



# **The Buddhist Perspective on Mind Consciousness**

**Buddhism in Every Step** (A19)

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# **The Buddhist Perspective on Mind Consciousness**

Here, I would like to discuss with you the Buddhist perspective on mind consciousness.

We usually focus on our bodies but not our minds. Because the body needs nutrition, we eat our fill and wear clothes to keep warm: we know to maintain a healthy diet and avoid the harm of summer heat and winter chills. We even know how to apply skin care, put on makeup, or sculpt our bodies, but we rarely try to beautify our minds. In addition to the body, which we cherish the most, we cherish money. Day and night, we think of how to make a fortune, but we never think of discovering the treasure of our minds. We are also fond of our relatives and friends. As

soon as we have time, we check in with them to see how they are doing or try to build a closer relationship with them, but rarely do we think of building a relationship with our minds.

Why do we know to cherish our bodies, money, relatives, and friends, but not to get close to our minds? We should realize this: after we die, our bodies do not belong to us; money does not belong to us; family, relatives and friends do not belong to us either. Only our minds really belong to us. As an old saying goes, “We cannot take anything along; only karma will accompany us.” Our karma and our minds are our treasures.

There was a parable in the Buddhist sutras. One day, the mind gave a lesson to the body. The mind said to the body, “Every day, from the morning on, I, the mind, help you put on clothes, wash your face, brush your teeth and guide you to eat, walk, go forward, come back, sit, and lie down. Doesn’t everything require my help? Now you, the body, want to practice and find the truth. You worship at temples here and there to seek the truth at different places every day, why do you not seek the truth from me? It is like climbing up a tree to catch a fish.

The mind continued and said, “Have you never heard of this four-line verse?

*The Buddha is on Vulture Peak,*

*But do not seek afar.*

*Vulture Peak is found within*

*our minds.*

*Everyone has a Vulture Peak*

*pagoda.*

*One should cultivate underneath*

*this pagoda.*

You leave behind the Vulture Peak within yourself but seek the Buddha outside instead. Oh, Body, you are too ignorant.”

This parable points out that people are inclined to forgo what is within reach but seek things far away. We do not pay attention to the mind. We are oblivious to it even though it is in our every breath and with us in our daily activities. In fact, the mind is the most important of all; the mind is the basis of all phenomena.

In *The Five Kinds of Suffering Sutra*, it is stated, “The mind leads us to hell, the mind leads us to the realm of hungry ghosts, the mind leads us to the animal realm, and the mind leads us to heaven and the human realm.” It points out

that the six realms of existence depend on one's thoughts. There is an advertisement that says, "Eureka! I found it. I found it." What have we really found? In this world, whatever we find is unreal. If we find the original mind, the eternal mind, then we have truly found it.

There is another story in the sutras that also teaches us that our practice should center on cultivating our minds. There was a king who had faith in the Triple Gem. He resolved to practice great giving; therefore, he broke all the gold bricks in the palace into smaller pieces and proclaimed that: every spiritual cultivator who came to this country would get a handful of gold. The announcement spread and whoever heard it praised the king. When Sakyamuni Buddha heard the announcement, he was happy that the king had generated such a great aspiration and practiced great giving, but he felt pity that the king only knew of the outer giving of money yet did not know how to realize his intrinsic nature within. Hence, the Buddha manifested the form of a spiritual cultivator and came to beg for gold as well. When the Buddha took a handful of gold in front of the king he quickly put the gold back, saying, "I don't want it," and then he left.

The king thought this was strange, “A handful of gold is quite a lot. Why not take it?” He stopped the spiritual cultivator and asked for his reason.

The spiritual cultivator joined his palms together and said, “I am a traveling monk, living a carefree life. I am not working for material goods, and I am not bound by my body. If I took a handful of gold now, it would be neither enough to build a house nor safe to keep with me. I realized the handful of gold was useless, so I returned it to you.”

Upon hearing this, the king thought the monk’s remark made sense, so he asked, “How much gold would be enough for you to build a house to stay in?”

The monk smiled and said, “Three handfuls of gold.”

The king thought, “For the sake of his visiting here from far away, okay, let me give him three handfuls of gold.”

After the king granted permission, the monk took three handfuls of gold. He pretended to leave by walking away, but he soon came back, put back the gold, sighed, and said, “I would still like to return the gold to you. I don’t want it.”

The king was surprised. “Again, why do you not want it?”

The monk shook his head, saying, “Three handfuls of gold are enough to build a house, I think. However, after the house is built, I will be the only one living there. If I am sick, there won’t be anyone to take care of me. If I have any doubts or questions during my practice, I won’t be able to discuss them with my fellow practitioners. This house would serve no purpose. If a house is going to be built, in my opinion, the house should be built big enough for several people to dwell in. I’m afraid the three handfuls of gold would not be enough, so I don’t want them.”

Hearing this, the king first thought this monk was greedy. However, upon further thought, he began to appreciate that the monk was not selfish, not just concerned with his own liberation; he was actually thoughtful of others, so he asked the monk, “Well, how much gold do you want?”

The monk raised one palm and answered, “Five handfuls of gold should be enough.”

The king nodded, “I can do you this favor. Take five handfuls of gold.”

The monk then took five handfuls of gold and turned to bid farewell to the king. However, the monk did not go far before he slowly walked

back, dumped the gold, and said, “I don’t think it is right. I would rather not take the five handfuls of gold. I don’t want them.”

The King stood up in great astonishment and asked, “What? Were five handfuls of gold not enough?”

The monk counted on his fingers and said, “Your majesty, with the five handfuls of gold, a huge house could be built and many people could be settled. It would be pretty good, but when so many people live together, they need money for food, clothing, medicine, house maintenance, as well as emergency expenses. The five handfuls of gold are not enough to spend without further income.”

The king was very displeased at this moment, but he withheld his temper and asked, “How much gold on earth will you be satisfied with?”

With his palms joined, the monk said “Seven! Seven handfuls of gold.”

The king agreed immediately. “Fine! You can take seven handfuls. Don’t be greedy anymore.”

The monk wrapped up seven handfuls of gold, hesitating for a moment before laying everything down at once. He shook his head and said, “No! No! I still don’t want them.”

The king finally became angry. He stood up at once and scolded the monk, “This is absurd! Do you want me to give you all my gold? Humph!”

The monk replied in a dignified manner, “Your majesty, please don’t be angry. Even if you give me all your gold, I don’t want it.”

The king was furious and said, “Tell me, what do you want exactly?”

The monk smiled and said, “What is the use of giving me all your gold and providing me food to eat, clothes to wear, a house to live in, and supporting good Dharma friends? That still does not resolve the need for food, clothing, housing, and the transportation of my mind and cannot support the good Dharma friends of my mind.”

Upon hearing this, the king thought, “What? Does the mind also need food, clothing, housing, and transportation? Does the mind also have Dharma friends?” The king curiously asked, “Well, please tell me: What does your mind eat, what does your mind wear, and where does your mind live?”

The monk manifested by Sakyamuni Buddha calmly explained: “A body is adorned with clothes; a mind is adorned with the clothes

of loving-kindness and compassion. A body is sustained by eating rice and vegetables, while a mind is sustained by the food of truth, the Dharma, and the joyfulness of meditation. A body needs a house to live in, while a mind needs to live in the eternal truth, to live in a place that has neither birth nor death.”

The monk saw the king was absorbed and concluded, “A body requires care from others; a mind also requires good Dharma friends to practice with. When our minds are without perversion, ignorance, bondage, and all attachment, we are close to the truth.”

Upon listening to this, the king fully realized, “Indeed! No matter how much money a person has, money is only to care for the body that will decay sooner or later. It cannot care for the bodhi mind, which we always have. Cultivation involves more than our bodies; furthermore, we should cultivate our minds.”

Now, I will divide the Buddhist views on mind consciousness into four points for further explanation.

## **I. A Moment and an Eternity of the Mind**

What is the fastest thing in the universe? Of course, everyone knows it is light, which moves at three hundred thousand kilometers per second. However, in Buddhism, the fastest thing is not light but a person's mind. The speed of the mind is several hundred times faster than light and is not limited by time and space. In a flash, you can think of Li Bo, a famous poet from the Tang dynasty, and in the next moment, you can think of the scenery in Los Angeles, California. In a moment of thought, you can travel up throughout the heavens and down into the deep underworld. Hence, the speed of the mind is the fastest.

The phenomena of the world are not separate from the mind. A Buddhist sutra says, "The three realms are mind-only, and all phenomena are consciousness-only." Mind and consciousness are the origin of karmic causes and effects. It is said, "When there are perceptions and thoughts in the mind, there is the cycle of birth and death; when there are no perceptions and thoughts in the mind, that is nirvana." All phenomena arise from the defiled mind and deluded thoughts.

After the sixth patriarch Master Huineng attained awakening, he hid himself with a group of hunters for ten years. He started to propagate the Dharma only when the opportunities and conditions were ripe. One time, he came to Guangzhou and saw two monks arguing over a flapping banner. One monk said, “The wind is moving; it is not the banner moving.”

The other monk said, “The banner is moving; it is not the wind moving.”

“Without the wind, how could the banner move? It was the wind moving.”

“No, no. Wind by nature is moving. The wind does not move even though it is blowing. It is just like how the nature of flowing water is flowing, but in fact, flowing water is not flowing. It is also like when you sit in a moving carriage looking out the windows. The scenery appears to be moving because the carriage is moving. The scenery, in fact, is not moving. It is the banner moving, not the wind.”

The sixth patriarch saw both monks standing their ground, refusing to budge. Smiling, he walked over to them and tried to resolve the issue.

“Why are both of you so attached to this? The wind is not moving, and the banner is not moving. Your minds are moving.”

It doesn't matter whether it was the wind or the banner that was moving; both of them are the illusory exterior appearances of objects. We do not need to attach our minds to the appearances and let the mind be controlled by objects. When the mind is controlled by objects, the mind is moving. When the mind is moving, a thought arises and ceases in an instant—this is a moment of the mind. If the wind is moving, so be it; if the banner is moving, so be it; then there is nothing moving in the mind. One looks but does not see; one hears but does not listen. The mind completely abides in the intrinsic nature of equality and does not fall into ignorance and affliction. This immovability of the mind in according to suchness is an eternity of the mind.

In the Tang dynasty, Chan Master Deshan Xuanjian applied great effort to studying *The Diamond Sutra* and composed *The Blue Dragon Commentary on the Diamond Sutra* in the North. He disagreed with the propagation of “sudden awakening and becoming a Buddha” in the South, so he carried his work of *The Blue Dragon Commentary on the Diamond Sutra* and headed to the South, intending to dispel the Chan teachings of sudden awakening by

the sixth patriarch. Chan Master Deshan's trip was difficult and exhausting. One day he was tired from walking. He saw a small store by the roadside selling cakes and wanted to purchase some to sate his hunger. An old lady in the store greeted him with a smile when she saw him walking in.

“What are you carrying on your shoulder, Chan master?”

“This is my commentary on  
*The Diamond Sutra.*”

“Oh, where are you carrying it to?”

“To the South.”

“To do what?”

“To dispel the Chan teachings of sudden awakening in the South.”

The old lady nodded, thought for a while, and said, “I am studying *The Diamond Sutra*, and there is a sentence that I don't understand. Chan Master, please explain it to me. If you can answer my question, I will offer you cakes for free.”

The old lady asked, “*The Diamond Sutra* says, ‘The mind of the past cannot be obtained, the mind of the present cannot be obtained, and the mind of the future cannot be obtained.’ So master, you want to have some

snacks, which mind did you use to order the snack?”<sup>1</sup>

“Well . . .” Master Deshan was astonished and did not know how to answer it.

Although Chan Master Deshan had a good commentary on *The Diamond Sutra*, he was startled and stumped by the unexpected question. The quote from *The Diamond Sutra* explains that thoughts arise and cease continuously. Our bodies metabolize and change non-stop from birth to death. There is not a real self for us to hold on to. What about our minds? Thoughts in the mind arise and cease in a flash. Past thoughts cease and vanish in one moment, present thoughts arise continuously and cease immediately, and future thoughts have not yet arisen. Since the minds of the past, present, and future are moving nonstop, which of them can we hold on to as our true mind? Thus, we know that in arising and ceasing, thoughts are illusory and are without either the brevity of a second or the eternity of billions of years. A popular Buddhist saying explains that “One thought contains the three thousand-fold world system;

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1. “Snack” in Chinese is composed of two characters: “dian” and “xin.” The first character, “dian,” means “order” when used as a single character. The second character, “xin,” means “mind” or “heart.” The lady intentionally separates the two characters to test Chan Master Deshan.

the three thousand-fold world system is within one thought.” In Chan, one moment of mind is eternity. Eternity only exists within one thought.

Every once in a while we may pay attention to our minds: I am feeling very miserable, my mind is full of worries, I am thinking of how I can make a fortune, and I hope that annoying problems are quickly resolved, and so on. These are minds of arising and ceasing, not the eternal mind. What we need to find is our eternal mind. Chan Master Damei Fachang was Master Mazu Daoyi’s disciple. Whenever someone asked Master Mazu, “What is the Buddha?” he always answered, “The mind is the Buddha.” If someone asked a follow-up question, “What is the mind?” he would answer, “The Buddha is the mind.” Whoever asked him for the Dharma, he always answered affirmatively, “The mind is the Buddha; the Buddha is the mind.” After Master Damei Fachang awakened under Master Mazu, he went away to teach the Dharma. He followed Master Mazu’s teachings and also answered, “The mind is the Buddha; the Buddha is the mind,” when anyone asked him for the Dharma; therefore, he transformed and liberated many people. When Master Mazu heard about this, he wished to check if his disciple was really awakening or just following his suit, so he

sent a disciple to test Damei. The disciple arrived at Master Damei Fachang's place and asked him, "What did you learn under Master Mazu?"

Damei answered, "The master enlightened me with this: The mind is the Buddha."

The disciple asked further, "What is the mind?"

Damei still answered, "The Buddha is the mind!"

The disciple then said, "Huh, that doesn't seem right. Master Mazu doesn't answer that way now. He now answers, "There is no mind; there is no Buddha. There is no Buddha, and there is no mind."

After hearing this, Master Damei Fachang was not surprised but laughed instead. "Ha! Is that so! The master really likes to tease his students. I don't care if it was 'There is no mind; there is no Buddha. There is no Buddha, and there is no mind.' I will continue to say 'The mind is the Buddha; the Buddha is the mind'!"

The disciple related the conversation to Master Mazu. Master Mazu was happy and said, "Good. The plum<sup>2</sup> is ripe now."

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2. "Mei" in Chinese means plum. Master Damei's name has a "plum" in it. Therefore, Master Mazu said the plum is ripe now when he knew that Master Damei fully understood the meaning of "The mind is the Buddha; the Buddha is the mind."

What Master Mazu said has double meaning: the master is not bound by language and not swayed from what he has been awakening to; he is really enlightened. It is said, “When the mind arises; all phenomena arise. When the mind ceases; all phenomena cease.” All phenomena are not separate from the mind. As long as one is resolute in one’s mind toward enlightenment, time and space can no longer be a constraint; one will be able to enter the realm of truth and not be led astray or confused by the changing environment. One’s mind then can be close to the Dharma.

Enlightened Chan masters can find their own minds. Right or wrong, good or bad, moral or evil, gain or loss—everything is within themselves. The masters have a balance scale in their minds. They are not swayed in different directions by the worldly winds. They are utterly self-assured and affirm that they are morally upright. This is the eternal mind.

Some people live a life for others rather than for themselves. For instance, when we walk down the street and hear someone complimenting, “Hey, your outfit is pretty,” our minds are happy. On the other hand, if we hear someone criticizing, “That outfit is outdated! How dare

this person wear that outfit,” our minds are sad. Living in this way is simply miserable. The quality or beauty of an outfit has nothing to do with ourselves. How can we live happily and worry-free when we are not masters of our own minds, allowing others to control us, our minds happy from the complements and sad from the criticisms of others? Like this robe on me. I have been wearing it for a long time. I simply view it as an object and do not spend time thinking about it. I wore this robe in Yilan. The disciples in Yilan noticed the robe was very old; I did not mind. I wore this robe in the United States, and the disciples in the US thought I would look more dignified in a Dharma robe; I did not feel uneasy, either. *The Diamond Sutra* says, “All forms are illusory.” The mind is so immense as to be beyond all things and yet so small that nothing can fit into it, and it is not restricted by time and space. As long as we do not base our actions on mundane matters, do not hesitate to do the right thing even at the cost of our life, do not seek fame, and are not greedy for fortune but keep the mind clear and taintless, we will not be set back by the rights and wrongs of the mundane world. All the desires, greed, anger, ignorance, and delusion will be merely like the

sword that cuts through water or the wind that blows upon the light, and just like the water and light are never damaged in this way, the permanent mind can never be contaminated.

## **II. A Square Inch and the Open Space of the Mind**

Where is our mind? Some say, “Isn’t the mind within a one square inch area?” However, “a one square inch area” is not limited to one square inch within the body. Some people think prime ministers in the old days were magnanimous, as in the old saying, “A prime minister can hold a boat in his abdomen,” but they do not know that monastics are more generous after they are enlightened. Just how large is the mind of an enlightened monk? The mind embraces the great infinitude, encompassing worlds as numerous as grains of sand. The enlightened ones can embrace open space and the three thousand-fold worlds in their minds. In *Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, could ride clouds and travel one hundred and eight thousand miles in one somersault. Still, the Monkey King could never somersault his way out of the Buddha’s palm. The Monkey King represents

one's mundane mind, while the Buddha represents one's true mind, our intrinsic nature. No matter how our illusory and mundane minds leap and somersault, they can never leap their way out of our true mind. Although we are constantly changing from one lifetime to the next—I may be John in this life and be Jennifer in the next, or I may even become an animal, a hungry ghost, or a hell being because of bad karma—no matter how we are reborn into this or that realm of existence, one thing that remains unchanged is the true mind. Take making rings, necklaces, and bracelets with gold as an example. No matter what shape or which item it is made into, its nature of being gold does not change. There is a saying in a sutra that describes the mind: “It does not change from the past into the present, always fresh throughout myriads of kalpas.” It means the enlightened mind will not change throughout the ages and will never vary even after tens of thousands of lives.

Thus, isn't a square inch mind in open space? In the Yuan dynasty, there was a scholar named Hsu Heng who was forced to flee from the war along with crowds of other people. During the flight from calamity, he and the crowd came upon a fruit garden, after several days without

food. The fruit trees were laden with fruit. The hungry and thirsty crowd flooded into the fruit garden and began to eat. Hsu Heng sat still under a tree instead, resting with his eyes closed.

“Why don’t you pick the fruit?” some people who ate the fruit encouraged him.

Hsu Heng opened his tired eyes and said, “No, I can’t. This is someone’s fruit garden. How can we steal the fruit while the owner is away?”

Whoever heard what he said laughed at his silliness. “Oh heck, in these troubled times the owner of garden would have fled long ago. How can these fruit have an owner?”

Hsu Heng became very serious and said, “Just because a fruit garden is without an owner, does it mean that our minds are without a master?”

We need to be the master of our own one-square-inch mind. We must build our self-awareness so that we can be well-disciplined people who can keep away from evil. Nowadays, social values are corrupt and criminal cases keep rising because many people cannot locate the master of their minds and do not have morality and discipline.

How do we recognize our true mind, which is like open space? There is a saying in a sutra: “If one wishes to know the Buddha state, one should purify one’s mind to be as clean as space.” In other words, if we can apply wisdom to attain awakening and practice Chan, we will be able to see the Buddha state. When we can expand the mind to be as great as space, we can have control of our birth and death.

There was a Chan master called Jingqing who liked to ask everyone, “What is the sound outside the door?” On one occasion, he asked a monk, “What is the sound outside the door?”

“The sound of rain falling,” the monk answered.

Chan Master Jingqing sighed, “Sentient beings are deranged, and they lose sight of themselves, while chasing after outside objects.”

Another time he asked someone, “What is the sound outside the door?”

The person answered, “The sound of a snake biting a toad.”

Jingqing said, “We speak of sentient beings suffering, but there are also suffering sentient beings in agony.”

In the instance of the sound of rain falling, sentient beings are deranged: they only pay

attention to worldly matters and worry about personal gain and loss; they are oblivious to the truths of life. In the instance of the sound of a snake biting a toad, it shows the cruelty and killing in the world as sentient beings compete with and eat one another, completely unaware of the vastness of the universe. No matter if it is the sound of rainfall or a snake bite; both illustrate the sounds of confusion about the world. The door is our mind. “What is the sound outside the door?” is equivalent to asking “What is the sound outside of the mind?” The universe is vast and open. If we broaden and transform our minds to be like the universe and listen, we will hear all the sounds, including the sounds of the inversion of right and wrong, the sounds of attack and killing, the sound of blinding ignorance, the sound of bewildering confusion, and so on. No wonder Chan Master Jingqing lamented that sentient beings are deranged and that sentient beings are suffering.

Let us abandon our greedy minds. Let us enter the space-like, non-abiding true mind, and let us enter into the life of wisdom in the truth of the Dharma body, where the mind is so immense as to be beyond all things and yet so small that nothing can fit into it. This is like

the saying, “When expanded, the mind can pervade throughout the boundless universe. When brought inward, the mind can retreat into invisibility.” When our minds are in such a state, how can sufferings and afflictions bother us?

### **III. The Hell and Heaven of the Mind**

People always ask, “Is there a heaven? Is there a hell?” Where exactly are heaven and hell? In fact, we don’t need to look for them in the outside world; they are right inside our minds. For instance, while we are eating breakfast, our minds may be in heaven in one moment and in hell the next. We may even go through the ten Dharma realms many times a day: those of hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, asuras<sup>3</sup>, sravakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas. Why is that? When we first get up in the morning, we are free of worries and concerns, and we sit in meditation and recite the Buddha’s name. At that moment, our minds are as calm and clear as a Buddha’s mind. While we are brushing our teeth and washing our face, we think of helping certain people solve problems or tackling some

3. Also known as “non-gods.” These beings are prone to hatred, arrogance, and suspiciousness.

issue that day. At that moment, our mind of serving others is the same as a bodhisattva's mind. We sit down at the breakfast table ready to eat, but the food is not ready; we yell out, "Hurry up, hurry up! I'm hungry!"

We have given rise to the mind of a hungry ghost. When breakfast is ready, we see only two choices: peanuts and tofu—pretty much the same every single day. We fuss about the food and at this moment, we have the mind of an asura. Some of us may even throw down the utensils, hit the table, shout out in anger, "I'm not eating at home!" and storm out. With the fire of anger in our minds, the mind of an animal and then the mind of a hell being appear. On the way to work, we hear fellow passengers talking about famine in Africa or we read about a tragic fire in the newspaper. As the minds of sympathy and compassion arise and develop within us, the minds of a human being, a heavenly being, and a bodhisattva also appear at the same time. Take a look here. During the brief time of a meal, we may be in the realms of Buddhas or bodhisattvas in one moment and then be intertwined with hell beings, hungry ghosts, or animals in the next. Even before we begin our day of work, we may travel between the human and heavenly realms,

or we may be like sravakas or pratyekabuddhas. Every day our minds are constantly living and dying in different realms, rejoicing now but sad later, being ignorant and greedy in one moment but enjoying the freedom from worldly desires in the next, immersing ourselves in a refreshing Dharma realm or entangled in the battle for fame and gain. Isn't this the heaven and hell of the mind?

*The Flower Adornment Sutra* states, "The mind is like an artist, able to paint various objects." The greatest artist in the universe is our mind. We turn into whatever our minds thinks of. In the past, there was a person who sculptured ferocious yak-sas. He imagined and depicted ferocious yaksas' facial expressions every day. Because of this, his looks became ferocious, inadvertently. One day, he came upon a Buddhist master. The master was startled by his hideous appearance and asked him, "How did your face get this way?"

Deeply distressed, the sculptor answered sincerely, "I don't know! This is not how I looked before. I make yaksa statues, and my look became ferocious after numerous sculptures."

The master contemplated and answered with a smile, "Amitabha Buddha! I see. Mister, I think you should start sculpting bodhisattva statues. Perhaps there would be a good transformation."

This sculptor had no choice and gave it a try. He visualized the dignified appearances of bodhisattvas and depicted the bodhisattvas' looks. Oddly enough, his look gradually became kinder and more dignified, even nicer than what he had looked like before. He then realized that one's mind can transform one's appearance. Whatever we sow in our minds, we will reap the effects in the world outside of our minds. Some of us are naturally good-looking and are very proud of our appearances while some of us are unattractive and blame our looks on our parents. Both attitudes are incorrect. If we want to have an attractive appearance and noble temperament, we first need to purify our minds. If we can purify our minds, we can even ascend to heaven, not to mention having a better temperament and more beautiful look. It won't be difficult to achieve.

In the past, there was a general who sought the Dharma from Chan Master Hakuin. He dubiously asked,

“Chan master, are there really a heaven and a hell?”

“Yes, there are.”

“So where are heaven and hell?”

Chan Master Hakuin looked him over and asked, “What do you do?”

“I am a military general.”

Chan Master Hakuin laughed out loud. “Ha, I am laughing to death. With your panhandler’s look, do you think you are qualified to be a general who safeguards the country? I am laughing to death!”

The general’s expression changed suddenly. He thought, “I have sincerely come for the Dharma, how could the master disdain me with such words? This is so rude.” So the angry general pulled out the sword on his waist, slashing toward the Chan master. Chan Master Hakuin stopped laughing and pointed his finger at the general.

“Look! The gate of hell is opening!”

Upon hearing that, the general’s mind changed in a flash. He was immediately enlightened and ashamed for his violence. He quickly dropped the sharp sword and apologized to the Chan master respectfully,

“I was ignorant. Please forgive me for my transgression.”

Chan Master Hakuin laughed and nodded, “See, isn’t that the gate of heaven that just opened?”

During our lives, whether we go up to heaven or down to hell is not determined by others. Only our own minds can make that determination!

## IV. The Purification and Liberation of the Mind

Once the mind changes, land, mountains, and water will change for our minds. *The Vimalakirti Sutra* states, “Wishing to purify the land, one should purify the mind. When the mind is pure, the land will be pure.” This is the purification of mind. Furthermore, *The Vimalakirti Sutra* states, “Why does one get sick? Because of attachment. How does one end attachment? By the mind not seeking after anything.” When the mind does not attach, does not generate delusive thoughts, and attains great freedom, this is the liberation of the mind. Often times we hear someone say, “I don’t like this person. That person is very annoying.” At this moment, why not think about the bright side of that person: “This person actually is kind to children. That person also has a good side.” When you change your point of view, you may find the person whom you disliked earlier much more agreeable. The main teaching of Buddhism is to eliminate three poisons: greed, anger, and ignorance, and to transform unwholesome to wholesome, suffering to happiness, hell to heaven, and enemies to friends. It is just as in the saying, “When practicing Chan, what need

is there for sitting in mountains or beside water? When you extinguish the fire of the mind, it is cool.”

National Master Muso’s Buddhist verse also explains:

*Green hills have turned yellow  
so many times.  
Worldly affairs whirling about are not  
my concern.  
With dust in the eyes, the three realms  
are narrow;  
With a mind is free from worries, one’s bed  
is wide.*

If there were dust and sand in our eyes, this world would change color and become small, and we would not be able to see the truth. If our minds were open, pure, and free of concerns, even sleeping on a tiny bed, we could experience the vast, boundless Dharma realm.

How does one purify the body and mind so that we attain liberation? I will now explain this through four specific kinds of minds.

## **1. Attain Liberation through the Ordinary Mind.**

What kind of mind is the ordinary mind? It is a mind not weary from always eating inexpensive food such as tofu and vegetables, a mind not annoyed by always wearing simple clothing, a mind not distressed by constantly facing anger, malevolence, terror, and fright, and a mind not confused by worldly entertainments and mundane pleasures. The ordinary mind is to eat when it is time to eat, sleep when it's time to sleep, be joyful when it's a joyful occasion, speak up when we are supposed to talk, complete the tasks that have been assigned to us, and follow and practice according to the teachings when it is time to listen and heed the advice. In other words, we should treat everyone with the ordinary mind, a sincere mind, an impartial mind, and always maintain the right mindset appropriate for the situation.

I have seen some people talking pompously without stopping when they should be listening, but when they are invited to give their opinions, they keep silent. The ordinary mind reveals our true self, completely free of pretension, hypocrisy, or untruthfulness. When we are with our true self, our minds are naturally liberated.

In the past, there was a monk serving as a cook<sup>4</sup> in a temple from his 20s to 50s, a course of 30 years. One day, Chan Master Dogen visited the temple and asked him,

“What do you do in the temple?”

“I am a cook, making meals in the temple.”

“For how long?”

“30 years.”

“Over the past 30 years you worked as a cook. Did you not meditate, practice Chan, read sutras, and recite Buddha’s name?”

“You are correct.”

“Why haven’t you done something else besides work as a cook in the last 30 years? Have you not wasted your talent?”

“Chan Master! You should know that being a cook is not easy; it involves a lot of principles.”

“Oh? The cook’s job is merely cooking. How many principles can being a cook involve?”

“Should I explain it to you? It is just like the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. There are too many principles to explain, and you will not understand.”

Chan Master Dogen persisted in asking, “Why is that?”

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4. Chinese, *Dianzuo*, title of the monastic responsible for food preparation and management in a monastery, here translated as “cook.”

The old monk answered with a smile, “From thirty years of experience, I have learned in the midst of each grain of porridge, each cooked rice grain, each flower, and each leaf of everyday life, and I have understood while tending the fire and washing vegetables. If you do not experience these on your own, you will not understand no matter how I explain. How could you possibly describe the cold and heat of water? And how could you understand the chilling and burning of fire?”

This monk had cooked for 30 years. It is like “drinking iced water in winter and experiencing how each drop feels in one’s mind.” He lived 30 years comfortably in the midst of washing produce and burning fire because he had the ordinary mind. He did not compete for fame and wealth and was not attached to having or not having. As Venerable Cihang said, “As long as we have peace in the mind, north, south, east, or west are all fine.”

Another parable called “Moneybags Deliver Agony” also explains that the ordinary mind is the path to enlightenment. There was a wealthy man living in a mansion. He was always thinking, and he constantly worried about success, failure, gain, and loss. Next to where he lived

was a short, illegal building where a poor couple lived. This couple went to work every day. After they came back from work, they would sing and play music. Their life was joyful. The wealthy man was puzzled when he saw them play music and sing all the time. He asked himself, "This poor family can barely have a decent meal, what are they happy for? I have delicacies from land and sea and tons of money, but I have never-ending worries. This does not make sense." His butler heard what he mumbled, so he told the wealthy man, "My lord, do you want them to have worries? It is simple. Just give them two hundred thousand dollars."

The wealthy man did not understand. "Won't they enjoy life in comfort with two hundred thousand dollars? How could they have worries and agony?"

The butler said, "Well, you will know after you give it to them."

Two hundred thousand dollars cost nothing for the wealthy man, so he called the poor couple and gave them two hundred thousand dollars. After the poor couple unexpectedly received the two hundred thousand dollars, they were very happy because they immediately get out of financial hardship. However, at the same

time, they panicked from having such money, so they decided to hide the money at night: Hiding it under the pillows? That's not safe. Under the bed? They felt uneasy about that. On top of the roof beam? It could be easily stolen. In the closet? It might get chewed up by rats. The couple kept moving the money from one place to the next the whole night without getting any sleep. When the sun rose, the couple looked at each other. Seeing each other's red eyes and tired faces, they realized that the wealthy man had duped them. They immediately returned the money to the wealthy man and said,

“We are giving your worries back to you. We do not want them.”

That is why we say the ordinary mind is our first step on the path toward liberation.

## **2. Attain Liberation through a Mind of Humility**

A mind of humility is the mind that feels remorseful for one's unwholesome actions toward others and oneself. When one often feels remorseful towards others and oneself in one's everyday interaction with others, one is certainly a person with morality. There was a painter who

wanted to paint a picture of yaksas and was looking for a model with a ferocious look. Someone recommended he look for the model in a jail because the jail had many notorious criminals and ferocious thugs. This painter came to the jail and saw there was also a Buddha hall. When he was told it is a place for inmates worshipping the Buddha, he gave up looking for models in this jail. The warden asked the reason, and the painter answered, “This place has the Buddha’s teachings. People who have learned the Dharma have a mind of humility, no matter how violent they were before. I will not find anyone here with a ferocious look.”

Now I am standing at the podium. With lights, I see each of you sitting in the audience have a benevolent and compassionate look—very kind and gracious. I believe everyone will have a humble and elegant mind of humility under the influence of the Dharma. As long as we maintain a great open mind to “Be willing to be wrong and let others be right; be willing to be small and let others be great; be willing to suffer and let others be happy; and be willing to go without and let others have things,” our Buddhist mind will be more beautiful and fragrant.

### **3. Attain Liberation through a Mind of Non-Abiding.**

*The Diamond Sutra* states, “They [all great bodhisattvas] should give rise to a mind that does not abide in anything.” The meaning is so profound that it cannot be explained within a short time; therefore, I am going to explain it with an example:

Master Juzhi became awakened when Chan Master Tianlong raised one finger. Thereafter whenever someone sought the Dharma from him, no matter what question it was, Master Juzhi always kept silent but raised one finger. There was a boy who was Master Juzhi’s student. One time, a devotee came to ask questions about the Dharma while Master Juzhi was out running errands. The boy saw the devotee and raised one finger just like Master Juzhi would do. This devotee later mentioned this to Master Juzhi and said, “Master, the boy is as great as you, like teacher like student. I sought the Dharma from him, and he was able to raise one finger just the same as you.”

Master Juzhi did not say anything. When the devotee left, he called the boy and asked, “I heard that you now understand the Dharma, do you?”

The boy thought Master Juzhi was testing him because the master looked peaceful, so he immediately responded, “Yes, I understand the Dharma.”

Master Juzhi asked, “So what is the Buddha?” The boy proudly raised his finger right away, and Master Juzhi cut the boy’s finger off immediately with a knife without saying a word. The boy was astonished, screamed, and burst into tears because of the pain. He turned and ran away, but Master Juzhi yelled at him, “Freeze!” The boy halted, looked back over his shoulder, and heard Master Juzhi asking him,

“What is the Buddha?”

The boy raised his hand out of habit. When he saw that his finger was not there, he suddenly understood.

This gongan tells us that our intrinsic nature and all the phenomena are like the wind blowing across the sky, like the sun shining upon the land—they are everywhere in the universe. It is said, “Realize one truth, then all truths are known, and all states are suchness.” All the various things in the world are just empty existence; all conditioned phenomena are impermanent; they are mere illusion. All is one, and one is all. This is why Master Juzhi always raised one

finger regardless what the disciples' questions were. It is as in the saying, "When it is cold, all the heaven and earth are cold. When it is hot, all the heaven and earth are hot." Master Juzhi was simplifying everything, but the boy was merely copying him, not realizing the meaning, only clinging to what he saw. Therefore, Master Juzhi cut off the boy's finger to enlighten him to the realm of non-abiding in the Chan teaching—"not abiding in the middle, inside, or outside."

In addition, there was Master Wuye. Regardless what others asked him, he always replied, "Do not have delusive thought!"

This is also the realm of non-abiding—"no coming or going, no formation or destruction."

If our minds, too, are in the realm of non-abiding like this—no greed, no clinging, no attachment, no obstruction, realizing that "out of emptiness all things arise, and all things return to emptiness," then how can we not be liberated?

#### **4. Attain Liberation through the Bodhi Mind**

Bodhi mind is a mind of great loving-kindness and compassion and is a mind of wisdom.

Poet Bai Juyi in the Tang dynasty believed in Buddhism. One time he asked Chan Master Weikuan,

“How can we cultivate body, speech, and mind individually?”

Master Weikuan answered, “The Buddha’s teachings are to be practiced and realized in every aspect. Precepts are what one practices through the body. The Dharma is what one teaches and explains through speech. Chan is what one cultivates through the mind. Precepts are the Dharma, and the Dharma is not separate from Chan. The body, speech, and mind should be cultivated together as one. How can we make differentiation and separate them?”

Bai Juyi argued, “Since there is no separation among body, speech, and mind, why do we talk about cultivating the mind?”

Master Weikuan answered, “The mind originally has no flaws and so does not require cultivation. To cultivate, all that people need to do is not to give rise to thoughts, whether pure or impure.”

Bai Juyi further argued, “Filth should be wiped away. Therefore, it is correct not to generate impure thoughts. But why shouldn’t we generate the pure mind, either?”

Master Weikuan explained, “As with our eyes, dirt and dust cannot remain in them. Although specks of gold are precious, they still cause harm when they fall into our eyes. Don’t you see the clouds in the sky? Dark clouds can cover a bright blue sky, so can white clouds!”

Bai Juyi was not giving up, “If one does not generate the impure or pure, does not cultivate or have thoughts, how is one different from an ordinary person?”

Master Weikuan smiled and explained, “An ordinary person has a mind of ignorance; a Chan practitioner has a mind free of the two diseases of ignorance and attachment. An ordinary person either does not know to cultivate or cultivates wrongly; a Chan practitioner truly cultivates.”

In his past lives, the Buddha cut his own flesh to feed a hawk and sacrificed his body as food for tigers. For the sake of giving to others, he would relinquish even his own life. This is practicing real bodhi mind. Nowadays, many people say they believe in and practice Buddhism, but in fact they cannot be pure in body, speech, and mind. It is said, “They are fooled and deluded by craving and desire; they do not follow morality and virtues; they are confused and mired in anger; and they greedily pursue wealth and

sensual pleasures.” They do not really have the bodhi mind. Their appearances show they are the disciples of Buddha, but their minds still remain like that of an ignorant person. This is a pity.

I have discussed the Buddhist perspective on the mind consciousness, hoping everyone can master the mind, be open and free, without obstruction or worry. I also hope everyone can read more Buddhist sutras, practice the Dharma, purify ourselves under the Buddha’s light of loving kindness, liberate ourselves through the sweet dew of the Dharma, and eventually make our world brighter and more beautiful.

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