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The Unique Characteristics of Buddhism

Buddhism in Every Step (A2)
（英文版）

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Every religion or philosophy has its own set of doctrines or critical ideas. Buddhism is no exception. This booklet describes some of the ideas that make Buddhism stand out from other religions and explains the relevance of those terms. Karma has become a recently popularized word in the West, but what does the word really mean in Buddhism? What are the primary different forms of karma we experience in our lives? Dependent origination is another critical Buddhist idea that encompasses all existence. How does everything come into existence in the first place? Dependant origination helps explain the Buddhist perspective on such matters. Next, I will introduce the idea of "emptiness." This does not mean that Buddhists don't believe in anything; on the contrary, emptiness helps explain the Buddhist view

on the essence of all existence. Finally, this booklet describes the "three Dharma seals," the central three factors of Buddhist philosophy that help encapsulate all other Buddhist concepts and thus help determine whether other ideas could be called Buddhist or not. This framework of karma, dependant origination, emptiness, and the three Dharma seals introduce a few of the most significant areas of Buddhist thought.

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I. Karma

Karma is one of the most fundamental teachings of Buddhism. Among all Buddhist doctrines, it is the most important. At the same time, it is often the most misunderstood. *Karma* is a Sanskrit word that means "action" or "deed." Any intentional physical, verbal, or mental action is karma. As an umbrella term, karma can also be used to refer to not only one's intentional actions, but also the responses to and effects of these actions. Karma can be generated by one's deeds, words, and thoughts. Some examples of unwholesome karma created by the body are killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Unwholesome karma created by speech includes lying, flattery, duplicity, and harsh speech. Unwholesome karma created by the mind includes greed, anger, and ignorance. However, karma refers to more than just unwholesome karma. The

karma of body, speech, and mind creates happiness in our lives as well as sorrow.

Broadly speaking, there is wholesome karma, unwholesome karma, and neutral karma, which is neither wholesome nor unwholesome. Wholesome karma is action that is moral and benefits others. Unwholesome karma is action that harms others. Any action that does not have a moral component, which cannot be said to be good or bad, is neutral karma. When we perform wholesome or unwholesome actions, they are stored as karmic seeds within our *alaya* consciousness, which acts as a storehouse for all of our karma. When the right conditions are present, these karmic seeds will generate karmic effects. Wholesome karmic effects provide us with blessings in our lives and lead to rebirth in the higher realms. Unwholesome karmic effects bring suffering in our lives and lead to rebirth in the lower realms. Those beings who have attained great degrees of meditative concentration may also be reborn in the form or formless realms, where beings are constantly absorbed in states of meditative bliss.

Karma can also be divided according to the time that its effects reach fruition. Karmic effects can ripen in this life, in the next life, or in future lives beyond the next. Across the past, present, and future, karma is never lost or forgotten. Karmic effects mature at different rates, just like some crops are ready

to harvest in a single season, while others require several seasons before they are ready.

Those who do not understand karma may see kind people suffer misfortune and wicked people live comfortably and think that karma must not exist. Such people may say, "We are living in the twenty-first century. Why still believe in old-fashioned superstitions like the law of karma?" However, the relationship between karmic causes and effects are very complicated. In fact, all of existence arises dependent on karma and does so in a very orderly and precise manner.

Karmic effects ripen at different times according to two different factors. The first factor is how weighty the karmic cause is. The second is the strength of the conditions necessary to bring about the effect. That being said, all wholesome and unwholesome karma will eventually produce karmic effects. It is just a matter of time. A good person who is suffering in this life suffers because the karma from previous lives is finally producing effects now. Even though he does wholesome deeds in this life, they may not ripen and produce karmic effects until the next life. The bad person who lives an easy life is enjoying the wholesome karma of previous lives that is only now producing effects, but the unwholesome karma that he is creating in his present life will still ripen and mature one day.

Karma is inevitable. Once something is done, wholesome or unwholesome, the seeds of karma are stored in the *alaya* consciousness and will one day produce effects when the conditions are right. Wholesome and unwholesome karma also do not "cancel each other out." Unwholesome karma will produce unwholesome effects. These effects cannot be removed by doing good deeds. The only thing that can be done is to do more good deeds to generate positive conditions. The severity of the effects of unwholesome karma can be lessened, or wholesome effects can be caused to ripen more quickly.

Consider the following: A glass of water has salt added to it until the water tastes salty. The salt is similar to unwholesome karma. If we add fresh water, similar to wholesome karma, the salt water becomes diluted, so it tastes less salty. That is why it is important to do wholesome deeds and create positive conditions.

Some people may say, "I have been a vegetarian my whole life, but what do I have to show for it? I've gone bankrupt!" or "I have been bowing to the Buddha and reciting Amitabha Buddha's name for a long time, yet my health has not improved!" Such people do not understand karma. Morality is governed by its own causes and effects, just as finance is governed by its own causes and effects, or health is governed by its own separate causes and effects.

If you want to be healthy, you need to pay attention to what you eat, get an adequate amount of exercise, and maintain good hygiene. If you do not pay attention to these things and simply believe that reciting Amitabha Buddha's name will give you good health, you do not understand karma.

If you want to be financially successful, then you must practice sound business management. You cannot expect to become wealthy just because you are a vegetarian. Again, this is a misunderstanding of karma. People need to understand that most things in life do not come free. Believing in the Buddha will not help you achieve your goals. Effort and results are directly proportional. One needs to put in a sufficient amount of effort for a certain amount of results. Even if a calculator or computer were used to add up the wholesome and unwholesome deeds committed by a person, it would not be as accurate as the law of karma.

Karmic effects that manifest at the time of death can be divided into weighed karma, habitual karma, and recollective karma. Weighed karma means that if a person has performed both wholesome and unwholesome karma, then whichever is heavier will manifest first.

Habitual karma will also manifest itself according to one's daily habits. The Pure Land School of Buddhism teaches people to recite Amitabha

Buddha's name so that this practice will become a habit and that at the time of passing away, the Pure Land practitioner will recite Amitabha Buddha's name by habit and thus be reborn in the Pure Land.

Recollective karma means that one's karma manifests according to one's memory. For example, when a person is on the street and comes to a cross-road, he may be at a loss as to which direction he should go. Suddenly, he remembers that he has a friend on the street that leads west, so he continues in a western direction. He may be guided by his recollective karma in a similar fashion.

Whether or not a person is reborn as a human is determined by his or her own karma. We are born as human beings as a result of our previous karma. In other words, karma is the strong force that drives us to be reborn in our present lives as human beings, instead of being reborn as dogs or horses. Though we are all human beings, we nonetheless have individual differences, such as being intelligent or foolish, virtuous or unruly, rich or poor, or being born into noble or humble circumstances. These variations are due to differences in the past karma performed by each of us during our past lives. Those who were generous in their previous lives will become rich, while those who have killed others will consequently have a short lifespan. The karma that "fills in the details" of our rebirths is called completing karma.

Karma can also be divided into the categories of collective and individual karma: the karma performed by a single person will give rise to a certain force; the karma performed by hundreds and thousands of people will give rise to a greater force; the karma performed by millions and billions of people will give rise to an even greater force. These latter two forces are called collective karma.

The collective behavior of many beings will produce a very strong karmic effect that determines the course of life, history, and the universe. Individual karma differs from collective karma in that it only affects the individual. For example, people experience natural disasters such as famines and earthquakes if they live in the disaster area. The disasters are manifested due to the collective karma of the people within the disaster area. However, during the same disaster, each person may be affected differently, due to his or her own individual karma.

There are many ways to categorize and understand karma. But regardless of the system used to understand karma, karma is governed by several overarching principles:

1. Karma Is Self-Created

We are responsible for our actions, good or bad, as well as their wholesome and unwholesome effects.

Karmic effects are not bestowed upon us by deities or gods, nor is punishment inflicted upon us by King Yama.

2. Karma Applies to All Equally

Karma applies to all beings equally, and no one receives special treatment. Wholesome actions produce wholesome effects, and unwholesome actions produce unwholesome effects. Some might say that people are equal under the law as well; however, there are still people who enjoy special privileges under the legal system. Karma is absolutely fair: no one enjoys any special privileges at all.

A Japanese government minister left the following five words after being sentenced: "wrong," "reason," "law," "power," and "heaven." What this means is that "wrong" cannot win against "reason," "reason" cannot win against "law," "law" cannot win against "power," and "power" cannot win against "heaven." If we visit the prisons, we will discover that not all convicted felons are irrevocably guilty and unreasonable. Some of them may even have plausible reasons to justify the crime that they have committed. However, it does not matter how reasonable one may be; the deed committed may still be against the law. The law may be just and fair, but there are

certain privileged people who have the power to manipulate the law. But no matter how much power one has, the effects of karma cannot be avoided.

3. Karma Gives Us Hope for the Future

Even if we have done many wholesome deeds, we should not think too highly of ourselves. The merit from our wholesome deeds accumulates like a bank account. No matter how much we have saved in the past, if we keep withdrawing without making any deposits, eventually our bank account will be empty. Conversely, those who do many unwholesome deeds may feel a heavy burden and consider life hopeless, but if they work hard to change their karma, there will come a time when all their "debts" are paid off. A person who has broken the law must serve their sentence before they are released to start a new life. Karma is similar. The future is in our own hands, for we are free to decide in which direction we want to go. Karma can give us hope that the future can be bright.

4. Good Begets Good and Bad Begets Bad

Something as direct as "good begets good, and bad begets bad" may at first sound fatalistic. It is true that karma decides our future, but we are the ones who

create our karma. The effects we experience depend on the causes we create. Someone may ask, "Did Sakyamuni Buddha still feel the effects of unwholesome karma after he became fully enlightened?" The answer is yes.

A person may have committed countless wholesome and unwholesome deeds in his or her past lives, but unless the conditions are present for the karmic effects to manifest, it is as if these wholesome and unwholesome deeds do not exist. This is similar to planting seeds in soil. If the seeds are not provided with the right conditions for growth, then they will not grow. However, when the right conditions are provided, they will grow healthily even if there are some weeds mixed among them. That is to say, we need not overly dwell on unwholesome karma that we have committed in the past. If we keep sowing good seeds in this life, then the seeds of our previous unwholesome karma will not have the opportunity to grow. Thus, with this clearer understanding of karma, we can effectively work toward happiness.

II. Dependent Origination

Sakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, attained awakening while sitting beneath the bodhi tree. The truth that he realized that night he later called the truth of "dependent origination." Dependent

origination is the Buddhist doctrine that all phenomena arise due to causes and conditions. During the Buddha's forty-nine year teaching career, he gave special attention to the doctrine of dependent origination, for it is one of the features that distinguishes Buddhism from other religions.

Dependent origination states that, since all phenomena arise due to causes and conditions, all existence in the universe is interdependent. From something as large as the universe to something as small as a speck of dust or a blade of grass, all things arise due to causes and conditions.

This principle cannot be understood through academic knowledge alone. It has to be experienced and realized through actual practice. Before the Buddha renounced secular life, he was already very well versed in the philosophy of the four Vedas, the five classical Indian sciences (composition, mathematics, medicine, logic, and philosophy), and the many practices and meditation techniques of the various mendicant religions. But he only realized the truth of dependent origination upon attaining Buddhahood.

During the time of the Buddha, there was a Brahmin named Sariputra. He had amassed many followers, and though he had been searching for a long time, he had yet to realize the truth. One day, Sariputra was walking on a street in Rajagrha when he met Asvajit, one of the Buddha's first five disciples.

Asvajit was deeply influenced by the Buddha's teachings and always practiced what the Buddha taught. Asvajit's demeanor and outward appearance earned him the respect of people who saw him. Sariputra asked him respectfully, "Who are you? Who is your teacher? What does he teach you?"

Asvajit replied, "All phenomena arise due to causes and conditions; all phenomena cease due to causes and conditions. Lord Buddha, the Great Sage, always teaches thus."

Sariputra was overjoyed when he heard this. He imparted the wonderful news to his good friend, Maudgalyayana. The two of them, together with all of their respective followers, went to follow the Buddha. Among the disciples, Sariputra became the foremost in great wisdom, while Maudgalyayana became the most prominent in supernatural powers, all of which arose from that one teaching on dependent origination.

There are three primary principles of dependent origination:

1. Effects Arise from Causes

No phenomena can exist without suitable causes and conditions. In this instance, a "cause" is the direct force that brings about an effect, while a "condition" is a secondary, indirect factor that contributes to an effect.

No phenomenon simply arises by itself. For example, let us consider a soybean. The soybean is a seed, the main cause. Water, soil, sunlight, air, and fertilizer are the necessary secondary conditions. If these causes and conditions come together in an appropriate manner, then the seed can germinate, bloom, and produce fruit. Thus, the fruit arises from causes. If we store this soybean in a granary or place it on gravel, it will always remain a seed. The seed cannot grow and bear fruit in the absence of the necessary external conditions.

When we look at society over a long period of time, it may seem like the status of a society in any given period has nothing to do with society as it was or as it will later become. But with careful analysis, we can see that each societal moment cannot arise without the society of the previous moment.

Let us take the example of a torch. When the flame from one torch is passed on to a new torch, the previous and the subsequent torches are two separate entities. However, there is a very subtle relationship between these two torches. The flame of the new torch is a continuation of the flame of the old torch. In the flow of time, it is impossible to find an entity isolated from all other entities.

Sometimes, two things may seem like they have no relationship at all, but if we look carefully, we

can see the causes and conditions that connect the two phenomena. For example, when I give a Dharma talk, it is only able to happen because of many different causes and conditions. Someone needs to invite me, I must be available, the venue must be open, and the audience must be interested enough to come. Only when these all come together can the talk happen. If even a single one of these causes and conditions was lacking, it would not be possible.

People also exist due to causes and conditions. Our advanced technology can create many things, but it still cannot create life itself. Life arises from causes and conditions. The joining of the father's sperm with the mother's ovum gives rise to a new life. Life will only continue if certain conditions are present, such as food provided by farmers, and other necessities made by workers and sold by merchants. A house cannot exist unless cement, wood, bricks, and other construction materials are put together in the proper order, and a person is like this as well. If we were to separate a person's skin, flesh, blood, and bones, the person would certainly no longer exist. In this same way, all phenomena arise from causes and conditions.

When we talk about the formation of life, which came first, the chicken or the egg? If the chicken came first and the egg came later, then where did the chicken come from? If the egg came first and the chicken came later, then where did the egg come from?

For example, the clock on the wall runs continuously from one o'clock to twelve o'clock and from twelve o'clock back to one o'clock. Which is the beginning? Which is the end? It is very difficult to say because there is no beginning and no end. From this, we can understand that causes and conditions are interdependent and interrelated. The best summary of dependent origination is offered by the Buddha himself: "This exists, therefore, that exists; this arises, therefore, that arises; this is absent, therefore, that is absent; this ceases, therefore, that ceases."

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2. All Phenomena Arise According to Principles

Dependent origination is subtle and profound and can be difficult to understand. It cannot be analyzed using scientific techniques, nor can it be clarified by the metaphysics of philosophy. It is a truth of the universe that cannot be found in secular teachings. In *The Agamas*, the Buddha said that dependent origination is a unique characteristic of Buddhism.

Dependent origination states that all phenomena arise according to principles, the most fundamental principle being the law of karma. For example, the Buddha said all things that arise will one day cease. From the viewpoint of time, this statement can apply in the past, present, and future. From the viewpoint

of space, this statement is true in every part of the world. Regardless of how developed we are culturally or how advanced we are technologically, we cannot escape the fact that anything that arises will eventually cease. Nothing that is contrary to this principle can exist. This is what is meant when we say, "All phenomena arise according to principles."

Another principle is that a given cause will generate a particular effect. This is the way it has always been, it will inevitably occur in this way, and it is so universally. Truth cannot be modified via debates and need not be described in words. It simply is.

3. Existence Arises from Emptiness

Where did this all come from? According to dependent origination, all phenomena arise from emptiness. Without emptiness, all phenomena would not exist. Why? Because without emptiness, there can be no existence. In its Buddhist usage, "emptiness" does not mean nothingness, but the "empty nature" of all phenomena. Without their empty nature, phenomena would be unable to manifest their functions.

Some people misunderstand the meaning of emptiness and interpret it as meaning that Buddhists must give up everything. However, according to Buddhism, "emptiness" is the basis of all existence. For example, there is a lot of empty space in the

human body. We are only alive because there is some empty space in our ears and some empty space in our digestive system. If the nose, mouth, and stomach were not empty, how could we survive?

If a bed was not empty, then it could not hold anything. If the universe was not empty, then human life could not exist. Thus, there is existence only if there is emptiness. Without emptiness, all phenomena could not arise from conditions, and thus, there would be no arising or ceasing of anything.

Based on this phenomenon of existence, in the chapter on the Four Noble Truths in *The Middle Way Treatise*, Nagarjuna said, "Because there is emptiness, all phenomena can arise; if there is no emptiness, all phenomena cannot arise."

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III. Emptiness

Ordinary people often misunderstand emptiness and equate it to nothingness. This is a misconception. We have already mentioned the phenomenon of dependent origination, in which all phenomena arise and cease due to causes and conditions. When the proper causes and conditions come together, phenomena arise, and when these same causes and conditions come apart, phenomena cease. Because these phenomena are merely an assembly of other factors, they lack an intrinsic nature and are thus "empty."

Most people think that existence is firm, solid, and real. According to Buddhism, it is temporary and illusory, as it comes into existence because of dependent origination. But existence does not preclude emptiness. In the same way, the presence of emptiness as the nature of all things does not preclude existence. Dependent origination and emptiness affirm one another.

I would like to describe how emptiness interrelates with other Buddhist concepts and provide descriptions and examples of how the concept of emptiness is viewed in daily life:

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1. The Four Great Elements and the Five Aggregates

In Mahayana Buddhism, emptiness means infinity, not nothingness. Emptiness is constructive, and accounts for the existence of the world and the universe. The Buddha said that the four great elements and the five aggregates, the constituent components of reality, are all empty.

All phenomena are formations of the four great elements. What are they? They are earth, water, fire, and wind. Earth has the property of solidity, water has the property of fluidity, fire has the property of heat, and wind has the property of mobility.

Consider how a cup is made. A cup is produced by firing clay that is molded into the shape of a cup. The main ingredient, clay, belongs to the earth element. Water is then added to the clay in order to make the clay malleable. The cup is then fired in order to solidify its shape. Finally, the cup is cooled and dried by the wind. Even something as simple as making a cup involves all four elements.

The human body is also formed by the unity of the four great elements. For example, our skin, hair, nails, teeth, bones, and flesh all belong to the earth element. Our blood, saliva, and urine belong to the water element. Our body heat belongs to the fire element, and our breathing and movement belong to the wind element. Thus, if any one of these four great elements is out of balance, we will become ill. If these four great elements disintegrate, we will no longer exist.

As we can see, our bodies are a combination of the four great elements. The body and the mind together are made up of the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. Life is a combination of many causes and conditions that lack a true, independent, and intrinsic nature.

Su Dongpo was a notable Chinese scholar and poet during the Song dynasty who maintained a close friendship with the great Chan Master Foyin. Once,

Su Dongpo went to visit the Chan master when he was teaching the Dharma. When the Chan master saw Su Dongpo, he said to him, "Mr. Su, where did you just come from? We do not have a place for you to sit."

Su Dongpo replied immediately, "Master, if there is no seat, why don't you lend me your four great elements and five aggregates to use as my meditation seat?"

Chan Master Foyin said, "I have a question for you. If you can give me a satisfactory answer, I will let you use me as your seat. If you cannot give me an answer, then please leave your jade belt behind as a souvenir. Here is my question: my four great elements are all empty and my five aggregates do not have true existence. May I ask where you are going to sit?"

Su Dongpo could not give him an answer. So he removed his jade belt, which had been bestowed to him by the emperor, and left.

2. Defining Emptiness

Most people do not understand emptiness. They think it means complete nullity and nothingness. This is not so. In fact, emptiness is a most profound and wonderful philosophy. If one can truly understand emptiness, one can understand the entirety of

Buddhism. What, then, is emptiness? It is simply not possible to explain the meaning of emptiness in just one sentence. *The Explanation of the Awakening of Faith in Mahayana Treatise* lists ten definitions of emptiness. Although these definitions cannot thoroughly explain the true meaning of emptiness, they are close approximations:

1. Emptiness does not obstruct. It pervades everything but hinders nothing.
2. Emptiness embraces all places. It spreads everywhere. There is nowhere it is not present.
3. Emptiness is equality. It has no preference for one thing over another.
4. Emptiness is immense. It is vast, without limits and boundaries.
5. Emptiness is formless. It has no shape or figure.
6. Emptiness is pure. It is devoid of defilement.
7. Emptiness is motionless. It is always still. It is not born and does not die and does not arise or cease.
8. Emptiness is unlimited. It completely negates all things that have limits.
9. Emptiness is empty. It completely negates the substantial existence of all things and destroys all attachments to it.
10. Emptiness cannot be clung to, caught, or held.

Although no single definition can entirely describe the truth of emptiness, together these ten definitions provide a vivid depiction for us to better understand how important the concept of emptiness is in Buddhist teaching.

3. Perceiving Emptiness

How can we come to know emptiness? We can actually recognize emptiness by observing existence. The following are seven such approaches:

1. Emptiness can be known through the continuous succession of events. All things are impermanent, and time marches on without interruption. As the march of impermanence continues, we can know emptiness.
2. Emptiness can be known by observing natural cycles. All things are governed by cause and effect: a seed is a cause that generates a fruit as an effect. The seeds in that fruit in turn become the cause for future effects. When we see that cause becomes effect and effect becomes cause, we can know emptiness.
3. Emptiness can be known from the compounding of various elements. All phenomena are made up of many components. For example, the human body is made from skin,

flesh, bones, blood, and various fluids. If each of these parts were separated, no "human body" that existed apart from the components could be found.

4. Emptiness can be known through the relative nature of phenomena. All phenomena are defined by how they relate to one another, just as a father is a father because he has a son, and a teacher is a teacher because he has students. But when a son gets married and has children of his own, he, too, becomes a father. Likewise, a student who learns well can become a teacher. Thus, each of these is relative and empty.
5. Emptiness can be known through the lack of absolute standards. For example, if we see the light from a candle in the darkness, we may say that the light is bright, but if we were to turn on an electric light, the candle may then seem dim. We may say that the speed of an automobile is very fast, but it is slow when compared with the speed of an airplane. With no set standard, we can see each of these qualifications as being empty.
6. Emptiness can be known through the temporary nature of names. Everything in the universe has a name, but these names are non-substantial and thus are empty. For

example, a female baby is called a baby girl. When she has grown up, she is referred to as "Miss." When she gets married, she will be addressed as "Mrs." When she has her own children, they will call her "mother." When she is old and has grandchildren, she is then known as a grandmother. From a baby girl to a grandmother, she is still the same person, though her name has changed.

7. Emptiness can be known by examining the difference in perspectives. Different people with different states of mind will have unique views of the same thing or event. For example, on a snowy night, a poet sitting in front of a window inside a warm and cozy house hopes that the snow will continue through the night, so he can enjoy more beautiful scenery. In contrast, a homeless person shivering in the cold hopes that the snow will soon stop; otherwise, he may not be able to make it through the night.

IV. The Three Dharma Seals

The three Dharma seals are a Buddhist doctrine that is used to test the veracity of other doctrines. If a teaching holds true against the three Dharma seals, it is a true teaching of the Buddha. If a teaching fails

to pass the three Dharma seals, it is not a true teaching. The three Dharma seals are (1) all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, (2) all phenomena are without an independent self, and (3) nirvana is perfect tranquility.

1. All Conditioned Phenomena Are Impermanent

"All conditioned phenomena" is really another way of saying "everything in the world." According to Buddhism, nothing is permanent. All conditioned phenomena are impermanent in two ways: first, because they are in a constant state of flux as they flow from the past, to the present, to the future; and secondly, because they arise due to causes and conditions and disperse due to causes and conditions.

The mind is also impermanent. Our thoughts change every moment, constantly arising and ceasing. All phenomena in the universe arise and cease from moment to moment. Their existence is a continuous process. Phenomena arise, abide, change, and cease. The seasons change from spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Life moves from birth, aging, sickness, to death. All of these continue on like a flowing river. Nothing ever remains unchanged in this continuous flux.

Buddhism says there are three types of feelings: pleasant feelings, painful feelings, and feelings that are neither pleasant nor painful. Painful feelings cause suffering, but pleasant feelings bring suffering as well because they are subject to decay. For example, health and beauty will give rise to pleasant feelings, but the loss of health and beauty can cause suffering. Even feelings that are neither pleasant nor painful can bring us suffering because of change. Examples of these kinds of feeling are those caused by the passing of time, the shortness of life, and the impermanence of all phenomena. All these perpetual changes bring people unbearable anguish—this is the suffering of impermanence. This is why the Buddhist teachings state that because all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, all feelings are suffering.

2. All Phenomena Are Without an Independent Self

Human beings like to cling to the "self." We believe that the "I" and "my" exist—*my* head, *my* body, *my* thoughts, *my* parents, *my* spouse and children. We see these things as ours and cling to them. Consequently, we become overly protective of what we see as ours. We look at the world and locate the "I" as the center of the universe, as if nothing would

exist without "I." However, according to the rational, penetrating perspective of the Buddhist teachings, there is actually no such thing as a permanent and independent "self." Why? For any entity to be called "self," it should fulfill four requirements: it must be permanent, in control, unchanging, and independent.

Let us now consider the human body, the entity that we tend to regard as "I." From the moment of birth, and continuing throughout the decades of a person's lifetime, the human body is perpetually undergoing the physiological changes of birth and death as it grows, matures, and ages. How, then, can it be permanent and unchanging? Formed from the four great elements and five aggregates, the human body comes into being when these conditions are present in their proper proportion, and ceases to be when that balance is no longer present.

How then can the human body be in control? The human body is where all varieties of suffering assemble—physical suffering such as hunger, cold, illness, fatigue, and mental suffering such as anger, hatred, sorrow, fear, and disappointment. When the body is undergoing all these sufferings, it simply cannot break free. How can it be independent and have control? Therefore, we can see that the "self" as we have defined it earlier does not exist. Therefore,

the Buddhist teachings state that all phenomena do not have an independent self.

The absence of an independent self is the foundation of the Middle Way; it is the fundamental teaching of Buddhism. The absence of an independent self is a teaching that differentiates Buddhism from other religious or philosophical doctrines.

3. Nirvana Is Perfect Tranquility

This means that no matter how chaotic things are in this world, they will eventually become tranquil. No matter how different things are, they will eventually become equal in the end. Indeed, the state of nirvana is tranquil. According to Buddhism, when the state of nirvana is attained, all afflictions and the cycle of birth and death are extinguished; there will be no more suffering, equanimity will be attained, perfect wisdom will be realized, and all delusion will be eradicated.

Ordinary people think that nirvana is attained only after death. Actually, nirvana is "without birth or death." Nirvana is the end of clinging, the elimination of the attachment to the "self" and the concept that things are real. It is the end of defilement and the hindrance of worldly knowledge. Nirvana is liberation. Defilement is bondage. A criminal chained and in shackles has lost his freedom. Likewise, the

chains of greed, anger, and ignorance bind sentient beings. If sentient beings practice the Dharma and put an end to these defilements, then they will all be liberated and thus attain nirvana. Nirvana cannot be attained in any other way.

During the Buddha's time, when one of the Buddha's disciples attained nirvana, they would travel to different places to teach. From their example we can see that nirvana is not something attained apart from all other phenomena. All phenomena are originally nirvana. However, because the mind is obscured by ignorance, delusion, clinging, and the supposition that the "self" and phenomena are real, we encounter obstacles, hindrances, and bondage everywhere we go.

If we can be like the Buddhist sages, who understand that all things arise due to dependent origination, then even though we still exist in this world, we can realize that all existence is ever-changing and lacks true intrinsic nature. We will no longer be attached; no matter where we are, we will be liberated. Liberation is nirvana.

Some people say that life is like an ocean in which there is perpetual motion, with waves coming one after the other. The continuous movement of the ocean exemplifies the impermanence of conditioned phenomena. If we can look at the waves through the eyes of the Buddhist sages, we then soon realize that

although the waves are turbulent, the nature of water is always calm. Likewise, life is an endless cycle of birth and death, but one's true intrinsic nature is always in a state of perfect peace. Thus, if we want to attain the liberation of nirvana, we have to realize it through the impermanence and insubstantiality of conditioned phenomena. It is impossible to find the state of perfect equanimity of nirvana without understanding impermanence and insubstantiality.

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