied the arts of Shamanism and hypnotism. During this period I was thoroughly engulfed by the magicized religion of the Way of the Gods, paying great attention to the phenomena of individual longevity and mysticism. This enlarged my vision and this search for truth had a good effect upon me.

I groped around in the darkness of this faith for two or three years before my father discovered what I was engaged in. He, of course, did not approve of what I was doing and wanted me to become a teacher. With the help of teachers and friend I began to study the work of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu (the Taoist philosophers) and at the same time read some

¹ *In the History of the Han Dynasty thirty-six works on therapeutics are mentioned. Some of this material is attributed to Shen Nung, a mythical hero of China's legendary period. The Bao Pu Zi is an alchemical work by Ko Hung of the fourth century A.D.*

modern works. The result was that my religious outlook began to change.

One cannot say that there is no connection between Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu and the later ascetic practices of the Taoists. The philosophical principles of these two thinkers are exceedingly deep and far reaching. They were opposed to the artificial, and demanded a return to what is natural and they searched after an ideal simplicity. But this ideal of theirs is unattainable. A philosophy which is firmly based in this world and is concerned with refining human nature seems to be a reasonable philosophy, but for me, their philosophy lacked the power necessary for its fulfilment. Surely, a life of retirement led purely for the cultivation of one's own goodness cannot be of any positive value to society. The thought of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu was a contributing factor in my choice of Buddhism. Taoist philosophy and Taoist methods of self-cultivation captured some of my sympathy. Nevertheless, I was no longer a disciple of Taoism for I had awakened from the beautiful dream world of the Way of the Immortals.

After my faith in Taoism was shaken I did not let it go. I followed it haphazardly and returned to Confucian books which I had previously studied. Confucianism was the absolute opposite of Taoism with its completely esoteric character and its religious individualism.

Confucianism stresses the need for mental and physical cultivation. Above all, it is concerned with a great political ideal. It is common, down to earth, takes human affairs seriously and pays honour to rationality. All these are principal elements in the culture of China. I agreed with their

philosophies and even praised them, but they were unable to fill in the emptiness in my unsettled heart. Others thought that I had become more pragmatic, but the fact is that I experienced an increasing emptiness.

Now that I reflect on it, I find that this experience was due to the fact that Confucianism gives little emphasis to religion. To the ordinary people, the practices of Confucianism seem common, and down to earth. The establishment of one's virtue, merit, and teachings solely for this life cannot be constructed into an imposing and glorious blueprint for living. Such a plan is lacking in foresight. It cannot bring people into a state where their minds and hearts are at peace(i.e. a state in which they are unmoved by gain or loss, suffering or joy, life or death) and in this state stride forward along the path of glory. My sojourn among Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, and Mencius lasted four or five years.

I was in a state of agitation and emptiness when I was introduced to Christianity. I became deeply interested in it. This is a religion with a fully socialised character. It was from Christianity that I learned the relationship of devoutness and a pure faith to the true meaning of religion. Christianity, which had faith, hope, and love had something that Confucianism had not. I studied the Old and New Testaments, and Christian periodicals such as True Light and Spiritual Light. I practised praying, and attended revival meetings. Nevertheless, I could never bring myself to be a Christian.

The external causes for this included the fact that there was an anti-Christian movement at that time. Although this had no connection with the Christian faith itself, yet the Christian

Church, relying on an international background, could not avoid the sin of cultural aggression. My main reason however, was the difficulty I had in accepting certain aspects of Christian thought, such as the promise of eternal life for believers, and eternal fire for un-believers. Human behavior and actions (both in the heart and externally) were not taken as measures for this judgment. The standard of judgment was simply whether one had faith or not. The slogan “Let live the believer, condemn the unbeliever” exhibits a fiercely monopolistic and exclusive attitude. All are to be destroyed except for those belonging to one’s own side. Underneath this “class love” was revealed a cruel hatred. There is also the view that a man’s spirit comes from God and that this spirit is united to flesh and thus becomes man. According to Christian doctrine, a human being can only be saved if he is born again. This implies that the great majority of people are walking on the way to Hell. To say that an omniscient and omnipotent God is willing to treat all mankind, which He calls His sons and daughters, like this, is beyond imagination and unreasonable. I could not believe that Jesus was able to atone for my sin and redeem me.

The light I received from Christianity lasted less than two years and rapidly disappeared. The feeling of emptiness and hopelessness descended upon me, just like a tiny ship in the midst of violent waves. I became emotionally depressed and at times perplexed and troubled. In this state of deep depression I read anything to pass the time.

By chance I came upon Feng Meng-Chen’s preface to Chuang Tzu in which he says: “Are not the texts of Chuang Tzu and the commentary by Kuo in fact forerunners of

Buddhist thought?” My heart leapt and I began to enquire into Buddhism. However, it was difficult to get information on Buddhism and it was not easy to obtain copies of Buddhist scriptures. I visited monasteries and searched everywhere, but only managed to obtain and read the “*Lung-shu-ching-tu wen*”, the “*Chin-kang ching hsi-shu*”, the “*Jen-tienyen-mu*”, the “*Chuan-teng lu*”, the “*Fa-hua ching*”, a damaged copy of the “*Hua-yen ching shu-chao chuan yao*” and the “*Chung lun*”¹.

Naturally, I failed to understand the writing for it was too difficult for a beginner like me. Yet, it was my failure to understand which caused me to pursue this course. I was like a child who was fascinated by the luxurious surroundings and keen to know and learn. Although I could only understand them partially, this is where I began to realise the limitlessness of Buddhism.

Later, I came across Abbot Tai-Hsu’s article entitled “A Method for the Study of Buddhism in the Home” and only then was I able to commence my studies from the simple levels. I read a number of introductory books as well as some works concerned with the Madhyamika and Vajrayana Schools of Mahayana Buddhism. Although I was still lacking in comprehension, Buddhism had become my glorious ideal and my faith grew continuously. I firmly believe that the

¹ *The first of these works is a didactic treatise written in the twelfth century; the second is a work on the Diamond Sutra; the third is a compilation of the Sung Dynasty which sets forth essential doctrines of five Ch’an (Zen) schools; the fourth is the work known as The Transmission of the Lamp; the fifth is the Lotus Sutra; the sixth is a work on the Avatamsaka Sutra which is the basic text of the Hua-yen (Kegon) sect, and the seventh is the Madhyamika Sastra.*

teachings of the Law of Karma come closest to the reality of our situation in life. It is through a knowledge of this that we leave what is evil and turn to what is good. It is by following this path that we turn from being an ordinary human being to becoming a sage. Even if we fall, in the end we shall progress upwards and achieve complete enlightenment if we stay to the path. It is not simply a matter of looking for a final refuge. Along our way to enlightenment, there are also circumstances when the pathway appears to be leading to a dead-end, and yet, we discover so often that a new road appears. These situations spur us on, comfort us, and lead us on so that we can continue on our journey of eternal hope.

I find that Buddhism is a religion that does not rely solely on faith. It takes good or evil behavior as measure in justifying an ordinary person and a saint. It stresses individual enlightenment and above all, it emphasizes benefitting all living beings. Buddhism puts great emphasis upon perfect enlightenment. It is only through such an awakening that genuine freedom can be obtained. Buddhism is a unity of faith, perfect wisdom, and compassion. The cultivation of body and mind in Buddhism embraces the best to be found in Confucianism, and then goes far beyond it. Conversion through trust, which is found in Christianity, is also to be found in Buddhism.

In my opinion, Buddhism contains all that is best in all religions. There is final truth and there is expedient truth. Each of them is able to meet the need of every kind of person, logically leading them on to that which is good.

I chose Buddhism to be my comfort in distress and the light which brightened my darkness. Unfortunately I lack sensitivity by nature and although I praise and look up to the eternal way of Bodhisattvas, I have yet to experience it for myself. However, from the time of my choice of Buddhism until now, I have lived quietly and securely, knowing nothing else except bold and direct progress in accordance with its teaching.

In 1928 my mother died and a year later my father followed her. The time was appropriate for me to enter the monastic order. There was no longer anything in my family which demanded my care. So, in the summer of 1930, I decided to become a monk. May my body and mind be absorbed in the Triple Gem and strive for Buddhism, the highest of religions.

Translated Chai Gao Mao, edited by Mick Kiddle, proofread by Neng Rong. (19-2-1995)

The Basic Purpose of Following the Teaching of Buddha

1. What is the purpose of existence?

Many people often talk about following the Buddha. But why should we follow the Buddha? What is its basic purpose? This is something that a Buddhist should understand. The significance and purpose of following the Buddha is to attain perfection. If we can understand thoroughly our purpose in following the Buddha and feel confident that it is essential to follow the Buddha's teaching, then we will tread a true path and learn the essence of Buddhism rather than being side-tracked or practising incorrectly.

What is the purpose of human existence in this world? What is its meaning? We have to begin by observing ourselves to find an answer for this question. This is the only way to grasp the purpose of following the Buddha because Buddhism aims at resolving the problem of human existence. This aim may be common to all higher religions, but Buddhism gives a more complete view to the purpose of life and its meaning.

1.1 Veiled in mystery, no one understands what birth and death is.

From the moment we were born to the day of our old age and death, several decades of our life seem to have gone in a split second. Most of us live in ignorance. Where did we come from? Where does death take us to? Nobody can answer these questions. Hence, we can only say that befuddled, we come

into being, and befuddled we depart. In confusion we pass our life. More often than not, even our marriage seems a union of accident. Our life career, too, seems often a matter of muddling chance. Seldom is it the result of the execution of a plan carefully designed from the very beginning.

A Western philosopher once drew a very good simile for this existence veiled in mystery. He said, "There is somewhere two steep mountains with a deep and wide gorge between them. The gorge is spanned by a long, narrow bridge. On this bridge humans move forward. Ahead of them, they see a mountain shrouded in dense fog, presenting only a picture of blank confusion. Looking backwards, the scene is no less misty. Down below is an unfathomable abyss. Some people walk only a few paces and then they fall into the abyss. Others have gone even as far as halfway, but to their misfortune, they too, slip and fall. Even those who have drawn near to the mountain on the opposite side, they are still not secure against falling into the bottomless canyon below. Where do they fall, no one knows." This is an excellent depiction of the precarious nature of human existence.

To follow the Buddha is to gain a clear and thorough understanding of this precarious human existence. Without this understanding, we will be like a ship sailing at random in a vast ocean from this shore towards a distant destination and such reckless sailing is extremely dangerous. Buddhism explains where life comes from, and where death leads to. It shows us what we are supposed to do now, in order to land safely on the other shore of light.

1.2 What do we attain by keeping ourselves busy all life long?

For decades we keep ourselves busy doing various things. We are busy from our very childhood until we age and die. But what have we achieved at in the end? This question is worth contemplating. Some people have to be “busy” most of the time although they are doing nothing. They cannot answer when asked what they are busying about. Simply put, they find it impossible not to continue to be busy. Young people probably do not think this way, as they think their future is full of hope and brightness. But once they are middle aged, they will begin to have the same thoughts. I am not asking you not to be active and busy, but we must examine what can we achieve in the end.

As the saying goes:

“Life is like a honey-gathering bee,
After collecting all the honey from myriad flowers,
They age and their labour leaves them with nothing.”

Certainly some people do acquire grand official title, wealth and high social position. But what they have gained is soon all gone. Everything seems to be a farce and an empty joy. We seem to accomplish nothing really. Older people generally have more intimate knowledge of such experiences. One common situation facing them is the raising of children. In their childhood, they always stuck to their parents. But once grown up, all of them will leave home to start their own life. This fact often causes us to become depressed and pessimistic. But this is not the Buddhist view of life.

1.3 What is the benefit of persisting in doing good deeds?

All religions advise people to do good deeds and refrain from doing evil. They all promote that “we should strive to perform all good acts.” But what is the benefit of doing good? What is the value of morality? We often say, “Good deeds bring about good rewards, and evil deeds harsh retribution.” This is the Law of Cause and Effect. The Chinese expect kind acts to bring rewards largely to their family. They believe that if the parents do good deeds their descendants will live in abundance. Thus the saying: “House of accumulated good deeds shall be blessed with abundance.” This contradicts reality! Because a kind and good family may have very wicked children. And many a wicked parent gives birth to children both filial and loyal. Our ancient Emperor Yao (who lived more than 2100 years ago) was a kind and magnanimous person. But his son Dan Zhu was notorious for his arrogance. Again, Gu Sou the Blind, father of Emperor Shun, was stupid and evil, while Emperor Shun was renowned for his filial piety. These are just a couple of examples.

Individually speaking, the wicked always find it easier to secure social reputation and power. However, more often than not, the good are down-trodden and have to lick their wounds in solitude. Was Confucius not a man of high moral and great erudition? Yet, he was nearly starved to death when he was travelling around the warring states in China. Neither did his political ideals met with appreciation. On the other hand, the notorious robber Dao Zhi had practically everything his way at the time. Then how can we say that there is an inexorable law governing reward and retribution of good and evil acts? What

is the reason for us to perform good deeds? We can only answer these questions by the Law of Three Birth (past, present and future lives) and Cause and Effect.

Hence, “All religions advise people to do good deeds.” In this, their motives are the same, but Buddhism draws a different conclusion. In following the Buddha, we persist in the performance of good deeds. May be our present circumstances are unfavourable and frustrating, but once our good karma (deeds) ripen, they will naturally bear good fruit. If we can perceive the world in this light, then and only then can we consider ourselves to have grasped the spirit of Buddhism.

1.4 There is no peace when the mind is not at rest

This restless mind is indeed a source of great suffering. Our mind is at all times craving for satisfaction from external objects: beautiful sights, music, luxurious commodities, profits, fame and power. Why should it be so? Because we seek contentment.

If we live without food and clothing, we will need to obtain money in order to solve the problem of livelihood. But once we have enough food and clothing, we will still be dissatisfied. This time we will seek for food and clothing of better quality. We will want stylish sedans to drive, and a magnificent mansion to live in. When we have all these, we will still remain dissatisfied. The human mind is just like that, forever seeking, never contented. It runs like a galloping horse, no sooner than its rear feet touch the ground, its fore

feet are already in the air. Never will its four feet land at the same time.

A discontented mind always feels that the other person has all the advantages. Actually, it is not so. Scholars are discontent because they always seek more knowledge. Even kings who possess unlimited authority are not satisfied and they too have inexpressible sufferings of their own. If we do not find contentment, we will never have peace and happiness. Thus we say, “We have to be content in order to have peace and happiness.” Yet the fact remains that the human mind can never be content. So how can there be peace and happiness? Religions in general try to give people comfort and make them content. Giving comfort may also be considered a common denominator of most religions. Some religions preach salvation through faith and say that salvation will naturally bring contentment and peace of mind. However, they can be seen to treat adults like children. That is, they will give “toys” to the children if the latter obey their guidance and refrain from crying. In fact the problem remains unsolved, because a discontent mind cannot be satisfied by external gifts.

Buddhism shows us the significance of birth and death, and what we gain by keeping ourselves busy in our whole life. Buddhism also shows us the benefits of performing good deeds, and how to gain inner peace and satisfaction. We must investigate life from these points of view before we can grasp the core of Buddha-dharma. Only then can we acquire true peace and happiness.

2. The relationship between the universe and “I”

2.1 Am I created by God?

Another question arises in this nebulous existence. What position do humans hold in this endless expanse of time and space? The universe is so large, with the heaven above, the earth below. Surrounded by myriad phenomena, we live and die, do good and evil deeds. But what is our status in this universe after all? What attitude should we assume? If you are the parents of a family, you should bear parental responsibilities. Apprentices must adopt an attitude consistent with their position of apprentices. According to some religions, we are created in the universe. God creates every entity in the universe, every bird, every beast, every blade of grass, every shrub and jungle, every breed, genus and species. He rules and governs as supreme authority over his creation. Since the human belongs to God we are his servant. Thus we call God our “Lord”, and ourselves, “his servant”. Therefore, these religions view of life is one of a master-servant relationship. The human is the servant of the God. We have to be faithful to God and to do the will of God.

A master orders the servants to scrub the floor before cooking the meal. If they should first cook the meal and scrub the floor later, although they do their job well, they would still be in the wrong. This is because they disobey the command of the master. There are two relationships that exist in this universe, that is, the relationship between the creative God and the human, and that with all his creatures. The God empowers the human to rule and control the other creatures by the authority of the God of the creation. Thus, in front of the God,

the position of the human is utterly dependent. However, in comparison to the other creatures, we are full of authority and pompous presumption. If we exclude the God, the concepts of these religions become entirely devoid of meaning. They might have seemed logical at the time of dawning civilization. However, we should re-evaluate this concept in this modern time.

2.2 Am I a product of heaven and earth?

The Chinese view of the human position in the universe seems more reasonable than that of some other religions. Chinese claim that heaven and earth give birth to the human, or that we are the product of the union of yin (the negative principle) and yang (the positive principle). Heaven here stands for the metaphysical or spiritual constituents of the human, while earth represents the physical or corporeal elements. Heaven and earth give birth to all beings. However humans are the only ones endowed with the essence of the natural principles, and are called the most intelligent of all beings. Humans are so great that we are sometimes equated with heaven and earth, and all these three are then called the “Three Potentials”.

Thus, the human, standing between heaven and earth, is most noble. This concept is quite different from the Western master-servant relationship. However, can all human beings be equated with heaven and earth? No! Only the saints are capable of assisting heaven and earth in the evolution and development of the world. In addition, Chinese also say, “Heaven and Earth evolve without a mind. The saints, however, suffer with the myriad beings.” All these statements serve to indicate the greatness of the saints.

It is a spontaneous act for heaven and earth to give birth to myriad beings. It is a natural phenomenon. It differs to God's creation of the world because Creation is an act of will. Let there be life! And life there is. When we look at the world from a positive perspective, everything is lovely; flowers in blossom, the singing birds, every single plant and every blade of grass is beautiful. However, if we look at it from a negative perspective, we see big worms eat little worms, and big fish eat little fish. Everyone is hurting and killing each other. We see the scenes of mutual destruction. Is mutual destruction also the purpose of creation?

Confucianism says that the myriad beings are mindless. They are mutually destroying and conflicting; and also mutually assisting and complementing each other. The saints cannot disregard all these happenings and want to share the sorrow of the myriad beings. Heaven and earth represent the natural existence, and the saints and sages represent the humanistic and moral forces.

When the saints see mankind engaged in mutual destruction, they would advocate kindness, love and peace. When they see the masses live in ignorance, they would educate them to behave well. When there is no morality in the world, they would advocate moral disciplines. Everything that is bad in this world, the saints would try their utmost effort to improve it and uplift it to eventual perfection. In this way do all saints assist heaven and earth in their evolution and development.

This concept is more logical than that of some religions, owing to the concept that heaven and earth, or yin and yang, give birth to the human. The Chinese religio-cultural system is one of father-son relationship. The family system is patriarchal (i.e. father is the head of the family). Politically, the king considers his subjects his children, and people call the local magistrate as their “Parent-Officer”. In a father-son cultural system, sentiments carry more weight than reason. It differs to master-servant system, as law predominates, the world is harsh and relentless.

2.3 Did I create the world?

Buddhists believe the myriad beings created everything in this universe. The Law of Cause and Effect stipulates that whatever deed an individual performs, the result of that deed goes to him or her alone. Whatever deeds a group of persons perform, the group will bear the result. Such a doctrine is diametrically opposite to theistic teachings. Therefore, all Buddha-dharma practitioners should understand two things:

a) All the chaos and sufferings in this world are the result of evil deeds performed by the human in the past. In order to make this world a pure and stately place to live in, the only hope lies in our refraining from evil and doing all that is good. Individually speaking, if I should suffer from being uneducated, live in poor family circumstances, or chronic illness, then these are the influences of my past or present karmic forces. Therefore if we wish to live in peace and happiness, then all of us must strive very hard to perform good acts. If humans were the Creation, we would have no power of our own. Instead we would have to follow the decision and

will made by the Creator. Buddhism believes that all events that take place are due to reverberations of our own karmic forces. Thus we are capable of changing ourselves, even to the extent of changing the world.

b) After we are convinced of the Buddhist doctrine of karmic conditional causation, that whether the world is foul or pure, whether our careers are a success or failure, these are the results of our bygone karmic forces; then we will not then blame the unfavourable situation on heaven or others. We can change and improve our karma. If we start toward the direction performing wholesome acts from this very moment, then our future will be full of brightness. This is the basic way of life taught by Buddhism. Why should we do good deeds? Because we all want to lead a life of security and happiness so that the world will live in peace, We can assist heaven and earth in this manner in their work of evolution and development. This is a task that all of us can perform. That is why Buddhism advocates equality for everyone, because everyone is capable of attaining Buddhahood. Understanding this fact will lead us to realise the very important role we are playing in this universe.

The Buddhist doctrines “I create this world”, and “all of us create this world”, is a view of life based on freedom and self-determination. The Buddhist human relationship is neither one of master-and-slave, nor that of father-and-son. Those who awaken first and advance the farthest on the path to enlightenment are the teachers. Those who are late in awakening are the students.

The enlightened ones have an obligation to lead the slower wakers. It is a duty instead of a privilege. The slow waker and the unawakened will consider it their duty too to respect and obey their teacher's guidance and instructions. In a teacher-friend relationship, they lay equal emphasis on sentiments and reason. While in a working relationship, both teachers and students stand on entirely equal footing. Thus, a socio-cultural structure-built on the Buddha-dharma must necessarily be one of teacher-friend relationship, and is most consistent with the spirit of freedom and democracy.

When Buddhism states that "I" can make the world, it is different from the creation of the world by a God. When the Creator creates the human beings and other myriad creatures, he creates them from nothing. This is in contradiction to the moral-causation law of creation. Buddhism holds that it is our karmic forces of mental activities and thoughts that create the world. If we perform good deeds, then we are capable of realising a pure and idealistic world.

Recently, someone said that Buddha, too can create a world. For example, Amitabha Buddha has created a Western Paradise of Bliss (Sukhavati). In fact, to draw a parallel between this creation and the creation by the God is unreasonable.

If we intend to talk about this creation to show the power of Buddha, we simply reveal our ignorance of Buddha-dharma. It is of no unusual feat by creating the world in accordance with the Law of Causality. Even ordinary people can do this. Except the world they fashion is only fit for hell dwellers, hungry ghosts, animals, human and devas (deities). This is because ordinary people suffer from mental defile-

ments and evil karma, so the world they make is a foul and unclean one. Buddha is replete with boundless and purified merits, having wholly-completed the blessed-rewards and perfect wisdom. Therefore, the world he creates is stately, pure and clean. This is the Buddhist Law of Causality.

Having understood this point, Buddha's followers should in their everyday life be mindful of their mental activities. Thus every thought that arises from their mind should lead them to perform wholesome acts. They should do so themselves, as well as persuading others to do the same. Only then can we transform our world into a Pure Land (many such worlds are already in existence in all ten directions of the world system).

3. To follow the Buddha is an advancement in life

In order to understand the basic purpose of following the Buddha, we must first recognise the value of human existence that we are playing a leading role in the universe. Having recognised this value, we can determine the correct direction of the path to head towards. It is ourselves who cause the human suffering and happiness, and the commotion and tranquillity in the world. There is no external authority who govern our lives. Since we possess such a initiative power, therefore we can uplift ourselves to perform wholesome acts.

To be progressive is to perform wholesome acts step by step until we reach the summit of ultimate truth. This is the purpose of following the Buddha. It is human nature for us to look up to the good. Unless we are confronted with failures in our lives and we are losers, then we may be low in our spirits.

Once we give ourselves up we might as well be the scum of the community, but there are not many people acting this way, and there are many opportunities lying ahead waiting for us to discover them and improve ourselves.

“Average” people consider that good things in life consist of a happy family with many children, good health, wealth and holding high social positions, and this is certainly true to some extent. But according to Buddhism, these are good fruits, not the good seeds. If we want to continue to enjoy the good fruits then we must not be content with what we have at the time. This is because good times will eventually come to an end. Only by accumulating good seeds (performing wholesome acts) can we maintain and progress towards a better life.

This may be compared to our actions when we see a beautiful flower. Our greed urges us to pluck it so that it becomes ours instead of taking care and cultivating it. In this way, we may have possession of the flower but we will soon lose it as it is impermanent. In addition, it is also a wrong deed.

Although some people acquire wealth and social status within reasonable means, they exploit others’ benefits to their advantage. This is because they lack the understanding of the spirit of progressive life. Worse still, they do not establish the right outlook of progressive life.

Some people say, “I do not want to follow the Buddha nor attain Buddhahood. All I want to do is to be a good person”. This is not a right attitude. As the ancient saying goes: “If we follow the best examples, we may end up as moderately good

examples. If we follow the moderately good examples, then we may end up even below these”. It is right to start following the Buddha by becoming a good person but if we are content in only trying to be good persons, then we may end up as not being such good persons after all. Therefore, to follow the Buddha is not just to be a good person, but we must set up a noble objective to strive to accomplish. And accomplish we must, if not in this time, then we should realise the objective in the future.

All high cultures and religions in the world have noble ideals which teach the people to strive and attain. Thus Christianity teaches people to obey the will of, and learn from, God. Although Christians believe that they can never attain the status of God and Jesus Christ, they must adopt the teachings of universal love and self-sacrifice as Jesus of Nazareth exemplified. They say the dust makes the human body, whereas God endows the soul to the human. Because the humans commit sin, so they degenerate. This has sullied the originally pure and clean soul. Therefore, they teach people to firstly purify their dirty souls, before admitting them into their ideal objective — the Heaven.

The Chinese Confucians also say: “The scholarly should strive to be virtuous; the virtuous, saintly; the saintly, celestial.” The scholarly people are the class of intellectuals well versed in various branches of higher knowledge. Their ideal is to attempt to rank themselves among the virtuous ones they see. Furthermore, the virtuous should attempt to rank themselves with the saintly ones. But even the saints are not all-knowing, so they too should attempt to be “heavenly”.

Thus, the orthodox Confucian spirit is a constantly striving towards virtue and saintliness.

The Taoists, too, have a set of ideals for themselves. That is: “Heaven models itself on Tao (the Way of Nature); Tao models itself on nature.” “Tao models itself on nature” means that we should follow the natural law of the universe without artificiality. We should act in accordance with the purest nature and the flow of non-intervention. This is their progressive outlook on life. The world will be in a chaotic state if the activities of the world, the individual activities and inter-personal relationship do not act with the flow of the natural law. The situation will worsen if we try to solve it using ways that contradicts the natural law. Then suffering will set in.

From the above observations, we find that the Confucianists follow the virtuous acts of the sage and the saint. From there they uplift themselves to the heavenly state. Taoists, on the other hand, advocate acting with the flow of the natural laws of the universe. In short, both of them have some means of guiding us to the ideal progressive path of life.

Most people think that it is good enough for them to be good persons. They do not approve of setting goals of uplifting themselves. The mentality of “muddling along” cannot help them to improve themselves and make any progress in their lives. If this is the mentality of the nation or the people, then there is a crisis of degeneration. Most high religions set a long-term promising goal. When we see the goal far in front of us, we will long for it and admire it, and before we accomplish it, we will constantly improve and uplift

ourselves. Then these are the real benefits that are yielded when we take up and practise a religion.

How do we uplift ourselves when practising Buddha-dharma? First of all we must start with understanding the concepts of the Five-vehicles (The Five-yanas). The Five-vehicles refer to the human, the heavenly (celestial), the Sravakas (the hearer of Buddha-dharma), the Pratyeka-buddhas (a self-enlightener, enlightened through reasoning the riddle of life, apply to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists), and the Bodhisattvas (or the Buddha). The human and the heavenly vehicles are the foundation of Buddhism but they are not the heart of Buddhism. This is because to behave well as a human is our obligation. It is common that the blessed-rewards of our wholesome acts may enable us to be reborn in the heavenly realms.

Although the life in the heavenly realms is happier than our mundane world, the heavens are still within the three realms (Triloka, namely, the sensuous desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm) and hence subject to impermanence. When the devas exhaust their celestial blessed-rewards, they will degenerate and fall into the cycle of rebirth.

The significance of practising Buddha-dharma is to follow the renunciation of the Sravakas and Pratyeka-buddhas, and to follow the path of the Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas by benefiting oneself and others (performing egoistic and altruistic acts). Thus, our worldly activities do not contradict with our supra-mundane commitment. However, the following of the path of Sravakas and Pratyeka-buddhas should be expedient because our ultimate goal in practising Buddha-

dharma should be the attainment of Buddhahood. We can realise this goal by practising the Bodhisattva's path.

The Bodhisattva's path leading to Buddhahood is closely related to cultivating the merits of the human, the heavenly and the hearer. It is a gradual way upward. It will take us a tremendously long time and require the accumulation of boundless merits. However, with this noble objective ahead of us, it helps us to uplift ourselves towards the path of performing wholesome acts progressively. It helps us to keep our aspirations up and gives us much joy on the way. Thus, at least we will not feel discouraged and allow ourselves to become degraded.

When practising Buddha-dharma we must first take refuge in the Triple Gem, namely, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The Triple Gem is highest ideal in which all practitioners can take refuge. All Buddhists should rely on the Triple Gem.

The Dharma of the Triple Gem is the Absolute Truth in the universe and this mundane world and is the combined teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha, the enlightener, is one who has attained the perfect knowledge of this Truth. The Sangha or Religious Community comprises the Three-vehicles, saints and sages. Although they are not fully enlightened, they have already deeply dwelled in the Dharma and have had varying degrees of intimate experience of the Truth. Therefore, both the Buddha and the Sangha are the highest ideal model for all Buddhists.

Buddhism is different to Christianity, Confucianism and Taoism in that Christianity relies on a personified God; Confucianism, on human saints; and Taoism on Eternal Natural Laws. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem serves to unify the practitioners and Dharma so we can establish the ideal belief. Why should we respect, prostrate, praise and make offering to the Triple Gem? This is not merely a way of showing our sincerity and belief, nor is it a means to seek and cultivate blessed-rewards. In fact it is a way of showing our yearning for the perfect wisdom and noble virtue of the Buddha and the Sangha. It also expresses our longing for absolute faith in taking the refuge of genuine dharma. Therefore we can completely realise the ultimate truth of the dharma. The Chinese teachings of Confucius and Mencius have their outstanding merits in that they guide the people in their personal and social behaviours. However they cannot inspire people to strive for a brighter future. Religions in general constitute a precipitating force that urges us on towards goodness, no matter how old or stolid we are. Thus, without sincerity, faith and actions, one may not be considered a true practising Buddhist, even though one may read the sutras, study Buddhist teachings, pay homage to Buddharupas, or recite the Buddha's name.

As true followers of the Buddha, we should place our major emphasis on the Triple Gem as a noble objective towards which we can strive. This effort, in addition to the compassionate vow of the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, will help our mind and body merge with the Triple Gem, so that day by day our blessings and wisdom will grow, and we will draw nearer and nearer to our objective of enlightenment.

4. The essential practice and understanding in following the Buddha

In practising Buddhism from establishing faith to experiencing enlightenment, there are stages of “understanding” and “practice”. The terms “practice” and “understanding” are self-explanatory. But there are infinite numbers and boundless ways of understanding and practising Buddhism. Now I will expound only the two most essential points. Regarding “understanding”, we must know two things. Firstly, continuity of birth and death, secondly, mutual accretion of all entities.

Continuity of birth and death explains that the life is impermanent and continuous. This is consistent with the truth that all phenomena are impermanent. From childhood to old age, life is continuously changing. Although it is constantly changing, the state in the future is different to the present, the life forms of the present and future are forever inter-connecting, thus life maintains its seemingly identical and continuous individuality.

In a broad sense, death in this life marks the beginning of the next new life. Death is not the end of all existence. For example, when we go to bed tonight, we will wake up tomorrow morning again. Having understood this truth, then we can deeply believe in the Law of Conservation of Karmic Fruit (conditions of rebirth depending on previous karmic conduct). In terms of present time, the success or failure of our undertakings will depend on whether we receive proper upbringing and schooling. In addition, if we do not make an effort at young age to learn and master a skill, or we are not

hard at work, then we will have no means to make a living at older age.

Extending this simple principle, it shows that if we do not behave well and fail to cultivate blessed-rewards in this life, then we will face unfavourable living conditions in our future rebirths. In other words, we have to behave well this life so that in future rebirths we will be better off, more intelligent and happy. This fact of continuity of birth and death, and the truth that every phenomenon is impermanent will help us to make an effort to uplift ourselves.

Now we come to mutual accretion of all entities. Here accretion means strengthening or growth through mutual dependence. No person can live independently in a society, as there must be mutual dependence and support among individuals. For example, young children depend on their parents for upbringing and guidance and when the parents grow old, they in turn, will need the support and care from their children. By the same token, all branches of activities in the society, such as agriculture, industry, commerce, politics, depend on the others for its growth.

According to Buddhism, in the universe we have an intimate relationship with all sentient being residing in all dharma-realms (forms of existence). It is possible that other sentient beings have been our parents, brothers and sisters in the infinite past. Due to the influence of karma, our living existence and circumstances now differ to that of the past, therefore we do not recognise each other. When we gain an understanding of mutual accretion, then we can cultivate the virtue of helping and loving each other. This in turn will lead

us to a harmonious and happy co-existence with others. Otherwise, we can never achieve world peace and personal happiness if we harm each other, cheat each other, and kill each other. Thus we can play an active role in this world. If we wish to turn this impure world into a pure land, then it depends on whether or not we can start to lead a harmonious and happy life with our fellow sentient being of this world.

Regarding the methods of practice, although there are many, principally they are: purification of one's mind and performance of altruistic acts. To follow the Buddha is to hold the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas as our ideal objective to attain. Our chief aim is the accretion of blessed-rewards, virtues, and wisdom. But we cannot acquire these without practising what the Buddha has taught. The major tenet of practising Buddhism is the purification of our own minds. Since the beginning of time we have deluded our minds with greed, aversion, heterodox views (perverted views), arrogance, and doubt. They all serve as obstacles to prevent us from performing wholesome acts to profit ourselves and others. Thus, to follow the Buddha we must first purify our minds.

The purification of our minds does not require us to abandon all worldly affairs, do nothing and think nothing. We should do and think (i.e. contemplation) anything that is appropriate, however, we should cultivate a wholesome mind to act and think in accordance to the truth so that we can profit ourselves and others. These practices are similar to removing the weeds in a garden. Not only must we totally uproot the weeds so that they will not grow again, but also we must plant flowers and trees for everyone to enjoy and appreciate. Hence, Buddhism states that the practice of concentration (dhyana)

alone is not sufficient to solve the problems of birth-and-death. We must cultivate both concentration and wisdom at the same time, and sever the mental defilement to attain the fruits of enlightenment. Buddha-dharma states, “All sentient beings are pure if our minds are pure. The world is pure if our minds are pure.” These revelations teach the dharma practitioners to purify themselves first. Then they should extend this purification to the world and other sentient beings. Mind-purification is the essential practice among all schools of Buddhism.

Next we can talk about the altruistic acts. According to the principle of mutual accretion, an individual cannot exist away from the masses. In order to find happiness and security for ourselves, we must first seek security and happiness for the masses. In terms of a family, you are one of its members, and in respect to a society, again you are one of its members. Only when the family is happy and secure can you find happiness and security for yourself. If everyone in society is peaceful and happy, then you will have real peace and happiness. This is similar to the observation of sanitary practices. If you care only for the cleanliness within your home, and pay no attention to the sanitation of the surrounding environment, then such sanitation is not thorough.

Thus, in the view of Mahayanists, practises that emphasis on self-benefit and self-liberation only are not ultimate, they are only expedient paths.

The Bodhisattvas emphasise altruistic acts. Altruism is always the first and foremost intention of their every word, every act, every where and every time. Purification of the

mind is common to the two-vehicles (Sravakas and Pratyeka-Buddhas) and to put highest emphasis on acts of altruism is a special feature of Mahayana Buddhism. This is a practice that conformed with the spirit of the Buddha's teachings.

Translated by Lin Yang, edited by Mick Kiddle, proofread by Neng Rong. (19-5-1995)

The Path from Human to Buddhahood

1. To practice Buddhism is to learn from the Buddha

In discussing the Path from Human to Buddhahood, we must first recognise that we are human beings. As human beings who would like to practice Buddhism, what are the things that we should try to learn? How should we learn them? I will touch on some of the basic, important steps here, so that you may know the keys to attain Buddhahood.

We should try to understand the Buddha's Teaching from two aspects. Firstly, the ultimate ambition and goal of practising Buddhism is to attain Buddhahood. Secondly, due to variations in background and upbringing, there are many different ways for an individual to practice. However, the ultimate aim of all practices is to attain Buddhahood. This resembles the roads that we are walking on, some walk on smooth and flat roads, some walk over roads full of bumps and pits, some follow the winding tracks, while others follow a straight and direct path. As long as we are clear on our final aim, then "All these roads will lead us to Rome". Now, I would like to discuss with everyone the Path from Human to Buddhahood. This is the direct and easy path. Not only is this path reliable, it is also easier in leading us to our goal.

To practice Buddhism is to learn from the Buddha and to take the Buddha as our example. We should follow the footsteps of the Buddha and learn the best methods of attaining Buddhahood from him. Thus, the real purpose of practising Buddhism should be:

1.1 To practice Buddhism for more than just worldly merits, and happiness in future lives.

Some people perform meritorious deeds such as almsgiving, hoping that the future life will be better than the present one. In Buddhism, we call this “practice with a mind to accrue’. The objective is to secure good merits and good karma for the future life, so as to be reborn in heaven. Although this may be expedient in Buddhism, it does not aim at attaining Buddhahood. A point to clarify here is that this does not mean that when one practises Buddhism one does not seek to improve one’s future life. Before one attains Buddhahood, one will of course hope to be reborn in a heaven or human realm, but this should not be the ultimate aim of following the Buddha. Everyone should aim at attaining Buddhahood. If we practise according to the Teaching of the Buddha, we should have the long term ambition of carrying out the Buddha’s advice diligently and accurately, our aim will then undoubtedly be achieved.

One may ask why is it not satisfactory to be reborn as a human or a heavenly being? This is because it is not perfect, nor ultimate. It is imperfect to be born in the human realm, because in this realm one’s wealth, life-span, status, and personal relationships are in constant change.

To be born in heaven is equally imperfect. Even beings in the realm of heaven experience constant changes in their lives, and will one day fall again from heaven. Those who believe in heavenly beings will certainly disagree with this point, but in actual fact, heavenly beings are not completely emancipated. Take the Mahabrahman, an Indian God, for instance. He

claimed that all things, including human beings were created by him and were born from him. Let us ask, was there a heaven and earth before heaven and earth were created? Were there human beings before human beings were created? If not, then why should heaven, earth and human beings be created? The Brahman's answer is; "For the sake of having fun." That is to say, all the creations are just a show of ego-freedom and self-satisfaction for the Mahabrahman. This is like a new but vacant house that gives one a feeling of hollowness and dissatisfaction. Thus it must be decorated by furniture and vases etc. Therefore, to say that human beings and all other things are created by God implies that this God does not like to be lonely. He feels loneliness in himself, and therefore his mind is not at peace. For example, when a person is very busy, he feels impatient and hopes that he can be left alone to rest quietly, but when he is actually given a quiet rest, he feels lonely and wants to be around someone again. In other words, in order to fulfil his self-satisfaction and enjoyment, the Mahabrahmin wanted heaven and earth, human beings, and all things. As a result of that, he created endless suffering for all. He is in fact looking for trouble for himself.

A person who possesses a discontented and demanding mind is still not at peace, and is not perfectly emancipated. When a follower of Buddha talks about the cultivation of mind and the emancipation from life and death, his aim is to feel contented anywhere he dwells, whether amidst a buzzing crowd or in an utterly deserted place. It is practitioner who is peaceful and free from attachment everywhere. The Gods in theistic religions are not free from desires, their minds are not yet at peace and this is the most important cause for their

falling from heaven in the future. Therefore we cannot adopt this way as our right path.

1.2 To practice Buddhism for more than self-salvation

Nothing in the human or heavenly realm is completely emancipated, so we must try to be released from the cycle of life and death (Samsara), and transcend the three realms of Sensuous Desire (heaven), Form, (the human realm), and the Formless realm of the pure spirit. But this path that is only leading to self-emancipation is still a narrow and roundabout path. The aim of practising the Dharma of course, is to be released from samsara. But the emphasis should be of benefitting others as well as oneself. The release from samsara achieved by practitioners who emphasise self-emancipation only is not final. It is like a pedestrian who runs a short distance and hastens to rest by the roadside. This attitude of hurrying towards a goal can actually result in slower progress. Even as the turtle and the rabbit raced in the well known fable, the rabbit runs fast, but is too anxious to rest and sleep, and he is left behind in the end. Similarly, if we are too anxious to be released from samsara and suffering to secure happiness only for ourselves, the path we follow will prove to be a tortuous one.

1.3 To practice Buddhism for Perfect Wisdom

A true follower of the Buddha should follow the teachings of the Buddha with the aim of attaining the Buddha's perfect enlightenment. This is the only path that is perfect and direct. The enlightened mind is replete with the perfections of faith and determination, wisdom and compassion; and a beginner may lay their emphasis on any of the following:

a) Faith and Determination: A beginner may seek enlightenment with faith and determination. Since the spiritual potential of each sentient being is different, beginners may try to seek enlightenment through their faith in the abounding merit, ultimate perfection, supreme wisdom, and all-embracing compassion of the Buddha. They look upon the Buddha as their goal and hence determine to attain perfect enlightenment.

b) Wisdom: Another type of person may seek the Buddha's perfect enlightenment through the practice of wisdom. They investigate the Buddha's answers to the truth of the Universe and the reality of human existence, and realize that only Buddha has the wisdom and ability to see the truth in all things. He is the most perfected One. Hence, they are determined to learn the Buddha's great wisdom and through the accrual of wisdom, they progress toward Buddhahood.

c) Compassion and Loving Kindness: There are others who realise the endless sufferings of all living beings and praise the Buddha's great compassion and loving kindness. The advocacy of moral standards, participation in community and cultural activities, and increasing economic growth cannot bring us ultimate peace. The Buddha's great compassion and loving kindness is the most perfect one. We should practise the Buddha's great compassion and loving kindness and progress towards enlightenment.

There are many ways of following the Buddha. Meditation on the Amitabha Buddha has its emphasis on faith and dedication. Recitation and study of scriptures in order to understand the theories of Buddhism has its emphasis on

wisdom and those who do charitable works stress compassion. We should try all these meritorious ways and can start with anyone of them. However, a dedicated follower of the Buddha must gradually practise all three of them if achieving enlightenment is his ultimate goal.

2. Only human beings can learn from the Buddha's example

2.1 The Superiority of the Human Mind

Generally speaking, human beings have a strong sense of self-esteem. Yet often they belittle themselves, feeling that they are insignificant. We are often unwilling to undertake great tasks or to strive towards the highest ideals or goals. This is the wrong attitude! In fact human beings are of great significance.

Buddha Dharma tells us that among the six realms, the beings in hell are too miserable, and the hungry ghosts are always starving. Under such conditions, these beings cannot practise the Buddha's teachings. The animals have low intelligence and are unable to understand the Buddha's teachings. The Asuras are too suspicious and cannot believe in what the Buddha said. They are also full of hatred and in constant warfare. The heavenly beings have too much enjoyment, and cannot find the time and mind to practice the Buddha's teaching. That is why the heaven of Longevity is considered as one of the miseries of the "Three Sufferings and Eight Miseries". Hence, it is said in the Buddhist scriptures, "Human form is difficult to come by", and only human beings have the ability and opportunity to follow the Buddha.

Some may ask: “What is the difference between the theistic and Buddhist teachings?” Theistic teachings claim that the human realm of existence is inferior to the heavens, but in Buddhist teachings, we claim that the human world is better than the heavens. Now that we have acquired a human body, we should not waste it. We should respect our own body and try to develop fully our maturity. We should strive diligently towards our goal. This is a speciality in the Buddha’s teaching.

What is so good about being human? According to the sutras, human beings are endowed with three supreme qualities which even the devas cannot exceed. Although Mahabrahman was a noble being he was not as great as human beings. Therefore, Buddha had chosen the human realm of existence as the place to be born in and to achieve enlightenment, setting an example for us to follow.

The three supreme qualities of Human are memory, pure behaviour and perseverance.

a) Memory — In the Indian language the word human (manusya) means memory. The human memory is stronger than that of any other creature. We can remember clearly things that happened in our childhood. We are also capable of preserving our experiences and history from thousands of years ago. In this regard, cattle, sheep, pigs and dogs, or even devas are not as good as us. Because of our memory, we have gained great wisdom. All the cultural and scientific advances that we have made to date are the fruit of the progress and development of our accumulated past experience and preserved memory. This wisdom that we have derived from memory is incomparable to any other creatures.

b) Pure Behavior — The control of carnal impulses, the performance of a moral acts for the benefit of others, often at the sacrifice of one's own profit, is distinctive only in human behaviour.

c) Perseverance — Human beings are capable of withstanding a great deal of suffering and can overcome almost any difficulty that exists in this Saha world. Determination and perseverance to succeed is another supreme quality lacking in the devas.

These three supreme human qualities if used unwisely, can cause great suffering and disaster to Mankind. However, when used to perform meritorious deeds, they become the “great wisdom”, “great benevolence”, and “great courage” of the ancient Chinese sayings.

Now everybody knows that all sentient beings are endowed with the Buddha-nature and have the ability to achieve Buddhahood. The sutras say that the Buddha-nature possesses four merits, namely, wisdom, compassion, faith-joy (the joy of believing in the Dharma), and samadhi (concentration). Meritorious deeds are equivalent to compassion, and when there is faith-joy, there will be perseverance, The three supreme qualities of Human are equal to three of the four merits in Buddha-nature. These traits are especially well developed in humans, and because of this human find it easier to follow and succeed in practising the teachings of the Buddha. Prime Minister Fei Siu of the Tang Dynasty once said; “All sentient beings can attain Buddhahood, but among the beings of the six realms, only the

human beings can practise the acts of a Bodhisattva and strive towards perfect enlightenment.” The merits of the Buddha-nature are most developed in the humans, thus, Man can practise the Buddha’s teachings and attain Buddhahood.

2.2 The Direct Path from Human to Buddhahood

Among the expedients, for example, trying to be reborn in heaven or become an Arahant, are generally more tortuous ways of attaining Buddhahood. For instance, through the practice for achieving a heavenly realm, we may be reborn in the heaven of Longevity, and be caught in one of the Eight Miseries, obstructing our progress on the Buddha’s path. On the other hand, those who practise with the aim of self-emancipation only may attain Arahantship and be released from samsara, but this will be like a person who gets attached to the enjoyment on the way of the journey and forgets about the final destination. This journey is neither direct nor fast.

Thus, it is better for us to take the straight and direct route. We start out as a human and, if necessary, we should try to be reborn as a human again, remain in this state until we achieve Buddhahood. We should not aspire to be reborn in heaven nor attain the fruits of the Arahant practice. It is best if we depend on the human form as we work towards attaining Buddhahood. Some people think that they are pursuing the path to Buddhahood, but actually, they are engaging in the esoteric practices of the devas. Some ignore the cultivation of wisdom and devote all their attention to acquiring concentration (samadhi), which really aims at rebirth in the heavens. Some study the Mahayana doctrines, but do not possess great compassion. This is similar to following the path

of a selfish practitioner. Of course pursuing courses as such may also lead to Buddhahood eventually, but the way is a tortuous one.

When we practice Buddhism in these modern times, it is important that we should first pursue the right path as a member in the society, and not segregate ourselves from home or country. We should start on the path from Human to Buddhahood in order to avoid any misunderstanding in the society. Modern people have a different disposition from those of ancient times, especially the Chinese who lay a great deal of emphasis on moral human relationships. Chinese Buddhists particularly, must develop their moral practices and human relationships first.

With the accumulation of righteousness in this world, the causes and merits needed for us to progress towards Buddhahood will also increase. None of us should waste our time, we should fully utilize the short life span that we have and strive diligently towards the goal of Buddhahood.

3. Faith and Understanding needed in Practising

To follow the Buddha's path, faith and understanding are indispensable. The scriptures give eight logical, solid reasons why we should have faith in the Buddha-Dharma. We have now simplified them into six categories.

3.1 The authority and merits of the Triple Gem

The Triple Gem is the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddh-

ism all possess supreme wisdom and compassion and are worthy of our deep reverence. They are also capable of doing things that ordinary people cannot do. Besides our belief in the Buddha's and Bodhisattva's authority and merits, we should further believe in Buddha-Dharma, which is the door towards Buddhahood. The Buddha-Dharma also possesses merits and powers, which enable us to attain our ultimate aim if we practise conscientiously.

3.2 The Truth of All Dharma

By "All Dharma" we mean all events and things in this world. All phenomena that we know in this world is not absolute. Why? This may be explained in two ways.

a) All things, from human beings to the earth that we live in are in constant change, they are not permanent and not ultimate.

b) Everything in the world is relative. When there is good there will be bad; when there is birth there will be death; when there is a rise there will be a fall; when there is this, there will be that; when there is this family, there will be that family, when there is this nation, there will be that nation; and within the same nation, there are different parties. In addition, there are parties outside the party and there are groupings within the party. This is how the world stands. It is relative and full of contradiction. Hence the phenomena in this world cannot be considered absolute. Since everything in this world is relative and changing, human existence cannot be regarded as ultimate either. Therefore, a true follower of the Buddha must believe amidst this variegation, that there is an unchanging indiscriminate truth of absolute equality. If one tries to

understand this by proper methods, and puts this understanding into practice, then one will be able to experience the Truth. Suffering will then be alleviated and endeavours towards Buddhahood and Bodhisattvahood will be duly rewarded.

3.3 Pure Karma

Most people know that Buddhism lays a great deal of emphasis on the Law of Cause and Effect. But the causes and effects that we have created may not necessary be pure, Evil deeds such as killing, robbery, adultery and lies have causes and effects that are not pure. Likewise, even acts such as almsgiving, paying homage to the Buddha, or reading sutras are not necessarily pure.

Take almsgiving for instance, which is undoubtedly a good act. Sometimes people may do this with the thoughts; “I can perform good acts”, or “I have given more than others”, or “I can win someone by this action to serve my own purposes”. In these situations, as long as there are thoughts of an ego or an expectation of reward for the act, then the act is not a pure one, and is sullied. Thus, one who follows the Buddha, must believe in the existence of pure causes and effects; i.e.: causes and effects that are free from defilements, free from the attachments of an ego. Pure causes will produce pure effects. One should adopt the attainment of Buddhahood as one’s ideal goal and have strong faith and understanding in pure causes and their corresponding effects.

3.4 The Possibility of obtaining Bodhi

But understanding faith in the three previous sections, does not guarantee one's path towards Buddhahood. Some may say "I am too dumb or too busy". If we do not have confidence in ourselves, how can we find the determination to follow the Buddha? Therefore we must do our best to strengthen our confidence and believe that everyone possesses Buddha-nature and be determined to attain enlightenment. We should do our best and use all the strength we have in the endeavour. If we fail today, we still have tomorrow. If we cannot be successful in this life, we still have the next life. With unflinching determination, faith, and continuous effort, enlightenment will be achieved one day.

3.5 The expedient path

All sentient beings are endowed with Buddha-nature and all may become Buddhas. But Buddhahood is secured through practice. If we practise according to the teachings, we will eventually become a Buddha. Such teachings are called expedients to Enlightenment.

To use an analogy; it is not enough for us to believe that there is water under the ground. We must know how to dig down to the water level and how to bring the water up. If we do not do this, we will remain thirsty despite the proximity of the water. Likewise, Buddhahood has to be achieved by certain methods and thus, there is neither a naturally born Maitreya Buddha nor a naturally existing Sakyamuni Buddha.

3.6 The sacred teachings of Tathagata

None of us are Buddhas, so how do we know the path leading to Buddhahood? After Sakyamuni became a Buddha out of his compassion towards the sentient beings, he taught the methods for Enlightenment. These were later recorded in the Tripitaka (the “Three Basket”). Therefore, we should believe in the teachings that are recorded in the sutras, vinayas and abhidharma and try to understand them. Our faith in these teachings will strengthen our endeavours to follow the Buddha’s path. Those who can read should read, and those who cannot read should listen, as in these “Three Baskets”, there are helpful methods that can lead us to Buddhahood.

4. Begin as a Bodhisattva of Ten Meritorious Deeds

After we have acquired sufficient faith and understanding of the Buddha, we should start to practice the Ten Meritorious Deeds like a Bodhisattva. Many people do not understand the term “Bodhisattva”. There is a lot of misunderstanding about it. “Bodhisattva” is an Indian word which is made from the two words; bodhi and sattva. Bodhi means enlightened mind and sattva means a sentient being. Therefore, a Bodhisattva is a sentient being who seeks an enlightened mind.

There are different levels of Bodhisattvas, some are higher in their practice and some are lower. To an ordinary mind, the term Bodhisattva usually reminds one of great Bodhisattvas such as Manjushri, Samantabhadra, Avalokitesvara and Ksitigarbha. In fact, any person who has made up his mind to be a Buddha is a Bodhisattva. The difference between a Buddha and a Bodhisattva is that the Buddha represents

supreme perfection, the summum bonum. He is like a person who has completed all processes of learning, while a Bodhisattva is a student who is still in school. The students can be in kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, university or even post-graduate school. They are all students, with the only difference being the degree of learning while the process of study is the same for all. Similarly, there are also Bodhisattvas who have just started on their path. They are not much different from the common people except that they have made the decision to seek enlightenment and to become a Buddha. If they continue to learn and practise the various acts of a Bodhisattva, they will eventually attain the standards of the great Bodhisattva such as Manjushri Bodhisattva and Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva.

We should not think that it is impossible for us to become like them. When we go to school. We start with the kindergarten and gradually progress to postgraduate school As with a Bodhisattva, the great Bodhisattvas too had to start from the novice level. Now, lets talk about the Bodhisattva who have just started their journey as they are closer to the common people mentally and their example is therefore much easier to follow.

A newly initiated Bodhisattva should lay his emphasis on the following points:

4.1 Start with a mind of great compassion

When one makes a decision to become a Bodhisattva, one needs to cultivate one's faith, dedication, and wisdom. However, the emphasis should be on compassion. Those who

start out with a feeling of compassion for all sentient beings and are determined to acquire Buddhahood with the intention of saving sentient beings are the Bodhisattvas. Without compassion, Buddhahood cannot be achieved. Even when a person has thoroughly envisaged the Truth, if he has no compassion, he will become a selfish practitioner. Therefore, the most important thing about a Bodhisattva is his compassion. He sees and shares the sufferings of sentient beings. He thinks of methods to relieve them from their sufferings. This is the mind of a Bodhisattva, and the seed to Buddhahood. To take an initial step towards Bodhisattva is to be compassionate, to set great vows and be determined not to forget them. Once the mind has decided, we should make a firm stand and never turn back.

There are many ways of cultivating compassion, one of the best methods described in the scriptures is that of “putting yourself in the other person’s shoes”. We should think what it is like to stand in the other person’s position. When we do this, our compassion will naturally grow. If a question is asked: “What are the things that you love most?” All of us will almost certainly answer, parents, spouse, friends, country, nation. But in actual fact, as the Buddha said, “One loves no more than oneself”. One can, of course love one’s parents, and others, as long as they do not hurt one’s own interests. Otherwise we will love no one.

Almost everyone loves others with the selfish mind of loving themselves. If a person can think of other people’s sufferings as his own sufferings, can love others in the same way that he loves himself, always thinks of the other persons situation rather than his own perspective, then this can be

called true love and compassion. If one considers the suffering of others, before one's own suffering, then great compassion will come naturally. It is not necessary for a newly initiated Bodhisattva to have supernatural power or magnificent body and appearance, once compassion is aroused, and one aims to acquire Buddhahood for the salvation of sentient beings, one becomes a Bodhisattva. However, a mind with an ambition to attain Buddhahood is still not enough to get us there. It must be strengthened with right action.

4.2 Act according to the Ten Meritorious Deeds

The difference between ordinary people and a Bodhisattva is that the latter have the determination to seek enlightenment, and perform the deeds of a Bodhisattva. A novice Bodhisattva is one who performs the Ten good acts with a mind to be enlightened. He is called a Bodhisattva of the Ten Meritorious Deeds.

The Ten Meritorious Deeds are the ten good acts that counteract the ten evils. They are as follow:

- (1) Not to kill is to love and protect lives.
- (2) Not to steal is to refrain from illegal possession of wealth.
- (3) Not to commit adultery is to refrain from illicit sexual behaviour.
- (4) Not to lie is not to tell something false.
- (5) No gossiping tongue is not to tell tales between people thereby causing disharmony between them.
- (6) No harsh speech is not to say things that are coarse or sardonic. When criticizing others for their wrong deeds we must speak softly instead of using words that are cruel and hurtful.

- (7) Not to speak words that are beguiling is to speak words that are moral and beneficial for society. Beguiling words are words that sound nice, but have wrong thoughts and may result in killing, robbery, adultery, falsehood and other sins. They can be meaningless prattle and a waste of time.
- (8) Not to be greedy is to take only what you deserve, and to be content with few desires. We should not covet things that do not belong to us.
- (9) Not to have any hatred is to have compassion and to refrain from disputes and fights.
- (10) To be free from wrong views is to have right understanding. This means understanding and accepting the Law of Cause and Effect, the existence of past lives and future lives, the cycle of life and death, the state attainable by the saints and Arahats, and that Bodhisattvas and Buddhas are able to release themselves from the cycle of life and death. Do not let wrong thoughts, such as thoughts that claim death as the end of human existence arise.

A Bodhisattva who acts according to the Ten Meritorious Deeds is an apprentice who has initiated the mind of enlightenment that has great emphasis on compassion. He is determined to become a Buddha for the salvation of other sentient beings. To act according to the Ten Meritorious Deeds can be accomplished by almost everyone.

If we say that we cannot perform the ten good deeds, then we must be fooling ourselves. The Buddha-Dharma teaches us that to be a human equipped with a wholesome personality, we should start by observing the Five Precepts and the Ten Meritorious Deeds. The Ten Meritorious deeds are the right actions and conducts for life. However, if a person has high

morals and is able to perform the Ten Meritorious Deeds, but lacks compassion, they will only be a sage in the world or a virtuous Human among men. In Buddhism, it is different. The Ten Meritorious Deeds are guided by the mind of compassion, the essence of the mind of enlightenment. Therefore, the Ten Meritorious Deeds are the first steps from Human to Buddhahood.

Everyone should consider Buddha as the ideal, be dedicated to seek enlightenment, and practise the Ten Meritorious Deeds. Besides we should also repent, set vows, pay respect to the Buddharupa, meditate on the Buddha, and be enthusiastic to protect the Dharma as we would protect our own life. We should not think “As long as I am following the Buddha, that is good enough”. We should also care about what is happening to Buddhism in the world. Should Buddhism meet with any disaster or destruction, we must protect it for our own faith as well as for the spiritual life of all sentient beings. There are many things a Bodhisattva should do which cannot be covered by this brief address. Last but not least, I hope that you all will start to take this first step in practising the Mahayana Buddhism. Try to be a Bodhisattva-child, cultivate your compassion and practise the Ten Meritorious Deeds.

Translated by Neng Rong, edited by Mick Kiddle, proofread by Neng Rong (14-5-1995).

The Three Essentials in Practising the Teaching of the Buddha

1. Faith and Determination, Loving Kindness and Compassion, Wisdom

The philosophy expounded by the Buddha is very profound and broad. It is so broad and profound that sometimes ordinary people have difficulties in finding a right entrance into it. They do not know where to start. However, this does not imply that the Buddha's Teachings are confusing or disorganised. On the contrary, Buddhism has very logical, well-reasoned and practical principles.

Wise men in the past commented that all the methods taught by the Buddha, whether the expedient or ultimate paths, serve the sole purpose of leading one to Buddhahood. Whether it is the path that leads one away from evil, and towards the right aspirations (the principle of the *Five Vehicles*¹) or the path that leads to disentanglement from worldly desires and to freedom (the principle of *the Three Vehicles*²); or the path that turns one away from the practice of *the Sravaka*³ and *Pratyeka-buddhas*⁴ and redirects one to Mahayana thought (the principle of *the one Vehicle*⁵);

¹ *The practice of men, devas, sravakas, pratyeka-buddhas and the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.*

² *The practice of the Sravakas, Pratyeka-buddhas and Bodhisattvas.*

³ *The personal disciples during Buddha's time, viz. 'the hearer'*

⁴ *Those who attain enlightenment through private contemplation of the meaning of life.*

⁵ *The Mahayana which contains the final or complete law of the Buddha.*

the Buddha explained the paths to enlightenment in all these various ways for the benefit of sentient beings in all their corresponding variety. It is for this great reason that the Buddha appeared in this world.

From the stand point of one who wants to learn about Buddhism, it is important to understand that all the methods taught by the Buddha are in fact processes in the Bodhisattva's¹ practice. They are the Bodhi paths that lead to Buddhahood. Due to the differing conditions, causes, times and places into which we were born, the best ways towards Bodhi (Enlightenment) may differ for each of us. But if we try to seek the truth of nature through the various methods we will realise that there are no great differences in the teachings of the Buddha. Three themes characterize all the teachings and encompass them as one coherent whole. These themes are as applicable to the practice of "One Vehicle" as they are to the "Three vehicles" and "Five vehicles". Thus, we call these themes the "The Three Essentials in Practising the Teaching of the Buddha".

1.1 The Three Essentials of Practice Defined

What are these Three Essentials? As stated in the Sutra of Great Prajna they are; "To maintain mindfulness of supreme Bodhi (the mind of enlightenment), to centre oneself on

¹ *Literally the 'Being essentially enlightened'. One capable of escaping this world of suffering but who voluntarily remains active here out of compassion for all deluded beings. The 'Bodhisattva Vow' to do likewise is the central feature of Mahayana practice and the expression of its highest ideal.*

compassion, and to learn the skilful means of emptiness (the wisdom of non-grasping or subtle intangibility)”.

The Great Prajna Sutra emphasizes the all-inclusive practice of a Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva must learn all methods of practice, (which are in fact nothing more than the ways of cultivating goodness and wisdom). All these methods should comply with the Three Essentials, which are their foundation. The ultimate aim of all practices is to attain perfection in these three virtues.

Thus, these themes are in fact the heart of practising the Bodhisattva way. As the ancients said, “If we did not find the right direction of practice we would be wandering blindly around the eight thousand methods and teachings taught by the Buddha, just like walking in the darkness. If we could find the right direction of practice, the twelve divisions of the Mahayana Canon, would be as clear as ordinary simple conversation to us.”

a) Mindfulness of the heart of wisdom, or the Supreme Bodhi (wisdom of the Buddha), as the ground of faith and determination.

This is the perfect and ultimate merit of the Buddha that was attained through His enlightenment. Practitioners should contemplate always the wisdom of the Supreme Bodhi. One should have faith that the Buddha has attained the Supreme Bodhi and that the Supreme Bodhi may bring us the vision of splendour and boundless merits. Belief in the merits of the Supreme Bodhi arouses our determination and joy for it, and further inspires us to seek it out. In other words, appreciation

of the wisdom of Supreme Bodhi meaningfully translates into our determination to attain perfect enlightenment.

b) Great Compassion.

Great Compassion may refer to sympathy or loving kindness and compassion in general, in a wider sense, it refers to loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity. To be compassionate is to have the mind intent upon relieving living beings from their miseries. To have loving kindness is to be intent upon giving living beings enjoyment and happiness.

All the practices of the Bodhisattva begin with the mind of loving kindness and compassion. The mind of loving kindness and compassion is always first and foremost. As stated in the Sutra, “The status of a Bodhisattva is attainable through the mind of compassion, it is not attainable by merely meritorious deeds”. Without loving kindness and compassion, all virtues and wisdom will not comply with the practice of a Bodhisattva. Thus, the great mind of loving kindness and compassion is indeed the heart of the Bodhisattva’s practice.

c) Emptiness (The wisdom of non-grasping or subtle intangibility) as the wisdom of Prajna.

This is the wisdom of non-attachment and supreme emptiness. The wisdom of emptiness that was cultivated under the guidance of the compassionate vow (i.e. the Bodhisattva vow) will not be just a dull emptiness and still silence. It is a great skilful characteristic. By possessing this wisdom, the practice of loving kindness and compassion can be successful

and hence lead us to the attainment of the fruit of Bodhi. Thus, these three themes, the Bodhi vow, the Great Compassion and the Wisdom of Emptiness are the real essences of the path of the Bodhisattva.

1.2 The Three Essentials in the Superior Practice of the Bodhisattva

The great *Bodhi* vow¹, the Great Compassion and the great wisdom of the Bodhisattva are an extension of the purest practices of all humans and devas as well as the *Two vehicles*². Summarising the merits of all teachings, in terms of aims, humans and devas practice to become saints or to be reborn in heaven. They look forward to the worldly reality, beauty and virtue. The practice of the Two Vehicles cultivates the mind to the extinction of worldly desire and Nirvana. It promotes the mind of leaving the deluded world. And the practice of the Bodhisattva emphasises the cultivation of the great Bodhi vow.

Loving kindness to living beings, in the practice of humans and devas, is aroused due to sympathy towards other living beings. In the practice of the two vehicles, it is the sense of universal altruism that gives rise to loving kindness. In the practice of the Bodhisattva, it is the wisdom of emptiness (the realisation of Dependent origination, non-self and non-attachment) that gives rise to loving kindness.

In terms of the cultivation of wisdom, in the practice of human and devas, wisdom refers to worldly knowledge. In the

¹ *The determination to attain perfect enlightenment (Buddhahood).*

² *The Sravakas and Pratyeka-buddhas.*

practice of the Two Vehicles, wisdom is one-sided dogma In the practice of the Bodhisattva, it is the wisdom of non-discrimination in all aspects.

The response of the mind to the external environment varies among the three realms of practice. The mental activities involved are basically the activities of faith and determination, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom. The distinction among the three realms is that practitioners in each realm practise them at different levels. From the above analysis, it can be seen that the three main themes of the practice of the Bodhisattva are beyond all others, they encompass the practices of all virtues.

The embodiment of Dharma	In Human & Devas Practice	In Two Vehicle Practice	In Bodhisattva Practice
Faith & Determination	To be a saint & to be reborn in heaven	To leave the deluded world	The Bodhi vow
Loving Kindness & Compassion	Sympathy to living beings	Sense of universal altruism	Mind of loving kindness & compassion
Wisdom	Worldly knowledge	one-sided dogma	Wisdom of Prajna

As we begin practising the teachings of the Buddha, either as a lay person or as an ordained follower, we should learn the practice of the Bodhisattva as this is the only way to Buddhahood. The real merits of the Bodhisattva are within these three themes. We should always reflect on ourselves: “Have I practised? Have I put effort into the practice of these three themes?” If not, how can we call ourselves a Bodhi-

sattva? We should always remind ourselves to practice and to look upon the Bodhisattvas as our example.

2. A Comparison of the Confucian, Christian and Buddhist approaches to the Three Essentials

The main themes in the practice of the Bodhisattva way are faith and determination, loving kindness and compassion and wisdom. They constitute in fact a process of purification and improvement of the human mind according to its natural ability. These have some similarity with the other worldly practices such as Confucianism and Christianity. However, the worldly practices or ideologies tend to cling to one aspect and regard that as the whole, or adopt one aspect and neglect the rest. Hence the practice becomes incomplete.

Confucianism, which represents the mainstream of Chinese culture in China, advocates the Three Virtues, namely knowledge, benevolence and bravery. It takes them as they become moral values for dealing with people and living life in society. In brief, knowledge may be compared with wisdom, benevolence with loving kindness and compassion and bravery with faith and determination.

There is a saying in Buddhism, “Faith instils determination and determination instils diligence (right effort)”. With sincere faith we can arouse our greater determination. And with sincere determination, one will naturally become diligent and put right effort into practice. In short, faith leads to determination and determination will lead to bravery and diligence. This is the development of energy from faith.

Diligence and bravery are needed in all meritorious deeds, but it has to begin with faith and determination.

Confucianism over-emphasises the common relationship among human beings, and lacks inspiration. Hence, it is difficult to arouse sincere faith and determination in its followers. Without strong faith, the virtue of bravery cannot be fully expressed. The concepts of “being wise”, “being the saintly”, “the Law of Heaven”, “the conscience”, and “the fear of Heavenly commands, fear of the saint and fear of commandments of the authority”, all weaken the cultivation of faith and determination. The idea of bravery becomes “one who knows how to feel ashamed is close to being considered brave”. This ideology is difficult to spread among the general population, and the faith that arises from this ideology of “to be reborn in heaven” or “to attain Buddhahood”. The Chinese nation which has long been under the influence of Confucianism is withering and becoming weaker each day. It has failed to arouse the virtues of bravery from faith, and the Chinese lack strong motivation and enthusiasm for life. From the view of promoting human nature or strengthening the Chinese nation, and cultivating of sincere and dedicated faith and bravery, this decline is something that the Confucianists should take note of.

Christianity (Catholic and Christian) conditions the contemporary culture and spirit of the West. It also has three main themes: faith, hope and love. Christians believe in the existence of God and because of their faith in God there is hope of a bright future for them. Because God loves us, we must in turn love others. Everything was created by God. These teachings are of course very different to the teachings of

Buddhism. However, in general, we may consider faith and hope to be equivalent to faith and determination in Buddhism, and love equivalent to loving kindness and compassion in Buddhism.

Although Christians claim that they have a rational belief in righteousness, it does not emphasise the virtue of wisdom in nature. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, their eyes brightened. This is the beginning of self-awareness and development of human knowledge. However, for the theist, this is a sin, and is the source of death. Teaching as such is shaken by the development and achievement of modern scientific cultures nowadays.

The Sravakas (the people who lived in the Buddha's time and listened to his teachings personally) placed less emphasis on the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion. There were Sravakas who stressed faith and wisdom but there were none who stressed compassion. This is just the opposite to Christian practice. Christians emphasise faith and love but lack wisdom. The Sravakas stressed faith and wisdom, but undervalued loving kindness and compassion. Both modes of practice are narrow and incomplete. The practice of the Mahayana Bodhisattva, which puts great emphasis on the equal practice of all the three themes, is undoubtedly more complete. Although the teachings of Confucianism are not complete, Their three virtues are closest to the practice of the Bodhisattva.

The Pure Land sect in Chinese Mahayana Buddhism (originated in India and completed in China) also has three main themes. They are: faith, determination (dedication) and

practice. The order of faith, determination and practice delineates the process. From faith determination arises, and with determination, effort to practice arises.

When we say the words “to practice” most people interpret it as “practicing diligently” without the concepts of loving kindness and compassion or wisdom. Some Pure Land practitioners practice by chanting the name of the Amitabha Buddha but do not cultivate wisdom or compassion and loving kindness. This type of person will have to wait for a long while before they can fulfil their wish to become enlightened and return to this world in order to relieve the suffering of the worldly beings. This is the result of the imbalance development and negligence of Mahayana philosophy in practice.

When the Pure Land sect spread to Japan, it immersed into its theistic tradition and changed itself into the “Truth” sect, promoting the ideology of rebirth with faith and determination. Even the chanting of the name was not important anymore. This is similar to the Christian doctrine, where those who have faith will be saved.

In short, other religions or ideologies do emphasise the Three Essentials in one way or another but not all. It is important for us to remember that, the main themes of the practice of the Bodhisattva are the completion and perfection in the cultivation of faith determination, wisdom, loving kindness and compassion.

3. Finding, entering and advancing in the Buddhist practice of the Three Essentials

a) Different ways of entering the practice

In the practice of the Bodhisattva, we should not emphasise one practice and neglect the others. However, as a beginner, one may find entrance through one (or two) of the gates. Those who are interested in philosophy psychology or theoretical subjects may investigate the righteousness and profundity of the teaching and hence arouse an interest in learning the teachings of the Buddha. These are people who enter through the gate of wisdom.

On the other hand, those who are engaged in social welfare work and who are fond of rendering assistance to others, are close to the Buddha's teaching on relationship with others. They praise and appreciate the loving kindness and compassion of the teaching of the Buddha and hence begin to practise them. These are people who enter through the gate of loving kindness and compassion.

In addition, there are others who admire the perfections of the Triple Gem, or who because of the special experiences that they have had with the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, decide to practice the teachings of the Buddha. These are people who enter through the gate of faith and determination.

Due to differences in the spiritual potential of living beings, beginners may find entrance through different ways. In brief, people who have more greed may enter through the door of loving kindness and compassion. Those who have more

hatred may enter through the door of wisdom and those who have a simple mind may enter through the door of faith and determination.

b) The importance of the balance practice in faith determination, loving kindness and compassion, wisdom — the Three Essentials

However, after beginning our Buddhist practice, we should not remain confined to studying and practising in a particular fashion permanently. Otherwise, there will be no improvement even after ten years or even twenty years of learning, and its consequent benefits will be poor.

We should understand that even in the practice of Two Vehicles, there are people who emphasise faith whilst the others emphasise wisdom. This is mainly due to differences in individual spiritual potential, and does not mean that such practitioners stay permanently in one stage of that they only possess either faith without wisdom, or wisdom with out faith.

Both the Nirvana and Pitaka Sutra state that “Faith without wisdom leads one to become more ignorant and wisdom without faith leads one to a perverted view. “If we rely on faith only and do not cultivate understanding and wisdom we will be unable to comprehend the Triple Gem and the methods that we are learning. In that case, the real benefits of the Dharma would be beyond us. For those who practice in this manner, in their minds, they believe Buddhism is no different to the worship of ghosts or Gods. It is just an ignorant faith-superstition. This kind of attitude is in fact very commonly found in the circles of Chinese Buddhists nowadays.

It is more dangerous for one to have wisdom without faith. The Nagarjuna Bodhisattva said that, “If we try to attain ‘emptiness’ without the foundation of faith and precepts, such a concept of ‘emptiness’ will be a perverted one.” This perverted view of ‘emptiness’ rejects the Truth of the Law of Cause and Effect. Such a mistake is made due to self-approbation and the lack of pure faith in the merits of the Triple Gem. The foolishness of superstition is less than the foolishness of perverted views. Perverted view may lead one to Hell. Thus, it can be seen that faith and wisdom must be practised together, neither should be neglected.

In the teachings of the Great Vehicle, there is a ‘superior Bodhisattva of Wisdom’, and a ‘Superior Bodhisattva of Mercy’. We should note the word “Superior”, which simply means that they have greater emphasis on those aspects. If there is only wisdom without compassion or compassion without wisdom, the practice cannot be considered the practice of a Bodhisattva. Both compassion and wisdom must be cultivated together. Even if one practises compassion and wisdom together, if the merits and determination of compassion are not strong enough, one will be anxiously seeking for self-salvation and the attainments of wisdom for oneself only, one deteriorates to a selfish practitioner (Hinayanist) and cannot attain perfect enlightenment. If one’s mind of loving kindness and compassion is strong but weak in wisdom, in the process of practising the Bodhisattva’s way one may be defeated and become a “Defeated Bodhisattva”.

This is because the practice of the Bodhisattva cannot be successful without the skilful means of the wisdom of

emptiness (wisdom of non-grasping). Thus, one may enter Buddhism through any one of the gates, however, if one is thinking of progressing and advancing further into the teaching and learning of the practice of the Bodhisattva, one must develop balanced strength in all these three areas, loving kindness and compassion and wisdom. These three areas of development will supplement each other and gradually lead the practitioner to a higher stage.

When one gains the profound wisdom of the Buddha, one is perfect in the practice of all three themes. This is the attainment of the great Bodhi or great Nirvana, in other words, Buddhahood. Some people think that it should be sufficient to just become expert in one theme, it is not necessary for one to learn all three together.

In fact, if one really becomes expert in one theme, one will naturally understand the interrelationship of the three and how they complement each other in order to lead one to completion. One theme may be used as the starting point of practice and its main focus. Looking deeply in this way one sees how each theme enfolds all the others at the same time. It does not imply that one is giving up the practice of the other merits.

We, who are practising the Bodhisattva's perfections and aiming for the fruit of Buddhahood, should ask ourselves, are the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas incomplete in their practice of the three themes? Do they have faith without wisdom, or have wisdom without faith? Buddha means the perfection of all merits. Thus, those who are determined to learn from the Buddha, should look upon the perfect merits of the Buddha as their goal and strive forward diligently.

4. The role of the Three Essentials in mental development, practice and attainment

Those who sincerely develop the mind of Bodhi and make the effort to practise the perfection of the Bodhisattva, must equip themselves with the essentials of Mahayana practice, even though they may have inclinations towards certain aspects. The essentials are: faith and determination, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom. Without the foundation of Bodhisattva teachings, one's faith and determination will be similar to benevolence and knowledge in Confucianism; one's loving kindness and compassion will resemble the faith and wisdom of the Sravakas; and one's wisdom will be equivalent to faith and love in Christianity. The only practice that can fully convey the Truth of Buddha's teaching, and can become the supreme way of practice for human beings, is the practice of the Bodhisattva—the unification of faith and determination, loving kindness and compassion and wisdom. These three themes supplement each other and lead one to the attainment of perfection.

The three themes are the essentials and cannot be ignored or neglected. In the process of learning, there is a certain order of progress. One progresses from emphasis on one aspect to another according to their order until the completion of the course. To begin practice from the mind of a worldly person, we must know the order of practice. If we boast about perfection and completion, all these will be just empty words of mouth and reality will prove that our success is illusion.

a) The Order of practice

The sutras and abhidharma have given many explanations about the practices paving the Path of the Bodhisattva. Generally speaking, it can be divided into two smaller parallel paths — the Path of Prajna and the Path of Skilful Means. The stages of the Paths are as follow:

i) To begin the practice of the Bodhisattva, one must first develop the mind of Bodhi (mind of enlightenment). With the mind of Bodhi one can then step into the practice of the Bodhisattva. This is the stage that emphasises the importance of faith and determination.

ii) After the initiation of Bodhi mind, one progresses in practice. The practice of the Bodhisattva emphasises benefitting others. The accumulation of virtues and wisdom is not only for oneself. This is the stage that emphasises compassion.

iii) When one is equipped with virtues and wisdom, and balance in the practice of compassion and wisdom, one then attains the wisdom of equanimity and non-discrimination. This is the stage of Prajna (wisdom of emptiness).

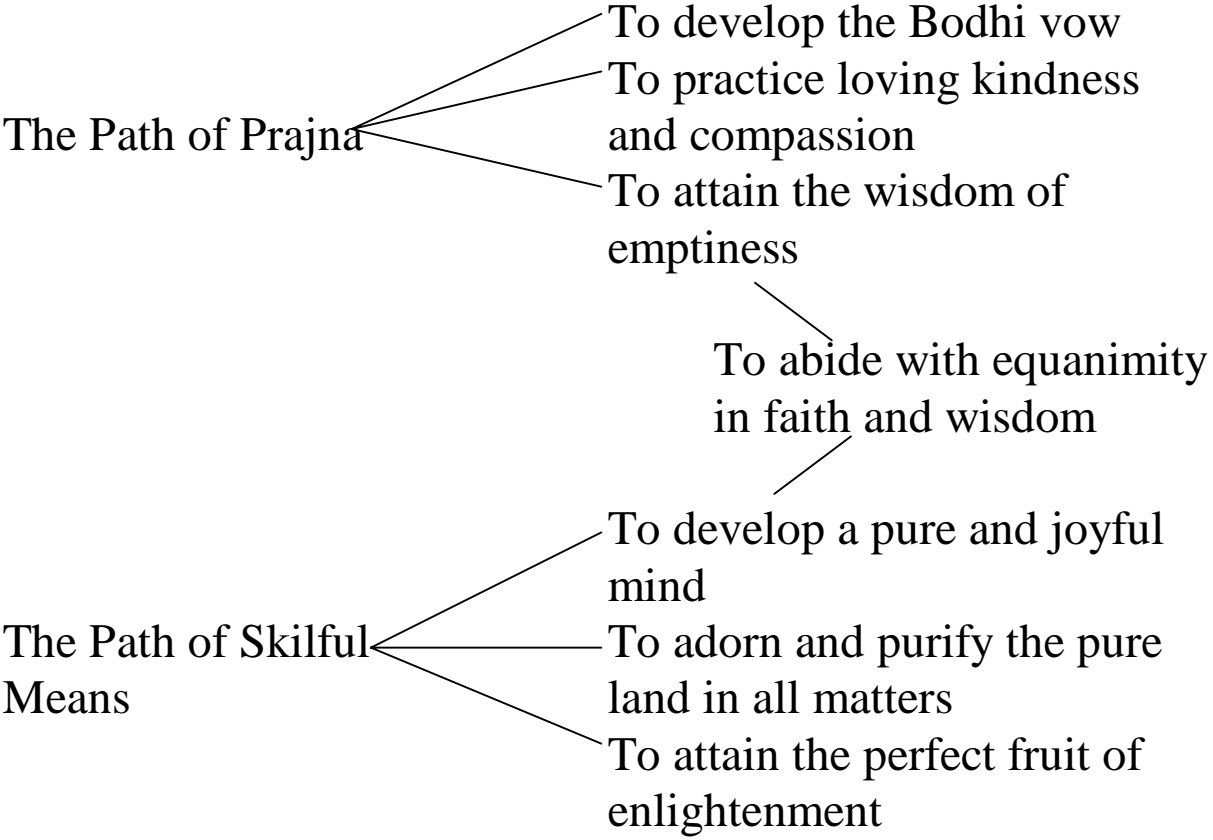
The above are stages along the Path of Prajna. The realisation of the wisdom of emptiness in the Path of Prajna represents the development of the mind for the Path of the Skilful Means. This is the supreme mind of Bodhi. It is the unification of faith and wisdom-the pure attainment.

iv) From then on, the Bodhisattva put great emphasis on relieving the sufferings of all living beings and the adornment

of a pure land. This is the practice of loving kindness and compassion with wisdom.

v) At the stage of perfection, one realises the supreme Bodhi the wisdom of all wisdom.

The order of progress along the Path of Skilful Means includes the development of the supreme Bodhi mind, the practice and attainment of perfect wisdom. Together with the Path of Prajna, there are five stages. These are stages that a Bodhisattva must go through in the process of practice, and it is something that those who are practising the Path of the Bodhisattva should always bear in mind.



These two paths and five stages can be summarised into three: the first is the development of the mind, the middle three are the practice (the practice of compassion to wisdom in the Path of Prajna, and wisdom to compassion in the Path of Skilful Means), and the last one is the attainment of Buddhahood. They are the stages of practice from worldly beings to Buddhahood, which is in fact the purification and improvement of the three virtues (three virtues of the Buddha, perfection in detachment, compassion and wisdom) to the state of perfection.

In summary, the worldly beings are ignorant, impure and full of desires. From the state of a worldly being, one arouses one's faith and determination in pursuing Buddhahood, through the practice of loving kindness and compassion one progresses towards the attainment of the wisdom of emptiness. The wisdom of emptiness is also the Bodhisattva's faith and determination (the pure mind of supreme joy). It is the unification of faith and wisdom.

With this faith and determination (no yet perfect), one continues the practice of compassion and loving kindness more broadly until one attains the perfect stage of wisdom. This is also the time when one's wisdom, loving kindness and compassion, faith and determination attain perfection. The practice of the Bodhisattva is boundless and profound. For one to practice the perfection of Bodhisattva from the stage of a worldly beings, one must always hold on to these Three Essentials as the guiding principles of practice.

5. The Three Essentials and the recitation of the Buddha's name, vegetarianism, and sutra chanting

The various ways of practice in the countless methodologies introduced by the Buddha boil down to the practice of the Three Essentials. They are very broad and profound. Now, let's discuss the expedient ways for a beginner. To recite the name of the Buddha, to be vegetarian and to chant (to intone) the sutras are the main ways of practice for most Chinese Buddhists. They represent beginners steps along the Path of Bodhisattva.

a) Recitation of the Buddha's name

The purpose of reciting the name of the Buddha is to arouse one's faith and determination. A Bodhisattva's faith and determination is the development of the Bodhi mind, and the maintenance of mindfulness on supreme Bodhi. The Buddha is the person who has realised the supreme Bodhi — the wisdom of all wisdom. He has majestic appearance and boundless power. He embodies all wisdom and incomparable loving kindness and compassion. Since his practice as a Bodhisattva, he has done countless meritorious acts benefiting others.

One should respect and admire the Buddha. The Buddha preaches the Dharma, and because of Dharma, the Sangha exist. Hence, the Buddha is also the embodiment of the Triple Gem. Thus we should look upon Buddha as our all encompassing refuge and ideal example at all times. With respect and admiration for Buddha's merits, and sincere appreciation of His kindness and compassion, one's faith and determination to practice will be strengthened. This is the main purpose of the practice of "reciting the name of the

Buddha”, and “praising the development of the mind of Bodhi”, advocated by many of the Mahayana Sutras.

We recite the name of the Buddha to remind ourselves of *the virtues of the Buddha*¹, *the marks of the Buddha*², *the essence of the Buddha*³, and the pure land of the Buddha. Expanding the scope of this practice leads into practices such as paying respect to the Buddha, praising the Buddha, making offerings to the Buddha, repentance in front of the Buddha, rejoicing in the merits of the Buddha and encouraging the promotion and distribution of the teachings of the Buddha; these are the broader means of practising.

The Prajna-Paramita Discourse states the “The Bodhisattva enters into Dharma with strong and diligent faith (determination), and happily accumulates the merits of a Buddha. This is ‘an easy path’ that was specially introduced by the ‘Superior Faith Bodhisattva’ in the Mahayana Teaching.

This ‘easy path’ is also the expedient alternative to the “difficult path” (the Path of Prajna and Skilful means that emphasise wisdom and compassion). Thus, “The Commentary on the Ten Stages of Bodhisattva” written by Nagarjuna Bodhisattva states that: “A beginner should practice reciting the name of the Buddha, repentance, promotion of the doctrine of the Buddha and other methods as mentioned above, so that the mind may be purified and faith strength-

¹ *Virtues of perfect wisdom, compassion and detachment.*

² *The thirty two marks or sign on the physical body of Buddha after Buddha attained Buddhahood.*

³ *The truth of emptiness.*

ened. Thereafter he may be able to go a step further into the practice of wisdom, loving kindness and compassion.”

The Sraddhotpada Sutra also says that: “Beginners should learn such methods in order to strengthen their faith, as living beings are weak minded.” By teaching them to “concentrate on the name of the Buddha”, this will help them to maintain and strengthen their faith so that they do not fall back.

The main purpose of the practice of reciting the name of the Buddha is to initiate the faith and determination in those in whom they have not yet developed, and to strengthen and maintain faith and determination in those in whom they have. To recite the name of the Buddha is to recite with the mind. Also to remember the virtues of the Buddha whilst reciting with intense concentration is a skilful means of initiating one’s faith and determination. The normal practice of reciting by mouth is just a convenience among the conveniences, it is not the best way of practice.

b) Vegetarianism

To be vegetarian means not to eat meat. Vegetarianism is a tradition of Chinese Buddhism. It is not necessary for one to be a vegetarian in order to become a Buddhist. Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Buddhists in Tibet and Japan do take meat as an accepted part of their diet. Some Chinese Buddhists thought that to be vegetarian is the Hinayanist practice, and not the teaching of the Mahayana. This is a great misunderstanding. In actual fact, vegetarianism is a practice specially advocated in the Mahayana teachings. This can be found in sutras, such as the Lankavatara, Nirvana and

Angulimala Suttas. There are various reasons for not eating meat, but the main reason is to cultivate one's loving kindness and compassion. As the sutras say: "Eating meat nips compassion in the bud".

A Bodhisattva should always seek to benefit others and to relieve the sufferings of all living beings. If one is cruel enough to kill beings and eat them, then where is one's mind of kindness and compassion? The practice of the Bodhisattva emphasises the mind of compassion. Hence, the virtue of vegetarianism is certainly the conclusion of the Mahayana teaching.

c) Sutra Chanting

The chanting of sutras is also an expedient way of practice. Although the practice may have other purposes its main aim is to develop wisdom. There are three stages in the practice of wisdom before the realisation of the true Prajna (the wisdom of enlightenment). They are the stages of hearing, thinking and analysing, and practising.

These three stages of cultivating wisdom can also be classified into the Ten Righteous Practices (The Ten Ways of Devotion to the Buddha's Teaching), namely: to copy sacred texts, to offer places for keeping and maintaining sutras or Dharma writings, to preach or give such exposition of Dharma to others, to listen attentively to their exposition, to read them, to teach others about them, to intone them, to explain them, to think and analyse them and to practise them. In this traditional schema, the first eight are practices of wisdom through hearing. Sutra chanting reminiscent of schools in olden days

when one would intone the text before giving an explanation of it. After one intones the sutra one becomes familiar with it. Then one may eventually understand it or at least seek such an understanding. These are the expedient paths in practising wisdom through hearing.

d) Righteous practice of the Expedient Path

The most common methods of practice amongst Chinese Buddhist are the recitation of the name of the Buddha, vegetarianism (releasing lives) and chanting the sutras. These are in fact expedient steps for anyone who wants to begin the practice of the Bodhisattva. These are expedient measures that will strengthen one's faith and determination, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom as stated in the Mahayana teachings.

However, some people stress the merits of chanting the sutras whilst placing little value on the understanding of their meanings. In this case, the chanting will not expedite the development of wisdom.

On the other hand, those who advocate the practice of vegetarianism and the release of captive lives may emphasise their practice of these two methods but may not show loving kindness and compassion towards sufferings human beings or act to protect and help them. They only care about other living beings but neglect their calling to care for and protect human beings. This perversion of practice arises due to ignorance of the purpose behind true practice and cannot lead to the development of true loving kindness and compassion.

By comparison, reciting the name of the Buddha cultivates one's faith somehow or other as the action reminds one about the virtues of the Buddha. However, the problem is that most followers incline towards superstitious acts whilst others are only seeking personal salvation. Thus it is very rare to have someone who will develop the Bodhisattva's faith and determination in seeking attainment of Buddhahood and relieving the sufferings of all living beings through practising the recitation of the Buddha's name.

Recitation of the name of the Buddha, vegetarianism and chanting the sutras are the supremely expedient practices on the path to the perfection of Bodhisattvahood. But due to the lack of enthusiasm in seeking wisdom and the lack of loving kindness and compassion, the practices are faith oriented. As a result, the full benefits arising from the skilful application of these expedient practices, cannot be fully expressed. This is the sad and source of deterioration in Chinese Buddhism.

Practising in this manner cannot be considered the practice of a Bodhisattva, nor can it reflect the greatness and beauty of the Dharma. Those who practice in this way will not be able to save themselves, let alone save the world. When we are practising the path of the Buddha and the Bodhisattva, we must understand clearly the aim of these expedient practices. We should not recite the name of the Buddha just for the sake of reciting; become a vegetarian just for the sake of becoming a vegetarian, or chant the sutras just for the sake of chanting. We should recite the name of the Buddha hoping to develop our faith and determination; become a vegetarian in order to strengthen our loving kindness and compassion; chant the sutras with the aim of developing our wisdom. These are

methods of practice and their aim is to cultivate one's faith and determination, loving kindness and compassion, and wisdom.

Thus, one who is sincere in practising the Teaching of the Buddha and is learning the Path of the Bodhisattva, should practise the recitation of the Buddha's name in a righteous way and develop great determination and effort in seeking the attainment of Buddhahood and relieving the sufferings of all living being. From the practice of vegetarianism and releasing captive lives one should cultivate loving kindness and compassion and take part in social welfare activities that are of benefit to mankind. From the chanting of sutras one should go a step further into understanding their meanings, and hence develop wisdom.

In doing so, these expedient practices will fulfil their purposes and lay the foundations for one to progress along the Path of the Bodhisattva. These are only initial steps. There is still a long journey ahead. We should start here and strive forward in pursuit the boundless Teaching of the Buddha.

Translated by Neng Rong, edited by Mick Kiddle, Proofread by Neng Rong.(16-6-1995)

A Commentary on the Excellence of the Three Birth, and Cause and Effect Theories

We know that in our modern age humanity lives in fear of mass destruction. Terrors and stresses of every kind threaten us everywhere and impinge upon our freedom. Why has the world deteriorated to such a state? According to Buddhism, the answer lies in the fact that we human beings have lost the sense of purpose in our lives. We deny our own worth and live with hollow and illusory emotions. Our lives have become either malevolent or corrupted. We are either intoxicated with passion and desire for wealth, or maddened by vengeful violence. Material covetousness and emotional negativity lead this world towards the sombre brink of death.

I said: “Human beings have lost the sense of purpose in their lives and renounced their own real worth.” What does this statement mean? For this, I wish to give a simple explanation. Human beings view life in three different ways. These are the One Birth, Two Birth and Three Birth Theories.

1. The One Birth Theory

Nowadays, the One Birth theory of materialism has made raids into human hearts everywhere. Human beings have set their eyes on the realm of substances, considering the material world to be the only reality.

Under the influence of materialism people feel that life is nothing but a superficial and inconsequential affair. Birth is merely the result of ones, parents, union. It is purely the result

of sexual intercourse and subsequent physical development. Death is merely the decomposition of the bodily organism. It brings the organic process to its end and then vanishes without trace. Life within this cosmos is nothing but that. Materialists recognize only the present, denying everything before birth and rejecting whatever may lie after death. With a life-view that everything ends with death, there is ultimately nowhere for one to go. This leads to extreme emptiness and boundless despair.

Life is toilsome, but what is it really aiming for? For the individual? The individual so lost and alone has nothing to hope for but a senseless life ending in death and annihilation. For his family, his country or the wider world? What kind of relationship does he have with them? The result of this One Birth Theory is to restrict ones, thought to the present and the temporary benefit of oneself only. One becomes selfish. Hence the more learned one is, the more deceitful one becomes. The more good words one speaks, the more evil deeds one performs. One is only thinking of personal benefits. Those of the elder generation strive toward personal desires and lust. Those of the younger generation, having abundant imaginations and vigour of youth fall into temptations and strive toward their aims without considering the righteousness of the means they use. The misdirection of their energies ends up leading us towards a cruel and ruthless world.

The idea of everything ending with death tragically obscures the real value of oneself. This is the One Birth Theory or the life-view of materialists. Society nowadays is being infected with this plague that makes the entire world go insane. Some people think that they are anti-materialist or anti-communist, but do not realise that their own life-views

are in fact the same as those of the materialists. They also subscribe to the One Birth Theory and unwittingly succumb to its fatal notion that everything ends with death.

2. The Two Birth Theory

The Two Birth Theory is the general point of view of the polytheist and the monotheist. They believe that there will still be a future after death. As the Chinese of old said: “One dies and becomes a ghost.” Those who are virtuous and have accumulated merits ascend to the realms of deities. Those who do evil deeds, or who do not have any descendants, are to become “homeless spirits”.

Since the Sung and Ming dynasties non-religious ideology has become stronger. Almost everyone in modern intellectual circles believes in the vulgarised One Birth Theory. The Two Birth Theory has strengthened and sustained the inner-hearts of human beings both past and present. It brightens hope for the future and gives strength to endure and overcome present difficulties. In addition, this view of life has an extraordinarily positive influence leading to the improvement of personality and morality.

The theistic Two Birth Theory is now declining day by day. This is because the Two Birth Theory generally believes that there is an independent soul that existed before ones, birth and will continue to exist after ones, death. It is just like one going into a room through one door and later leaving through another. This explanation of soul or ego as an object which is separate from both body and mind, is difficult for modern scientific thought to accept. As for Western monotheism, it

only deals with the present and the future, i.e. the fall into Hell or the ascension to the Kingdom of Heaven. It does not provide a satisfactory explanation for the origin of life.

To say that life is the creation of God, and the obedient reflection of His intention to create this human world, shows clearly and completely nothing but the conflict with the supposedly perfect love and kindness of His nature. Thousands of human beings are born into this world every hour of every day, but in reality how many of them are destined to ascend to the Kingdom of Heaven? If God is omniscient, He will know that a large number of them are going to go Hell. One may say: “God gives mankind free will God likes mankind to obey Him with free will.” But mankind is ignorant. Humans are like children. Isn’t it cruel to send masses of ignorant children into unusual danger hoping that one or two of them might be able to rush through? How cruel is this? Does God like this?

If there is a God, and God knows clearly that thousands and millions of people have fallen into misery yet still continues with His creation, He must be either crazy or cruel! Therefore, more and more human beings do not believe in the Two Birth Theory. Their inner-hearts are in a void. They have no spiritual support and become trapped in the One Birth Theory and the materialism of Satans’ realm. This is an important cause contributing to the decline of world civilisation in this century.

3. The Three Birth Theory

The Three Birth Theory is a speciality of the religions of India. Among the Indic religions, Buddhism gives the most thorough explanation of this theory. Human beings and all other living beings exist continuously through boundless lives. They are not created by God, nor are they there by chance with meaningless death ending everything. The process is described as being similar to a stream that gives rise to patterns of waves; birth and death being the rise and fall of a certain period, or activity.

In accordance with Three Birth Theory, there is no God seen to be dispensing rewards and punishments. In this view life is seen to be the natural result of ones own deeds. This affirms the real purpose of life. If our thought and conduct in past lives tended towards benefitting oneself and others, that is if our lives were lived positively, then we will be able to enjoy the good fruits of those lives as fortune and happiness in this life. On the other hand, if one does not live this life in a wholesome manner, then, once dead, miseries and darkness will easily befall one.

With faith in the Three Birth Theory and in the Theory of Cause and Effect that is its consort, one will remind oneself of the past and be satisfied that the present life is just. One will not grumble against Heaven nor lay blame upon others. The Three Birth Theory leads one to strive diligently and never to be lazy or extravagant. It enables us to be at peace in our present life and at the same time strive for a better future. This is the supreme excellence of this theory. Furthermore, from the

continuum of endless lives we can see that suffering and enjoyment are in fact the ongoing effects of our good and evil deeds.

The causal force of good and evil action is not boundless. Thus suffering or enjoyment cannot be everlasting. Pains and pleasures are but passing phases on the journey of our life. No matter what miserable situation one encounters, even if it is in Hell, one should not be disheartened. This is because once the force of the evil deed is exhausted the being in Hell will be released, that evil then being finished and done with. Conversely, any situation of fortune and happiness that one enjoys, even if one is in the Kingdom of Heaven, should not be a source of self-satisfaction because once the forces of good are exhausted one will descend. Thus, a true follower of the Three Birth Theory is always full of hope and striving diligently in order to progress.

The theory may be extended from “receiving the reward of ones, own deeds” to “receiving together the rewards from deeds done by people together”. Throughout history the rise and fall of every family and every country always acts in accordance with the Law of Cause and Effect.

The defects of the Two Birth Theory are clearly highlighted by the Three Birth Theory. Therefore, we should accept the Three Birth and Cause and Effect Theories and invest in them our firm and common belief. In this way we may find refuge from the calamities of materialism and the One Birth Theory.

Translated by Neng Rong, edited by Mick Kiddle, proofread by Neng Rong. (2-6-1995)

Common Buddhist Misunderstandings

It has been more than one thousand and nine hundred years since Buddhism spread to China. Thus, the relationship between Buddhism and China is very close. The development of Buddhism influenced, and was influenced by Chinese culture. In fact Buddhism became a religion of the Chinese.

Buddhism originated from India, and the special characteristics of the Indian culture were sometimes not easy for the Chinese to understand. The Chinese traditions influenced and modified some of the practices, and these deviated from the teaching of the Buddha. As a result, there are unfortunately many misunderstandings about Buddhism in China among the Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

It is very easy to misunderstand Buddhism if one knows nothing about its origins. Some followers may practice the cultural rituals without ever knowing Buddha's teachings. As a consequence, those who believe in "Buddhism" may not really be following the Buddha's teachings, and those who criticise Buddhism may not actually be criticising what the Buddha taught. So I hope this talk may help everyone gain a better understanding!

1. Misunderstanding that arises from the teachings.

The theory of the Buddha's teaching is very profound. Some people do not understand its meanings and may only know it superficially. After listening to a few phrases, they may start to explain to the others in their own way. As a result, some explanations people tell, may not be accurate teachings

of the Buddha. The most common misunderstandings are about the teachings: “life is suffering”, “out-worldly” and “emptiness”. So now let's discuss these terminologies separately:

a) Life is suffering

The Buddha told us that “Life is Suffering”. One who does not understand the Truth of this may think that life is meaningless and become negative and pessimistic. Actually, this theory is commonly misunderstood. People in society and even some Buddhists are trapped in this wrong and gloomy view.

When we encounter phenomena, and have a feeling of dislike, worry or pain, we say that there is “suffering”. This should not be generalised to “all life is suffering”, because there is also a lot of happiness in life! Noises are disturbing but nice melodies bring happiness. When one is sick, poor, separated from loved ones, one has suffering. But when one is healthy, wealthy, together with one's family, one is very happy. Suffering and happiness exist in all phenomena. Actually where there is happiness, there will be suffering. They are in contrast with each other. If we only say that life is suffering when things do not go according to our wish we are rather foolish.

The Buddha says, “Life is suffering”. What does “suffering” mean? The sutras say: “Impermanence therefore suffering”. Everything is impermanent and changeable. The Buddha says that life is suffering because it is impermanent and ever-changing. For example, a healthy body cannot last forever. It will gradually become weak, old, sick and die. One who is wealthy cannot maintain one's wealth forever. Sometimes one may become poor. Power and status do not

last as well, one will lose them finally. From this condition of changing and instability, although there is happiness and joy, they are not ever lasting and ultimate. When changes come, suffering arises.

Thus, the Buddha says life is suffering. Suffering means dissatisfaction, impermanence and imperfection. If a practising Buddhist does not understand the real meaning of “suffering” and think that life is not perfect and ultimate, they become negative and pessimistic in their view of life. Those who really understand the teaching of the Buddha will have a totally different view. We should know that the theory of “Life is suffering” taught by the Buddha is to remind us that life is not ultimate and lasting, and hence we should strive towards Buddhahood — a permanent and perfect life.

This is similar to one who is sick. One must know that one is sick before wanting to seek the doctor’s treatment. Only then can the sickness be cured. Why is life not ultimate and permanent and full of suffering? There must be a cause for the suffering. Once one knows the cause of suffering, one will try one’s best to be rid of the causes, and hence end the suffering and attain ultimate peacefulness and happiness.

A practising Buddhist should practice according to the Buddha’s instruction, and change this imperfect and non-ultimate life to a ultimate and perfect one. Then would come a state of permanent joy, personality, and purity.

Permanent means ever-lasting, joy means peacefulness and happiness, personality means freedom and non-attachment, purity means cleanliness. This highest aim of Buddhism is not

only to break through the suffering of life but to transform this suffering life into a life that has permanent peacefulness, joy, freedom and purity. The Buddha told us the cause of suffering and instructed us to strive towards the goal. The stage of permanent, joy, personality and purity is an ultimate ideal phenomena. It is full of brightness and hope. It is a stage that is attainable by all of us. How can we say that Buddhism is negative and pessimistic?

Although not all practising Buddhists are able to attain this highest point of practice, there is still boundless benefit in knowing this theory. Most people know that they have to strive to do good when they are poor, but once they become rich, they forget about everything, and only think about their own enjoyment and hence walk towards the wrong path foolishly.

A practising Buddhist should remember to strive not only when one is poor and in difficulties, but should also be mindful when one is enjoying, because happiness is not permanent. If one does not strive towards the good, they will degenerate and fall very quickly. The teaching of “Life is suffering” reminds us not to look forward for enjoyment only and go the wrong way. This is the important implication in the teaching of “Life is suffering”, taught by the Buddha.

b. “Out worldly” (Supra mundane)

The teaching of Buddha tells us that there is this world and the world beyond this. Many people think that this world refers to the world that we are living in and the world beyond this is some place outside this world. This is wrong. We are

living in this world and we remain here even if we become monks or nuns. The Arahats, Bodhisattva and Buddha are saints who have realisations beyond this world but they are still living in this world and giving assistance to us. Thus, “out-worldly” does not mean that one has to go away from this world and go to another place.

What does “worldly” and “out-worldly” mean in Buddhism? According to the Chinese understanding “worldly” has the implication of time. For example, the Chinese regard thirty years as an “age” and in the West, a hundred years make up a century. Anything that exists within the time frame, from the past to the present and from the present to the future, is the “world”.

The teaching of the Buddha is also as such. That which is changeable is called “worldly”. Within this time frame, from the past to the present, from the present to the future, from existence to non-existence, from good to bad, everything is changing continuously. Anything that is changing is called “worldly”. Besides, the word “worldly” also has the meaning of concealment. Normal people do not understand the cause and effect of the past, present and future. They do not know where they come from, how to behave as a human being, where to go after death, the meaning of life and the nature of the universe. They live ignorantly under the influence of the karma of the three births. This is called “worldly”.

What does “out-worldly” (supra mundane) mean? “Out” has the meaning of beyond or superior. One who practices the teaching of the Buddha, has wisdom and is able to understand the truth of the life and universe; has no defilements and is

pure in one's mind; and experiences the permanent Truth is called the "out-worldly" one. All the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are living in this world. They have great wisdom in seeing the Truth and their minds are pure. They are not like the normal "worldly" people.

Thus, the term "out-worldly" encourages all of us who are practising the Buddha's teaching to progress further and become the man above the men, to improve ourselves from a worldly person to an out-worldly saint. It is not asking us to go to another world. Misunderstanding "out-worldly", some think that the principle of Buddhism is to run away from reality.

c. Emptiness

The Buddha says that everything is "empty". Some think that this is empty, that is empty, or everything is empty. Since everything is empty, and meaningless, one does not need to do either evil or good. These people understand the concept vaguely, and lead an aimless life. In fact, "emptiness" in Buddhism is the most profound philosophy. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are the people who have realised the truth of emptiness. "Emptiness" does not mean nothing at all, in contrast, it includes everything. The world is world, life is life, suffering is suffering, happiness is happiness, everything does exist.

In Buddhism, there is clear teaching as to what is right or wrong, good or evil, or cause and effect. One should turn away from the wrong one and redirect to the right one, refrain from evil and do more good. Those who do good will gain good effect, and if one practices one may attain Buddhahood. This is the cause and effect. If we say that everything is empty,

then why are we practising the teaching of the Buddha? If there exist the karma, good and evil, worldly people and saint, then, why does the Buddha say that everything is empty? What is the meaning of emptiness?

Things exist due to causes and conditions and do not have a real and unchangeable identity of itself. Thus, they are “empty”. The right and wrong, good and evil, and the life are not permanent and unchangeable. They exist due to causes and conditions. Since their existence is dependent on causes and conditions, they continue to change with the changes of the causes and conditions. They do not have a permanent form, and therefore they are “empty”.

For example, when one is facing a mirror, there will be an image in the mirror. The image is produced by various conditions. It is not a real thing. Although it is not real, it is very clear when we see it. We cannot say that it does not exist. The concept of “emptiness” relies on this truth that things arise due to causes and conditions. Thus, when the Buddha says that everything is empty, he is implying that everything arises due to causes and conditions. A practising Buddhist must realise and experience emptiness and understand the existence of the Law of cause and effect, good and evil. The perfect realisation of the two truths is that emptiness and existence are equivalent.

2. Misunderstanding that arises from the system

Buddhism originated from India. Its custom were different from the traditional customs of China. For example, the under-

standing of the aspects of renunciation and vegetarianism were different.

a) To renounce (To take the vows of a monk or nun)

To renounce is a custom in Indian Buddhism. In Chinese society, especially for the Confucianists, there are a lot of misunderstandings about this.

In China, we always hear that, if everyone practised the teaching of the Buddha, then this world would become extinct. Why is it so? Because everyone would become monks or nuns (celibate). There would be no husband and wife, nor son and daughter. How then could society survive?

This is a very serious misunderstanding. There is an example: The teachers teach the students. Will they encourage everyone to be a teacher, and therefore develop a world of teachers? In the Philippines, there is not much misunderstanding about this because there are Fathers and Sisters everywhere. They have also taken vows, but they are only the minority among the Catholics. Not all Catholics must be a Father or Sister.

For the Buddhists, there are the renounced ones and the lay people. One can practise Buddhism by renouncing, or as a lay person. One can practise in order to end the cycle of life and death by renouncing, and can also achieve the same aim by practising at home. It is not necessary for Buddhists renounce themselves. It is also not true that if everyone became a Buddhist, the world of the humans would become extinct. The question now will be, if one can attain the aim of ending the

cycle of life and death by either practising as a lay person or as renounced follower, then why must one to renounce? This is because, in order to promote and encourage the spread of Buddhism, someone has to take the responsibility. The best person to take charge of this responsibility will be the renounced monks or nuns, as they do not have family responsibilities and are not involved in other work duties. Hence, they can concentrate more on their practice and the spreading of Buddhism. In order to prolong the existence of Buddhism in this world, we need these type of people to take responsibility. This is also the reason for the formation of the Sangha, the community of renounced ones.

How great is the merit of renouncing? The merit of renunciation is very great. However, those who cannot renounce should not force themselves to do so. If one cannot practise in line with the teaching of the Buddha after renouncing, it is worse than a lay follower. The higher one climbs, the worse will one fall. The merit of renouncing oneself is great, but if one is careless, one will deteriorate even more. One should develop one's mind sincerely, practise diligently and sacrifice oneself for Buddhism. Then renunciation will be worthwhile. The Sangha (the renounced monks or nuns) are the centre members of Buddhism, they are the main force in the motivation of Buddhism.

The practice of not getting married can also be found in the Western religions. A lot of scientists and philosophers also remain single so that they will not be disturbed by the matters in the family, and hence they can concentrate more on their studies and contribute more to the development of science and philosophy.

The practice of renunciation in Buddhism is to get rid of one's worldly attachment, and hence concentrate more on Buddhism. To renounce is an act of a great person, thus, one must put in extra effort. If one renounces without proper understanding, or without pure aims, one will not gain any benefit but will obstruct the development of Buddhism.

Some people want to renounce just after they begin to practice. They think that in order to practice the teaching of the Buddha, one must renounce. This is not correct and may frighten away the others from stepping into the practice of Buddhism. This kind of thought — that one must renounce in order to practice the Buddha's teaching, is the thought that all of us should avoid. One should recognise that it is not easy to renounce. One should first practise to be a good lay follower, practise for the sake of the Dharma, benefitting oneself and others. If one can develop one's mind greatly and sincerely, practise the renounced way, contribute to Buddhism first before one decides to renounce, it will be better for oneself and at the same time will not create any unpleasant influence to the society.

With regards to renunciation, there are two points to mention here:

a) Some people observe the spaciousness, majestic appearance, quietness and beauty of the temples and monasteries, and this arouses their admiration to be renounced. They think that the monks and nuns who live inside there are just waiting for the offerings of the devotees and enjoying themselves. They do not need to do any work.

The idioms such as “do not wake up even when the sun has risen up to three metre high”, or “cannot compare with even half-a-day’s freedom of the monk or nun” show the misunderstandings among the general people.

They do not know that the monks and nuns have their own responsibilities, they need to strive hard. When they are practising themselves, they have to “practice diligently before and after midnight”; and in terms of their duty to the devotees, they should go around to preach the teaching of the Buddha. They lead a simple and hard life, striving for the benefit of Buddhism and all beings, benefitting one and another. This is something very great. Thus, they are called the Gem of Sangha. They are not just sitting there waiting for the devotees offerings, waiting for things which are ready and never do anything. May be it is because of too many monks or nuns who are not fulfilling their responsibilities that leads to this misunderstanding.

Some people who are against Buddhism say that the monks and nuns do nothing, they are parasites of society and are useless. These people do not know that it is not necessary for one to be engaged in the work force of agriculture or business in order to be considered productive. If it is so, then are people who choose to be teacher, reporter or other occupations also considered as the consumers of society’s output too?

It is not right to say that the monks or nuns have nothing to do. They lead a simple and hard life and striving diligently everyday. The things that they do, besides benefitting themselves, is to teach others to do good, to emphasise moral

values and practices, so that the personality of the devotees can be improved, leading them to the end of the cycle of life and death. They bring great benefit to the people in the world. Thus, how can we say that they are the parasites that are doing nothing?

The monks and nuns are religious teachers. They are profound and respectful educators. Thus, the saying of those who have no understanding on Buddhism, that the monks and nuns are doing nothing and are the parasites wasting society's money are in fact wrong. A person who really leads a renounced life is in fact not free, they are not mere consumers but are busily repaying their gratitude to all living beings whenever they can.

b) Chinese Buddhism emphasises a vegetarian diet. Thus, some people thought that one who practises Buddhism must be a vegetarian. People who cannot stop eating meat misunderstood that they are not ready to start to learn about Buddhism. If we look around at the Buddhists in Japan, Sri Lanka, Thailand or Tibet and Mongolia, not to mention the lay followers, we find even the monks and nuns have meat in their diet. Can you say that they are not practicing the Buddha's teaching? They are not Buddhists?

Do not think that one must be a vegetarian in order to learn about the teaching of the Buddha and that one cannot practise Buddhism if one cannot be a vegetarian. To practice Buddhism and be a vegetarian are not the same thing. Some people who become a Buddhist, do not learn much about the teachings but only know how to be a vegetarian. This causes

unhappiness among the members of the family. They feel that it is too troublesome to be a vegetarian.

In fact one who is practising the teaching of the Buddha should: — after becoming a Buddhist — first understand the teaching of the Buddha and behave according to the teaching in both the family and the society. Purifying one's conduct and mind, so that the members of the family feel that one has changed for the better should be the goal. If before becoming a Buddhist, one was greedy, has strong hatred and lacked of a sense of responsibility and loving kindness; and after practising the Buddha's teaching, one becomes less greedy, less paranoid and shows more care to the others with a stronger sense of responsibility, then the members of the family would see the benefit of practising the Buddha's teaching. At that time, if one wants to be a vegetarian, the family members would not object to it. In fact, they may also be encouraged to have sympathy towards other living beings and follow one to be a vegetarian. If one only knows to be a vegetarian after becoming a Buddhist and does not learn about others, one will surely encounter obstacles and cause misunderstanding.

Although it is not necessary for a Buddhist to be vegetarian, it is a good moral conduct in the Chinese Buddhism and is something that should be promoted. The teaching of the Buddha says that becoming a vegetarian will cultivate one's loving kindness and compassion. By not harming the life of other living beings, not eating the meat of the other animals one will reduce one's karma of killing and strengthen one's sympathy towards the sufferings of Mankind. Mahayana Buddhism advocates the practice of vegetarianism,

and says that to be a vegetarian has great merits in cultivating one's mind of loving kindness and compassion. If one becomes a vegetarian but does not cultivate the mind of loving kindness and compassion, it is only a practice of no killing in a pessimistic way. It resembles the practice of the Hinayanist.

From the view point of the worldly Dharma, the benefit of becoming a vegetarian is very great. It is more economical, highly nutritious and may reduce illness. In the world at present, there are international vegetarian organisations. Everyone who likes to be a vegetarian may join them. Thus, it can be seen that it is good to be a vegetarian. And as Buddhist who emphasises compassion, we should advocate the practice more to others. However, one thing to note is that, do not claim that a Buddhist must be a vegetarian. Whenever meeting with a Buddhist, some will ask: have you become a vegetarian? Why are you still not a vegetarian after practising the Buddha's teaching for so long? This will frighten some people away. To regard practising Buddhism and becoming a vegetarian as the same will in fact obstruct the spreading of Buddhism.

3. The misunderstanding that arises due to the observances

When non-Buddhists visit the monastery and see observances such as paying respect to the Buddha, intoning the sutras, repenting and the morning and evening chanting, they cannot understand the meaning behind them and comment that these are superstitious acts. There are many misunderstanding within this category. Now, lets briefly mention some of them:

a) To pay respects to the Buddha

To pay respects to the Buddha when entering the monastery, to offer incense, flowers, candle and light to the Buddha are the observances of the Buddhist. The Theistic followers say that we are idol worshippers and superstitious. In reality, the Buddha is the master of our religion, he is the saint who has attained the perfect and ultimate stage by practising from the stage of a worldly being. The great Bodhisattvas are the Buddhas to be. They are our guides and indicators of refuge. We should be polite in showing respect to the Buddha and Bodhisattva just as when we show respect to our parents. When the Buddha was still in this world, there was no problem. One could show one's respect to him directly. However, now that the Sakyamuni Buddha has already entered final Nirvana; and the Buddha and Bodhisattva of the other worlds are not in our world, we have no way to pay respects. Thus, we have to use paper to draw, ceramic, wood or stone to carve their images, to be the object of our worship. It is because of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, merits and images that we are paying our respect to them, and not because of they are the paper, earth wood or stone.

It is similar to the way we respect and love our country. We use coloured cloth and make it into a flag. When the flag is flying, we pay respects to the flag. Can we say that this is also a superstitious act? The Catholics also have images in their church. The Christians, have no image of the God, but use the "cross" as the image for them to pay respect to. Some even kneel down and say their prayer. What is the difference between these acts and the paying of respects to the Buddha? To

say that the paying of respects in Buddhism is idol worshipping, is just the intentional defamation of some people.

What about the offerings of fragrance flowers, light and candle? During the Buddha time, the Indians offered these to the Buddha. Light and candle represent brightness, flowers represent fragrance and cleanliness. We believe in the Buddha and pay respect to the Buddha. The offering of these things to the Buddha is to show our respect and faith. On the other hand, it means the gaining of brightness and purity from the Buddha. We do not offer flowers and incense so that the Buddha smells the fragrance; or offer light and candle so that the Buddha can see everything.

Some religions, for example the Catholics, also use these things in their offerings. These are in fact the common observances among the religions. When we are paying respect to the Buddha, we should be respectful and sincere and contemplate on the merits of the real Buddha. If one thinks of other things or talks while paying respect to the Buddha, it is not respectful and loses the meaning of the act of paying respect.

b) To repent

The non-Buddhist or free thinkers always feel that it is an act of superstition when they see Buddhists repent or chant. To repent is to admit one's mistake. Everyone of us, from the past until the present, have committed countless wrong and evil deeds. We have left behind the karma that brings us sufferings and obstructs our progress towards enlightenment and freedom. In order to reduce and get rid of this karma that is obstructing and bringing suffering to us, we should repent

in front of the Buddha or the Sangha and admit our mistakes, so that the past evil karma can be reduced. There are methods of repentance in Buddhism and these are equivalent to the 'confession' in Christianity.

This practice is very important for us to progress further along the path of Buddhahood. One must repent for oneself with great sincerity. Then this repentance can be beneficial and comply with the teaching of the Buddha.

People generally do not know how to repent. So, what should we do? The great masters in the past thus compiled some procedures and observances that one could follow if one wants to repent. They taught us to chant word by word, contemplate and understand the teaching behind it. The services of repentance teaches us how to pay respect to the Buddha, seeking for the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas, loving kindness and compassionate protection. We should admit our own mistakes, knowing that killing, stealing and adultery are evil deeds, sincerely repenting our past evil deeds and be determined to practice for a better future. These are the procedures of repentance taught by the great masters in the past. However, the most important aim of these services is to develop one's mind to correcting oneself and repent sincerely for one's past evil deeds.

Some people cannot even read the readily written procedures, hence, they invite the monks or nuns to lead them during the repentance. As time passes, it gradually turns out to be that these people do not even know that they should repent, and only employ the monks and nuns to repent for them. Some, when their parents or family members pass away, in

order to release the past evil karma of the parents and the other family members, invite the monks or nuns to do a repentance service for them. They hope that relying on the merits of the Triple Gem, the death may be relieved from the realms of suffering. However, sometimes they do not understand the real purpose of the teaching and only emphasise on how big the ceremony should be; or do it for the sake of tradition, and spend money to employ the monks or nuns to do the services for them. They do not have faith in Buddhism, and do not show any sincerity in repenting themselves. In this case the purpose of these repentance services will not be achieved.

Gradually, the purpose of the services for repentance becomes vague. The Buddhist devotees do not repent and request the monks or nuns to do everything for them, As a result, the monks and nuns are busy with all these services all day; to do the service for this family today, and the next family tomorrow. And these services become the only activity in some of the monasteries, with the main task of the monks and nuns being neglected. This is one of the causes of lack of faith in Buddhism nowadays.

Repentance has to come from within. If one repents sincerely, even for just an hour, it has better merits than inviting a lot of people and conducting a few days services but not repenting oneself. If one understands this theory, and would like to show one's filial piety to the one's parents, the best merit will be to do the repentance oneself. It is not right to regard the services of repentance or other services as the occupation of the monks or nuns, as this will not bring any good to the society, but creates more misunderstanding and defamation for Buddhism.

c) Daily Chanting

Some people who practices the teaching of the Buddha, recite the name of the Buddha and chant the sutras every morning and evening as their daily homework. This is what we call daily chanting (prayer) in Buddhism.

In Christianity, they have morning and evening, and meal time prayer. The Catholic also chants in the morning and evening. There is nothing wrong with these religious ceremonies, but some Buddhists were concerned about these matters and asked: “Maybe it is better not to practice Buddhism. Once one practices Buddhism, problems come. My mother spends at least one to two hours each morning and evening to do her chanting. If all practicing Buddhists are like this, then who is going to do the work at home?”

Among some of the lay people, this is the real situation. They create the misunderstanding that Buddhism is only suitable for the old people and those who are free, it is not suitable for the general people to practice. In fact, it is not necessary that one must chant a specific sutra, or recite a certain Buddha’s name or to intone for a long time. One can practise according to one’s wish. The duration of the practice should depend on the circumstances and the time that one has. The important thing in the daily practices is to recite the verse of taking refuge in the Triple Gem. The “Ten Vows of the Pu Xian Bodhisattva” is also important. The Buddhism sect in Japan, such as the Pure Land sect, the Tien Tai sect and the Secret sect, which originated from China, have the daily practices of their own sect. They are simple and do not require

too much time. This was the situation of Buddhism during the Tang and Song Dynasties.

The daily practice in China over the last few centuries varied:

i) In the forest monastery where there were hundreds of people, it took a long time to gather everyone together. In order to adapt to this special environment, the daily practices became longer.

ii) Since the Yuen and Ming dynasties, the different sects in Buddhism merged. Thus, in compiling the procedure of the daily practice, it included the practices of the various sects in order to suit the needs of followers. It is not necessary for a lay person now to follow all these procedures. In the older days, the Indians who practiced the Mahayana teachings practiced the Five Repentances six times per day. It does not matter if the time is shorter. The frequency of the practice may be increased.

In short, to practice the teaching of the Buddha is not to chant only; and for one who is practising at home, one should not neglect one's responsibilities at home because of long daily practices.

d) To burn paper money after a death

The Chinese in the olden days have the tradition of burning white silk when praying to the ancestors. They burn the silk so that the ancestors may use it. They were then replaced by paper; as it is more economical. Later, they used paper to make money, ingots, notes, and even houses and cars,

and burn them for their ancestors. These are generated from the traditional customs of the olden days. They are not the teachings of the Buddha.

However, there are also some good points about this. It allows the children to show appreciation to their parents. When they are drinking or eating, they think of their parents and ancestors. When they are living in good houses and wearing nice clothes, they remember their ancestors, and do not forget the help of their ancestors. This practice has the implication of remembrance. When Buddhism spread to China, in order to adapt to the Chinese culture, and for convenience sake, this practice was merged into the practice of chanting and paying respect to the Buddha. It arouses the criticism of others, and thoughts that Buddhism is superstitious and wasteful. Buddhists should understand this and should not burn paper money as this is not the teaching of the Buddha. If one still wants to keep the tradition and want to show one's remembrance towards the ancestors, then one may burn a little at home. But do not burn them in the temple or monastery as this will create misunderstanding of Buddhism.

e) To draw lots, to ask for fortune, to divine

In some Buddhist monasteries and temple, there is misbehaviour such as drawing lots, asking for fortune, divining etc. This arouses the criticism and ire of the society, and people say that Buddhism is superstitious. In fact, true Buddhists do not allow this behaviour (whether they are effective or not is another matter). One who is really practising the teaching of the Buddha, should believe in the Law of Cause and Effect. If one has committed evil karma in the past

or present lives, one will not be able to avoid the effect of it through any methods.

One who practises good acts will gain good fruit. One who does evil deeds will not be able to run away from the evil effects. In order to gain good effects, one must do more merits. A practicing Buddhist should try to do more good deeds, according to the teaching of the Buddha, and should not try to find short cuts and behave in a bad way.

4. Misunderstanding that arises from the current development of Buddhism.

Many Chinese do not understand Buddhism and its development in the international level. They criticise Buddhism on their own accord and opinion, based on the current situation of Buddhism in China. The following are two commonly heard criticisms:

a) The country will weaken and end if the people believe in Buddhism.

They think that the end of India is due to its people's belief in Buddhism. They want China too strong and hence subjectively conclude that the people should not believe in Buddhism. In fact this is totally wrong. Those who have studied the history of Buddhism will know that the time when India was strongest was during the time when Buddhism was most popular. At the time of Emperor Asoka, he unified the whole India and spread the teaching of the Buddha to the whole world.

Later, with the revival of the Brahmana practice, Buddhism was destroyed and India became more restless each day. When India was conquered by the Muslims and the British, Buddhism has already deteriorated to the stage of near to non-existence.

Buddhism in the Chinese history also has a similar path. Now that we call the overseas Chinese the “People of the Tang”, and to call China as the “Mountain of Tang”, shows that the Tang dynasty was the strongest dynasty in the history of China. And, that is in fact the time when Buddhism was at its high peak: After the destruction of Buddhism by Emperor Tang Wu Zhong, the Tang dynasty began to deteriorate. After the Tang dynasty, the Song Emperors, Song Tai Chu, Tai Zhong, Zhen Zhong and Ren Zhong were all faithful followers of Buddhism. That was also the peak period of the Song dynasty. For the Ming Emperor, the Ming Tai Chu had had the experience of leading a renounced life, the Tai Zhong was also very faithful to Buddhism. Weren’t these the times when the country was in good order, peaceful and strong?

Although Japan is facing failure at the moment, they became one of the stronger countries in the world sometime after the Ming Zhi Revolution. Then, they were mostly Buddhist. Thus, who says that Buddhism will weaken a country? From the facts in the history, the time when a nation was strong was also the time when Buddhism was at its peak. Why are people wishing that the Chinese nation can become stronger but at the same time condemn the propagation of Buddhism?

b) Buddhism is useless to society

The Chinese this century, see the Catholic and Christians' contribution in setting up schools and hospitals, but little is being seen to be done by the Buddhists. Hence they feel that Buddhism is pessimistic and does not contribute to the social welfare of the society. This is a wrong concept. The most that one can say is that Chinese Buddhists this century were not hard working and responsible. This is not the attitude that the Buddha taught us to have.

The Chinese Buddhist in the past also participated in the social welfare activities in the society. In Japan, Buddhists are at present setting up a lot of universities and high schools. The monks and nuns are the principals or lecturers of the universities or high schools. The charitable work of the society is also conducted and organised by the Sangha of the monastery or temple. This is especially so in Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. The Buddhists in these countries maintain a very close relationship with the development of education and other charitable work in the society.

Thus, one cannot say that Buddhism is not bringing benefit to the society, one can only say that the Chinese Buddhists have not fulfilled their responsibilities or acted as true followers of the Buddha. One should put more effort into these areas of charity in order to fulfil the basic teaching of the Buddha in relieving the sufferings of the world, and hence increase the popularity of Buddhism.

Unfortunately many Chinese do not understand Buddhism well. Today we have discussed some of the

common criticisms. I hope this has enabled you to understand better the wisdom of the Buddha's teachings. I hope too, that you may practise according to the Buddha's example, rather than allowing yourself to blindly follow meaningless and perhaps, unhelpful rituals.

Translated by Neng Rong, edited by Mick Kiddle, proofread by Neng Rong. (19-6-1995)

The New Idea We Ought To Have

Today, I would like to introduce a “new” Buddhist idea to you all. What I would like to talk about is actually an old faith that has been a vital tradition amongst Buddhist circles for thousands of years. Yet it is always new and fresh whenever it is mentioned, especially in a desolate and miserable period such as this. Bodhisattva Sadaparibhuta used to say, “I would never slight you, you shall all be Buddhas.” His saying indicates the ingrained truth of life. It denotes the attitude we ought to have towards all human beings.

We know that everyone in this world is different. There are the wise, the ignorant, the weak, the strong, the progressive, the stagnant, and the down-trodden. Thought distinguishes the faulty and the correct. Behaviour distinguishes the kind and the cruel. But the differences are never permanent. The differences between us should not be interpreted as good or bad racial qualities, or as fundamental differences in the natures of individuals. According to Buddhism the present differences between wise and ignorant, strong and weak, rich and poor, kind and cruel, are intermediate steps in the process of life. They are not final. As long as we have not achieved the perfected state of enlightenment we are all trapped in the ongoing process of cause and effect, reaping the results of past deeds whilst continually sowing the seeds of future crops.

Those who are unable to strive upwards towards the light will eventually degenerate. Those who are able to exert themselves striving for goodness will find improvement. We humans have the capacity and latent virtues necessary to progress upward, to develop our goodness and to search for the supreme accomplishment. Assuredly then, we will finally

attain the state of perfect enlightenment after many rebirths. Just as Bodhisattva Sadaparibhuta said, “Everybody will become a Buddha.” In Buddhism there is no permanent sin, no permanent affliction and no permanent degeneration. On the contrary, we are all able to recover from delusion and ignorance to become awakened and enlightened. We can turn our defilements into cleanliness and purity. The future always holds goodness and joy. We should apply this idea to ourselves and to our perception of others. This life-view is positive and optimistic and allows us have the confidence and motivation to overcome any difficulties without becoming disheartened.

“Human beings are equal, and all of us are able to achieve Buddhahood.” Possessing this faith enables us to avoid slighting others. What is meant by “slight”? Slighting others may involve demeaning them with our disdain, offending them with our pride, or abusing them with our insulting words and behavior. Whilst the tenacious attachment to the competitive self endures and the Buddha-potential remains unclear to us, we may be drawn into this ignorant and unskilful mode of being, alienating ourselves from others. Very often we are self-centered and are inclined to bully others. This self-intoxicated pride is a distortion caused by an erroneous view of the ego-concept. Unfortunately, this overwhelming complex of egotistical ideas has been deeply ingrained in our hearts all along the chain of rebirths. Our egos have ensnared us in the endlessly repetitive round of transmigrations. Ego delusion involves us in successive births and deaths, making the wide world evolve with afflictions.

Implicit disdain for others may not be very serious, but sometimes it develops into proud conceit and self-

aggrandisement. It makes our self into the seeming master, the supposedly superior person; one who has either the intention to make others obey, or one willing to sacrifice the welfare of others in the pursuit of self-satisfying pleasure. Sometimes our self-esteem may reach a low ebb. We place a degraded value upon ourselves but deep in our hearts we refuse to accept that others are better than us. The effect of this smarting insecurity is to arouse tension, hatred, jealousy, intrigue and cruelty in both ourselves and others, thereby making the whole world our foe. This ego-inspired antagonism is a deeply rooted tendency.

A number of religious, political or ideological leaders have fallen into such serious error and come to consider their own religion or philosophy to the only one that represents the Truth. The only way to be right and to deserve to exist is to believe in them, follow them, obey their directions and act upon their opinions. Those who do not believe in these leaders and who do not follow them will be looked on as if they are completely tainted and extremely evil, no matter how good in actuality they may be. They are guilty of treason and must be killed. This old way of praising the mean self, and with narrowed mind feeding its insecurity by cutting down all others in supposed opposition, ruins both oneself and others. It should be changed.

If we can accept the idea that all humans are equal, and that we can all attain Buddhahood, our pride will gradually dissolve. There will be no disdain for others, nor denial of the dignity of the disagreeable. A Buddhist ought to be broad-minded, tolerant, respectful and kind towards others. A real Buddhist will not consider other religions or tenets of thought as nonsense and of no value. Even if they are imperfect,

erroneous, or misleading, it is possible that they may carry some semblance of truth and may act as qualified points of reference for us. Regardless of whether a person opposes Buddhism, has unorthodox beliefs, or does not believe in anything at all, that person's shortcomings should not be taken for granted. Nor should it be assumed that he is a completely bad person. Such a person may have a sublime personality, good behavior and excellent habits that serve society's needs well. Even if he is indeed evil, he will not be completely without a kind thought or behavior worthy of praise.

Believing that all human beings will eventually and inevitably attain Buddhahood, our mind will naturally become tranquil and we will be more generous in our dealings with others. We will understand that our future is determined by our own behavior. Good or evil behavior will lead us to progress or to degenerate, to suffer or to enjoy. If we are evil we will bring suffering to ourselves and to others. Believing in Buddhism gives us the confidence to walk a righteous path and to enter into a loftier and more accomplished situation.

Buddha-dharma teaches us not to hate and not to be destructive with our thoughts, words or actions. Buddhism teaches us to establish a sublime and virtuous ideal, to be firm with ourselves, and to practice self-improvement. It teaches us to do good deeds for the benefit of others and to have patience. It also encourages us to be sympathetic towards the wicked. Do not despise those in error but endeavour to assist their sublimation of that error. Gradually exert your benign influence upon them so that the salutary inclination towards virtuous fulfilment may grow in their minds.

Appreciating the verity and sheer beauty of this ideal enables us to understand why the Buddha wanted us “not to slight the unlearned” and “not to slight those who offend us.” Everybody can attain Buddhahood. Those who are ignorant and confused may learn and gradually become more and more learned and virtuous. Those who commit offences against the precepts and rules may confess and gradually accomplish more skilful moral behaviour. With such ideas in mind we can have sincere friendships with other people, and not just take advantage of them. We should sow true kindness containing no seed of war. Consider yourselves to be equal to others. Never consider yourself superior.

With dedication towards these ideas we can increase our compassion for others and strengthen our determination to save all. We can cultivate our wisdom towards non-self (viz. “anatta” the Buddha’s teaching concerning the unreality of ego) and help Buddhahood ripen within us by practicing the perfections of the Bodhisattva. If we can extend this ideal and practice it well we will enter a period of mutual understanding, mutual trust, mutual help and enjoyment of great peace and happiness together.

Bodhisattva Sadaparibhuta used to say, “I would never slight you, you shall all be Buddhas.” This is a saying of everlasting and perfect truth. With this saying I began and with this saying I shall end. This is a special offering to all of you today.

Translated by Chai Gao Mao, edited by Mick Kiddle, proofread by Neng Rong.(20-6-1995)

The Position of the Chinese Tripitaka in World Buddhism

The main objective of the World Buddhist Fellowship is to link the various schools of Buddhism, coming as they do from all over the world. This communion can be accomplished by harmonious co-operation on the basis of spiritual sharing. As a global community we can then actualize the inspiring ideals of world enlightenment and salvation through the encouragement of our common Buddhist culture.

We must first acknowledge that the various schools of thought in Buddhism are indeed facets of the Triple Gem that is Buddhism. There is no room for superficial and dogmatic claims that one school is true whereas others are not. For instance the Mahayana schools should not be lightly dismissed as illegitimate, nor should the Sravakavana school conversely be despised as moribund. Only when the study and practice of Buddhism is carried out in a friendly and accommodating atmosphere, with mutual trust and understanding, will co-ordination and co-operation be possible. With this attitude, the trash and trimmings now enshrouding Buddhism can be removed to reveal the essential splendor of the Triple Gem. Thus Buddhism, which is well-adapted to this modern world, can be redeemed and developed for the purpose of the enlightenment and salvation of the world in its dire present need.

Buddhism stems from one point of origin and is highly adaptable under many circumstances. For different races, time and environments it seems to develop into entirely different shapes and forms. But a close study of its trends and modes of

development, its adaptations to new environments whilst preserving the integral identity of its core, brings one to the realisation that the different forms of Buddhism are interrelated and that cooperation amongst them is entirely feasible. Generally, each school has its own characteristics and shortcomings. Buddhists should honestly survey these various schools, exchanging the shortcomings in each for the strengths in others on the basis of equality, and for the sake of pursuing truth. In so doing, the ultimate truth as experienced by the Buddha may be realized and his original intention, as embodied in his teaching, may be fully understood.

When we trace the different schools of Buddhism in the world today from their origins in India we can see that the profile sprouting of sectarian Buddhism seems to have taken place as follows:

(1) The sacred texts embodying the Buddha-dharma developed over time. The sutras and Vinaya Pitaka were the earliest to be compiled and circulated. Round about the beginning of the first century A.D., the researchers of the Agama Sutra and those dedicated to Sravaka practice had compiled the Abhidharma, emphasising the existential aspect of Dependent Origination. On the other hand, the Mahayana scriptures had been compiled by those who stressed the virtues of the Buddha and the practice of the Bodhisattva, emphasizing the aspect of emptiness as central to the attainment of real understanding of Dependent Origination.

By the third century A.D., Nagarjuna had composed his famous Sastras on the Madhyamika doctrine interpreting the Agama and Abhidharma on the basis of the Mahayana sutras

of the Sunyata school. At about the same time, Mahayana scriptures tending towards 'eternal-reality' idealism, such as the Srimaladeve-Simhanada Sutra and the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, had begun to be found, followed by sutras such as the Lankavatara Sutra. Along with this development, the Asters and Yogacaryas of the Sravastivada school accepted the "mind-only" aspect of the Mahayana school. They compiled a number of Sastras of the Yogacara Vijnanavada and eventually flourished as a great Mahayana school in their own right.

Then, at about the fifth century there was a further development of esoteric Yoga from the school of eternal-reality idealism. If one tried to follow the course of development of Buddhism as outlined above, one would have no difficulty tracing the evolution of the vast diversity of scriptures and doctrines held sacred by the many schools.

(2) Doctrinally, Buddhism was just Buddhism at first and there was no sectarian difference. It did not divide into the Sravakayana and Bodhisattvayana until about the beginning of the Christian era. Then in the scriptures of the Bodhisattvayana we begin to see the division of Hinayana and Mahayana.

In the second and third centuries scriptures of eternal-reality idealism started to appear in the Bodhisattvayana. In such Sutras were first seen the terms "noumenon, Sunya and Madhya"; and "Hina-, Maha- and Eka-yana." These scriptures of later date laid special emphasis on the achievement of Buddhahood, and were thus also classified as Buddhayana.

At the beginning of the fifth century, another 'yana', the Dharaniyana, sprung into existence from the noumenal school

of Buddhism. This school classified all Buddha Dharma into the Tripitaka, the Paramita Pitaka (including everything of the exoteric schools), and the Dharani Pitaka. It also categorised the Dharma according to practice as: Catvri-satyani, Paramita, and greed-ingrained.

These classification are indicative of the diversification and development of Buddhism and are consistent with the schematic three periods of historical development proposed by the late Venerable Tai Hsu. The latter were as follows:

First 500 years after Buddha's demise — Hinayana in vogue with Mahayana in the background. The Pali Tripitaka are representative of the Buddhism of this period.

Second 500 years — Mahayana to the fore with Hinayana attendant. The Chinese Tripitaka reflects the development of Buddhism in this period.

Third 500 years — Tantric Buddhism took the lead, leaving the exoteric school in its wake. The Tibetan Tripitaka is the fruit of this period.

Chinese Buddhism — from which Japanese Buddhism derives is representative of the Buddhism of the second 500 years, i.e. it is founded mainly on Bodhisattvayana, which links the earlier Sravakayana and the later Buddhayana. It therefore effectively ties Buddhist history together.

As it plays such a pivotal role in the historical development of the Buddha-dharma, the Chinese Tripitaka deserves the special attention of all those concerned with the present

development of world Buddhism. It is my humble opinion that only in the study of the Chinese Tripitaka can the contents of Buddhism be fully and totally understood. The Chinese Tripitaka offers the following:

(a) Agamas: All four Agamas belong to the Bhava division. The Madhyamagama and Samyuktagama were translated from the texts of the Sravastivada school while the Dirghagama and Ekottaragama were translated from those of the Mahasamghika or Vibhajyavada schools. Though admittedly it does not contain a complete set of the sutras of any single school, (the Pali Tripitaka does present a more complete set), a textual conglomeration of many schools does have its merits (The Tibetan Tripitaka contains no Agama at all).

(b) Vinayas: The Tibetan Tripitaka contains only the new rules of the Tamrasatiya sect, while the Chinese Vinaya contains all the following:

(i) The Mahasamghika Vinaya of the Mahasamghika school.

(ii) The five divisions of the Mahisasaka Vinaya, the four divisions of the Dharmagupta Vinaya, the pratimoksa of Mahadasyapiyah, and the Sudarsana Vinaya of Tamrasatiya. All these are rules of the Vibhajyavada school.

(iii) The old Sravastivada Vinaya and the new Mulasarvasti vadanikaya Vinaya, both of the Sarvastivada school.

(iv) The Twenty-Two-Points-Of-Elucidation Sastras of the Sammatiya sect of the Vatsiputriyas school.

This rich collection of materials from different sources greatly facilitates comparative studies of sectarian Buddhism.

(c) Abhidharmas: This body of scripture is common to the three main schools of Theravada Buddhism, namely, the Vibhajyavadins, the Sarvastivadins, and the Vatsiputriyas. In the Tibetan Tripitaka there are only the Prajnapti of the Jnana-prasthanasatpadabhidharma and the later Abhidarmakosa.

The Pali Tripitaka contains seven Sastras. While the Chinese Tripitaka has an especially large collection of the work of the Sarvastivada school, it also possesses the Abhidharma work of practically all sects. The Chinese Tripitaka contains:

i) The Samgitiparyaya, the Dharmskandha, the Prajnapti, the Vijñanakaya, the Dhatukaya, the Prakaranapada, the Jnana-prasthana, the Mahavibhasa, the Abhidharma-hrdaya-vyakhya, the Abhiraharmananyanyanusara and the Abhidharma-samayapradipika Sastras of the Sarvastivada school.

ii) Of the works of Vibhajyavadins, it includes the Abhidharma Sastra of Sariputa, which is the only important work that links up the Southern and Northern Abhidharmas.

iii) It also contains the Vimmuttimagga which is a different version of the Pali Visuddhimagga.

iv) It further contains the Sammitiya Sastra of the Vatsiputriya School.

v) The renowned Abhidharmakosa of the third to fourth century which combines the best teachings of the Sarvastivada and Sautrantika schools, and the Satyasiddhi Sastra of Harivarman which greatly influenced Chinese Buddhism.

All these treasures of the Abhidharma may be found in the Chinese Tripitaka. It can thus be seen that although the works of earlier dates in the Tripitaka were not given the full respect due to them by the majority of Chinese Buddhists, the wealth of information they contain will be of great reference value to anyone interested in tracing the divisions of the Sravaka schools and the development of the Bodhisattva ideal from the Sravakayana. If these scriptures are ignored, I will say that it would definitely not be possible for anyone to fulfil the responsibility of co-ordinating and linking the many branches of world Buddhism.

(d) Mahayana scriptures of the Sunyavada

(e) Mahayana scriptures of the noumenon school, or the school of eternal-reality, are very complete in the Chinese Tripitaka. These scriptures are very similar to those found in the Tibetan Tripitaka. The four great Sutras, the Prajnaparamita, the Avatamsaka, the Mahasamghata, and the Mahaparinirvana (to which may be added the Maharatnakuta Sutra, making five great sutras), are all tremendously voluminous works. Here it may be pointed out that the Chinese scriptures are particularly notable for the following characteristics:

(i) The different translations of the same Sutra have been safely preserved in the Chinese Tripitaka in their respective

original versions without their being constantly revised according to later translations, as was the case with Tibetan scriptures. From a study of the Chinese translations we can thus trace the changes in content which the majority of scriptures have undergone over time and reflect upon the changes in the original Indian texts at different points in time. Thus we have the benefit of more than one version for reference, recording the evolution of the scriptures.

(ii) The Chinese Mahayana scriptures that were translated before the Tsin Dynasties (beginning 265 A.D.) are particularly related to the Buddhism of Chinese Turkestan with its center in the mountain areas of Kashmir. These scriptures form a strong nucleus of Chinese Buddhist thinking. The translations of the Dasabhumika Sastra and Lankavatara Sutra all possess very special characteristics.

(f) Madhyamika: The Madhyamika texts of the Chinese Tripitaka are considerably different from the Tibetan renditions of the same system of thought. The Chinese collection consists mostly of earlier works, particularly those of Nagarjuna, such as the Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra and the Dasabhumikavibhasa Sastra, which not only present Madhyamika philosophy of a very high order but also illustrate extensively the acts of a Bodhisattva.

Of the late Madhyamika works, i.e. works produced by the disciples of Nagarjuna after the rise of the Yogacara system, only the Prajnapradipa Sastra of Bhavaviveka has been rendered into Chinese. The Chinese Tripitaka does not contain works or as many schools of this system as the Tibetan Tripitaka. The Mahayanavatarika Sastra of Saramati and the

Madhyayata Sastra of Asanga clearly indicate the change of thinking from the Madhyamika to the Yogacara system.

(g) Yogacara-Vijnanavada: The Chinese Tripitaka contains a very complete collection of this system of thought. It includes important scriptures such as the Dasabhumika, Mahayanasamparigraha Sastra, and Vijnaptimatrasiddhi Sastra. While the Tibetan system was mainly founded on the teachings of Sthiramati which are more akin to the Mahayanasamparigraha school of Chinese work, the Chinese students of orthodox Vijnanavada follow the teachings of Dharmapala.

The Vinaptimatrasiddhi Sastra, which represents the consummation of the Dignaga-Dharmapala-Silabhadra school of thought, is a gem of the Chinese Tripitaka. The Hetuvidya which is closely connected with Vijnanavada, is not fully translated in the Chinese Tripitaka and cannot compare favourably with the works of Dignaga and Dharmakirti collected in the Tibetan Tripitaka.

This seems to indicate that the Chinese people were not logically inclined, and gives no weight to engagements in verbal gymnastics and debates. In times past this had relegated the position of Sastra masters in China to one of relative unimportance.

(h) The esoteric Yoga: The Chinese Tripitaka includes Chinese translations of both the Vairocana Sutra of the practical division, and the Diamond Crown Sutra of the Yoga division of the Tantric school of Buddhism. The only esoteric scriptures that are missing are those of the Supreme Yoga

division which, as they arrived in China at a time of national chaos, did not have much chance to circulate widely. Its very nature of achieving enlightenment through carnal expressions also made Tantrism unacceptable to the Chinese intellectuals. However, the texts of esoteric Yoga are abundant in the Tibetan Tripitaka

From the above it can be seen that the Chinese Tripitaka is composed mainly of Mahayana scriptures of the second 500 years, yet translations were not restricted to scriptures of this middle period. The Chinese Tripitaka also possesses a wealth of works of early Buddhism as a good portion of the later productions.

Thus, if one could have a sufficient knowledge of the Chinese Tripitaka, and could extend his knowledge from there to include the Pali Tripitaka of the Sravakayana, and the Madhyamika and Supreme Yoga of the Tibetan system, then he would have little difficulty in gaining an accurate, complete and comprehensive panorama of the 1,700 years of development of Indian Buddhism, the record of which has been preserved in the three great extant schools of Buddhist thought.

The late Venerable Tai Hsu once said, "To mold a new, critical and comprehensive system, based on the Chinese Tripitaka, the Theravada teaching of Ceylon, and selected components of the Tibetan canon, should be the objective of the writing of a history of Indian Buddhism." Even more so, it should be the objective of co-ordinating and connecting the many tributaries of world Buddhism. It is our responsibility to discard the trimmings and to retain the very essence of the great Tripitakas, adapting Buddhism to the modern world so

that it may fulfil its mission of leading the way, taking under its wings the miserable beings of the present era.

Translated by Mok Chung, edited by Mick Kiddle, proofread by Neng Rong. (20-6-1995)



Part Two

Preface

Venerable Dr. Yin Shun is one of the greatest contemporary Buddhist masters. He has spent more than sixty years in the Buddhist Order. Although he has throughout his life suffered almost constantly illness, his strong determination and perseverance has allowed him to complete a huge collection of works on Buddhism. Unfortunately, most of his works remain in Chinese. Only a very small proportion of them have been translated into English and Japanese. There are experts in Theravada; in the Mahayana; in Vajrayana; in Buddhist history; on Zen and on various other schools in Buddhism. But these scholars and masters each worked, for the most part, in a limited sphere, and very few of them can give us an integrated understanding of Buddhism as a whole. The Venerable's collected works serve this purpose very well. They help clarify confusion regarding Buddhist practices and show us the right path in order to follow the teaching of Buddha.

Buddhism has a history of more than two thousand five hundred years. After the Buddha's Parinirvana, His Dharma continued to develop and grow in India. Later, it spread throughout the countries of Asia, adapting its forms and rituals to individual cultures. During its development and propagation, the teachings of Buddhism were enriched and necessarily employed skilful means (s. upaya) in order to assist the transmission of the Buddha Dharma to different individuals. However, when these skilful means and the absolute truth lying behind Buddhism cannot be distinguished or understood clearly, confusion may arise and may even prevent us from pursuing true spiritual development.

As Venerable Yin Shun says in his preface to “Buddhism in India”,

“I deeply believe that during the long period of the development of Buddhism, some teachings have been changed and even deformed. Therefore, the core teachings of Buddhism have to be revealed and the cause of the change in the teachings has to be understood. Only with this will we be able to distinguish, clarify and distill the teachings.”

With these purposes in mind, as stated in “The Method and Attitude in Learning Buddhism”, Venerable Yin Shun has put most of his efforts into “searching what are the ultimate and core teachings in Buddhism? How does Buddhism develop over time? How has the teaching changed in India?” Furthermore, he uncovers the links between various teachings and presents the vast system of Buddhist thought as an integrated whole. Although not all the teachings we find in Buddhism today equally parallel the core teachings, Venerable Yin Shun is impartial with respect to the development and mutation of Buddhism through various schools and traditions. Instead of ridiculing the variety of practices and beliefs, he expounded the truth. When Venerable Yin Shun comments on a particular practice in Buddhism he does not draw us into hasty value judgements. He is always very patient. Customarily his commentaries start with an explanation of the origin of a certain practice, and then explicate how that given practice changes in order to create the forms we see today. In “The Method and Attitude in Learning Buddhism” Venerable writes: “It is not just a simple question of right or wrong. We have to perceive these changes as skilful means and as developmental adaptations.”

Venerable Yin Shun does not bind himself to any particular school or tradition. The way he approaches and learns Buddhism, as explained in “Learning Buddha Dharma Through Buddha Dharma”, is based on the Three Universal Characteristics of Buddha Dharma i.e.

*‘All existence and phenomena
are subject to change (s. anitya),
All existence and phenomena
do not have any substantial reality (s. anatman),
The eternally serene state of Nirvana’*

The state of Nirvana is the ultimate aim of all Buddhist practices. Therefore the teaching is to be studied, more to be practiced, and above all to be realized by oneself. Mere learning is of no avail without actual practice. Only by living in Buddha Dharma can its very essence be known.

The approach by which we understand Buddha Dharma should be grounded in an awareness of constant flux as the underlying nature of phenomenal existence (viz. anitya). Discourse on the Dharma also changes and grows as Buddhism historically develops. Therefore, we should “understand the changes in Buddhism in order to reveal what is the absolute teaching of the Buddha Dharma, and what are the relative truths which have been adapted from time to time.”

In practising Buddhism, we should have the attitude of egolessness. There are two aspects to egolessness (s. anatman), i.e. the non-existence of the individual soul (s. pudgalanairatmya) and the non-self nature of Dharma (s. dharmainairatmya). Because of the egolessness of the individual, “we

should learn and practise Buddhism without becoming attached to our own view and should eschew all prejudice against others.” Because of the egolessness of Dharma “everything in this phenomenal world exists in the form of interdependence and interrelationship, conditioned by every other thing.” Therefore, when we study Buddhism we must also understand the interrelationship between the teachings and the Law of Dependent Origination. By following the Three Universal Characteristics of Buddha Dharma, Venerable Yin Shun illuminates for us the right way to learn Buddhism.

The Venerable’s collected works range widely and include, but are not limited to, Buddhist text books for primary schools; Dharma talks for general audiences; commentaries on sutras and sastras; a history of Buddhism in India; guides to Buddhist practices; and teachings from various schools and traditions. The selected translations which comprise Parts I and II are in total just a very small portion of the works of the Venerable. A substantial proportion of his important writings lie beyond our abilities to translate at this stage. We sincerely hope that more people will become involved in their translation in the future. On the other hand, we sincerely hope that even this limited selection will enrich the understanding of Buddhism in the West so that more people can benefit from contact with the Dharma.

This volume, “Selected Translations of Miao Yun Part II”, is our second humble attempt to translate works by Venerable Yin Shun. All the articles in this selection were selected from the eleventh volume of the Miao Yun Collection, namely “Buddha Dharma is the Light of Deliverance.” The articles we have selected can be broadly divided into two categories. The

first category includes “Buddha Dharma is the Light of Deliverance”, “Buddha Come to Save and Protect Us”, “Two Distinctive Characteristics of Buddhism”, “Let Go of Your Sorrow”, “Form Relieving the Suffering of the Mind to Relieving suffering of the Body”, “The Critical Issue of Life and Death”, “What is the Significance of Life” and “Dharma About Lay People For Lay People”. All these articles deal with the fundamental understanding, perspective and practice of Buddhism. They try to answer questions such as: Why should we learn Buddhism? How can Buddhism help us? How do we face life from a Buddhist perspective? From an understanding of the unique characteristics of Buddhism we will be able to grasp the true significance of life, and furthermore realize this significance i.e. achieve Buddhahood in this very life. These are all important teachings of the Buddha that every Buddhist should understand from the very outset of his or her practises. The remaining articles in this selection deal with more advanced teachings in Buddhism such as voidness (s. sunyata) and the Middle Way. They assume some prior knowledge in this field and are therefore more suitable for those who have a deeper grounding in the Dharma.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Triple Gem for guiding our lives. We gratefully acknowledge and express deep appreciation to Venerable Tsang Hui for his guidance and encouragement. We would also like to thank Mr. Mick Kiddle. Mr. Gregg Heathcote and Mr. Michael Morrison for correcting our English and smoothing the writing. They have made this publication possible. These translations involved members from the University of New South Wales Buddhist Society, the University of Sydney Buddhist Society,

the University of Newcastle Buddhist Society and Hwa Tsang Monastery Inc.. Despite their busy academic and working lives, many people have contributed their time and energy so that these translations could be completed.

We are responsible for any possible mistakes and distortions in the translations and any remedial suggestions from you would be very precious, and very welcome. We hope that we have succeeded in presenting these works of Venerable Yin Shun to you as faithfully and clearly as we can.

Finally, let us share a message from Venerable Yin Shun,

“Faith in the Triple Gem should be developed from right understanding. The faith derived from right understanding will lead us to skilful action and further our progress on the path of Buddhahood. Let us bring benefits both to ourselves and to others. Let us contribute ourselves to the promotion of Buddha Dharma.”

Beng Tiong Tan
Newcastle, Australia
10 July 1996

Buddha Dharma is the Light of Deliverance

Dear Dharma Friends! In this desolate and miserable period, it is precious to have such a valuable opportunity here and now to share Dharma with joyful hearts. We should all therefore greatly honor the benevolence of the Triple Gem and the compassion of the Buddha.

This is the first Dharma Talk I have given in Xin Yuan Monastery during this Chinese New Year. Thus I have taken “The Light” as the theme of my talk. I have seen so many people looking for brightness and hope in their lives. No doubt, living in the light is blissful and peaceful. However, the universe is full of gloom. Who, or what, can give us hope? The answer is the Buddha and the Dharma. In other words, brightness will only eventuate if one believes and practises the Dharma.

We often hear others commenting that the world is gloomy. Conflicts and violence are everywhere, and they create agitation and anguish. Buddhists understand these problems and seek for brightness within the dark.

From the perspective of Buddha-Dharma, the cause of darkness and chaos in this human world is grounded in the sentient beings themselves. We often think that we are very intelligent and capable. But in actual fact, we are not. We often mistake the bad deed for the good deed, and not many of us are interested in doing good. The activities that bring us suffering are often misconstrued as sources of excitement and

happiness. Do you think then that human beings are really so clever and intelligent?

Let me take an example. Human beings are getting more knowledgeable nowadays. Science and technology are advancing. Harmful products are continuously being produced by these intelligent minds. What are the threats that they have brought to the mankind? Fear and worries consequently arise. Everyone fears the explosion of wars and nuclear weapons. This is a cogent evidence that our intellect is misleading us. Therefore various discoveries and so-called material “progress” may in fact harm us and leave us with a nagging sense of insecurity.

I am not condemning the advancement of science and technology, but demonstrating the ignorance of the human beings. We do not know how to make proper use of science; rather, we are being used by it. This is comparable to a kitchen-knife being used as a weapon to kill oneself rather as a cutting utensil for food. Because science is not used wisely, we end up living and groping in the dark in spite of our advanced science and technology. The Buddha Dharma points out the path to brightness whilst we are groping in the dark.

Amidst the darkness, feelings of fear and grief often engender illusions. We may either see nothing or perceive incorrectly. We may assume a rope as a snake; or mistake a shadow as a human body; or are headed in a wrong direction.

Religions in the world believe that they have shown humans the light and brightness of life. The worldly scholars also assume their own knowledge as the Universal Truth. But

in fact, we can find the truth most clearly revealed in the Buddha Dharma, the teaching of the Buddha. Since Sakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment 2000 years ago, the bright light began to shine into our hearts and illuminate the whole universe. The “Amitabha Buddha”, whose name everyone recites nowadays, means “Infinite Brightness”. Buddha emits two lights to help sentient beings. They are the light of wisdom and the light of compassion. The light of wisdom shows us what has happened before this life and what will happen after this life. It enhance our understanding of skilful and unskilful actions, and tells us the causes of suffering. It also shows us the way to end suffering so that we will be liberated and happy. If we receive and follow the guidance of this light of wisdom, many mistakes can be avoided, and the significance of life will gradually be uncovered and understood. I have just mentioned that human intelligence is unreliable and man commits many mistakes. There is a saying of Sariputra, “If we are unable to live in the light of wisdom, it is just like a blind person who cannot see the light of the external world and who always lives in darkness.”

The Buddha radiates not only the light of wisdom, but also the light of compassion, for the liberation of all beings. His salvation is proceeding everywhere, every moment. His care for us is far greater than the care we give to our children. If we receive the light of compassion radiated from the Buddha, feelings of peace and serenity will arise while anxiety and annoyance will disappear. This is like a child who walks alone on the street. His fear of being attacked by other naughty children will vanish as soon as his mother appears and he is safely in her company. This is the power of love from the

mother. If one who purportedly practises Buddhism still immerses oneself in deep feelings of grief and anguish, this must reflect the fact that the inner self still lacks true faith, and that right understanding of Dharma has not yet been developed. Therefore, such a one has not yet received the light of compassion from the Buddha.

The light of compassion from the Buddha is illuminating everywhere. However, there are still some people who wonder why they are unable to receive it. This is just like one who closed the windows and curtains to prevent sunlight from shining into one's room. Those who have true faith in Buddha Dharma are freed from defilements and anxiety, and to them the light is illuminating. Others may not understand why, with their kindness and faith in Buddha, they are unable to receive the light. I have seen a common phenomenon occurring in our country, Taiwan. People pray for wealth and good fortune in front of the Buddha or a Bodhisattva. If their wishes are not fulfilled they will begin to blame the Buddha and Bodhisattva. What a wrong attitude! One should realize that true faith towards Buddha is not conditional upon environment and favors received. As long as firm and resolute faith exists, there will be an opportunity to receive the warmth of the light from the Buddha.

The Buddha appears in this world to teach us the Dharma and to radiate the light of wisdom and compassion, so that we may all live under this brightness and be benefitted in the following two regards:

1. Accomplishment in wholesome activities: What ever activity we perform, we need guidance. The warm light of

Buddha-Dharma guides us to deliverance so that everyone may become happy and peaceful. All merits, and all large or minor activities, will be able to proceed to accomplishment under the illumination of the compassionate and wise lights of the Buddha.

2. Fullness of hope: Under the illumination of the light of wisdom and compassion, we have tremendous hope. Those who practise the Dharma will not easily give up and fear for failure because they have received the light of Buddha Dharma and have firm faith in a bright future.

Therefore, the causes of all problems in the world originate from ourselves. If everyone accepts the light from the Buddha, the light can also be transmitted to the others. When one has the right view, one can influence the others. This is how Buddha works for the salvation of the world. May I take this opportunity to wish everyone who listens to today's talk about the "Dharma as the Light of Deliverance", to accept the light of wisdom and compassion of the Buddha, and to have an infinite bright future. [Recorded by Xiao Juan] (*Translated by Loh Wai Heen, edited by Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rong. (21-10-96)*)

Buddha Came to Save and Protect Us

Today is the birthday of Sakyamuni Buddha. We are all inspired by Buddha's beneficence and kindness to come together to celebrate his birthday. May we sincerely express our happiness deep from our heart. In today's birthday puja, let's speak about how to appreciate Buddha's kindness. The purpose of Buddha being born in this 'Five Impurities' world more than two thousand years ago was to liberate distressed sentient beings like us. The Buddha is of great benevolence to us.

According to the Buddha, a sentient being who aspires to persevere on the path of Bodhisattva and accumulates unlimited pure merits for three Great Asogi Kalpa periods, may go to a pure land and attain Buddhahood. But in order to save the sentient beings, the Buddha had chosen to attain enlightenment in this Five Impurities mundane world. In other words, Buddha came to save and liberate us. Therefore, the Buddha's presence in this world is of great significance to us. We should not forget about his kindness.

When the Buddha was diligently walking the path of Bodhisattva, he did not only aspire to achieve Buddhahood for himself. He also had a very deep concern for all the distressed sentient beings in this world. The Buddha showed much compassion in his constant actions of helping sentient beings. The world is like a dirty, stinking sewage tank and we are almost drowning in it. No one but the Buddha was willing to come to this suffering world to rescue us. Therefore, when Buddha was born in this world more than two thousand years ago, he denounced the worldly life, practiced diligently, attained enlightenment and then preached his teachings. If

there was no distressed sentient beings like us, he wouldn't have needed to come into this suffering world, as he had already freed himself from the cycle of birth and death and awakened to the truth of all phenomena.

The contributions of Buddha to us are profound and incomparable. As Buddhists we should reinforce the concept of appreciating the Buddha. Otherwise, if we do not understand the Buddha's sincerity, do not learn his compassion, and do not pursue the vast merits of the great teaching in Buddhism, we do not qualify as the Buddha's faithful disciples.

What are the benefits of the birth of Buddha to this human world? What are his ways to help all sentient beings?

1. The birth of Buddha has shone a light on sentient beings who live in this world of darkness. Please do not think that the mighty sun and these bright fluorescent lights are the mentioned brightness. The world we are living in, is full of conflicts and injustices. There is fear and darkness among people. It seems that the human world has lost the light of truth which poses as the biggest defect in human nature. At a glance, human actions seem to have ideals, plans and targets. But if we look more carefully, these actions are thoughtless and out of our control. Sentient beings in this world spend their whole life living in ignorance and distress.

Sariputra once said, "I am like a blind man before the emergence of the Buddha." Even Sariputra, who was known as the wisest among Buddha's disciples thought that he was as if blind before the emergence of the Buddha, not to mention

sentient beings like us. The emergence of the Buddha brought us the light of truth to this world, he showed us the right way to liberate our sufferings. He is of great benevolence to us.

2. The birth of Buddha in this world has also brought us warmth. Warmth comes together with light. For instance, when the sun rises, there is light as well as warmth. The warmth in this world is manifested in the love between spouses and siblings, the sincerity among relatives and friends, and the dedication to one's community and country. However, when the worldly love and friendship break up, they instantaneously become enemies. This is the coldest and cruelest thing that can happen. The radiance and compassionate blessing of the Buddha is the only one that would never abandon any sentient beings.

Once, the Buddha went to look around in a monks' quarters and saw a sick monk. His clothes and bed were dirtied by his excrete. The Buddha asked him, "Where are your companions?" "They have all gone!" He then regretfully continued, "In the past when people fell sick, I never took care of them. Now that I am ill, there is no one to take care of me." The Buddha then consoled him, "Don't be sad. I'll look after you." So, Buddha cleaned away the dirt and gave him medicine. Although others had abandoned him, the Buddha still cared and protected him.

There is another story of Ksudrapanthaka in the sutra. Ksudrapanthaka was a very stupid person. He denounced the world together with his brother and they lived together in a monastery. One day, his brother kicked him out of the monastery. He stood outside the monastery and cried pitifully.

The Buddha approached him and asked him sympathetically, “Ksudrapanthaka, why are you crying?” “My brother said that I’m too stupid and won’t be able to learn Dharma. He won’t allow me to become a monk any more.” He cried more profusely upon finishing his answer. The Buddha then told him, “Dharma is mine. Don’t be afraid, follow and learn from me.” Although his brother had abandoned him callously, the Buddha still took him back warmly, stayed with him, and taught him Dharma patiently.

The great spirit of not abandoning any sentient being can only be performed with the Buddha’s profound compassion. Hence, the Buddha’s compassion is the true warmth in this world.

3. The presence of Buddha in this world provides us with refuge and gives us enormous strength. Once we take refuge in the Buddha, our mind is strengthened. The Buddha imparts an unimaginable strength for us. For instance, after learning the Dharma, we can bravely perform tasks which we once used to fail. The body and mind that are full of suffering become happy after learning the Dharma.

Buddhists who are away from home and have no one to look after them, may feel afraid sometimes. But once they visualize the virtue and the appearance of the Buddha, their fear will spontaneously be reduced. This is analogous to soldiers who generate great power to defeat their enemies once they see their flag standing tall at the battle field. Those who learn Dharma have a bright future. Even to the moment of death, they are still being protected and blessed by the

Buddha. Under conditions as such, what disappointment and horrifying sufferings will there be?

Loving kindness and compassion are the Buddha's special merit. He used his profound loving kindness and compassion to save and protect all sentient beings. This is the reason why we are still fervently commemorating him, even though he departed this world more than two thousand years ago. The Buddha always lives in our hearts. If the Buddha didn't give us great beneficence, who would still hold this great puja celebration for him today?

Loving kindness and compassion are the Buddha's special merits. Loving kindness is to provide happiness to all sentient beings, whereas compassion is to alleviate suffering from all sentient beings. Although loving kindness and compassion differ in certain degree, they are of the same principle. It is said by some that, loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha is the same as the humanity of Confucius and the love of Jesus Christ. But there are in fact great differences in the Buddha's love. These include:

1. The loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha's teachings are not bounded by strata or class. Someone asked me, "Buddhism mentions that people are suffering and are very pitiful. Does it mean that you will be free from being pitiful once you learn Dharma?" As a matter of fact, the distress that Buddhism mentions includes ourselves. We are all immersed in deep worry and misery. So, how can we say that we are not pitiful?

Realistically, only the Buddha who has realized the truth and released from the cycle of rebirth is the fortunate person full of perfect merits. If a sentient being does not pursue wisdom and end one's defilements, no one can say that oneself is not pitiful. The truth is that all sentient beings in the cycle of birth and death always suffer great sadness. These are the sentient beings who gain sympathy of the Buddha, and he compassionately protects and helps them all the time.

If we make an effort to cease our worries and gain wisdom, we can also achieve the ultimate enlightenment and get rid of our worldly sufferings. The Buddha treats all sentient beings equally, gives them equal status, and equal help. Loving kindness and compassion are not the god's privilege. Thus, we would not be pitiful forever. We should sincerely accept Buddha's help and, at the same time, help other sentient beings with a compassionate mind. Then, we can be free from suffering, obtain happiness and possess the great loving kindness and compassion as that of the Buddha.

2. The loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha are free from partiality. In real life, it is not easy for a mother who has several children to be impartial to all her children. But the Buddha treats all sentient beings as one beloved child. He regards the elderly as his parents, his cohorts as his siblings and the young as his children. Human beings are close to their beloved but distant from those disliked.

Human interactions show great 'close' and 'distant' distinction. Buddha shatters this close or distant concept and uses his profound compassion and wisdom to liberate all

sentient beings. The Buddha's teachings will protect and bless even people who have committed hideous crimes.

In Christianity, one benefits from the god if one believes in him. Conversely, if one does not believe in the god, one is guilty of being a non-believer, and will never ever get away from the hell. If this is the case, if I believed in the god now, but my ancestors were not Christians, does this mean that they would be in a hell forever? The cruelty of hating people for disagreeing with them is hard to accept. We should not accept this cruel and strict love.

The Buddha never gave up any sentient beings. He helped and blessed everyone. Even the sentient beings in the hell that he couldn't help at the present moment, he helped them once they were reborn in the human or heavenly realms. These sentient beings will eventually progress and attain Buddhahood. Therefore, the ubiquitous compassion and impartial spirit of saving of the Buddha's teachings cannot be compared to other kinds of love.

3. The loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha is given with both generosity and wisdom. Parents' love for their own children may sometimes lose its rationality. They always think good of their children. If they hear someone saying that their children are not good, they become very unhappy. In contrast, the loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha is full of rationality. His teachings have the ability to save us compassionately. But, why do we still grieve and suffer today? The door of Buddhism is wide open, but it is difficult even for the Buddha to help those with unwholesome karma.

Sentient beings have their own past good and evil karma. When their evil karma ripens, even the loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha's teachings cannot save them. The Buddha hopes that all sentient beings will stop doing evil and begin to do good. But sentient beings choose to commit evil and do not believe in the Law of Cause and Effect. How can the loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha save them? If we do good deeds according to the Law of Cause and Effect, the Buddha's principles would provide us with unimaginable protection and blessing.

If there is a slight chance, the Buddha will help us through the cause and effect of right action. Without our own right action, even the profound and infinite power and compassion of the Buddha cannot save us. The loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha's teachings to sentient beings is not due to the faith of sentient beings towards the Buddha. This principle is worthy of emphasis. If every action of sentient beings is good, then naturally they will receive good results. Their good nature will grow. Although they may not believe in the Buddha, the Buddha will still protect and bless them. Eventually, they will be attracted to the Buddha and take refuge in him. If this is not the case, it would be a violation of the Law of Cause and Effect. Even though the compassion and the aspiration of the Buddha's teachings to help is great, the karma of sentient beings is greater. Realizing this, we should understand that the compassion and aspiration of the Buddha is full of rationality.

There are many people who do not understand Dharma correctly. When they fall sick and cannot endure the suffering of

illness, they feel that it is useless to learn Dharma. This indicates that they do not have the right understanding of Dharma.

For example, there was a businessman who used various speculative and illegal means to swindle money out of somebody else. In the end, he failed and broke the laws. Under this circumstance, how could Buddha save him? Therefore, the Buddha's teachings protect and save all sentient beings by not violating the worldly Law of Cause and Effect. This shows rationality in loving kindness and compassion. In addition, The practice of loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha is complemented by rationality. Not only that it does not contradict the worldly Law of Cause and Effect, it also fully resembles the truth of the supramundane world as in the Buddha's state of mind. Therefore, the loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha's teachings is balanced in both compassion and wisdom. He is able to be compassionate yet knows the truth. He has wisdom, yet is able to protect and save all sentient beings.

Most religions in this world only talk about faith and belief. They are sentimentally inclined and tend to neglect reasoning. Those Theravadins who live in seclusion emphasize rationality, but lack the compassionate mind of saving others. The Buddha combined sentiment and rationality into one, and was not partial to either. This shows the equality of compassion and wisdom and the peak of ultimate realization. This is the most respectable part of Buddhist loving kindness and compassion.

4. The loving kindness and compassion of the Buddha's teachings provides us with thorough and complete help. To

treat an illness in this world, one may treat the cause of the illness or provide symptomatic treatment, i.e. to treat the head when there is headache or to treat the leg when there is leg pain. The latter may give temporary relief but it won't be able to eradicate the cause of the illness completely.

Similarly, there are two ways of alleviating human suffering in this world:

(a) Circumstantial help: for example, when we meet a poor person who does not have food and clothing, we can offer them food and clothing.

(b) Fundamental help: that is, to find out the reasons for their poverty. If the poverty is due to a lack of skills of making a living, then we could teach them the skills. If their poverty is due to annual floods, perhaps we could find ways to dredge the rivers. Only then could they be free from the suffering of their poverty.

Similar situations apply to the Dharma. The circumstantial help emphasizes giving (dana) etc., whereas the fundamental help stresses the importance of self effort. Our suffering can be solved by our own efforts. Therefore, a true practitioner of the Dharma will ultimately be free from suffering. If we don't practise diligently under the guidance of the Buddha but only think of getting protection and help from the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas, we will never get the fundamental help and will be in the cycle of suffering forever.

Human beings usually see things superficially and do not see the important part within. Once there was a person who

invited a friend to his house. The guest went into his kitchen and saw the chimney leaning towards the eaves. He then showed his concern by telling the host, “The chimney is too close to the eaves, it will catch fire easily. It is better to shape the chimney into a curve.” At that time, the host didn’t listen to the guest. Not long after that, the house unfortunately caught fire and part of the property was burned. The host was very sad about the fire but he also appreciated those people who had come to help extinguish the fire. However, he forgot about the guest who had advised him to shape the chimney into a curve. Some Buddhists believe in the Buddha and ask for his help and protection but neglect the fundamental ways of help taught by him and do not practise properly. This is the same as the ignorant host whose house caught on fire.

The learning of Dharma emphasises fulfilment of the teachings. It is only when we follow and practise the Dharma that we gain the endowment from the Buddha. Then all our difficulties will be solved perfectly. If one continues to do evil deeds, or is reluctant to follow the teachings of the Buddha, even though the Buddha is compassionately saving and protecting all sentient beings, he will not be able to assist us.

When we follow the teachings of the Buddha, we are also accepting his help. Indeed, we are deeply indebted to the kindness of the Buddha. I hope everyone who came to celebrate his birthday today would not forget the beneficence and kindness of the Buddha! [Recorded by Wei ci] (Translated by *Chen I-Chen*, edited by *Ke Rong*, proofread by *Shi Neng Rong*. (21-9-96))

A Discussion of The Three-Vehicles and One-Vehicle Practice

The concept of Three-Vehicles practice and One-Vehicle practice, has been the ground for much debate by Buddhist scholars. Is the practice of Three-Vehicles an expedient path or the ultimate path? Does the One-Vehicle mean the practice of Mahayana (greater vehicle) in the Three Vehicles? Does the One-Vehicle practice take us further than the Three-Vehicle practice? It appears that researchers have not come to any conclusions.

Recently I read the Xiu Xing Dao Di Sutra translated by Dharmaraksa, who is known as Dun Huang Bodhisattva. This author has also translated the Lotus Sutra (Saddharma pundarika Sutra). I found that there is an ancient interpretation of the One-Vehicle and the Three-Vehicle practice. It is simple and clear, and so today I would like to introduce you to it.

From the view point of aspiration, there are people who are weary of life and death, while others possess the great Bodhicitta (Bodhi-mind). Thus, the former will enter Nirvana, while the latter, Buddhahood. However, since the sentient beings' spiritual foundations differ, the Buddha taught us many different paths. Consequently there are the paths of the Three-Vehicles and the One-Vehicle. There are people who practise the greater vehicle and then degrade to the smaller vehicle and vice versa.

The Sravakas

There are two types of Sravakas. The first type are the people who practice the path of the smaller-vehicle and who never cultivate any bodhicitta. They learn and practise the Dharma from the Buddha for their own salvation. They cannot put up with a life that seems meaningless and without ending. Their only pressing problem is to be free from suffering. As long as they are at peace, they do not bother about anyone else. This is the attitude they have towards others. When they hear the worlds of the three realms, they shiver and scare.

Practitioners of this character are weary of not being able to be free from rebirth, and not being able to attain ultimate liberation. For these people, the Buddha condemned the suffering of rebirth, and praised Nirvana. He showed them the abode of the Enlightened Ones and guided them to understand the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha hoped that they could be free from suffering. Practitioners of this character believe that they have reached the ultimate path. They do not automatically progress to cultivate the path of the greater vehicle. The Buddha will have to wait for the moment when they are about to enter into Nirvana to show them the path of the greater-vehicle. They will then realize that they have not attained the ultimate practice and be encouraged to develop their bodhicitta.

The second type are those who have compassion but find it difficult to practice. They practise giving, the precepts, meditation, wisdom, and aim at freeing themselves from rebirth. They vigorously meditate and contemplate so that they may attain eternal Nirvana. However, they know that the attainment of arahantship is not the ultimate goal. Thus they

automatically want to follow the path of the Bodhisattva. They learn from the teachings of the Buddha and develop themselves to seek the greater path. They cultivate their great loving kindness and compassion and the Six Perfections, progressing towards the state of non attachment and emptiness. They may even choose to be reborn in order to teach and save sentient beings.

Pratyeka-Buddhas

Pratyeka-Buddhas are those who once developed themselves to cultivate their bodhicitta, but gave up the practice at a later stage. They had the bodhicitta, but forgot it and lost their aim. They may have also practised the Six Perfections, and meditated on the Buddha but became attached to the physical phenomena of the manifestations.

For sentient beings with spiritual foundation as such, the Buddha taught them the path of the Three-Vehicles. The fact that there was Buddha born in the world, these practitioners would lead a life of the hermit, live in a remote mountain cave or hut by themselves, contemplate and observe the existence of the myriad beings. They would realize that all existences are subject to causes and conditions and subsequently gain enlightenment.

The two types of practitioners above, have similar characteristics. They have initiated their bodhicitta, but did not progress further into its deeper context. They attach themselves too much to the well-being of the physical manifestations of the Buddha. However, eventually they may come back to seek the greater path. When they have ended

rebirth and entered Nirvana, the Buddha will show them “the path of Mahayana which integrates the Three-Vehicle”, and they will detach themselves from the realms of existence and Nirvana, and progress along the path of the great vehicle.

The Path of the Bodhisattvas

Bodhisattvas are practitioners who have cultivated their bodhicitta. Apart from those who later degenerate to become pratyeka-buddhas, we can further divide such practitioners into two groups.

1. There are those who will follow a gradual and progressive path. They realize that the three realms of existence are merely illusions and that all phenomena are void. They practice the Six Perfections vigorously and accumulate boundless merits. One step after another, they go forward. Eventually they possess skilful means, and gain enlightenment via expedient path. They attain the stage of no rebirth, and their position never recedes.

2. Then there are those who find instant attainment. They gain the stage of no rebirth, and do not recede as soon as they cultivate their bodhicitta. They immediately understand the immaterial personality and voidness of all myriad beings. They realize that all manifestations are void and are non-obtainable and non-distinguishable

The Awakened Mind Clings To Nothing

Does mental defilement pollute and constrain our mind? Because of our ignorance, we attach to our ego and possess-

ions. We are constrained by them. If we are free from attachments, and do not cling to any belongings, then we will be free from suffering. This is the ancient patriarch's teaching in guiding practitioners to the stage of no rebirth.

The teaching continues; "The wise ones observe the three realms of existence. They realize that the Five Skhandas are illusions. When they realize that there is no external object to cling to, they attain the state of no rebirth." There is no fast track nor short cut to the path of Bodhi. When the mind understands that the source of all is void, it's like suddenly seeing the light at the end of a tunnel. We do not feel in a state of gain or loss, past or present, when we attain this wisdom. The awakened mind clings to nothing. It understands the absolute truth and the void nature of all things.

It attains understanding of voidness, equality, and great wisdom. It does not attach itself any longer to the three realms of existence nor Nirvana. Nor will it attach itself to the fact that it is ferrying the suffering sentient beings over to the other shore of Nirvana. Neither will it attach itself to attaining Buddhahood. It will work vigorously to cultivate the Six Perfections. The awakened mind will utilize the expedient path to help all beings. These are the ones who have the Bodhisattva spiritual foundation. (According to the Nagarjuna Bodhisattva, this spiritual foundation can be further divided into three different levels.)

The aim of returning to one path allows us to concentrate on attaining the universal wisdom of understanding the truth of voidness. Generally speaking, cultivating the path of the greater-vehicle is equivalent to practising the One-Vehicle.

But the teachings of Buddha-Dharma propagate according to the minds and the conditions of the time and space. The classification of the Three Vehicle or One Vehicle depends on the practitioner's mind and aspiration. It is rather common for practitioners to classify which sutra or teaching is the greater vehicle, and which is the smaller vehicle. In fact, this is not the right way of classification. There are people who practice the Mahayana path, but who do not attain the Mahayana goal. Sometimes they may even deteriorate to follow other beliefs. This commonly happens.

The point is, practitioners should always examine their motivation of practice — is it for the sake of freeing themselves from rebirth? Or to ferry all sentient beings to attaining enlightenment? How do we practise the Dharma? Are we practising the path of relieving ourselves, or the path of the Six Perfections? What do we realize? Do we attach ourselves to phenomena and existence? Have our minds realized voidness and thus attained the stage of no rebirth? Eventually all sentient beings will become Buddhas and realize the great wisdom of the One-Vehicle. But before we come to that stage, we cannot classify ourselves as the practitioners of One-Vehicle simply because we are reading the One-Vehicle sutra or learning the One-Vehicle Dharma!

(Translated by Lim Yang, edited by Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rong. (6- 7-96))

Buddhism — The Middle Path

Among all religions, Buddhism is one that has withdrawn itself from theistic thought. To understand why this is so, we need to know about the other religions in India during the Buddha's time. During the period of the Vedas to the time of Upanishad, Brahmana influence was very extensive. The Brahmana believed in the mysterious creation of the universe. Theirs was a philosophy that believed in the existence of a time of cosmic origin. A god created mankind, and it was believed to be the origin of all things. It was called the God of Birth, the God of Prayer, the Brahman, or "I". Although the title for the creator varied over time, its implications were the same.

The Brahmana believed that the Brahman was the origin of the universe and of mankind. Spiritually, mankind had similar characteristics to the Mahabrahmanas, that was, a permanent, free, and happy "I" or ego. This was the nature of human life. This spiritual "I" of mankind was the same spirit as that in which adherents of the popular religions believed. The spirit had a close relationship with the god.

The Brahmana regarded the nature of the universe and of human life as permanent, free, and happy. In reality though, the Brahmanas knew that life in this world, be it normal activities, relationships in society, or even our own body and mind, always brings dissatisfaction. All phenomena are impermanent and constantly rising and falling, coming and going. Why did a permanent, free and happy existence create such an impermanent and uncomfortable world? This was the great contradiction. However, the Brahmana's intelligence seems to

have been deluded by their emotion. They ignored the contradiction, and only thought of ending their suffering in order to regain the permanently blissful state of the Brahman/god. Hence, the theory of liberation arose.

About the Buddha's time, there was a great change in Indian thought and ideology. The culture of the Brahmana, which originated in north-west India near the Five Rivers, became most popular near the upper stream of the Ganges River, at a place called Kuru. When their ideas travelled east along the Ganges River, the eastern countries such as Magadha and Vashali, which were influenced by the culture of the West, opposed the teachings of the Brahmana. The old religions in Western India were shaken, and the new religions, with various groups of ascetics in Eastern India were very extreme, and this created many doubts among the people. During this transition period where the new Western and old Eastern ideologies met, the Buddha was born. He introduced a new religion to the era.

The Buddha incorporated the theories of rebirth and of liberation into his teachings. But the Buddha denied the Brahmana's imaginative theistic theory, and set his own foundations upon an intelligent analysis of reality. He made a thorough change in both theory and practice from the old religions. Although the cycle of life and death, and the attainment of liberation in Nirvana were theories that were accepted by Indian society at that time, the problems lay in the questions of why was there rebirth and how could one be liberated. The Buddha gave wise answers to these questions. This was the teaching of the "Middle Path". The "Middle Path" distinguished the Buddha's Teachings from other religions.

“Middle Path” may be misunderstood as equivocal. In fact Buddhism is not as such. “Middle” means neutral, upright, and centered. It means to investigate and penetrate the core of life and all things with an upright, unbiased attitude. In order to solve a problem, we should position ourselves on neutral, upright and unbiased ground. We investigate the problem from various angles, analyze the findings, understand the truth thoroughly, and find a reasonable conclusion.

The Middle Path in Buddhism does not mean having a biased view or superficial understanding only. The “Middle Path” represents a distinct theory and way of Buddhist practice that is not common to other religions. Buddhism is a religion with high moral values. It lays great emphasis on human thought and action in dealing with the natural environment, society or individual problems. It is concerned with the relationship between thoughts and behavior, and the relationship between behavior and its consequences.

By observing the activities of mankind in real life, the Buddha mastered the principles of human behavior. He then taught the two characteristics of the Middle Path: The Middle Path of Dependent Origination and the Noble Eightfold Path. The Law of Dependent Origination explains the process of human activity. The Noble Eightfold Path shows the way of practice that enables one to uplift oneself.

*“The Tathagatha avoids the two extremes
and talks about the Middle Path.*

*What this is, that is; this arises, that arises.
Through ignorance*

*volitional actions or
karmic formations are conditioned.
Through birth, decay, death, lamentation,
pain etc. are conditioned.
When this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases.
Through the complete cessation of ignorance,
volitional activities or karmic formations cease.
Through the cessation of birth, death, decay,
sorrow, etc. cease.”*

(Samyuktagama, Chapter 12)

“What this is, that is; this arising, that arises” is the principle of the Law of Dependent Origination; the Conditioned Genesis that says that, “Through ignorance volitional actions or karma-formations are conditioned” is the content of the Law of Dependent Origination.

The Law of Dependent Origination based on the Middle Path avoids attachment to the two extremes. This can be clearly seen in the Samyuktagama. Based on the Theory of Dependent Origination, in Chapter 12 the sutra says that “*It is not one nor different*”. It also says that “*It is not permanent nor discontinuous.*” In Chapter 13 it says, “*It is not coming nor going.*” In chapter 7 it says, “*It neither exists nor not exists.*” (This is the “Eighth Negation of the Middle Path” in the Madhyamika Sastra, an abstract from the Samyuktagama). The basic principle of the Law of Dependent Origination is, “What this is, that is; from this arising, that arises; when this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases.” It explains the creation, cessation and existence of all phenomena and all things.

How does human suffering happen? The Buddha said it is not something that happens without any cause. It also does not arise because of perverted causes created by a god or Brahmana. It has its own causes. All things exist in accordance with the Law of Cause and Effect. When there is a cause there will be an effect. When causes exist, effects exist. The rising and existence of things are determined by causes and conditions. This is why the Buddha says “what this is (cause), that is (effect); this arising, that arises”. This is the Circulation Process of the Law of Dependent Origination. It explains the existence of worldly phenomena.

We may also see this formula in its reverse order. According to the Law of Dependent Origination, in order to end suffering, we must stop its causes. Thus, “When this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases.” When there is a cause there will be an effect; when there is perverted thought, there will be wrong behavior, and this will certainly result in evil consequences, i.e. sufferings. On the contrary, when there is no cause, there will be no effect. Once the perverted thought is corrected, wrong behavior will stop and sufferings will also cease.

All things arise due to causes and conditions. As causes and conditions are impermanent and will cease one day, all things will also cease correspondingly. When there is rising, there will be falling; when there is existence, there will be extinction. The rising and existence of things has its natural tendency towards cessation and extinction. It is like a wave; it comes and goes. Thus, when one sees the truth of “what this is, that is; this arising, that arises”, one should also see the truth of “when this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases”. The Law of Dependent Origination pointed out the

possibility of ending worldly suffering. It shows the way of liberation that corresponds to the Law of Cause and Effect.

*“When one is born, one will die.
One who admires high status will fall one day.”*

This is the natural Law of Cause and Effect. It is also an inner implication of the Law of Dependent Origination. It can be called the Cessation Process of the Law of Dependent Origination.

The two complementary processes active in the Law of Dependent Origination, of the Middle Path, are two processes that are in reverse or conserve sides of each other. They explain the Laws of Circulation and Cessation. This rise and fall of causes and effects is still a worldly principle, and an explanation for superficial phenomena. Although it was not the final truth, it is from this that the ultimate truth was realized. The ultimate truth was drawn from the empty nature of the Law of Dependent Origination. Thus, the Sutra says,

*“Tell the Bhikku, the ultimate truth of emptiness,
realized by the Enlightened Ones,
corresponds to the Worldly Law.”*

(Samyuktagama, Chapter 12)

By understanding these two processes of the Law of Dependent Origination, we may see the truth of emptiness, which is the ultimate truth. Chapter 13 of “The sutra on the Ultimate Truth of Emptiness” in the Samyuktagama says:

*“When the eyes see, the scene comes from nowhere.
When they shut, it goes nowhere.”*

*Thus the eyes see unreality.
All that arises will be destroyed....
except the truth of the Worldly Law.
The Worldly Law says that
what this is, that is; this arising, that arises.”*

Through the rising and falling of the Worldly Law of Dependent Origination, the Buddha explained the First (ultimate) Truth. The ultimate truth averted attachment to either existence or non-existence; to permanence or change. This is similar to the “True Jhana” (The Vipassana that leads to the realization of the First Truth) explained by Katyayana:

*“To contemplate the unreal nature of all things,
there is nothing real.*

*Various names arise due to the coincidence of
causes and conditions which are unreal.*

*When one sees the truth of emptiness,
one will realize that there is no Dharma
(the perverted view of existence)
and non-Dharma
(the perverted view of extinction).”*

(Samyuktagama)

All Dharma is unreal, for it is mainly the coincidence of causes and conditions. These are worldly (mundane) views. Through this worldly understanding we can see that it is conditioned. The Enlightened Ones see and realize the Truth of Emptiness. They relieve themselves from attachment to both the existence and non-existence of Dharma, and hence realize the Ultimate Truth. This is why the Buddhas always

preach about emptiness, hoping that beings may be detached from perverted views. The Buddha also said,

*“If we can see the truth
of the causes of worldly sufferings,
we will not be attached to the view of nothingness.
If we can see the truth of cessation in the world,
we will not be attached to worldly existence.
By avoiding the two extremes,
the Tathagatha teaches us
the Middle Path, which is,
what this is, that is; this arising, that arises...”*
(Chapter 12, Samyuktagama)

When worldly people see existence, they think that there is a real existence. When they see cessation, they think that it has really ceased. This is the perverted view of the two extremes. By compassion the Enlightened Ones, when they see Dharma arising, know that it is not nothingness, while at the same time not becoming attached to it as something real. When they see the Dharma disappear, they do not become attached to its extinction nor at the same time do they think that the extinction is real and means nothing at all. This is because, according to the Law of Dependent Origination, when there is a cause there will be an effect. When the cause ceases, the effect ceases. The Dharma is alive. It can exist or cease, rise or fall. If it is something real that has a permanent identity, then it should not cease and become extinct. If it is nothing, then it should not rise and exist. The Dharma rises and ceases, it can exist and become extinct. If we investigate the core of all things, we will realize that everything is conditioned and has

empirical names. Things have no permanent identity, existence, extinction, rise or fall. Their nature is empty and silent.

Thus, when we talk about emptiness, we do not deny the rising, falling, existence and extinction of all phenomena. In fact, emptiness explains the truth of rising, falling, existence and extinction. This is the main teaching of the Tathagatha. Do not misunderstand Circulation and Cessation as two separate identities. From these Laws of Circulation and Cessation, we can see the creation and extinction, rising and falling of all phenomena and hence realize the truth of emptiness in all things. This is the Principle of Emptiness of the Middle Path, the ultimate explanation of the Middle Path. It is also the special characteristic of Buddhism — the Truth of Emptiness and of Dependent Origination. This is also “the immediate moment is empty” that is always mentioned by Mahayana scholars.

We should not think that this is only an old saying. We should know that this is the part of Dharma that is beyond all worldly knowledge. The worldly religions assume a god, the creator of the Universe; and the real characteristics of “I” as perfect, permanent, and happy. With such philosophy, their faith tends to be emotional. The Buddha emphasized reality and explained that all things are impermanent, and in constant change. There is nothing that rises but never ceases. There is nothing that is permanently unchanged. All things rise and cease due to causes and conditions. There is no independent identity that can exist without other conditions. The permanent, independent god that most worldly people believe in is denied by Buddhism.

From the Law of Dependent Origination, the Buddha expanded the truth of emptiness and articulated the Three Universal Characteristics. As the sutra says,

*“All volitional actions are empty.
There is no law that is permanent and unchangeable.
There is no I nor mine.”*

(Samyuktagama, Chapter 11)

As all things have the nature of emptiness, there is thus no law that is permanent and unchangeable. There is no ego that is permanent and independent. With continuously changing phenomena, the existence of all things is a web of interrelationships. Understanding the Law of Dependent Origination, we can realize the Truth of Impermanence and Egolessness and hence the nature of the emptiness of all things. Emptiness also implies Nirvana, that is the renunciation of the perverted view of permanency and ego, leading to the realization of liberation. Thus, the sutra says,

*“One who thinks of impermanence
will understand the truth of ego-lessness.
The Enlightened One
lives in the state of ego-lessness,
renounces self-conceit
and hence progresses towards liberation and Nirvana.”*

(Samyuktagama, Chapter 10)

To realize the Three Universal Characteristics of impermanence, ego-lessness and Nirvana from the standpoint of Emptiness in Dependent Origination and on the Middle Path, is the basic teaching of Buddhism. Often people tend to

become attached to worldly phenomena, and think that only the phenomena that change are impermanent and that the origin of things is still permanent. They think that egolessness means that “I” has no real identity; that it is only an image formed by a co-operation of factors and that there is no “I” but that Dharma is still real and does exist nevertheless.

The original idea of the Agama Sutra is to indicate that both impermanence and egolessness mean emptiness. This is the nature of Dharma. The nature of Dharma is emptiness. It is not permanent. Thus, the Dharma is ever-changing. If the Dharma has a permanent identity and is not empty, why do phenomena change all the time? It is because of the nature of emptiness in Dharma that ego is unobtainable. If there was a real Dharma that existed permanently, whether in physical or spiritual form, it could become a place for the ego to reside.

*“The eyes (and all senses) are empty;
The law of permanency and change is empty;
I and mine are both empty.
Why is it so?
Because this is the nature of things.”*

(Samyuktagama, Chapter 9)

Isn't it very clear that the main theme in the Agama Sutra is to explain the concept of impermanence and ego-lessness from the standpoint of emptiness? Emptiness is the nature of all things. However, most people cannot see the truth and become ignorant and perverted, and they become attached to permanency and egotism and hence become entangled in the cycle of life and death.

From the rising and falling, existence and extinction of conditioned phenomena, one should eliminate the idea of an absolute, independent, permanent identity. Once we are able to realize the nature of emptiness, we will be liberated. To realize the nature of emptiness through the understanding of Dependent Origination is a penetration to the core of things. It is not a superficial understanding only. This is the truth of the Buddha's explanation of the Circulation and Cessation of human life. It can be used to identify our own religion, and to distinguish it from the other religions. This is the speciality of Buddhism.

Besides, there is another type of Middle Path. This is the Noble Eightfold Path that emphasizes good practice. The Noble Eightfold Path also corresponds to the Law of Dependent Origination. It does not explain why the deluded life can be liberated and does not talk about "What this is, that is; this is arising, therefore that arises." It tells us about the Middle Path that those who wish to be liberated should follow. It is a path that avoids both the extremes of suffering and of luxury.

Some heretics in India during Buddha's time encouraged extreme luxury and desire. They regarded extreme enjoyment as the purpose of life. Others concentrated on meaningless asceticism and tortured themselves. All these things do not help, nor do they bring us liberation. It was to counsel avoidance of these extreme behaviors that the Buddha taught us about the Middle Path. This is also a theme that is commonly found in the Agama Sutra. The Noble Eightfold Path teaches us to be normal and reasonable in our speech,

action, emotion, determination, ways of living and so on. Everything we do should be fair and right. This is the Middle Path.

All Dharma is conditioned. All Dharma is empty by nature. There is no exception rightness of one's behavior whilst following the Noble Eightfold Path. How does such right behavior whilst following the Noble Eightfold Path coincide with the nature of the emptiness of Dependent Origination?

One should know that “practice” is also conditioned. In the Parable of the Seven Carts, in Chapter 2 of the Middle Agama (Madhyamagama), King Prasenajit departed from Sravasti. It was a long journey. However, the King was able to reach his destination within one day. This was because he set stops on the way. At every stop there was a new, fresh and healthy horse. Thus, when he reached a stop, he did not need to rest. He changed to a new cart and horse and started his journey again. Hence he was able to reach his destination in a very short time. The travel from one place to another was not the hard work of one cart and one horse only. It was the co-operative effort of many carts and many horses. It was the co-operation of many causes and conditions.

To practice Buddhism is a similar journey, from the time we begin to practice, to the time of final attainment. We cannot rely on one Dharma only. We must rely on the co-operation of many Dharmas, many causes and conditions. Since the ways of practice depend on the coincidence of favorable causes and conditions, they are thus also empty in their nature.

In the Raft Parable the Buddha says,

“We should let go of the Dharma, and the non-Dharma “.

“Dharma” refers to moral behavior. “Non-Dharma” refers to immoral behavior. In the process of practising the Middle Path one should first use moral behavior (Dharma) to correct immoral behavior (non-Dharma). This Dharma that emphasizes moral values arises due to causes and conditions. It is empty in nature. If we cling to a perverted view, becoming attached to images and things as real, then we will not realize the nature of emptiness and we will not be liberated. The Sata Sastra says,

*“We should first rely on merits
in order to get rid of sin.
Secondly, we should rely on equanimity
and let the merits go.
Then we can attain the state of
formlessness or Nirvana.”*

Chapter 7 in the Samyuktagama says,

*“If I feel that nothing is obtainable,
then there is no sin.
If I am attached to form (and to other things),
then it is sinful.....
If one knows this,
then one will not be attached to anything
in this mundane world”.*

Sin means defilement and obstacles. As long as we constantly become attached to various things as real, we will not see the truth of emptiness. This is an obstacle on the way

towards liberation. Therefore it is clear that we should not become attached to the merits of good deeds, as these are also empty in nature. The Nagarjuna Bodhisattva once said, “*Merit is like a hot, burning gold coin, although it is valuable, it is untouchable*”.

Thus, the nature of the Noble Eightfold Path is also empty. It coincides with the wisdom (theory) of the Middle Path. Under the truth of emptiness, theory and practice merge into one.

The Middle Path that emphasizes emptiness and Dependent Origination avoids perverted views. The Noble Eightfold Path avoids the two extremes of suffering and luxury, and emphasizes non-attachment. These two main themes of the Middle Path supplement each other and lead us to perfection. If there was only theory to explain the Law of Dependent Origination without the emphatic proof of personal practice and experience, the Path could not fulfil religious faith in helping followers disentangle themselves from suffering, thereby attaining ultimate freedom.

On the other hand, if the Path only taught us the ways of practice without theoretical or intelligent guidance, it might be defeated by our lack of wisdom, and we might become a theistic follower. The Noble Eightfold Path of the Middle Path fulfils human religious expectations by encouraging moral practice. In addition, it has the intelligent guidance of the Law of Dependent Origination and of Emptiness. The Middle Path emphasizes the unity of wisdom and faith. This is the special characteristic of Buddha’s teaching. (*Translated by Shi Neng Rong, edited by Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rong. (6-7-96)*)

The Two Distinctive Characteristics of Buddhism

Buddhism is not limited to the two salient characteristics discussed here. The purpose of highlighting these two characteristics is to illuminate the difference between Buddhism and other religions or worldly philosophies. Generally speaking, practices in Buddhism may include following the Buddha; having faith in the Buddha and Bodhisattvas because of their virtues, wisdom, loftiness and greatness; and understanding the profound teachings of the Buddha Dharma. However, these Buddhists practices are just aimed at showing us the path of Buddha Dharma, which can lead us to understanding the significance of life, and ways of elevating ourselves, grounding our lives in true morality. In following the way of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we can attain the state of supreme realization.

Efficacious religions, irrespective of their relative merits and demerits, can guide us to a smoother and more expansive state of being. Religion thereby becomes an essential part of every human life. We have to be positive about this fundamental facility for acquiring actual benefits from religion and honor the essence and values expressed in humanity's religious variety.

The Unification of Faith (s. sraddha) and Wisdom (s. prajna)

People are of varying natures and types and thus have different temperaments, worries, demands and passions. In

general, one who has stronger feeling and sentiment is more likely to be compassionate and is more capable of developing strong faith in one's belief; while an intellectual person tends to have greater powers of discernment and lucid comprehension. The biased development of either faith or intellect results in protracted, cumulative, negative and harmful effects. For example, if an emotional person has strong faith without counter-balancing wisdom, he may sink into ignorance and superstition due to his fanatical faith. The lop-sided attitude of discriminating against rationality and wisdom is not acceptable in Buddhism. On the other hand, if we over-emphasize rationality and doubting everything, we will lose our faith and belief. This induces us to ignore moral values and to deny the existence of Universal Truth, saints and sages. One would thereby finally become anti-religious. Such perversity would lead us astray and prevent us from establishing truly moral behavior, eventually threatening the very fabric of our society! Thus, there is a saying in Buddhism,

*“Faith without wisdom will develop ignorance;
wisdom without faith will develop a perverted view.”*

Buddhism advocates the unification of faith and wisdom. How can we bring faith and wisdom together? Is it possible to unify them? In the first place, we need to understand the Buddhist perspective of faith and wisdom. Faith is characterized by the sentiments of respect and of inspiration by an ideal. Faith is a common experience amongst the followers of any religion. Faith without intellectual comprehension and discrimination cannot be regarded as a rational faith. Faith in Buddhism is developed through

contemplation and investigation so that the characteristics of truthfulness, righteousness, and efficacy of the ideal in which one develops faith, can be understood and revealed. This is the way a Buddhist develops faith and respect toward Sakyamuni Buddha. Sakyamuni is understood rationally to have existed in this world as a historical figure. He has supreme wisdom and great virtues and he has boundless compassion working towards the liberation of sentient beings. In Buddhism, faith is rooted in rational intellectual comprehension. As faith is strengthened and sharpened by the assessment of the intellect, it is further confirmed by the direct insight of wisdom. When understanding of the Buddha Dharma is developed further, faith becomes more intense. This faith will motivate us to elevate ourselves and ground our lives in true morality. It will enable our lives, guided by the ideals to which we have responded with faith. Faith is not merely an appreciation of the ideal but a desire to move towards it.

Although some intellectuals possess a vast knowledge of Buddhism, and have strong reasoning ability, they commonly lack faith in Buddhism. Therefore, Dharma can not take firm root and grow in their hearts. Because of this, Dharma cannot really benefit them. Studying Buddhism in this barren manner contradicts the teaching of Buddhism because the Buddhist way of life necessarily contains the element of faith. When we have confidence, we will be able to purify our minds and free them from defilements i.e. greed (s. raga), hatred (s. pratigha) and ego-conceptualization (s. atmamana). Confidence is like an alum; it purifies muddy water. Similarly, a strong faith will purify your mind. The reality of life is full of distress and misery, but faith can transform a mental state of emptiness and anguish into joy, peace, calm and contentment. This is like an

innocent child who wanders around the streets, lost, hungry, thirsty, cold, worried and not knowing what to do. While he is anxious and filled with despair, he suddenly finds his mother. He will immediately feel secure and happy because he deeply believes that he will obtain food, warm clothes and the consolation of his mother's love. Similarly, a life of faith is filled with joy, peace, security and contentment.

If our faith is not developed through open thinking and reasoning, then we are just following what others lead us to believe. A blind religious faith becomes fanatical when it is carried away by wild enthusiasm and the deprecation of wisdom. Buddhist faith develops through the cultivation of wisdom. Since it espouses a faith wedded to wisdom, Buddhism avoids the viciousness of that religious fanaticism which espouses faith devoid of deeper understanding and divorced from wisdom. The development of Buddhist faith involves several stages. The evolving faith displayed by some Buddhists does not therefore necessarily reveal the true, ultimate meaning of faith in the Buddha Dharma.

The most outstanding characteristic of wisdom is free thought and its operative functions include understanding and cognition. The wisdom of humanity extends through space to the farthest reaches of the Universe. Our knowledge is continuously changing, improving and progressing. Therefore traditions may not necessarily be reliable. This is due to the fact that when humans develop knowledge acquired through their own perceptions of the external world, much unreliable information is accumulated in the process. Such empirical knowledge is vitiated because the pieces of information from which it is derived are in turn derived from sensory

perceptions of the external world, and both the ordinary mind and the external world are comprised of, and compromised by, a certain degree of illusion. For example, when we are perceiving the external world we cannot know our minds at the same moment. Therefore, we are tempted by the external world and our minds are controlled by the material world. Since we lose control of our minds, greed, hatred and ignorance arise. In Buddhism it is acknowledged that the knowledge gained by human beings is far superior to that gained by other beings. We humans almost try to know everything, yet we do not know ourselves. This is a cognitive bias of ours. When we try to understand the external world we lack the ability to have a complete overview of it. Everything in the phenomenal world is impermanent and constantly changing, but we are always subjectively inferring about the nature of objects that this is their absolute existence and that they will be as they are forever. As a result, human knowledge generally harbors many illusions.

Some people think that Truth lies outside the mind, and they therefore seek it in the external world. Others consider that there is an external metaphysical entity which properly serves as their religious ideal, and the focus of their faith. In fact, all the external worlds are like mirages, unreal and constantly changing. The wisdom which Buddhism teaches starts with self-contemplation and an experience of insight. Truth cannot be simplistically derived from observation of the external world. Rather, Truth requires us to understand ourselves and to grasp our inner nature. Just as a person who has sharp senses and a bright and discerning mind does not need to seek help from others in order to clearly comprehend Truth, we should develop from the inside out so that we can

project this luminous understanding and contemplation of ourselves into the dimness of the external world. This is the only way to unify wisdom and faith.

In fact, wisdom and faith are not really in opposition to one another. Conflict will only arise if we practice prejudice against either wisdom or faith. Wisdom without faith is biased towards that which is material. This positivistic emphasis is inimical to religion. Faith without wisdom is biased towards a sentimental faith which is inimical to reason. Buddha Dharma is a unification of wisdom and faith; a faith which is grounded in wisdom, and a wisdom which emphasizes human life and self-effort. Faith is thereby kept away from illusion. Wisdom and faith are mutually grounded. If we can understand, experience and practice this path, life will be filled with infinite brightness and cheer.

The Cultivation of Faith and Wisdom

The cultivation of faith involves several stages. Although the depth of practice involved in each stage is different, the common purpose of all the various stages is ultimately the unification of faith and wisdom. These stages include:

1. Faith without prejudice — This is faith based on understanding devoid of any prejudice. Such an open faith is important because if one has a prejudiced mind it will make it difficult to understand others' views, or to accept the Truth. For a simple example, suppose A and B did not get along well. If B makes some mistakes and A then gives B some honest advice, not only will B reject A's advice but he will further misconstrue it as malicious slander against him. Conversely, if

A and B do not have any prejudice against each other, or if their relationship is very close, B will be willing to follow any of A's advice even if A uses strong language in expressing it to him. Therefore, one can only learn and have faith in the Truth if one first frees oneself from prejudice. This is the way to develop and to purify confidence and faith. (This is consistent with the first of the three ways that Buddhism teaches that one may acquire wisdom i.e. by listening and learning (s. srutamayiprajna).)

2. Faith with profound understanding — After establishing faith without prejudice, one is required to develop a profound understanding of the valid grounds for faith, and by such reasonable means to acknowledge its authenticity. The deeper the understanding of the valid grounds for faith, the stronger the faith that will arise. The valid grounds for faith are learnt and authenticated by listening, by seeing, and deepened by incisive thought in order to gain a systematic understanding. (This correlates with Buddhist teaching on the second of the three ways to acquire wisdom i.e. by thinking (s. cintamayiprajna).)

3. Faith with endeavor — After exercising one's reasoning and coming to understand the grounds for faith, one will make every endeavor to achieve it. The process is analogous to oil mining. One must first examine the ground and be very certain that petroleum can be found under a certain spot. One then starts to drill an oil-well at that spot, persevering until its riches are brought to the surface. (This corresponds to the third of the three ways to acquire wisdom i.e. by meditation and contemplation (s. bhavanamayiprajna).)

4. Faith with realization — By continuous practice and contemplation, one comes to realize that there is no difference between the ultimate truth and what one believes in beginning. It is like a miner who procures a large quantity of petroleum by virtue of his effort in drilling oil wells. (This corresponds to the realization of prajna.)

In Buddhism, faith is not antagonistic towards wisdom, and conversely wisdom is accomplished only in consort with faith and confidence. The ultimate achievement is the unification of wisdom and faith. The meaning of faith in Buddhism is thus very different from its meaning in other religions.

Wisdom in Buddhism is attained through the mental culture of self-contemplation. Since the main issue in the accumulation of true knowledge is the quest to learn all about human nature, we can consequently understand the Truth only by understanding our lives and by grasping the wisdom of life. We may then clearly contemplate the Universe and the phenomenal world, thereafter being able to penetrate to the Truth. If one believes that wisdom is to be gained through the external world, one can only arrive at a superficial knowledge of the Truth and cannot dwell in the heart of Dharma.

In Buddhism, the cultivation of wisdom does not hinder faith. For example, through His own exertions the Buddha realized that there are infinite number of different planes of existence, and that the ranks of sentient beings are likewise limitless. When science is not well developed, people always doubt this. But in these modern times, by using scientific instruments, we can prove that there are indeed an infinite number of planets in this universe. As science further

develops, it may become even easier to prove the correctness of the teachings of Buddha, which of course will help further reinforce faith. On the other hand, the cultivation of faith does not hinder wisdom either. We have faith in the teachings of the Buddha, and at the same time we can easily be learning the reality of such profound teachings as dependent origination, impermanence, non-self etc., and experiencing the application of these Buddhist teachings in our daily lives. The teaching of the unification of wisdom and faith is a distinctive characteristic and an emphatic feature of Buddhism. When we make a relevant comparison with other religions we can see that in this regard Buddhism is unique.

The Union of Compassion and Wisdom

A common saying in Buddhism, “to develop and practise both compassion and wisdom,” indicates that compassion and wisdom are inseparable and integral elements of the path of Buddha Dharma. The contents and functions of ‘loving kindness and compassion’ are similar to those of ‘benevolence’ in Chinese thought, and of ‘love’ in Western philosophy. However, loving kindness and compassion do not entirely and exclusively consist of sympathy and caring. They must also move in parallel with the Truth. Therefore, boundless compassion cannot be accomplished without wisdom. Moralities originate from loving kindness and compassion and they cannot be established without these two elements. Their presence constitutes the main criterion for moral evaluation. Whether or not an action is truly ethical depends on whether there are elements of loving kindness and compassion present amongst the actor’s motives.

Compassion is having sympathy for someone. For example, when we know that someone is facing difficulties, the feelings of care and concern for them will arise naturally. This will help motivate us to make every effort to assist and to comfort them. This is the practice of loving kindness and compassion. However, most of us only direct our loving kindness and compassion toward our loved ones, but do not extend loving kindness and compassion to other beings lying outside the circle of our affections. For instance, parents are normally very worried and anxious when their children are sick, and they are willing to suffer for their children. For most of us, this loving kindness and compassion is directed only to our own children and cannot be extended to the children of others. This is due to the fact that our love is reserved for a small number of people and does not go beyond this limitation. There is a saying in Confucianism,

*“to take care of one’s own aged parents first,
then extend the same care to aged people in general;
to take care of one’s own young children,
then extend the same care to young people in general.”*

Buddha teaches us to cultivate perfect equanimity as the rightly mediate state of mind in which we can further develop and extend our loving kindness and compassion.

In order to cultivate boundless compassion we need to deepen our understanding of the true meaning of life by applying the wisdom attained through contemplation. For instance, all-encompassing compassion has its own lucid logic when we see the facts of our lives from the luminous perspective of the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination.

Consider how we human beings gregariously live together, and how the necessities to support our individual lives are provided through the efforts of other people in all areas of society, such as scholars, farmers, workers and merchants. Our lives and properties are protected by our governments and their laws. The feeling of sympathy for someone will of course arise when we properly understand that we are mutually dependent, and complementary to each other. Furthermore, in view of the continuum of endless rebirths, in past lives we have had an infinite number of parents and relatives who have now been reborn and who surround us in our present lives. Therefore, we should requite the debt of love we owe our parents in this life as well as the debt we owe our parents from former lives. According to the Sutra,

“All men are my fathers; all women are my mothers.”

Our loving kindness and compassion should therefore not be limited to only one family, one particular race, one country, or just one species (viz. mankind), but should extend to all sentient beings in the Universe. This is the main reason why Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes vegetarianism and abstention from killing. In Buddhism, loving kindness and compassion are not purely and simply expressions of humane generosity. They also justly requite our very real indebtedness to others. The union of wisdom and compassion thus coincides with the Truth exemplified in the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination with its grand vision of universal interdependence and interrelationship.

Even though most religions do emphasize universal love devoid of discrimination and prejudice, the content of that

love still tends to be skewed toward egocentricity. For example, the sectarian slogans

“Long live the believers; down with the unbelievers.”

and

*“He who believes
will have life everlasting and
he who does not believe
will be cast into the lake of fire forever”*

both exhibit a fiercely monopolistic exclusiveness. All outsiders have to be destroyed. Behind this inbred, partisan ‘love’ one can see that there lies a culture of cruelty and hatred! Compassion in Buddhism is extended equally to both enemies and loved ones. Although we may not at the moment be able to give the Dharma to our enemies, or to those who do not believe and will not accept it, we may be able to help them later when favorable karmic conditions for presenting the gift have matured.

According to the universal Law of Cause and Effect, we reap what we sow, and there is no higher authority who wilfully rewards deeds that are good and punishes those that are evil. It is a similar situation to a person walking up a staircase, who may fall down if he is not careful enough, and thus will be responsible for any painful outcome. According to Buddhism, wholesome deeds naturally produce pleasant results and unwholesome actions naturally produce unpleasant consequences. Those who do not understand the working of this natural Law of Cause and Effect may think that the

teaching regarding it is mere utilitarianism. In fact, the fundamental criterion in Buddhism for distinguishing wholesome from unwholesome actions, by reasonable means, is the character of their impact upon human relationships. Those actions which are in accord with the law of morality, and which will generate good results, are regarded as wholesome. Those actions that are unreasonable and harmful to ourselves and to others, and which sow seeds for a bitterly fruitful harvest of suffering, are regarded as unwholesome. This is not mere utilitarianism, but is the natural law by which our society necessarily abides. Such natural law can motivate and encourage people to act positively and to promote the life we truly share, honoring the morality which truly serves our common life.

Most religions in general lack wisdom, and therefore the love they preach is limited. In Buddhism, wisdom is the core of the teaching, and compassion is the core of the practice. Boundless compassion can only be found amongst those who have attained ultimate wisdom. As the saying in the Sutra,

*“The heart of Buddha
is boundless loving kindness and compassion.”*

Since Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes the characteristics of the Buddha’s land and helping of all sentient beings, these practices of the Dharma cannot be accomplished if one lacks great compassion.

Human beings are of differing habitual characteristics. Those who emphasize wisdom tend to be eccentric and usually are not keen to associate with other people. Those who are

sentimental tend to be more egocentric. Both of these personality types cannot be regarded as the ideal models for approaching life. In Buddhism, the right purpose for life is grounded upon the unification of wisdom and faith, and upon the union of compassion and wisdom. Faith, wisdom and compassion constitute the three core teachings in Mahayana Buddhism. By cultivating these three components in a balanced way and by following a proper sequence in our practices we may ennoble ourselves and progress from our original state of limited personhood to the final achievement of supreme Buddhahood.

Our life span is only a few short decades. We should make good use of our precious time, and seize the opportunity life represents. Making this Dharma our ideal, and our perfect template for living, hence dignify our lives whilst ascending the pinnacle of their potential. [Recorded by Yin Hai] (Translated by *Tan Beng Tiong*, edited by *Ke Rong*, proofread by *Shi Neng Rong*. (5-10-96))

Sunyata (Emptiness) in the Mahayana Context

1. Sunyata (Emptiness) is the profound meaning of the Mahayana Teaching.

Two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha was able to realise “emptiness” (s. sunyata). By doing so he freed himself from unsatisfactoriness (s. dukkha). From the standpoint of enlightenment, sunyata is the reality of all worldly existences (s. dharma). It is the realisation of Bodhi — Prajna. From the standpoint of liberation, sunyata is the skilful means that disentangle oneself from defilement and unsatisfactoriness. The realisation of sunyata leads one to no attachment and clinging. It is the skilful means towards enlightenment and also the fruit of enlightenment.

There are two ways for us to understand this concept of sunyata in the Mahayana context. One way is to try to understand the explanation about its true nature. The other way is the realisation through practice. What we are going to discuss now is about its true nature.

Mahayana teachings have always considered that the understanding of sunyata is an attainment which is extremely difficult and extraordinarily profound.

For example, in the Prajna Sutra it says “That which is profound, has sunyata and non-attachment as its significance. No form nor deeds, no rising nor falling, are its implications.”

Again in the Dvadasanikaya Sastra (composed by Nagarjuna, translated to Chinese by Kumarajiva A.D. 408) it says: “The greatest wisdom is the so-called sunyata.”

This sunyata, no creation, calmness and extinction (s. nirvana) is of a profound significance in the Mahayana teachings. Why do we see it as the most profound teaching? This is because there is no worldly knowledge, be it general studies, science or philosophy, that can lead to the attainment of the state of sunyata. The only path to its realisation is via the supreme wisdom of an impassionate and discriminating mind. It is beyond the common worldly understanding.

2. The Significance of Sunyata and Cessation

The Buddha always used the terms void, no rising and falling, calmness and extinction to explain the profound meaning of sunyata and cessation. The teachings of the Buddha that were described in words are generally common to worldly understandings. If one interprets the teachings superficially from the words and languages used, one will only gain worldly knowledge and not the deeper implication of the teachings. The teachings of the Buddha have their supra-mundane contexts that are beyond the worldly knowledge.

For example, sunyata and the state of nirvana where there is no rising nor falling, are interpreted by most people as a state of non-existence and gloom. They fail to realise that quite the opposite, sunyata is of substantial and positive significance.

The sutras often use the word “great void” to explain the significance of sunyata. In general, we understand the “great void” as something that contains absolutely nothing. However, from a Buddhist perspective, the nature of the “great void” implies something which does not obstruct other things, in which all matters perform their own functions. Materials are form, which by their nature, imply obstruction. The special characteristic of the “great void” is non-obstruction. The “great void” therefore, does not serve as an obstacle to them. Since the “great void” exhibits no obstructive tendencies, it serves as the foundation for matter to function. In other words, if there was no “great void” nor characteristic of non-obstruction, it would be impossible for the material world to exist and function.

The “great void” is not separated from the material world. The latter depends on the former. We can state that the profound significance of sunyata and the nature of sunyata in Buddhism highlights the “great void’s” non-obstructive nature.

Sunyata does not imply the “great void”. Instead, it is the foundation of all phenomena (form and mind). It is the true nature of all phenomena, and it is the basic principle of all existence. In other words, if the universe’s existence was not empty nor impermanent, then all resulting phenomena could not have arisen due to the co-existence of various causes and there would be no rising nor falling. The nature of sunyata is of positive significance!

Calmness and extinction are the opposite of rising and falling. They are another way to express that there is no rising and falling. Rising and falling are the common characteristics

of worldly existence. All phenomena are always in the cycle of rising and falling. However, most people concentrate on living (rising). They think that the universe and life are the reality of a continuous existence.

Buddhism on the other hand, promotes the value of a continuous cessation (falling). This cessation does not imply that it ceases to exist altogether. Instead, it is just a state in the continuous process of phenomena. In this material world, or what we may call this “state of existence”, everything eventually ceases to exist. Cessation is definitely the home of all existences. Since cessation is the calm state of existence and the eventual refuge of all phenomena, it is also the foundation for all activities and functions.

The Amitabha Buddha who was, and is, revered and praised by Buddhists around the world, radiates indefinite light and life from this “state of cessation”. This state is a continuous process of calmness. It will be the eventual refuge for us all. If we think carefully about the definitions of calmness and extinction, then we can deduce that they are the true natural end-points of rising and falling. The true nature of the cycle of rising and falling is calmness and extinction. Because of this nature, all chaos and conflicts in the state of rising and falling will eventually cease. This is attainable by the realisation of prajna.

3. Contemplating the Implications of Sunyata and Stillness (Nirvana) by Observing Worldly Phenomena

All existences exhibit void-nature and nirvana-nature. These natures are the reality of all existence. To realise the

truth, we have to contemplate and observe our worldly existence. We cannot realise the former without observing the latter. Consider this Heart Sutra extract, “Only when Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva practised the deep course of wisdom of Prajna Paramita did he come to realise that the five skandhas (aggregates, and material and mental objects) were void.”

Profound wisdom leads us to the realisation that all existences are of void-nature. The sutras demonstrate that the profound principle can be understood by contemplating and observing the five skandhas. We cannot realise the truth by seeking something beyond the material and mental world. The Buddha, using his perfect wisdom, observed worldly existence from various implications and aspects, and came to understand all existences.

In summary, there are three paths to this observation:

- a) We should observe the preceding state and the current state of conditions. i.e., Observation according to the concept of time.
- b) We should observe existences according to their inter-relationships. i.e., Observation via the concept of space (either two or three-dimensions).
- c) We should observe the true nature of all myriad beings. This is like observing the worldly existences of a point, a line and an area. Those with supreme wisdom understand the true nature of all worldly existences by observing vertically the relationships between the preceding and current conditions, and horizontally the interrelationships. Then we can understand the true meaning of void-nature and nirvana-nature.

3.1 By observing the preceding-stage and the current-stage conditions, we can verify the Law of Impermanence of all worldly existences. All existences, be they material or mental, be they the material world, or the physical or mental states of sentient beings, are subject to continuous change.

The world may have certain states of beings where they stay static or are in equilibrium on a temporary basis (for example hibernation). But when we observe them with supreme wisdom, we will find that not only do they keep changing on a yearly basis, but also that this change applies to even every briefest moment. After the current state of conditions have ceased to exist, the newly-formed state materialises. This is the state of rising and falling. The rising and falling of each small moment reveals that all existences are ever-moving and ever-changing.

Conventional scholars have a very good explanation of these ever-changing worldly conditions. However they, including the practitioners of dharma, try to make sense of the reality from the ever-changing worldly existences. That is, they are fooled by the material existences and are not able to understand the deeper truth of all existences.

Only those with the supreme wisdom of the Buddha and Mahabodhisattvas realise and understand that all existences are illusions. They understand that existences are not real from the observation of the flow of changing existences. The numerous illusionary existences may well be diverse and confusing, arising and decaying. But when we look into their true nature, we will find them void and of nirvana-nature.

On the other hand, since all existences are of nirvana-nature, they appear from the perspective of time, to be ever-changing. They never stay the same even for the briefest moment. Impermanence implies existences do not have a permanent entity. This is another implication of the nature of sunyata and stillness.

3.2 From observations of existence via inter-relationships, we can conclude that nothing is independent of the Law of Causation, and that everything is without ego. For example, the Buddha explains that the individual sentient being is composed of physical, physiological and psychological phenomena. The so called ego is a deluded illusion which does not exist in reality. Its existence depends on the combination of both physical and mental factors. It is a union of organic phenomena. Thus we call it the empirical ego. It is a mistake to cling to it as an infatuated ego.

The Indian concept of the supreme spirit implies someone who rules. The spirit is the ruler who is independent of is self-dependent and all causes. In other words, the spirit is the one who is free from all primary and secondary causes (for physical and mental aspects). The spirit is the one who has the soul of his own body and mind. This is the ego or supreme spirit that the theologians cling to. From their view point, the only way to avoid physical and mental decay is to be self-determined and self-sovereign. In this way, the supreme being can stay permanent in the cycle of reincarnation, and return to the absolute reality by liberating himself from life and death.

But from the profound contemplation and wisdom of the Buddha and Mahabodhisattvas, we know there is no such reality. Instead, egolessness (non-self) is the only path to understand the reality of the deluded life. All existences are subject to the Law of Causes and Conditions. These include the smallest particles, the relationship between the particles, the planets, and the relationship between them, up to and including the whole universe! From the smallest particles to the biggest matter, there exists no absolute independent identity.

Egolessness (non-self) implies the void characteristics of all existence. Egolessness (non-self) signifies the non-existence of permanent identity for self and existence (Dharma). Sunyata stresses the voidness characteristic of self and existence (Dharma). Sunyata and egolessness possess similar attributes. As we have discussed before, we can observe the profound significance of sunyata from the perspective of interdependent relationships. Considering dharma-nature and the condition of nirvana, all existences are immaterial and of a void-nature. Then we see each existence as independent of each other. But then we cannot find any material that does exist independent of everything else. So egolessness also implies void-nature!

3.3 From the observation of all existences, we can infer the theory of nirvana and the complete cessation of all phenomena. From the viewpoint of phenomena, all existences are so different from each other, that they may contradict each other. They are so chaotic. In reality, their existence is illusionary and arises from conditional causation. They seem to exist on one hand, and yet do not exist on the other. They seem to be united, but yet they are so different to one another.

They seem to exist and yet they do cease! Ultimately everything will return to harmony and complete calmness. This is the nature of all existence. It is the final resting place for all. If we can understand this reality and remove our illusions, we can find this state of harmony and complete calmness.

All our contradictions, impediments and confusion will be converted to equanimity. Free from illusion, complete calmness will be the result of attaining nirvana. The Buddha emphasised the significance of this attainment and encouraged the direct and profound contemplation on void-nature. He said, “Since there is no absolute self-nature thus every existence exhibits void-nature. Because it is void, there is no rising nor falling. Since there is no rising nor falling, thus everything was originally in complete calmness. Its self-nature is nirvana.”

From the viewpoint of time and space, we can surmise that all existences are impermanent, all existences have no permanent self, and nirvana is the result of the cessation of all existences — the Three Universal Characteristics. But there are not three different truths. Instead, they are the characteristics of the only absolute truth and the ultimate reality. This is the explanation of Dharma-nature and the condition of nirvana. The three characteristics are the one characteristic, and vice versa!

We may cultivate our meditation, contemplating the impersonality of all existences. This will lead us to enlightenment via the path of voidness. Contemplating nirvana and complete calmness leads to enlightenment by the path of

immaterial form. Contemplating the impermanence of all existences, leads us to enlightenment by the path of inactivity (no desire).

The Three Universal Characteristics are the other implications of Dharma-nature and nirvana. The paths to enlightenment are also the same cause of absolute reality. All of them return to the Dharma-nature and the condition of nirvana. In short, the teachings of the Buddha start from the observation and contemplation of all worldly phenomena. They are like thousands of streams of water competing with each other, and flowing from the top of the mountains to the bottom. Eventually, all of them return to the ocean of voidness and nirvana.

4. Sunyata and Cessation is the Truth (Nature) of All Existences.

All existences that are recognised by worldly understanding, whether materially, spiritually or intellectually, have always been misunderstood by us. We cling to them as real, physically existing and permanent. Actually, they are only unreal names.

The more precise meaning of the term “unreal name” is “assumption” or “hypothesis”. It is an empirical name. It is formed by the combination of various causes and effects. (These include the effects of mental consciousness.) It does not exist by itself. Everything exists relatively. Thus, what is the ultimate truth? If we investigate existence further, we realise that all existences are empty. This is the fundamental characteristic and reality of all existence. It is ultimate and

absolute. But we should not think that empty means nothing. It implies the disentanglement from the worldly misunderstanding of the existence of self, identity, and the realisation of the absolute.

In the Sutras and Abhidharma, the worldly understandings are sometimes referred to as all phenomena (Dharma). Sunyata is referred to as “Dharma-nature”, and hence there is a distinction between “phenomena” and “Dhamma-nature”. However, this is only an expedient explanation that helps us to realise the truth of sunyata through the phenomena of all existences.

We should not think that “existence” and “nature”; or the “phenomena of Dharma” and “Dharma-nature” are something contradictory. They are just concepts needed to understand the implication of sunyata.

We may analyse the expedient explanation of “existence” and the “nature (voidness)” from two aspects:

a) The truth of sunyata is the nature of each individual existence. Each step we make in understanding that each minor form has a nature that is not describable by words, are steps to the realisation of the truth of sunyata. The sunyata of Dharma nature is the same for all, it is non distinguishable. However, from our deluded viewpoint, we assume that it is the nature of each individual existence and not an abstract common nature.

b) Dharma-nature is best described as the characteristic of equanimity of sunyata. It cannot be described as many or one

and absolute. (One is relative to many!) We cannot say that the Dharma-nature is different to existence. But at the same time, we cannot say that it is equal to existence. All in all, sunyata is the nature of existence. Although the realisation of supreme wisdom may seem to be abstract superficially, it embodies very substantial and compelling ideas.

5. The Relationship between Phenomena and the Sunyata of Dharma-nature.

From our discussions above, it is very clear that existence and nature cannot be described as the same or different. In the Mahayana teaching, the theory of “not the same nor different” is indisputable. However, in order to adapt to the different spiritual foundations and thinking, the ancient great practitioners have different explanations.

a) The Dharmalaksana Sects emphasise the “phenomena or characteristics of things”. Their theory is, “the appearance of karmic seeds nurtures the rising of things and vice versa.” The Law of Dependent Origination of karmic seeds explains all worldly (mundane) and out-worldly (supramundane) Dharma. When this sect explains impermanence and the rising and falling of all existence, they omit to mention its relationship with the Dharma nature that is not rising nor falling.

According to them, under the definitions of impermanence and rising and falling, “karmic seeds” appear and nurture the rising of things and in return, can be formed. Therefore, the nature of “no rising nor falling” cannot be the foundation of any existence.

This school is famous for its detail and careful observation. However, there is a tendency to misunderstand the theory of no-rising nor falling (the eternal Dharma-nature) and the theory of rising and falling (the causative Dharma) as two separate identities.

This is definitely not the intention of the scholars of the Dharmalaksana Sect. This is because as we detach ourselves from the illusion of rising and falling, and the Law of Cause and Effect, we will see the truth of Dharma-nature. We will realise that the Dharma and Dharma-nature are neither the same nor different. This is nature of the individual existence that is beyond description. It has no difference from the Dharma. To differentiate the Dharma from aspects of rising and falling, is to emphasise the difference between “nature” and “phenomena” only.

b) The schools of Tien Tai, Xian Shou and Chan (Zen) emphasise the Dharma-nature. They call themselves the “School of Nature” and the perfect intercommunion of all things is their emphasis. In respect of the equanimity of Dharma-nature, the phenomena of all things are embodied in Dharma-nature. The phenomena of Dharma that is pure or deluded arises from Dharma-nature.

The scholars of Tien Tai called it the “Embodied nature”. (This is the Buddha-nature that includes both good and evil.) The scholars of Xian Shou say, “It is arising from primal nature”, and the scholars of Chan (Zen) say, “It is nature that causes the rising of things”. All Dharma is Dharma-nature. It is not different from Dharma-nature. Dharma and Dharma-nature are not two separate identities, “Phenomena” and

“nature” are also not distinguishable either. In other words, there is no difference between principle (absolute) and practice (relative).

This also implies that there is no differences among practices. The schools that emphasise Dharma-nature do not emphasise differences. However, scholars who misunderstood its implication, always became attached to the principles (an absolute), and neglect the practice (a relative). This is definitely not the aim of the schools of “Dharma-nature”.

c) The School of Madhyamika, which is also called the “School of Sunyata”, explains the truth directly. They say that existence and sunyata are neither the same nor different. According to the School of Sunyata, all Dharma arises from causes and conditions. Therefore the nature of all Dharma is empty. Because of its empty nature, it has to rely on causes and conditions in order to arise.

In other words, all Dharma arises from causes and conditions, and all Dharma is empty in nature. The Law of Dependent Origination (existence) and the nature of emptiness is neither the same nor different. They exist mutually. The truth of “sunyata” and “existence”, and “nature” and “phenomena” are not in conflict with each other. Unlike the scholars of the Dharmalaksana Sect who explain the Dharma only from the aspect of Dependent Origination, or the scholars of Dharma-nature that explain the existence of Dharma only from the aspect of Dharma-nature, the scholars of Madhyamika explain the truth of the Dharma from both aspects. Hence this is called the Middle Path which does not incline to either side.

These are the three main schools in Mahayana teaching. The Dharma and Dharma-nature resemble worldly phenomena and entity, but they are not identical. In Mahayana teaching, the Dharma-nature is the nature of each individual Dharma. There is no entity that causes the appearance of things. Although Dharma (existences) and Dharma-nature are not identical, they are also not beyond Dharma (existences). We should not think that these concepts are too deep beneath or too high above us. By realising the Dharma and Dharma nature from the existence (Dharma) around us, then can the real and profound implications of sunyata be portrayed. *(Translated by Lim Yang & Shi Neng Rong, edited by Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rong (21-9-1996))*

The Critical Issue of Life and Death

Life is impermanent. After we come into this world, we may live for ten years, possibly a hundred years, or perhaps even longer. But we grow, and finally we have to die. People normally think of death as the end of everything. There is nothing great about it. But according to Buddhism, our life does not begin only at the moment of birth; and death too, does not imply the end of everything. If life was as simple as this, then this would encourage us to fritter away our time with no purpose. Actually, we existed before we were born, and we will have another life after death. We will be reborn in another place and the cycle of life and death will continue endlessly. The constant rebirth into this suffering world is a bigger problem than the simple death at the end of each life! Constant rebirth is difficult to solve and it becomes a critical issue when we recognize and wish to overcome it.

The situation is analogous to a businessman who starts his business at the beginning of the year. At the end of the year, he has to account for his profit and loss, repay all his debts and get back what others owe him. This process repeats the following year, and every year thereafter. The closing of everything. The businessman plans to accumulate long term profits and increasingly valuable assets year after year. But this is not an easy task to fulfil!

How should we handle this problem? We can be more confident about the following year's financial position if the current year's business is profitable. Everything will run more smoothly next year. However, if this year results in a loss, then next year's financial position will be tight. We may have to

borrow from here or there, causing a lot of frustration, worry, and suffering for ourselves.

Life is the same. When there is birth, there will be death. During this process of life and death, we have to consider our profits and losses. If we do not put in an effort to uplift ourselves, we may lose our human status in the next life, and this will certainly be a loss! If we improve ourselves and become a better person in this life, then we will create good prospects for our future.

Although our “End of Year (life) Account” may show an unfavorable “financial (karmic) position”, if we can justify ourselves skilfully, we may still get through the last difficult period. Thus, a practicing Buddhist should pay attention to the moment of their last breath. We should behave well, think positively, and be mindful at the moment of our last breath.

When we talk about life and death, some think that death means the end of everything. Thus, we must first clarify these misunderstandings about “death” before we discuss “life”. People normally have a fear of death. In fact, death is nothing to be afraid of. This is analogous to the businessman who runs a good business at all times and manages it well until the closure of the financial year. When the New Year comes he will certainly enjoy a comfortable life. Therefore, as long as we have prepared well during our lives, we should be happy when we are healthy, and should not be frightened when sickness or even death comes.

The Three Types of Death

According to Buddhism, there are three types of death:

1. The end of life: No matter how long we live, once the life that we obtained from our past karma is finished, we will die. This is like a lamp. When the fuel is consumed, the light will go out. If the “karmic fuel” for our life is for one hundred years, then, at the end of one hundred years, we will die, and there are no alternatives!

2. The exhaustion of merit: We need daily necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter in order to live. Some of us may die before we reach old age because of the exhaustion of our merits. We may die of hunger or cold.

3. Death at a time when one should not die: Some of us may die because of wars, floods, fires, accidents, sickness, lack of care or nutrition, or over-work. This type of death is different to the other two types mentioned above.

With regards to death, a practicing Buddhist should remember two points:

1. Whether we are young or old, we may die at any time. Although humans have an average life span, exhaustion of merits or unforeseen circumstances for any individual may cause us to die at any time. Life is impermanent. So we should be diligent in practicing the Buddha’s teachings, and not wait until the next life, or life thereafter!

2. Do not think or misunderstand that life is determined by our past karma only. In fact, the major influence comes from our actions in the current life. If we always commit wrong deeds, do not take care of ourselves, and are lazy, then consequently we may become poor and may die of starvation while young or middle aged. But death as such does not necessarily imply the end of one's actual life process.

How Does the Cycle of Life and Death Come About?

What is this cycle of birth and death? How does this cycle of life and death come about? What determines our improvement or deterioration? According to Buddhism, it is determined by our karma. Karma is the energy or influence that is left behind by our actions. Due to our past karma, we are born as human beings in this life. Similarly, the good and evil karma of this life and past lives will also affect our future lives. Many Buddhists think of 'karma' as 'evil karma' only. This is not true. The energy that is left behind by our actions or thoughts, be it good or evil, is referred to as 'karma'. Our future is determined by our karma. Thus, the Buddha Dharma says, "We reap what we sow".

Between our past and present, which bad or good karma, will determine our next life? There are three situations as stated in the following:

a) Strong karma

When we are at the brink of death, the good and evil karma we have generated in our life will appear in front of our eyes. Usually we generate a lot of good or bad karma every day. At

the moment of our death, if strong good or evil thoughts arise, they will determine our future.

For example, the memory of killing one's own father is unforgettable. The thought will always be in one's mind. At the moment of death, this evil scene (karmic action) will appear in front of one's eyes. Similarly, one who is very filial will see their own filiality and good deeds at the moment of their last breath. This is similar to a debtor. At the end of the year, all creditors will come and chase after the debtor for their money, and the debtor will pay the creditor who applies him the greatest pressure first.

b) Habitual Influence

Some people may have karma that is neither extremely good nor extremely bad. In these circumstances, habitual actions may become the major influence on their fate. Accumulated minor evil actions will produce an evil result. Accumulated minor good deeds will produce a good result. There is a saying;

*“Although a drop of water is tiny,
it may gradually fill a big container.”*

The Buddha also gave us an example: If there is a big tree that is leaning to the east, it will certainly fall towards the east when being axed.

The Chinese always say: “At the time of death, the ghosts that feel injustice will come and ask for one's life.” Those who killed pigs and goats will see pigs and goats, and those who

killed snakes will see snakes. If we see these, we will have great suffering. We may tremble with intense fear, and lose our minds. In fact, the pigs, goats and other animals that have been killed would have been reborn according to their own karma. However, those who did the killing will tend to continue to act in an evil way. They will accumulate more evil karma. Thus, at the moment of death the karmic action (cows, snakes, pigs, or goats etc. requesting recompense of life for lives taken) will appear in front of us and we will receive retribution according to our karma.

There is a story about a person who robbed and murdered a rich man in the middle of the night. After the incident, he felt that the rich man was always following him asking for his money and life. In time the murderer was frightened to death. Later, it was found that the rich man was only injured and was still alive. This anecdote illustrates that evil ghosts do not come to ask for one's life. The Buddha's explanation of karmic action explains the result perfectly. Those who did evil will see suffering at the last moment before death overtakes them, and those who behaved well will be peaceful and happy at that last moment. So we should be careful about the habitual karma that we generate daily!

c) The Last Thought

Some people may not have accomplished great things; perpetrated particularly evil deeds; nor established distinct habitual actions. During the last moment of their lives such people may suddenly think of something. This last thought, whether good or evil, will influence their next rebirth. The Buddha's teachings encourage those who are seriously ill to

remember and to recite the merits of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and the merits of Dana and of following the precepts. This will help us to have good thoughts. Relying on the energy of these good thoughts, we may have a good rebirth. Some may generate a lot of good karma during normal times, but may be nervous or sad during their last breath. This may cause evil thoughts to arise and hence result in a poor rebirth. This is analogous to a merchant who has done good business throughout the year but who does not manage his business affairs well during the closing period of the financial year and thus causes the whole year's effort to be wasted.

When someone is about to die, whether they are young or old, we should try not to cry, as this may affect the dying person's emotional state and cause them suffering. We should advise the person to let everything go and to think about the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, good acts of Dana, and other meritorious deeds that they may have done.

It is as if our business was not very good during the year, but because of skilful management during the crucial end of year period, we may nevertheless have a happy new year. However, we should remember that our daily effort is still important. It is not rendered insignificant compared to the last minute's effort. If we habitually commit evil deeds it is hardly to be expected that we will have good thoughts at our death. If we habitually accumulate great merits, or have more modest tendency to do good, then with the assistance of others in recalling these merits during the moment of our last breath, we may have a better rebirth.

Other Defilements Necessary for Rebirth

How does rebirth occur after our death? Normally death refers to the moment when one's breathing and mental activities have stopped, and the body temperature drops. On the other hand, birth refers to the time when the baby is born. However, according to the teachings of the Buddha, our past karma is the main cause of the new life which comes about when the father's sperm cell combines with an egg from the mother. This is referred to as conception: the initiation of the birth process. Thus, those who carry out abortions are in fact committing the evil deed of killing. Why are we reborn after death? It is not inevitable that everyone will be reborn. Some may be reborn and others may not. Rebirth is caused by one's karma. With good karma we will produce good fruit. With evil karma we will suffer evil results.

If we generate good and evil karma all the time, does this mean that our cycle of life and death will continue endlessly? In fact, karma alone may not cause us to be reborn. Besides karma, defilements are needed as the secondary cause of rebirth. The major defilement is the 'love' of life. Thoughts of greed and attachment to this illusory world, with the foolish wish to live forever, plant in our deluded minds the seeds for continuous life and death.

A practicing Buddhist who wishes to end the cycle of life and death needs to let go of self-centered love and attachment to self-destructive living. This is similar to planting crops. Although we may have seeds, without water and fertilizer, the seeds will not sprout. Thus, even though we may have generated a lot of good or bad karma, without the fertile

conditions provided by defilements (i.e. love and attachments), the seeds of our sufferings will not sprout. If we crave for comfort, luxury and wealth, and cling to our life, we will never break the cycle of life and death. In order to end the cycle of life and death, we must let go of our attachments thoroughly, then new life will not emerge.

To achieve this we should remember not to do evil, but to do more good. We should accumulate our merits in order to gain a good repay in the future. We should not attach ourselves to the process of life and death, but to strengthen our determination to leave this deluded, suffering world. [Recorded by Ming Dao] (*Translated by Shi Neng Rong, edited by Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rong. (8-2-96)*)

The Immense Teachings on the Expedient Path of Buddhist Practice

Recollection of the Buddha (s. buddhanusmrti) and the idea of a Pure Land are skilful means (s. upaya) common among different schools and different vehicles (s. yana) in Buddhism. However, the most common practices, particularly in the Pure Land school, involve recollection (s. smrti) of the Amitabha Buddha and seeking rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss (s. Sukhamati or Sukhavati).

The practice of the recollection of the Buddha on the Expedient Path is most completely expounded in Chapter 40 of the Avatamsaka Sutra — “Samantabhadra’s Practices and Vows.” This particular practice is clearly explained therein as

“The Ten Great Vows (s. mahapranidhana) guide one on the path to the Land of Ultimate Bliss.”

(The Ten Great Vows refer to ten vows as well as ten ways of practice.)

Recollection of the Buddha means to recollect and contemplate the Dharma Body (s. dharmakaya) of the Buddha, the virtues of the Buddha, the stately appearance of the Buddha, and the name (s. namadheya) of the Buddha so that the mind is freed from distraction and restlessness (s. aviksiptacitta). Recollection of the Buddha is not just the recitation (s. japa) of the name of the Buddha, but includes the following practices:

1. Paying reverence to the Buddha.
2. Praising the virtues of the Buddha (The name of the Buddha reflects the virtues of the Buddha. Thus, reciting the name of the Amitabha Buddha is equivalent to praising and recollecting the virtues of all Buddhas).
3. Making immense offerings (s. pujana) to the Buddha.
4. Making a frank confession of one's mistakes (s. desana) before the Buddha and sincerely asking for pardon (s. ksana).
5. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Buddha (and of all Bodhisattvas).
6. Requesting the Buddha to revolve the Dharma wheel (s. dharma-cakra-pravartana).
7. Requesting the Buddha to live on this world, working for the liberation of all sentient beings.
8. Learning from the Buddha and practising the Dharma.
9. Following the example of the Buddha, to help, comfort and teach all sentient beings according to their needs.
10. Transference of merits (s. parinama) to all sentient beings, hoping that all sentient beings may attain Buddhahood.

These are the practices of the recollection of the Buddha. Since the practices simply involve mindfully meditating upon Buddha (s. adhimoksa), and are free from any complicating

dependence upon special external requirements, they can be easily accomplished. To recollect the infinite Buddha is in fact to contemplate the vows and practices of all Buddhas (i.e. infinite Buddha-nature variously personified). The mind meditates upon the Buddhas presiding over the ten different directions (e.g. Amitabha Buddha in the Western Paradise). This entails penetrating the Realm of Dharma (s. dharmadhātu) and leads one to rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

The most systematic commentary regarding this practice can be found in “The Sastra of The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana”. It describes four stages of practice as below:

1. Mahayanist novices, whose minds are not strong, may lack the confidence to realize Buddhahood or to avoid rebirth in lower realms. They are not yet ready for the stage of cultivating confidence by themselves. The expedient means for them to practice is thus to concentrate on contemplating and recollecting the Buddha, especially the Amitabha Buddha, and to transfer the immeasurable virtues accumulated through this practice for taking rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Confidence can then be established gradually, and can be sustained by sensing the strong vibrations rippling throughout the Universe emanating from the ardent will, power and virtues of the Buddha. (N.B. This differs from the Real-Mark (Self-Nature) Recollection of Buddha).

2. The initial stage of a Bodhisattva’s career essentially entails extensive practices aiming to cultivate confidence (i.e. the Stage of Cultivating Ten Virtues of Mind). Such practices involving the recollection of the Buddha on the Expedient Path, such as paying reverence to the Buddha; making a frank

confession of one's mistakes and asking for pardon; rejoicing in the merits of others, transference of merits etc., all become skilful means for overcoming unwholesome karma (s. karmavarana). In turn these expedient means help develop practices on the Profound Path of Buddhist Practice, such as generosity (s. dana), morality (s. sila), patience and perseverance. Confidence is further strengthened thereby.

3. For those Bodhisattvas who have firmly established their faith and confidence, making a frank confession of their mistakes and asking for pardon becomes a skilful means to achieve mind concentration (s. samadhi); while the practices of offering, paying reverence, praising and rejoicing in virtue become skilful means to develop the stock of supreme merit. These will assist one to accomplish all great vows equally and to perfectly support the growth of both wisdom and compassion. Confidence and faith can then be further developed in order to achieve the supreme enlightenment.

4. When a Bodhisattva enters the Realization of Dharma Dhatu of the Ten Bodhisattva Stages (s. dasa-bhumayah) he still practises recollection of the Buddha through actions such as making offerings to the Buddhas of the ten different directions, requesting the Buddha to revolve the Dharma wheel etc.; all with the purpose of benefitting all other sentient beings. The Manjusri Bodhisattva and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, who have sought rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, belong to this type of Bodhisattva. They definitely differ from those Mahayanist novices who lack the confidence to successfully realize Buddhahood, or who fear the loss of confidence during the practices.

Recollection of Buddha on the Expedient Path of Buddhist Practice is a consistent feature of the training of a Bodhisattva throughout its various phases. It is followed in a proper sequence and gradual progress is made thereby, subject to the spiritual potentialities of individuals. According to “The Great Wisdom and Perfections Sastra” (s. “The Mahaprajna Paramita Sastra”) there are different emphases on the Expedient and Profound Paths for different Mahayanist novices due to the variability of their spiritual potentialities. However, from the perspective of the Bodhi Path (s. bodhimarga) as a whole, there is no contradiction between the Expedient and Profound Paths and it is wrong to discriminate against either of them. Those who have not read Chapter 40 of the Avatamsaka Sutra, “Samantabhadra’s Practices and Vows”, will not understand the profound meaning of the recollection of the Buddha on the Expedient Path. For those who do not read the sastra of The Awakening of Faith in Mahayana, it will be difficult to understand the different stages of practice involved in the recollection of the Buddha (which is consistent with The Great Wisdom and Perfection Sastra and The Dasabhumi-Vibhasa Sastra written by Nagarjuna). I would recommend these sutras and sastras to anyone practicing recollection of the Buddha so that they will not misinterpret the immense teaching of this practice and blind themselves to its profound meaning.

(Translated by Tan Beng Tiong, edited Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rong. (6-9-96))

Dharma About Lay People for Lay People

A talk given at The Lay People Organization
(Ju Shi Lin¹), Manila

Your Lay People Organization “Ju Shi Lin” asked me to give talks for three days. Because it is difficult to have the opportunity to listen to the Dharma, I feel very happy to give some talks. There is a saying, “When you meet a male, you should talk about something that interests the male; and when you meet a female, you talk about something that interests the female”. Likewise Dharma should be expounded in concordance to the occasion. This place is the Lay People Organization, and those of you who are present here are also lay people. Thus I will use Dharma about lay people as the theme for the talk.

Let’s start with the Lay People Organization (Ju Shi Lin). What is a lay person (Ju Shi)? What is an organisation (Lin)? A lay person is a “Kulapati” in the Indian language. India has four different castes. There are the “Ksatriya” which are the royal caste, and “Brahmana” for those who perform religious ceremonies. The lowest caste are the slaves (“Sudra”). The other caste is the “Freemen” (“Vaisya”) whose members work in agricultural, industrial or business sectors.

¹ “*Ju shi*” means a secular Buddhist devotee which is translated here as lay person. Literally, “*lin*” means forest and its meaning is further explained in the main text.

The “Freemen” gradually obtained their status in the Indian community. They are similar to the middle-class in the modern world. The name “Freemen” refers to the strata of lay people at that time. The teaching of the Buddha sees all sentient beings as equal and discourages stratification of beings. The term “laypeople” refers to people who live in a family in Buddhism. When Buddhism arrived in China, “laypeople” became the terminology that referred to the people who practised Buddhism at home. In the Philippines, the term “laypeople” is seldom used. In my country, China, all males and females are called lay people. Thus “laypeople” has become a general term that refers to Buddhists who practise at home.

“Lin” means forests which imply plural. When there are many trees in the same location we term it a forest. In the olden times, many monks and nuns stayed in the monastery and thus they called it “Chong Lin¹” i.e. “the thickly populated monastery”. The thickly populated monastery was not a temple. It merely referred to the assembly of monks or nuns. Nowadays we call the lay people who set up the Buddhist organization as “Ju Shi Lin” i.e. “the thickly populated organ-isation.” Thus “lin” implies an association or organization.

The history of the Ju Shi Lin is short. It started up in the time of about the tenth year of the Republic of China. At that time, Buddhists in Hu Ling and Hu Hang set up a Buddhist organization called The World Buddhist Ju Shi Lin. This was

¹ Literally, “chong” means thicket. “Chong Lin” refers to a Buddhist forest monastery.

how the word came into being and subsequently Buddhists in other parts of the world came to use it.

Two Groups of Buddhists

Buddhists can be broadly categorized into two groups, namely the lay people and the monastic community. The assembly of monastic community is the Order of Monks and Nuns (s. Sangha). The organization for those who practice Buddhism at home is the Lay People Organization. What is the difference between these two institutions?

In terms of faith, they both take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. From the perspective of attainment and enlightenment, there is not much difference. According to the Sravakayana, lay people can attain the third Supramundane Fruitions (s. phala) i.e. the Non-Returner (s. Anagamin), whereas the Sangha can attain the fourth Fruition i.e. the Holy One (s. Arahat). The difference is only one stage.

On the other hand, according to the Mahayana tradition, many Bodhisattvas are lay people. Among the great Bodhisattvas such as Manjushri, Samantabhadra, Avalokitesvara and Kshitigarbha, only Kshitigarbha presents himself as a member of the Sangha. The others all present themselves as lay people. Thus do not misunderstand that lay people will not achieve profound enlightenment and think that it can only be attained by the members of the Order.

If there is not much difference, what exactly is the distinction? The Sakyamuni Buddha was born in India. He then renounced his family life and later attained Buddhahood.

When he spread the Dharma initially, his followers voluntarily followed his footsteps to lead a monastic life. The Buddha assembled these followers together, and formed the Order.

The members of the Order are forbidden from dealing in business or holding government positions. The only aim of the Order is to spread the Dharma. The teaching of the Buddha is then propagated from generation to generation with the Order as the backbone of this continuity. In the past, the preservation of Dharma was the emphasis of the responsibilities for the Order.

Let's draw an analogy from a political party. It must first have an ideology. The party members must have faith in the ideology and hence implement and transform the party ideology into reality. As well, it requires some party members to not only have faith, but to also concentrate on running the party and make it their profession.

This is not to say that lay people do not need to spread the Dharma. As we all know, lay people have parents, spouses and children at home to look after. They are also busy in their pursuit of their occupations. They are unable to concentrate solely on propagating the teaching of Buddha. Hence it is important and necessary for the Order of Monks and Nuns to carry out this duty.

The monastic community do not have the troubles and worries of family and occupation. Their environment is more conducive to practicing and spreading the Dharma. This is the minor difference between lay people and the Order of Monks and Nuns.

One should not think that lay people are tied down and hence cannot practise and propagate the Dharma. It is actually to the advantage of lay people. Buddhism is not only observances such as chanting in the monastery or giving Dharma talks and meditation. It should involve in changing and directing the world, leading the inhabitants of this world in upgrading themselves day by day. In this way we may all bathe in the goodness of the Buddha, and pave the way for each other to attain enlightenment.

Since lay people are dispersed in all walks of life, it provides Buddhism with the strength and the vehicle to disseminate to every corner of the world. The monastic community generally preserves the sravakayana tradition of maintaining a certain distance from the general public. Some even practise on their own in seclusion. They may, temporarily sever their ties with the community. However, the monks or nuns of Mahayana tradition have all sentient beings as their target of practice. Thus they choose to reside in villages, towns or cities where they spread the Dharma and actively become involved in the community.

The relationship of lay people and the community may be very intimate, which makes the task of spreading the Dharma easier. From this we can see the importance of lay people in Buddhism. Lay people should particularly learn about the aspects of the Dharma that emphasize how to live in peace with others in the community. In this way, they may help those who are in need, and look after and enhance the well-being of other sentient beings. They should rejoice in the goodness of others.

They should abstain from over-indulging in the pessimistic and selfish issue of death and dying. There should be co-operation and distribution of tasks between the Order of Monks and Nuns and lay people to promote the spreading of the Dharma. If the Lay People Organization functions in a similar way to a monastery, then it will lose its significance as an institution for lay people.

The Five merits

One should learn to be a Mahayana layperson and learn to follow the path of the Bodhisattvas. That is one who aspires to attain Buddhahood and wishes to pave the way for all sentient beings. In order to achieve this aim, one has to practice the Five Merits. These Five Merits were expounded by the Buddha especially for lay people. We should ask ourselves whether we could gain all the Five Merits, or just a portion of them. Just as a human needs to possess all five sensory organs to be complete, a lay person should try to develop these Five Merits.

1. Faith: Is the faith we have in the Triple Gem strong and firm? If we have doubt and hesitation, shifting between belief and disbelief, then it would still be a far cry from the real merit. Therefore, we should first have firm faith in the Triple Gem.

2. Precepts (s. Sila): Lay people should have faith in the Triple Gem. As well, they should strive to observe the Five Precepts because precepts are the basis for all human morality. A Buddhist should try to perfect his personality by becoming a “gentleman” or “lady” of the human race.

3. Listening: Having faith and good moral conduct is not enough. One should try to approach the Noble ones and listen to the Dharma. In this way, one may acquire the right views and deepen one's understanding of the Dharma. Practising the Dharma can be developed from listening, thus:

*“From listening one knows good.
From listening one knows evil.
From listening one gets away from unworthiness.
From listening one may attain Nirvana.”*

4. Giving (s. Dana): The above three merits are mainly for one's own benefit, thus these merits are incomplete. One should contribute oneself and helps others financially or physically.

5. Wisdom: The listening merit mentioned above is close to general knowledge. The teaching of the Buddha deals with detachment, the overcoming of life and death and the liberation of suffering for all sentient beings. But one requires real wisdom. One has to listen, contemplate and put into practice the Dharma. Then one may gain wisdom, and realize the truth.

Some Buddhists have profound knowledge; some have very high morality; some have compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Every Buddhist has their own strength. For a lay person to perfect his practice, he has to learn to gain the above five merits. Only with the perfection of the five merits, can one develop the characteristics of the Bodhisattva.

A lay person aspiring to be a Bodhisattva, to help all sentient beings, should also learn to acquire the Four All-Embracing Virtues. To influence others' thinking and hope that they accept our view points, we must be skilful. We should not look down on ourselves, as though we would not be able to bring about any effect. A student can lead his fellow students; parents can guide their offspring; a shopkeeper can direct his workers; teachers can teach their students. In every walk of life, there are people who are successful. As long as we have the right means in attracting and directing them, we may encourage all people whom we meet in our daily lives with the teachings of the Buddha. We can teach them and help them. So what are these Four All-Embracing Virtues?

The Four All-Embracing Virtues

1) Giving (Dana)

Giving is practised when we help others either financially, career-wise, or in thinking constructively. Those who have received your help will spontaneously have good impressions of you. They will listen to your advice, follow your guidance; and some may even obey your instruction although the instruction may be unreasonable.

Someone once asked me, "The teachings of some other religions are quite superficial, but why do they flourish?" I replied, "The flourishing of a religion is not due to its teaching only. They may have done a good job in terms of giving. For instance, they may build schools or hospitals. There are thousands who have benefitted. With gratitude, regardless of

whether there is a heaven or not, or whether the divinity will help them, these people will believe in what they say.”

For Buddhism to prosper, Buddhists should start with the practice of giving by organizing welfare activities such as education and helping those in need. Mahayana Buddhism followers who want to help all sentient beings must practise giving.

Bodhisattvas should take the perfection (s. paramita) of Giving (s. Dana) very seriously. Sometimes one may not believe in what is said by person A but believes in the same words spoken to him by person B. What is the reason? This is because he has a very special karmic relationship with person B. Whenever we give, we will establish a karmic relationship with the receiver. This makes the transmission of the Dharma easier. Therefore, giving is an essential virtue in the spreading of Dharma.

2) Loving Speech

Loving speech means to communicate and discuss with pleasant speech. There are three types of loving speech:

a. Comforting speech: We should communicate in a warm manner when seeing one another. When we meet people who are sick, or suffering from major disaster or live in fear, we should encourage and provide them with psychological support. Even though we might not give them great help through gentle speech and compassionate attitude, they will appreciate our efforts.

b. Rejoicing speech: Every individual has his own strength. Even a bad person might have his good aspects. Whenever there is good point, we should rejoice, encourage and inspire him to do more, so as to encourage him to do more good. For example, there was once a European philosopher who was very ordinary initially, but with the encouragement from his wife, he strove diligently and eventually became a well-known philosopher. If we want to teach others, we should start praising them in order to give them confidence in their strength and virtues. They will not only be appreciative towards us but will soon be walking on the path of goodness.

c. Inspiring speech: This helps others to progress one step ahead. For example, for a person who is practising giving, we should guide him to observe the precepts. We should not restrict the usage of our speech to those of pleasant and gentle words. Sometimes we may have to use firm and wrathful words to urge someone to progress. With a sincere attitude and honesty, we will be accepted by others.

3) Beneficial Acts

Parents who look after and guide their children will have the respect of their children. A teacher who cares and teaches his students whole-heartedly will have the confidence of his students. A superior who cares about the welfare of those who work under him will have the support from them. Therefore, for those people that we would like to teach and help, we should carry out actions that will benefit them so that they will listen to our advice and follow our guidance willingly.

In Europe, there was an animal trainer who was with the tigers and lions all the time. Some people asked him as why the animals did not harm him. He replied by saying if the animals knew that he wouldn't harm them, they would follow his instructions. If that is the response from the animals, what about human beings? If one always perform beneficial acts and consider the welfare of the others, the one who benefitted will trust us, and follow our guidance.

4) Working Together

Working together is to share responsibilities, especially to share hardships with friends and those who work under us. Even though our individual ability is very minor, if we work together with others, they will come to help us and follow us. If we want to advise others, we should learn together with them, and do the same job with them. During the war, there was a group of youths who formed a choir and drama group. They went to villages to perform with the aim of encouraging the villagers to support them in the war. They achieved a certain degree of success but it was far short of their expectations. They analysed various causes and found out that the reason for the shortcoming was the vast discrepancy of the attitude to life between them and the villagers. Because of the gap, they could not come to a consensus on the war. This is reason why the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva appear in thirty-two different forms, in order to help and guide the uncountable number of characters of sentient beings.

The Four All-Embracing Virtues discussed above are the basic means of attracting and guiding others. They represent the principles of the mundane world. When we apply these

virtues in the spreading of Dharma, we will achieve a better response. If we are practising Dharma and guiding others but fail to lead more people into the Dharma, it is probably because we have not perfected these Four All-Embracing Virtues. If we can act according to the Four Virtues properly, it will bring about an enormous effect. We should take up the responsibility of a Buddhist lay person, and do our best to guide others towards the path of Buddhahood, so that the luminosity of the Buddha will spread even further.

[Recorded by Ming Dao] (*Translated by Mok Chung, edited by Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rong. (6-7-96)*)

Let Go of Your Sorrow

A reply to Mr. Gao Shi Xiong

From your letter, I am aware that in the past few years unfavorable environments and homesickness have caused deterioration in your health. This casts a cloud over your future. Fortunately, you have taken refuge in the Triple Gem, and are approaching towards the brightness of the Triple Gem. I believe that under the benevolence of the Triple Gem you will soon be enlightened and consoled.

You mentioned the sufferings that you have been through and wished that you may receive the brightness of the Buddha Dharma. This luminosity is in fact pervading everywhere at all times. It is just waiting for you to accept it. Please use your eyes of wisdom and see the brilliant hope right in front of you! You should understand that these sufferings are not the sorrow of an individual, the disastrous era is the result of common karma.

In China and all over the world, there are many who have escaped from the Iron Curtain and sought freedom. Thousands of them are like you, scattered everywhere, facing many difficulties, separated from their families, losing contact with their parents, and unable to go back to their homes. They are drowning in sorrow and frustration. Both their mind and physical body are seriously tortured. You are not the only one who is suffering. Furthermore, are those still behind the Iron Curtain living in a conducive environment? Can their families be together? Does their health deteriorate due to excessive work and malnutrition? You knew the situation very well, hence you chose to seek freedom. We are suffering in this

disastrous era that was created by our common karma and we should not think of ourselves only.

The deterioration of physical health is the result of the unfavourable environment and your anxiousness to see your family. You should not worry about your health only. Instead, you should be concerned about the grief that has arisen due to your unfavourable environment and homesickness. If you keep on worrying about the unfavourable environment and the unreachable home, you are in fact torturing yourself more, and it will be impossible for your health to recover. You should consider, can your grief and worry help to change your unfavourable environment and reunite your family? Of course it cannot. And in actual fact it will only worsen your health. Therefore it is useless for you to worry. By practising the teachings of the Buddha, we should learn to look from a wider and higher perspective. By understanding and developing faith in the Dharma, we should learn to let go our worthless worries.

It is true that you are facing an unfavourable environment. However, if you do not compare the satisfaction of the past with the dissatisfaction of the present, you will not have so much sufferings! Whatever is in the past has gone, including pleasure and happiness. It is useless for us to cling to it. Clinging to the past (i.e. cravings), is the defilement of all sentient beings. It brings alive past memories and consequently increases our disappointment and grief. It diminishes our effort to confront our difficulties and our enthusiasm to progress.

Why don't you think in this way: you have freed yourself from the Iron Curtain. In comparison to those who are still

behind the Iron Curtain, you are much more fortunate. The homeless and wandering period of the past few years is now over. You have arrived in a free country and settled down with a good job. Your situation is much better than those who are still wandering about as refugees and suffering from the stress of unemployment.

Whatever we are facing now is the result of our past karma and conditional causation. You should learn to feel at ease and find peace under all circumstances. You should make an effort to improve the situation gradually and cultivate more good merits. Poverty in living can be overcome by simplicity. The insecure feelings of personal relationship can be overcome by working hard and being modest. The Buddha Dharma teaches us to live with less desire, to feel content with whatever you have, and to live peacefully in accordance with conditions around us.

There is a saying in the Sutra,

*“Whatever treasure and wealth we accumulate,
they will disperse one day.
Whatever high status we struggle for,
it will be lost one day.
Whoever we love — families, relatives and friends,
they will leave us one day.
Whenever there is a birth,
there will be a death.”*

This is well known as the Four Impermanent Gathas. It can serve as a ringing statement for your homesickness. You should know that there is no family property that will never

disperse, there is no family which will never separate. It is just a matter of time. If one has planted good karma in the past, it is possible to start a business from scratch when the conditions are right. Otherwise, it may be difficult for someone even to maintain the family property. Our worldly properties can be snatched and possessed by five external factors, they are: flood, fire, thieves, despots and prodigal sons. For those who are still living behind the Iron Curtain, their properties are in fact being confiscated by the Communists. Their experience could be worse than what you have suffered now.

With regard to families, if the conditions are not fulfilled, even if you live in your hometown, you will still experience the sufferings of separation and death of family members. On the other hand, if the conditions are right, there will always be a time for reunion. You are now thinking day and night about your parents, your wife and your children. Are you wondering how their lives are? Are they healthy? Are they still alive? These worries bring you sleepless nights. As Buddha said,

“Whenever craving arises, suffering arises”

It is common to worry about one’s family. However, in this disastrous era, you should be independent and make an effort to plan for something more beneficial. You should not immerse yourself in great grief only. Your family would not be glad if they knew that you were so sick and depressed because of your worries. When there is a family reunion, they will be very upset and this will lead to more suffering in the future. From now on, you should think more positively, and not worry too much. Anxiety and worries can never solve your problems. You should let go of your sorrows. This does not

imply heartlessness, but it is to free yourself from being deluded by the sentiment of love.

The main cause of your suffering is the attachment to the individual family. The very first concept in learning the Dharma is to learn to have a wider capacity for tolerance and have less attachment to self. Since all sentient beings are subject to continual rebirth, on and on through beginningless and endless time, hundreds and millions of people in this land can be your parents, wives, brothers and sisters from many past lives. Why don't you direct your love to them? All the compatriots who are still trapped behind the Iron Curtain can also be your parents, wives, brothers and sisters from your many past lives, why don't you worry and feel sad for them? It is because you are living under such a narrow scope that causes so many sorrowful thoughts to arise in your mind. This is not only of no benefit to the others, it also causes harm to yourself. How silly this is! Don't you remember a saying of Confucius,

“One ought to take care of one's own aged parents first and then to extend the same care to other aged people in general;

One ought to take care of one's own young children first and then extend the same care to other young people in general.”

Buddhism extends this love to all sentient beings. This is the initiation of loving kindness and compassion in Buddhism. It will help you to extricate yourself from the attachment to individual love. The remaining question is how can one be kind and caring to one's compatriots? How can one help

them? Please do not say that you do not have any strength to do so! Everyone has certain strengths even though it may differ from one to another. You should try your best. First of all, you should fulfil your own responsibilities, then you may make use of your responsibilities time and energy to contribute something beneficial to the others and the country. No matter how little each and every effort is, they are all invaluable meritorious acts. If everyone can contribute a little, our efforts will accumulate and become a strong power and finally be able to confront with any tyrannical and evil deed. The suffering due to the common karma can only be changed by group effort. This is the way to solve the problems lingering in your mind. If you do not see things from this perspective and continue to immerse yourself in deep grief everyday, your situation will never change. If your health deteriorates because of this, even the Buddha and Bodhisattva cannot help you. In Buddhism, we solve problems through the understanding of the Law of Cause and Effect. This is different from the fanatical religions that believe everything can be changed unconditionally out of the will of a God.

The distracting thoughts of unfavorable environment and home-sickness may be bothering you persistently and it is hard to get rid of them. Buddhism teaches us to transform sentiment to wisdom. If you can be determined, and contemplate thoroughly about the truth, these worthless worries and grief will fade away and you will regain a healthy life. During this process of transformation, there are two daily practices that may assist you in transforming delusion to purity.

1. Making a frank confession of one's mistakes (s. desana) and sincerely asking for pardon (s. ksana): Although this

disastrous era is the result of our common karma, it so happens that you were born at this time. In certain ways, you may have a stronger feeling of grief than the others, this is due to your individual past and present karma. Your present suffering is the result of the ripening of this karma. Therefore, you should make a frank confession of whatever unwholesome karma you have done (s. desana) and sincerely ask for pardon (s. ksana) before the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas every morning and night (If you have no Buddha statue, try to visualize that the Buddha and Bodhisattvas are around you). A sincere repentance and confession that is full of faith, determination and sincerity, will strengthen your will to progress towards a new life. You will be able to free your mind from the old patterns of thinking and restlessness. When unwholesome thoughts arise, you will be able to detect and discard them immediately.

2. Reciting the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas: Reciting the names of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas with a pure mind can help you to discard and stop the distracting thoughts. Your mind will be pure and peaceful. You will not only free yourself from grief and worries, but you will also sense the strong vibrations rippling throughout the Universe, emanating from the ardent will, power and virtues of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. When your mind is pure, you will sense the luminosity around you and you will be filled with joy. Correspondingly, your emotions and health will improve.

In conclusion, grief and anxiety arise from our ignorance and they are unworthy. The aspiration to practise the teachings of the Buddha should be to benefit all sentient beings who are

in suffering. It should not be constrained to the benefit of oneself only.

May the brightness of the Buddha Dharma be on you,

May you be filled with the joys of Buddha Dharma.

(Translated by Wai Sim Loh & Boon Wee Low, edited by Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rong. (12-10-96))

From Relieving the Suffering of the Mind to Relieving the Suffering of the Body

Dharma talk at Le Sheng Nursing Home

After I decided to come for a Dharma talk at Le Sheng Nursing Home, I was unsure of what topic to talk about. Of course, the very first thing that worried me was the suffering of everyone. In such an environment, it is a rare fortune for anyone to come in contact with Buddhism! The compassion of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas will not abandon you. The Buddha and Bodhisattvas never abandon anyone, they always try to encourage and care for all people. Unfortunately our minds are not always receptive to the message of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. This world is full of suffering, and the Dharma is a consolation for us. Its luminosity brings us support, encouragement and hope that we may always rely on.

The Buddha told us, “Human life is suffering”. We all need to understand and recognize the meaning of this. The Buddha also said, “The human body is an illness, a carbuncle, and an ulcer, and this is what we all experience.” We all experience the conditions of sickness and suffering. But all human and sentient beings cannot avoid illness and suffering. The only differences are less suffering, or more suffering, less sickness, or more sickness!

If we can reduce our suffering, then of course, we will feel much better. Please try not to compare yourselves with others, hoping for happiness without suffering, and health without sickness. This will only increase your unnecessary suffering.

You must understand that all beings in this world are not able to avoid suffering. We always have some problems. The only way to solve these problems is by accepting them, and letting them go. This is the only way of going beyond life and death, and towards a state without suffering and illness!

The Two Types of Suffering

There are two types of suffering: suffering of the physical body, and suffering of the mind. Physical suffering may include a lack of basic necessities, or natural disasters, or injury to the body from weapons, diseases, burns, abuse, or poisons. We all experience this bodily pain no matter what our status is in life. Such suffering can be reduced by co-operation and improvement of our physical situation, such as, for example, an improvement of medical technology. Although the cure may not be ultimate, it provides a certain degree of relief.

The mental suffering of our mind can be caused by many things, including disappointment, hatred, frustration, fear, anger, and loneliness. Everybody experiences this suffering differently. Some, for example, while watching the moon, feel wonderful and peaceful. At the same time, others may feel terrible, lonely, or sorrowful. Another example is the mental anguish caused by an illness. Some feel sad and terribly frightened. However others do not feel this depression, and may never feel mentally downcast, even though suffering from the same illness, and the same physical pain.

Our physical sufferings may be caused by our past or present karma. We should seek the corresponding ways to overcome them. The suffering of our mind is derived from

karmic conditions the present influences or past habits. During the process of practising the Dharma, we should learn to control our mind, be free from unwholesome thoughts and attain the state of no fear and cessation of sadness, anxiety, all defilements and sufferings.

Accept Your Lot

I hope you will all try not to worry too much. Many of you here may have a severe illness, which may be caused by the past or present karma. Some of your illnesses may not be cured by medical technology today. In this case, you should accept your lot. Do not let defilements overcome you and worsen your mental suffering.

There are some Arahats who have freed themselves from the cycle of life and death. Although their mental pain and suffering were relieved, they still could not avoid their physical suffering. The Buddha aimed to teach the relief of this mental suffering even though our physical suffering remained. This is the most compassionate and skilful teaching of the Buddha. Everyone of us should try to learn it.

Body and Mind

The body and mind, the mental and material, are correlative relationships which depend on each other. Physical suffering may be caused by the suffering of the mind. As well, mental suffering may be produced from the suffering of the body! But lessening the pain or suffering of the body may not reduce the suffering of the mind.

The physical suffering and hardship of the older generations who had to work very hard to survive, has been replaced by modern technology. This improvement in our collective physical well-being, should have contributed to a better mental health throughout society. But in actual fact, mental illnesses and psychiatric patients are increasing nowadays.

The increase of wars and violent strategies bring distress and panic to people. Many simply feel a sense of failure, and fear the onset of death. Such an unpleasant situation is even more unbearable than the physical suffering of the body.

The body may still suffer, even though there might be an elimination of the mental suffering. But according to the teachings of the Buddha, a perfect way to free ourselves from suffering, is to relieve the sufferings of the mind and consequently the suffering of the body. We should set this as a goal of our life, and work hard to succeed.

People who do not understand and who do not follow the teachings of the Buddha may experience the physical suffering initiated by the suffering of the mind, and vice versa. Then mild pain may become severe pain. For example, if we experience a mild illness, we may then become terrified, agitated, and worry so much that we stop sleeping or eating. This makes it even worse for our health!

There are many thousands of such examples in the society. Those who understand and follow the Dharma, may not suffer as much as those who do not understand and follow the

Dharma. In this way, we may reduce severe suffering to mild suffering, and reduce mild pain to none. The key points are:

1. To understand and have faith in the truth of cause and effect. Do not be deluded by the present suffering.

2. To repent the past evil karma and ask for the blessings of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. To accumulate more good merits so that suffering may be reduced.

3. To practice meditation and contemplation. This is a method that trains the mind to control and transform the body.

In the past, Venerable Si of Nan Yu was afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis. Movements of his limbs were affected by the illness, and his mind was not able to control his body. Eventually, with his own power of meditation and contemplation he completely recovered.

There is another story recorded in a diary from a person in the Ching Dynasty, which corresponds to the teaching of the Buddha. I hope it will also encourage you.

An intelligent, pretty woman who came from a rich family, married a wealthy man. Her relationship with her husband and parents-in-law was fairly good. Unfortunately, when she began to suffer from severe leprosy, despite their love for her, they had to lock her in a little hut by herself. While she was locked up, she hated looking at herself. She thought of the ugliness and impurities of her body all the time, even when she was eating or excreting. The thought of these impurities was always in her mind. Finally, she saw her ugly and impure

body dropping off, leaving behind a set of clean and white skeleton. At this instance, light emitted from the skeleton and brightened the whole hut as well as the woman's mind and body. She was relieved from the disease. She detached herself from the impurities of the body and began to live in her hut in peace without any suffering.

This story corresponds to the Dharma. It exemplifies the process of practising the Contemplation on Impurities to the attainment of purity. By practising, the strength of our meditation and wisdom in our mind will initiate changes in our physical body! I hope ladies and gentlemen, that this may give you all some encouragement to use the time in Le Sheng Nursing Home to practice the Dharma persistently!

I suppose most of you practise the recitation of the Buddha's name. Reciting the Buddha's name may help us to purify our mind and body, and to be reborn in the Pure Land. But this is only possible if we detach our mind thoroughly from the impure world.

As the old saying: "If there is no urge to leave the world of Saha, it is difficult for one to detach oneself from the world of Saha and be reborn in the Pure Land." The world of Saha is the "Five Kasaya Periods of Impurity." The physical body is the accumulation of the Five Skandhas. If we are able to contemplate our impurities carefully, then we can transform ourselves from the impure, to the pure. The woman who was locked in a hut is a good example for everyone.

Ladies and gentlemen, Buddha is a great teacher and doctor. To have faith in the Buddha and to practice the

teaching of the Buddha shows that we are on the right path. Do not worry too much about your present conditions, there are countless of great prospects in the future. Do not cling to your physical body, as there is great mental peace and freedom beyond the body!

It is hoped that under the blessing of the Triple Gem everyone of you may be relieved from the suffering of mind; with the purification of mind, may everyone attain purification of the body in return. (*Translated by Loh Wai Sim, edited by Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rong. (5-10-96)*)

What is the Significance of Life?

What is the significance of life? This is an important question. After birth, a human being rapidly ages, then dies. Between the processes of birth, ageing, being sick and dying, he is busily working, eating, and grooming... But what is there to achieve? What is the significance of this? These questions are a puzzle. As children, we unconsciously follow the social norms, and often live without thinking about these questions. This is common. But for those who have a more sensitive perception of their situations, those living in unfavourable environments, those experiencing failure in their career, or those who are debilitated by illnesses, may lose some, or all of their hope. Then questions arise, “What is the significance of life? What are we busy indulging in?” Although these questions sometimes come to us, or linger in our mind, we may feel there is no way out. We keep on indulging in working, eating, and grooming.

But what actually is the meaning of our lives?

For some, “Everything is void” is the answer. For them, it is meaningless to engage oneself busily in working, eating, or grooming.... Let me tell you about one of the old popular songs. It was called the “Awareness Song”. The initial part of the song was,

*“The sky is nothing,
the earth is nothing,
and human beings are pervasively in between.”*

It then continued,

*“The husband is nothing,
the wife is nothing,
and when disaster comes, all must part.
The mother is nothing,
the son is nothing,
there is no meeting after death.”*

In the last line it says,

*“Living is just like the bee collecting nectar,
after the collection of nectar from all the flowers, and
the manufacturing of honey,
the effort eventually becomes void as old age arrives.”*

How depressing this song was, how lifeless! “Everything is just nothing”. It suggests that life is meaningless. This is vastly different from the concept of “Everything is empty” in Buddhism.

The “Awareness Song” represents perceptions which are dull, depressing and nihilistic. Buddhism rejects the notion of ultimativity¹, but recognizes the relative significance of reality and lives. The Buddha discovered the universal truth about life which revealed an ultimate refuge for us all.

Although there are certainly insecurities, sadness, and sorrow in the journey of life, it does not mean that life is meaningless. Although life may be imperfect, there should still

¹ *Ultimativity here refers to an ultimate beginning, end, or permanent state.*

be something meaningful that can console us to continue our lives. The old saying in Chinese,

*“To achieve virtue,
To achieve distinction,
To achieve glory by writing, “*

are the “Three Immortal Acts”. That is, if we have lived and performed these Three Immortal Acts, then the purpose of our lives is fulfilled and this has will be an ever-lasting significance.

Generally, the significance of life for most people can be divided into two groups; (i) the significance is within the present life and world; and (ii) the significance is in the future heaven. Those who belong to the first group can be further divided into three types.

1. Life is for the family — Some people place great emphasis on the continuity of the family. For them, even though the individual may pass away, the fact that the family continues means that there is an ever-lasting significance for their lives. This concept is common to Confucian philosophy in China. People must remember and appreciate their ancestors. The elderly only wish for a few grandchildren. While alive, they propagate their families and look after the grandchildren. For life after death, they look forward to the worship of the descendants. With this view of life, they are able to withstand all the suffering, and lead contented lives. According to this concept, there is a saying in Chinese,

*“There are three major offences
against filial piety,
and the gravest offence is
if one does not produce an heir.”*

In addition, one’s descendants will reap the fruits of whatever deeds one has done, either good or bad. Thus, there is another saying in Chinese,

*“A family of accumulated good deeds
shall be blessed with abundance.
A family of accumulated evil deeds
shall suffer misfortune.”*

2. Life is for the country — Some people focus their attentions on their nation and country. The significance of life is to contribute to the enhancement of national pride or development. Extremely patriotic people think that individuals belong to the nation, and it is only within the context of the nation that an individual’s life has any significance. For these people, the only purpose of life is to implement the country’s goals. This concept stems from the same origin as the concept of the family.

In the past, there were tribes who treated the whole tribe as one unit. If an individual in the tribe came under duress, it was perceived as a risk to the whole tribe, and hence the whole tribe responded to the threat. Under this concept, those who sacrificed themselves for the sake of the whole tribe were elevated to the level of a God. As the tribes have gradually expanded (or assimilated/conquered other tribes) to form countries in these modern times, so the concept of the tribe

has been replaced with the concept of a nation. Thus the significance of life based on the prosperity and strength of a nation is quite different to the Confucian ideal emphasizing nurturing and survival activities for only close relatives.

3. Life is for all Mankind — Some people prefer to consider humanity as a whole. The significance of life is on the progress of human society. Only with the progress and civilization of the human race is there a meaning to life. With this aspiration for all human beings, one should strive for the development of all humanity, and work hard for the benefit of the majority.

However, to place the significance of life on the family, or nation, or the human race is not one that people like to do willingly. We try to hang on to something because of the fear that our body and mind will degenerate one day. But can we assure that these are the real meanings of life? If the significance of life is on the family, for those who do not have any offspring, does it mean that it is meaningless to live? If the significance of life is on the country, from the perspective of history, there were so many highly prosperous countries and civilizations, but where are they now? They have long vanished and are only regarded as anthropological evidences now! Then, what about living for the advancement of mankind? Human activities rely on the existence of the earth. Although it may still be a very long time to go, it is inevitable that the earth will degenerate one day. What is significance of life when the earth ceases to support the human activities? It seems these three significances of life adopted by most people will eventually become void. Their ideas cannot get away from the ideology mentioned in the Awareness Song.

The concept of “a future in the heaven” has been used by most worldly religions, especially religion with God in the Western countries to explain the significance of life. In these religions, the world where we humans now live, is just a illusion. Human beings that live in this world, believe in the God, love the God, and abide by His instructions in order to go to the Heaven in the future. Some religions say, the end of the world is coming, and those who have no faith in the God will be trapped in the hell of eternal suffering; whereas those who believe in the God will get into the heaven and enjoy the eternal bliss. So it would seem, all the faith, morality and good actions people do is motivated by their desire to prepare for their entry into the heaven. But this heaven is something for the future. It is impossible to go to heaven while still living as a human being. Therefore, the concept of a heaven is only a belief. In reality, heaven cannot be proven to exist. It seems rather vague to use the existence of something that cannot be proven as one’s purpose for living!

As mentioned earlier, Buddhism denies that there is any permanent and absolute significance of life, and described life as unsatisfactory (s. dukkha) and void (s. sunyata). However, Buddha acknowledged that there is a relative significance of life, and it is through this relative and conditioned nature of life that we can achieve and realize the universal truth. According to the discourses of the Buddha, our lives, and the world, are nothing but phenomena that rise and fall. It is a process of forming and degenerating. There is nothing that is not subject to change or impermanence. Impermanence indicates that there is no eternal bliss, because even a joyous state will eventually cease and become suffering. Because

there is suffering, there will be no ultimate and complete freedom. Hence, the Buddha taught about non-self ('self' implies the existence). The Brahmin of the Buddha's era considered life and the world by conceptualizing that there was a metaphysical entity who has the nature of "permanence", "happiness" and "self". This concept was completely refuted by the Buddha and He described it as delusion. The Buddha observed the reality and taught the truth of "impermanence", "suffering" and "non-self". From these truths of life, i.e. impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self, how can we establish the significance of our lives?

According to the Buddha, life and the world, and existence, are "Dependent Originated". Dependent origination means that all phenomena and all existence, do not arise due to the instruction of a God, or nature, or fate, or spontaneity, but to the Law of Dependent Origination. Under the interplay of the main, auxiliary, and the various complicated conditions and reasons, we exist now as we are. Everything exists due to causes and conditions. From the perspective of the causes and conditions, existence is referred to as the effect. Therefore, life and the world are the product of a stream of extremely complicated causes and effects, and they are strictly abide by the Law of Cause and Effect.

The existence of human beings is therefore entirely dependent-originated. Dependent origination has a concomitant reciprocating relationship externally, and a past-to-future continuous relationship internally. For example, we have a reciprocating relationship and mutually-affected action and reaction relationship simultaneously with other human beings, other sentient beings, and nature, which

includes the earth, water, fire and wind (air). One type of existence, constitutes one type of activity that has at the same time, different effects on oneself as well as to the others, resulting in different karmic relationships. For instance, in one country, the political, economic, educational or foreign policy, will definitely affect other countries in some ways, although the greatest effect will be on the country itself. This is the same for a social organization, or a family. All actions will affect other social organizations or families; but the greatest effect is on the particular social organization or family itself. As for the individual, his speech and behavior will affect the others, but at the same time these actions will also affect the individual and his future. Even for those ideas within his mind that are not expressed, they will also affect him physiologically and mentally. The dependent-originated world and life is actually the network of our relationship with one and another. One could be motivated or being motivated. In the Sutras, this is described as “the illusory network” or “the pervasive network”. Understanding this infinite, reciprocating, and continuous relationship can help us comprehend our life and everything in the world.

From the principle of cause and effect, Buddhism explains that the body and mind activity of an individual, be it good or evil, will not only affect the individual internally, creating potentially habitual tendencies (karma), but also influence others externally. When our body and mind disintegrate and death comes, our habitual tendencies (the karma), with our desire to be reborn and attachment to life as the conditions, propagates into a new composition of body and mind. This is the beginning of a new life. From continuous causes and conditions and their effects, impermanence and non-self, there

is an infinite flow of life which continues from one to another. (This is different from the teachings of other religions that there is a permanent soul.) This is like a country, where there is a continuous disintegration of dynasties followed by the formation of new dynasties.

Life is dependent originated. For all the good and evil deeds we do, their results will be experienced in this life, or in our new lives in the future. The Law of Cause and Effect is the axiom. The combinations of mind and body of this life will disintegrate and die. All our actions, the good and evil deeds, will determine our future. The karma of sentient beings is continuous, be it good or evil, has a positive or negative significance which will influence our conditions in the future. Therefore, death is part of the process of life; it is not a sudden disappearance. Every act has its result, life after life, we continue to create new karma. When we experience temporary suffering or downfall, we should not feel disappointed. It will be only a temporary phenomena. Our future may still be bright. The avoidance of suffering and the attainment of happiness can only be achieved by avoiding evil and doing good according to the Law of Cause and Effect. It cannot be achieved by pure luck nor by the help of any God.

To be able to lead a human life is actually the result of the good karma. The good or evil deeds of this life will determine the higher or lower realms of our future life. The Buddha kept telling us that “It is precious to be born as human”. However, many Buddhists sometimes misunderstand the teaching of the Buddha. They only brood over the suffering of human beings, and do not appreciate that it is precious to be born as a human being!

According to the Sutra, humans have three supreme characteristics. These characteristics are not only better than animals, ghosts and beings in the hells, but they are also better than the Devas in the heavenly realms. What are these characteristics? They are morality, knowledge and steadfast determination. In the human world, we know about suffering and are able to help those who suffer. But morality, knowledge and human determination is sometimes not completely satisfactory. It has its side effects' sometimes including a tendency for humans to self-destruct. But through these three qualities, human beings are able to develop a sophisticated culture. This is a fact that cannot be denied.

During the evolution of mankind, we have come to realize that there is dissatisfaction and incompleteness in life. This prompts us to pursue perfection and completion. Human beings can avoid evil deeds, perform good deeds and accumulate merits. We can upgrade ourselves. According to Buddhism, humans are the only beings that can renounce the world and aspire to the mind of Bodhi (Bodhicitta). Only human beings can transcend relativity and have the possibility to experience the absolute state (which corresponds to the initial state of enlightenment). How precious human life is! We should understand the value of, "It is precious to be born as human". Then the significance of life can be well understood. We should appreciate and utilize our lives, and do our best not to waste it.

Let us talk about the significance of life from the perspective of absolutes. Human beings are able to practice meritorious deeds and upgrade themselves. But actually this

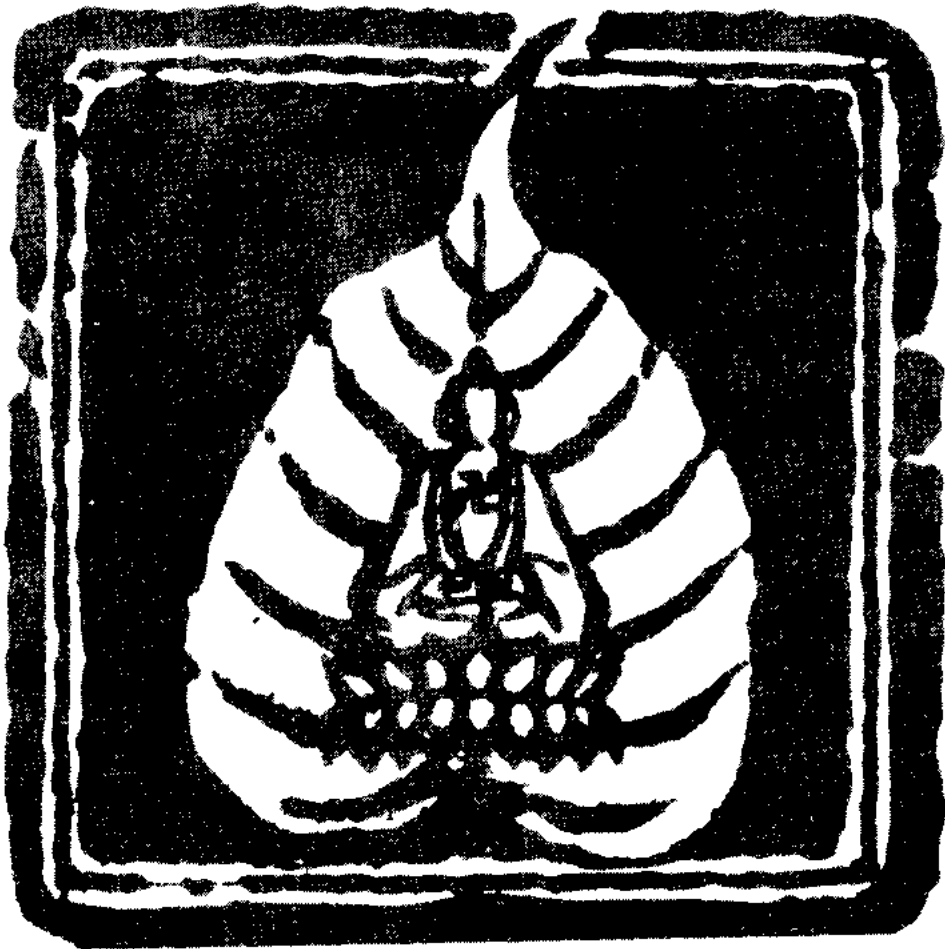
may not be perfect. It does not carry an eternal significance because any wisdom or merit will disintegrate in time. We can only say that as humans, we are still experiencing ups and downs in the cycle of transmigration. But we are able to realize our weaknesses. From these unsatisfactoriness, the ambition and the urge to attain perfection and completion arise. The worry is, if our wish for perfection is unrealistic, we may be led to believe in the imaginative eternal world of heaven by the followers of a divinity.

According to Buddhism, the reality of life is dependent originated. The only way to transcend the state of relativity and experience the state of absoluteness, is to understand, grasp and experience the nature of dependent-origination. Dependent-origination is a phenomenon of impermanence and non-self. Life is also impermanent (not everlasting), and non-self (not self-exists). Everything exists according to the Law of Dependent-Origination. From the perspective of the Law of Cause and Effect, why do we have to live life after life without a halt? The reason is, sentient beings including human beings cling and become attached to their own self, and they conduct all sorts of activity with this self-attachment. These activities generate karma, resulting in the individual's repertoire of cause and effect. This leads to their continuous existence in the cycle of life and death. Conversely, if these self-attachments can be eradicated, the conditions to live will not arise. Then, we will be free from the cycle of live and death and attain the state of:

*“Free from the phenomena of birth and extinction,
Immersed in the bliss (s. sukha) of Nirvana.”*

Why do we have self-attachment? Self-attachment (it is the cause of selfishness in human beings) arises from our ignorance. We are being deluded and confused by worldly phenomena and unable to recognize the truth of dependent-origination of all phenomena, i.e. not knowing things as they truly are. From this phenomena of birth and extinction, Buddha shows us the eternal nature of dependent origination through various profound skilful means. With reference to the worldly phenomena, this Law of Dependent Origination is beyond time and space, beyond relativity and beyond birth and extinction. The Law of Dependent Origination is always as such. It is because of the defilement of self-clinging and self-attachment that human beings are deluded. With our morality, wisdom, and determination, and the guidance of the Buddha, we may develop our practice and transcend the mundane state of human beings. Then we may realise and experience the ultimate absolute from the dependent originated worldly conditions. If we can attain this blissful state, we will find that although life is still life, every present state of life is eternal, and every moment is a moment of liberation. There may be some difference between the teaching of Sravakayana and Mahayana, but the core principles are the same.

Life is meaningful. Not only should we discover its worthiness, we should also realize its ultimate significance. With this human life, we can progress to the attainment of Buddhahood. How precious our lives are! (*Translated by Mok Chung, edited by Ke Rong, proofread by Shi Neng Rony. (18-10-96)*)



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First Print: December, 1996

*For reprint please contact the publisher at
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