



Questions on Buddhist Practice

Buddhism in Every Step (D1)
(英文版)

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Questions on Buddhist Practice

I. Why Do We Take Refuge in the Triple Gem?

The first step to becoming a Buddhist is to take refuge in the Triple Gem. If someone has not undergone the ceremony of refuge in the Triple Gem, then offering incense and bowing before the Buddha can only be considered acts of respect and interest in Buddhism, not true acts of a Buddhist follower. It is like a student who hasn't registered for a class; they cannot be more than an auditor. By taking refuge in the Triple Gem, one resolves to diligently practice Buddhism, become a disciple of the Triple Gem, and discard belief in other religions. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem shows that one's faith is firm.

Why should we take refuge in the Triple Gem? Because the Triple Gem is like a lamp that dispels the darkness, a boat that crosses the sea of suffering, or rainfall that extinguishes the flames of a burning house. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem means finding sanctuary within the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

In this world, children must rely upon their parents; only then will they be safe. The aged must rely upon a sturdy cane; only then can they walk. Seafarers must rely upon their compass; only then can they navigate. Those in the dark must rely upon a lamp; only then can they see. The Triple Gem is like our parents. When a child feels uneasy, all the child needs to do is cry out for their mother. As long as the child has a mother guarding them, no one will dare try and take advantage of them. In this world, there are many unwholesome practices, people, and unfortunate events, but the Triple Gem can serve as our sanctuary.

The Triple Gem is our compass. It guides us through the vast sea of people and into safe harbor. Everyone knows that when it becomes dark, it is time to head home. This is when we go to the Triple Gem for refuge, and remember its benefits. The Triple

Gem protects us and grants us merit. By availing ourselves of such a precious raft, we may transcend the currents of life and death and bravely cross the bitter sea of suffering, finding our original, true selves. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem grants us a sanctuary to return to.

After we take refuge in the Triple Gem, we can begin to practice our faith in our day-to-day lives. Only through practice can there be experience, and only through faith can there be strength.

The Buddha did not insist on the need for faith or taking refuge. These actions are means of affirming and finding the Buddha nature that we all have. In Buddhism, it is said that one should “Take refuge in oneself and in the Dharma, and nothing else.” It means that we must take refuge in ourselves to find ourselves. We must not let others lead us by the nose.

The Triple Gem consists of three parts: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The Buddha is a light that dispels darkness and brings hope. The Dharma is like pure water that nourishes all things. The Sangha is like a field in which one sows the seeds of merit for others far and wide.

There are some Buddhists who do not delve deeply into the teachings, but instead only pray to

the Buddhas for protection. These Buddhists have only taken refuge in the Buddha Gem. In addition, there are some intellectuals who are only interested in studying the Dharma, and they do not pay homage to the Buddha nor honor the Sangha. These Buddhists have only taken refuge in the Dharma Gem. Still, others limit themselves to consulting monastics. They neither listen to the teachings nor pay homage to the Buddha. These Buddhists have only taken refuge in the Sangha Gem. Strictly speaking, none of these are true disciples of the Triple Gem. Those who truly take refuge in the Triple Gem find refuge in all three: venerating the Buddha, listening to the Dharma, and honoring the Sangha. They have right view and deep faith in cause and effect. They avoid what is unwholesome, and adhere to what is wholesome. This is the way to attain the Dharma and gain the benefits of faith.

Everyone has Buddha nature. To reveal it, we must have compassion. Buddhism can expand the mind and spirit, raising our lives to a higher level. Buddhism teaches us how to forge connections with others to build a better future, and how to have loving-kindness and compassion. Studying Buddhism, practicing the teachings, and taking refuge in the Triple

Gem are how to become a Buddhist, thus allowing us to attain unsurpassed merit.

II. How Should I Practice?

Laypeople should practice based on the conditions of their environment and how much time is available. For example, if you enjoy meditation, then you can practice it for five minutes every day, after you wake up and before you go to bed. What should you choose as a meditation object for those five minutes? It would be best if you thought of nothing at all. Sometimes while meditating, your mind might wander. That's all right. It is difficult to empty the mind. If you cannot empty the mind, try visualization: picture a pure light, the Buddha, or doing good deeds

If you dislike sitting quietly on your bed, then try reciting the *Heart Sutra* or the Dharani of Great Compassion. This is very easy to do. If you are in bed and can't fall asleep, try reciting Amitabha Buddha's name for ten breaths. When reciting, how many times, how quickly, or how loudly you recite Amitabha Buddha's name is unimportant. Rather, be certain to harmonize it with your breathing. This is called "ten recitation practice," and is done to clear the mind of delusion through your breathing.

In order to make the practice easier for lay followers, we have recently made a compilation of prayers in the *Pearls of Wisdom* series. Each chapter takes four to five minutes to recite. In the mornings and evenings, you can pray for the well-being of people of hundreds of different professions. Your compassionate thoughts will be infused into their work, forming a connection between you and them. This is another form of practice. It is the best way to practice by oneself.

If you have a Buddhist shrine at home, you can offer incense, pay homage to the shrine, or adorn it with flowers. The most important aspect of practice is being consistent. Continue the practice no matter how busy you are, for this demonstrates that the Buddha is in your mind. Once your practice becomes habit, the Buddha will always be with you, for the Buddha is always in the mind. In time, you will develop great faith and resolve. This is what practice means.

III. How Do We Use the Dharma in Our Everyday Lives?

In Buddhism, there is the saying, “One who seems enlightened in speech, but becomes confused when

situations arise.” Sometimes we have an idea of how things should be done, but when the actual circumstances present themselves, we don’t know what to do. Cultivation is performed to strengthen ourselves, so that we can act as we intend during such situations.

Cultivation is one of the most important activities in life. Torn clothes must be mended, broken furniture must be repaired, disheveled hair must be combed, and long fingernails must be trimmed. Everything must be maintained, repaired, improved, and revised. Even pots and pans must be patched; broken shoes and torn socks must be mended and sewn. Similarly, we cultivate to avoid straying onto the wrong path or making errors in conduct.

Cultivation means correcting our conduct. Cultivation does not mean we have to go live in the mountains and engage in deep contemplation, or live in seclusion and meditate all day. Cultivation is not only chanting sutras, reciting mantras, reciting Amitabha’s name, or Chan meditation. If you chant sutras and pay homage to the Buddha every day, but remain full of desire, anger, ignorance, and self-attachment, then you are not cultivating in accordance with the Dharma, and will not get good results.

Such outward practices are certainly necessary, but cultivating the mind is more important. If our conduct looks correct, but the mind is not, then even though everything appears all right, we will not get wholesome results. This is what happens when our practice does not include cultivating the mind: the fundamental problem is not resolved. When we practice diligently and cultivate the mind, there is harmony between our inner thoughts and outer actions. When we are sincere within and without, then all matters are fulfilled and all practices completed.

Our practice should extend to both what we do and what we think. How we eat and dress, how we live and transport ourselves, whether moving about or at rest, sitting up or lying down, how we deal with matters, make friends and interact with others, and how we think and feel throughout the day, morning and night. All of these are opportunities to cultivate. For example, when it comes to how we dress, we feel the need to look distinguished and dignified. But even old and worn clothing, if well kept, will do. This is how to cultivate the way we dress. Everyone desires delicious food three meals a day, but we should also appreciate the unique flavor of plain and simple fare. This is how to cultivate the way we eat. Living

in a grand mansion with luxurious furnishing may be wonderful, but small rooms in a simple abode can be just as enjoyable. This is how to cultivate the way we shelter ourselves. Having a car means quick and efficient transportation, but we can just as easily get around on foot. This is how to cultivate the way we transport ourselves.

At work, we should strive to fulfill our responsibilities and do our best to complete the job. As people, we should endeavor to be honest and fair. These are all examples of self-cultivation. Practicing in daily life means being sincere and amiable when interacting with others and in handling situations. Merchants may seek a profit from their investment while selling honest goods at a fair price. Government officials should serve the people while maintaining their trust and abiding by the law. These, too, are ways to practice in everyday life.

In the past, the great Chan masters chopped wood, carried water, cooked food, served meals, planted trees, herded cattle, reclaimed fields, sifted rice, darned socks, and mended clothing. This is how they practiced in daily life.

“Cultivation” means cultivating oneself into a good person. If someone is malicious, vindictive,

untrustworthy, immoral, greedy, stingy, and underhanded, and does not seek to rid themselves of these flaws, they are like a dirtied pot. How can such vessels be used to serve food for one's nourishment?

Master Taixu said, "When one is perfect as a human being, Buddhahood is attained." By cultivating each day, we refine our character so that we do not go against the principles of the universe and the ways of humanity. Maintaining proper conduct means being honest, trustworthy, respectful of parents, and true to friends. Having integrity and developing our potential allows us to slowly transform our circumstances by transforming the mind.

We tend to focus on outside influences in our lives. The famed philosopher Hu Shi described this as "being led by the nose." But if we are able to train our minds, control our thoughts, and avoid falling prey to the influence of external circumstances, then we will be able to strengthen our minds. To remain steadfast in the face of external circumstances is true strength.

IV. How Do We Respect Life?

Many people eat beef, but these days we must worry about mad cow disease. Many people also like to

eat pork, but hoof and mouth disease is a concern. People also like to eat chicken, but bird flu is a recurring concern. Does it not seem like these animals may be protecting their very existence?

For a long time, humanity has been damaging the ecosystem. Is it strange to think that nature is striking back? Examples include dust storms, holes in the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, earthquakes, floods, mudslides, and so on. How can humanity fail to realize the significance of all these life-threatening phenomena? How could humanity believe it is their right to destroy the plants and animals of this world?

Conduct that is harmful to life is neither reasonable nor proper. Buddhism teaches us not to harm living things. This is a form of compassion. Not harming and protecting sentient beings promotes equality and the right to life. This extends to protecting the environment.

Buddhism's deep respect for life can be seen in the following verses:

Human flesh and the flesh of animals;
Though the names differ, the essence does
not.

We all belong to the same nature;
We merely vary in bodily form.

If I left others to suffer in pain,
Since the sweet and fat are what I want;
No need to wait upon the Lord of Death's
 judgment;
I know myself what such deeds will cost.

Who says the life of animals counts for
 naught;
We all are similar in flesh, bone, and skin.
So strike not that bird on the end of the
 branch,
For its chicks in the nest are awaiting their
 mother's return.

To avoid killing sentient beings means to avoid encroaching upon the lives of others. A Confucian text says, "Having seen it alive, he cannot bear to see its death; having heard its cry, he cannot bear to eat its flesh. Thus, a sage stays away from the kitchen." These words display their respect and concern for life.

The *Collection of the Six Perfections Sutra* records how the Buddha was born as a deer king in a

previous life, and sacrificed himself to save a mother deer. This act so moved the local people that they established a preserve for animals. King Asoka, who became a Buddhist only a few hundred years after the Buddha's nirvana, had planted vast tracts of forest to shelter sentient beings, and established many animal hospitals. He also ordered that royal cooks refrain from killing sentient beings. Such acts are fine examples of the Buddhist respect for life.

Today, vegetarianism has gained widespread popularity. Vegetarianism is not only beneficial to one's health, it also helps develop a compassionate mind. A compassionate mind is one that cannot bear the suffering of sentient beings. We feel pain when we accidentally cut our fingers, yet people kill chickens, slaughter pigs and cows, and eat fish because it suits them. Are they appreciating the pain these animals are suffering? A poem displays this sentiment well:

A finger burned in boiling water
Delivers a shocking pain to the whole body.
A needle prick into one's skin
Feels as if knives are cutting all over one's
skin.

When fish die, they look to us in sorrow,
And when chickens die, they weep before
the blade.

Such sad weeping is clear in every case;
It's just those that hear it recognize it not.

Raising pets is also a popular trend, and yet it is
said:

People kept in jail,
Sob in sorrow all day long.
Birds kept in a cage,
Cry in sadness all the day through.

Upon hearing such woeful crying,
A mournful feeling weighs heavy in the
heart.

Why not free them from their cage,
And let them soar high in flight?

A bird locked up in a cage is a prisoner. Such practices are animal abuse—not the protection of life—and should be avoided. We should refrain from hanging chickens and ducks upside down, whipping horses and cows, killing wild birds, and catching fish

and shrimp with a hook, and other such acts. But today, we have artificial ponds stocked with fish and shrimp. Even those who fish recreationally and free their catches are still injuring these animals. They are killing insects by using them as bait while injuring the fish with hooks. Where's the pleasure in that?

We should not only avoid killing living things, we should actively protect life. We protect life by offering opportunity. Saving life means to bring others convenience, relief, freedom from suffering, opportunities to generate good karma, and further the good work of others. Only by saving and protecting life can we show respect for life. Only in this way will our own lives have dignity.

V. How Can We Refrain from Killing Insects and Other Small Forms of Life?

Some people say that if you kill a pig, you will come back as a pig; kill a chicken and you will come back as a chicken. Does that mean that if you kill a person, you will be reborn in the future as a person? This kind of reasoning is a horrible distortion of cause and effect. Karma is more complex and intricate than that. After you eat rice, is what you excrete still rice? If a student breaks a rule, the teacher will punish him.

Does that mean in the future the student will punish the teacher?

A caterpillar is connected with a butterfly, but it is not the same as a butterfly. Seeds planted in a field will produce plants of varying height. The law of karma dictates that causes produce effects, but within this process we cannot overlook that “conditions” mitigate the results.

Consider the act of killing a mosquito to stop it from biting someone else. With the drop of blood it takes, the mosquito is able to maintain its life. Would you end its life for a mere drop of blood? Is it better to let it live, or to kill the mosquito to spare someone the loss of a drop of blood?

Once, a group of people were waiting on the riverbank for a ferry. When the ferryman came, he beached the ferry on the sandbank. In so doing, many small fish, shrimp, and crabs in the sand were crushed to death by the ferry.

The ferryman then set out to deliver his passengers to the other shore. Since the boat was small, some people had to wait for the second trip. Among those who stayed behind, there was a scholar and a Chan master. As they waited for the ferry, the scholar said to the Chan master, “Monk, monk, did you see

that? When the ferryman pushed the boat into the water, many small crabs, fish, and shrimp were crushed to death. Tell me, is that a wrongdoing of the passengers, or of the ferryman?"

Frankly speaking, there is no easy way to answer this question. The ferryman was just doing his job. He had no intention of killing sentient beings. The passengers were just trying to cross the river. They had no intention of killing sentient beings, either. Nevertheless, many sentient beings were crushed by the boat. So whose fault was it?

The Chan master's answer was very profound. He said, "It is your wrongdoing, scholar."

When he heard this, the scholar was incensed. He asked, "How could it possibly be my wrongdoing? I am neither the ferryman, nor was I a passenger in that boat. How could it be by my wrongdoing?"

The Chan master replied, "Because you meddle too much."

The Chan master's words make sense. Many problems in this world arise over nothing. They come into being because we meddle and attempt to find fault. Oftentimes, if we keep to ourselves, conflict will not arise. But we often obsess over events that happen naturally, unable to leave the matter

alone. We come to think about it too much. This is the wrong kind of thinking. The Buddhist sutras state that “When the Buddha gazes upon a bowl of water, he sees eighty-four thousand beings.” Does that mean we shouldn’t drink the water? Of course not. Though there may be eighty-four thousands beings in the water, we drink it anyway. We drink it unaware of the eighty-four thousand beings it contains.

Some people vaccinate themselves against diseases, but when they do so, many cells and tiny organisms are destroyed. How can we react so coldly to their deaths? We aren’t. When we receive a vaccination, we do not intend to or think about killing germs. We are thinking about our own health. Buddhism is focused on people. Peoples’ health is important. Buddhism emphasizes the mind. A pure mind brings about a Pure Land. Therefore, even though one may find themselves killing sentient beings, if there is no intention to do so, then the karmic effect of the action is entirely different from killing out of anger.

Some people are cremated after death. During the cremation process, many organisms within the firewood and the body are incinerated. Does that mean that the precept against killing sentient beings was broken? The goal of cremation is to prevent the

body from becoming putrefied, not to kill insects, so the precept is not broken. It is important that there was no intention to kill. In the mind, there were no thoughts of killing sentient beings. The karma that arises from the mind is very important. If we have no intention to do wrong, than the degree of negative karma generated by unwholesome action is lessened.

VI. How Does Karma Affect Illness?

As long as we are alive and have a physical body, we will suffer from illnesses. Some people reach seventy or eighty in good health, while others fall ill by twenty. Naturally, this is influenced by karma.

Though it is difficult to avoid suffering in life, there are ways to relieve it. When someone falls ill, they can be cured with medicine. Similarly, there are ways to relieve the karmic effects of one's actions.

With regard to unwholesome karma, consider the following analogy: If you put a spoon of salt into a cup of water, the water will taste foul; much too salty. But if you put a spoon of salt into a tub of water, the water will actually taste better. On one end of the scale, there is our unwholesome karma. On the other, there is our compassion. The water represents the capacity of one's compassionate mind. The

greater one's compassion, the more it will be able to dilute the foulness of unwholesome karma.

Here is another example: Suppose I have a field. The seeds in this field have grown into stalks of grain. But weeds, too, have grown up among them. What should I do? I must carefully pull out the weeds. If the weeds are simply cut rather than uprooted, they will regrow in time. We can continue cutting weeds in this way forever. However, this is inconsequential. After the grain stalks have grown tall, the weeds will no longer interfere with the growth of the grain.

It is difficult to relieve all the unwholesome karma we have accumulated in the past. But if the stalks of our merit have grown tall and strong, why should we worry about the weeds of unwholesome karma that lie beneath them?

Therefore, there is no need to fear karmic obstacles. As long as we do good deeds and accumulate merit, our unwholesome karma will be overshadowed. However, people who accumulate merit often lose it later. Just as a cup with a hole leaks water, so, too, can our merit slowly leak away.

How does our merit drain away? Merit leaks out due to our afflictions, emotions, harmful thoughts, anger, greed, and delusion. Suppose we do some good

deed, but in the very next moment become upset over some small matter, speaking harmful words or thinking unwholesome thoughts. This greatly reduces the merit we gain from acts of charity. Therefore, we must always be careful of the kinds of karma we create through body, speech, and mind. We must avoid creating more unwholesome karma. Otherwise our merit will leak away.

To care for their bodies, people employ herbal therapy, physical therapy, qigong, drug therapy, psychotherapy, diet therapy, water therapy, heat therapy, steam therapy, and so on. Any of these treatments is acceptable, so long as it cures the disease. There are many expedient approaches. An illness can have many different methods of treatment. Just as illness can be cured by various means, so too can karma be regulated by many methods. As long as the approach is appropriate, there's no need to think overly much on the subject.

VII. What is the Buddhist View on Terminal Illness and the End of Life?

There are some patients who cannot be saved no matter how hard the doctor tries. But the doctor refuses to let the patient die without trying to save them. In

such cases, it's best to let nature take its course. I have seen many hospital patients who'd simply reached the end of their lives. To keep them alive with oxygen tanks, injections, blood transfusions, and other artificial means merely extends their suffering.

Death is a natural occurrence. It's nothing to fear. Life itself cannot be extinguished. Only the physical body dies. It's like moving to another country. Many people would rather go on living poorly than die well, willing to suffer just to put off dying. This is a mistaken view.

In Taiwan, there is the "Institute of Life and Death Studies" at Nanhua University, founded by Fo Guang University. Research on life and death has become a popular subject in Taiwan. Our students volunteer to assist at funerals. This helps better their understanding of death, so that death will no longer be a source of fear for them.

Someone once asked me, "Since both religious and non-religious people die, why bother following a religion?"

People who believe in religion accept the noble aspirations and beliefs of their religion, which furthers their wisdom and gives them the strength to face life and death. They are able to understand that

life and death are natural phenomena. Death is the process of returning to where one came, hence the saying “look upon death as a return home.” Is that not a peaceful, happy thought? If employed wisely, the various forms of Dharma practice not only free us from the sorrows and sufferings of life, they can also put an end to the fear of death.

Old age, sickness, and physical decline are all natural phenomena. To die is to be like a lamp running out of oil. There is no need to fear death. Life and death are one and the same. Life is not just living, and death is not just dying. We can see the same from the Buddha: when the proper causes and conditions are present, the Buddha enters the world. When those causes and conditions break apart, the Buddha enters nirvana.

VIII. What is Dependent Origination?

It is beneficial to believe in the cycle of birth and death. If we believe that there is nothing after death, we believe that we have no future. If we believe in life after death, we will be able to put more effort into our lives, as we believe that there is a future to work for.

The cycle of birth and death is a continuous cycle of cause and effect. Causes produce effects, and in

turn these effects become causes for other effects. It is a cycle which continues, never stopping, but simply beginning again. This is also true for the cycle of birth and death.

Most religions consider human life to be linear—from here to there, with a beginning and an end. But Buddhism considers existence to be cyclical, produced through cause and effect, with neither a beginning nor an end. For example, in life, there is birth, old age, sickness, and death. We should not fear death, for after death there is birth. However, we also should not rejoice over birth, for birth is followed by death.

When the causes and conditions are right, a seed buried in the ground will sprout and produce fruit. This is the result of karma. Whenever we discuss birth and death or cause and effect, it is important to remember the importance proper conditions play in both. Whatever arises and whatever we gain, both causes and conditions are necessary. This is the relationship between causes, conditions, and effects.

Why do people drink water? Because the feeling of thirst has arisen. What happens after they drink water? The feeling of thirst ceases. This is arising and ceasing through cause and effect.

It's not a question of whether or not you believe in the cycle of birth and death. The cycle of birth and death is a real and inevitable phenomenon. It is true. For something to be true, it should be universal, inherent, and eternal. For example, the cycle of birth and death applied to men and women, young and old, rich and poor, high and low. Everyone is subject to the cycle of birth and death. Therefore, it is universal, inherent, and eternal. It is true.

“One reaps what one sows,” is the simplest way to sum up the cycle of birth and death. The world undergoes the cycle of formation, abiding, decaying and extinction. Time brings forth spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Human life undergoes the stages of birth, old age, sickness, and death. All of this is part of the cycle of birth and death.

Humans eat green vegetables and various grains. Their excrement becomes fertilizer. This fertilizer nourishes plants and trees, which then are used by humans. People feed lambs and pigs so they provide us with food to eat. Water is turned into steam by the heat of the sun, and when this steam encounters cold air, it condenses into rain. Flowers and fruit produce seeds, which are planted to produce flowers and bear fruit. A river flows to the sea. Where does all this

water go? There will come a time when the water returns to the river.

Birth and death is cyclical, and this should give us hope. The cycle of birth and death can lead to a wonderful future, but it can also lead to unfortunate results. We can see how one government replaces another or how great families rise and fall. These are all examples of the cycle of birth and death in our world.

There is a saying that “success makes one a king, while failure condemns one to be a bandit.” But both of these outcomes require certain conditions to be present. We need not be envious of the successful. Wealth and riches run dry within three generations, and an empire rarely lasts a thousand years. This is the meaning of the phrase, “When we see others die, we feel anxious and tense as if on fire; not because we are pained at the other’s fate, rather we worry that we will be next.” By understanding the cycle of birth and death, we know that there is cause and effect. Through this, we come to understand impermanence.

The wheels of a train are always turning, for they are constantly going forward. The turbines of a ship not only drive it ahead, but also turn it left or right. When we give rise to afflictions, generate negative karma, or experience suffering, we create bonds that

tie us to life. When this occurs, we cannot avoid the suffering that comes from the cycle of birth and death.

There is a Buddhist verse that says, “Know your past lives by looking at what befalls you in this life; know your future life by looking at what you are doing now.” This is the best way to describe the cycle of birth and death.

IX. What Are Buddha Nature and the Soul?

Human existence is not limited to the physical body. There is also a non-physical, “spiritual” aspect of existence. Oftentimes, this is referred to as the “soul.” However, in Buddhism the term “soul” is not used, because it does not fully encompass all the non-physical phenomena that make up a person. What most religions refer to as a “soul” corresponds to the Buddhist idea of the mind consciousness, or “sixth consciousness.” But in addition to that, beings have an *alaya* consciousness, which stores our wholesome and unwholesome karma and carries it from life to life, as well as Buddha nature, which is our true essence. Buddhism seeks to understand all of these non-physical parts of existence. By comparison, the “soul” is a rather superficial concept.

Buddhism is not the only religion that believes there is a spiritual aspect to existence. For example, Daoism believes in the integration of divinity with humanity and that, when a person dies, their spirit is not extinguished. Additionally, there are people who have heard, seen, or sensed deceased relatives. I imagine many people have experienced this. But it is not a shared experience. You may have heard them, but I have not. Even if you tell me, I may not believe you. It is a debatable matter, built on the personal experiences of an individual. If you experience it, you're certain to believe it, and will become attached to the idea.

In both the East and the West, there are now those who devote themselves to the study of the "soul." I believe that one day they will uncover the truth of it. But whatever its nature, we should have faith that there is a spiritual aspect to existence, whether we know it is true or not. If we believe that the spirit goes on after the body dies, then there is still a future, still hope. If there is no spirit that lives on, there is no hope for a future, only death and oblivion. This is too horrible to contemplate. As the Buddhist saying goes, "Better to give rise to a view of existence as grand as Mount Sumeru than give rise to a view of emptiness as trifling as a mustard seed."

The Buddhist view of the spirit should not be considered a superstitious belief. Confucius once taught his students to avoid “discussing strange occurrences, feats of strength, disorder, or supernatural beings.” Buddhism too avoids discussing strange occurrences, feats of strength, civil disorder, or supernatural beings. When confronted with unexplained phenomena, Buddhism will attempt to explain them and accept them for what they are, but by no means do Buddhists exalt such strange occurrences. The same applies to the concept of the “soul.” Buddhists would never worship the soul. Whether or not the “soul” exists, it is as significant as a teacup, a table, or a building.

Yet at the same time, it is important that Buddhists not dismiss the mundane, physical world. Most Buddhists live a lay lifestyle and cannot be without money and material goods. Thus, Humanistic Buddhism does not consider money to be the root of all evil. Instead, it encourages its followers to obtain wealth and prosperity, as long as they engage in right livelihood. Humanistic Buddhism approves of being in possession of wholesome wealth. Only with wholesome wealth can one endeavor to perform beneficial activities. Nor does Buddhism

reject appropriate relationships of love. Not only does Buddhism support love between husbands and wives, it wishes that everyone finds someone to love and start their own families. Humanistic Buddhism wishes that all people can embrace the “three benevolent acts” and do good deeds, say good words, and keep good thoughts, filling the mind with truth, goodness, and beauty. We should expand our capacity for magnanimity, so that we are without envy or hatred. We can expand our hearts and minds to encompass the entire universe.

Although there are those who say that “the soul is not extinguished and the spirit does not die,” this is a shallow analysis of human life. Delving deeper, we realize that only the mind is truly permanent, and that nirvana is tranquility. We should seek to transform our *alaya* consciousness to become perfect, mirror-like wisdom. Only then can we see our true nature.

Simply knowing the concept of the *alaya* consciousness is not the same as understanding it. The perfect mirrorlike wisdom of the *alaya* consciousness is only realized through spiritual practice and personal experience. It requires that we transform our consciousnesses into the “four wisdoms,” turning the first five consciousnesses into the “wisdom of perfect

conduct,” the sixth consciousness into the “wisdom of profound insight,” the seventh consciousness into the “wisdom of universal equality,” and the eighth consciousness into “perfect mirrorlike wisdom.” When this transformation is complete, not only do we have a spirit, but our Buddha nature is completely manifested. Would our lives not then be complete?

X. What is Non-Duality?

The “Entry into Non-Duality Chapter” of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* records how one day, when the lay Buddhist Vimalakirti fell ill, Manjusri Bodhisattva led a host of great bodhisattvas to Vimalakirti to inquire after his health. As Vimalakirti and his visitors conversed, Vimalakirti asked the question, “How does a bodhisattva enter non-duality?”

Each of the thirty-one bodhisattvas gave an answer based upon their own understanding. After all of them spoke, Vimalakirti said to Manjusri Bodhisattva, “Manjusri, how does a bodhisattva enter non-duality?”

Manjusri Bodhisattva answered, “According to my understanding, when all phenomena are no longer subject to either speech, indication, or knowledge, and have passed beyond all questions and answers,

one has entered non-duality.” This means that truths cannot be sought through logic, reasoning, analogy, induction, or deduction. They must be experienced directly. Concrete application is the only way to enter non-duality.

After Manjusri Bodhisattva spoke, he asked Vimalakirti, “Now let me ask you, how does a bodhisattva enter non-duality?”

Vimalakirti did not answer. Everyone was surprised by his silence. Only the wise Manjusri Bodhisattva understood Vimalakirti’s meaning, and exclaimed, “Excellent, excellent! Only when there is no longer speech or words can one truly enter non-duality.”

What he meant was that, since non-duality cannot be explained, it cannot be expressed in language. If one attempts to describe it in spoken words or written language, it would not be non-duality. Vimalakirti’s silence showed how the unsurpassed, profound path cannot be put into words, or explained in writing. It transcends the limitations of these forms and explores intrinsic nature directly. This is entering non-duality.

How can we experience non-duality? Does “non-duality” mean that birth and death are one and the same? From a perspective of non-duality, birth and

death are one: With birth, there must be death. With death, there must be birth. Birth and death are of one non-dualistic essence. Are existence and non-existence the same? In truth, existence and non-existence are one. Consider a cup filled with water. This cup is only a temporary manifestation. The cup is made of paper; paper that came from wood, which in turn came from a tree. The tree itself grew from an assemblage of causes and conditions such as sunlight, air, water, and earth. Everything in the universe arises due to dependent origination. Everything requires causes and conditions to come into being. Without causes and conditions, the world would not exist. Causes and conditions are non-duality.

See how the water in the great ocean is stirred into waves by the wind. The water and the waves may appear to be two things, but in reality, they are one: the water is the wave and the wave is the water. In the same way, earrings, bracelets, necklaces, and gold watches are all made of gold. They all share gold as their basic essence. The various forms of jewelry are all just temporary manifestations of this essence.

The mind is the source of distinctions. When you love someone, you want them to live forever. When you hate someone, you want them to die immediately.

The mind creates this huge difference between love and hate. But from the perspective of truth, there is neither love nor hate. All things are equal in the dharma realm; everything is one. This is non-duality.

Chinese culture pays particular attention to propriety, justice, honesty, and honor. We have also embraced Western knowledge of subjects such as applied sciences such as physics and chemical engineering. Essence and function must also be combined, for they are one, not two. In this same sense, the mundane and supramundane are also not separate, and the same is true of affliction and nirvana, existence and emptiness. Existence is not necessarily existing, nor is non-existence non-existing. This is what is meant by the Buddhist phrase “wondrous existence and true emptiness.” There can only be existence when there is emptiness. If a house is full, people would not be able to live in it. If emptiness is not empty, then how could it contain all phenomena? Only through emptiness can we realize the ultimate meaning of existence. We must avoid the extremes of “emptiness” and “existence” and return to the Middle Way. The Middle Way is the true Dharma.

What is non-duality? It is the “thunderous silence” of Vimalakirti. Non-duality is the

supramundane Dharma of Buddhism. When we say “affliction is the same as enlightenment,” this is the view of non-duality. For example, raw pineapple and persimmons are sour, but with gentle winds and warm sunlight, they can ripen and turn into sweet fruit. We can see that sourness is sweetness, and sweetness is sourness. That is why it is said that “affliction is enlightenment.”

This supramundane view seeks to explain the true principle of enlightenment. But when we have yet to attain enlightenment, it is impossible for us to embrace the principle and ignore phenomena as they appear before us. We use principles to explain phenomena, and clarify principles by using phenomena as examples. Achieving this is the true meaning of non-duality. If we can apply this philosophy to our own lives, we will be able to see that the self and others are one.

XI. What is the Pure Land?

There are eight main schools of Chinese Buddhism. Four such schools emphasize different kinds of Buddhist practice: the Chan, Pure Land, Esoteric, and Vinaya schools. Four schools emphasize different points of Buddhist doctrine: the Huayan, Tiantai, Mind-Only, and Three Treatises schools.

Humanistic Buddhism does not belong to any one of these schools or sects. Rather, Humanistic Buddhism follows the original teachings of the Buddha. In his forty-nine years of teaching the Dharma, it was not to ghosts, demons, animals, or beings in the hell realm that the Buddha taught. His teachings were for the benefit of beings living in the human world. It is only fitting that the Dharma given to human beings be called “Humanistic Buddhism.”

Whether it is the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, the Huayan Pure Land, the Amitabha Pure Land, or even the Pure Lands advocated by other schools, people often talk about the Pure Land mentioned in the Buddha’s teachings. But let me ask you this: in what realm does the Buddha now reside? Where is he now? You would say: He is in the Pure Land, of course!

In truth, it is not only the place that Amitabha Buddha resides that can be considered a Pure Land. Everyone who has a pure mind has a Pure Land. Buddhists speak of the “Pure Land,” Christians talk about “Heaven,” but some people may ask: what’s the difference? Are there differences between Pure Lands? Which one is the best?

Many Buddhist sutras state that all Buddhas follow the same path. In the *Medicine Buddha Sutra*

it states that by reciting the name of the Eastern Medicine Buddha of Pure Crystal Radiance, one can also attain rebirth in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. This is like how you can be hired by the Hong Kong government if you study at Hong Kong University, and a graduate of the Chinese University of Hong Kong or the Hong Kong Polytechnic University can also work for the Hong Kong government. Buddhists should not aim for a specific Pure Land. After you have attained a certain level of practice, you will obtain rebirth in whatever Pure Land you desire.

Sometimes people ask me where the Pure Land or hell are located. I like to say, “Well, the Pure Land is located in Pure Land, and hell is located in hell.” That’s one way to explain it. Another is that Pure Land, heaven, hell, or the animal realm can all be found in the human world. If you go to the marketplace, you will see chickens, ducks, and fish with their intestines cut open and the stomachs flayed, hung on hooks or suspended upside down. Is this not like the Hell of Sharp Knives or the Hell of Boiling Oil? In contrast to this, there are those who live in majestic mansions and enjoy all the material joys and comforts of air conditioning, refrigerators, and so forth. Is such not the same as heaven or the Pure

Land? Therefore, hell and the Pure Land are right here. They can be seen in this human world of ours.

The third explanation is that the Pure Land and hell exist in our own minds. Every day, each and every one of us experiences heaven and hell. When we get up in the morning, our minds are free of cares and concerns; we can go to the park for a jog, enjoying the fresh morning air. Isn't this heaven in this world? But when we get home and sit at the dining table, contemplating what to eat, we give rise to the mind of desire, the state of mind of a hungry ghost. If the meal is not to our liking, we drop our utensils and push away the bowl. Now we're angry. Is this mind of anger not comparable to hell? Sometimes we even curse or attack others. Is this not the ignorant behaviors of animals? Thus, we can attain the state of heaven, hell, hungry ghosts, or animals. There's no telling just how many times we slip in and out of heaven and hell in a single day. The Tiantai School promotes the idea that "one thought contains the three thousandfold world system." The ten dharma realms are found in the mind.

If the mind is filled with pure, compassionate, or charitable thoughts, then we have created our own pure land. But if we experience greed, anger, cruelty,

or false understanding, then we are in hell. Are we not then constantly drifting between good and bad, right and wrong? Humanistic Buddhism embraces all the Buddha's teachings, for everything the Buddha taught is Humanistic Buddhism. To borrow a phrase from the Buddha, "How could Buddhism exist without this human world of sentient beings?"

Humanistic Buddhism is not the invention of a single individual. It is neither the teachings of the Sixth Patriarch nor the thoughts of Venerable Master Taixu. To find the source of Humanistic Buddhism, we must look to the Buddha's own intentions. Humanistic Buddhism is well-suited to the modern era, as it differs from the Buddhism that was taught many years ago. In the past, monasticism was highly encouraged. All Buddhists were expected to renounce the world and give up their possessions, declaring that "only irreconcilable foes become husbands and wives," "children are debt-collecting demons," "money is the root of all evil," and other similar ideas. This behavior may be appropriate for those who have joined the monastic order, but what about laypeople? If laypeople gave up everything, how could they live? What meaning can their lives have without spouses, children, money, fame, and luxuries?

Humanistic Buddhism promotes faith and adoration toward the Buddha, belief in the Buddhas and bodhisattvas or gods and deities, and concern for society and all sentient beings. This is Humanistic Buddhism. It must begin with this interest in the human world. If we did not promote Humanistic Buddhism and fail to undertake activities that benefit humanity, choosing instead to seclude ourselves and chant the Buddha's name all day, would Humanistic Buddhism appeal to you? Therefore, Buddhism cannot simply stress the chanting of the Buddha's name and the worshiping of the Buddha. Otherwise, it will fail to bring liberation to sentient beings.

The goal of Buddhism is to bring liberation to all sentient beings. In order to do so, Buddhism must first adapt to the needs and spiritual capacity of individual sentient beings. If you don't like reciting Amitabha Buddha's name, perhaps you should try meditation. If meditation does not suit you, then you can try bowing to the Buddha. If you refuse to bow to the Buddha, you can try vegetarianism. If vegetarian food is not to your liking, you can contemplate Buddhist ideas and discuss the Dharma, or try chanting Buddhist hymns or music. It's even acceptable to refuse to believe in the Buddha. You only need

to follow the Buddha's teachings, thereby motivating others to perform good deeds.

The Humanistic Buddhism we promote today adapts to the needs and spiritual capacity of all sentient beings. It is pluralistic and multi-functional. It takes many forms, and can be practiced in whatever manner you find suitable. Humanistic Buddhism seeks to follow the Buddha's principle of teaching to suit the capacity of his audience and building a Pure Land in this world.

XII. What Can Buddhism Bring to China?

More than sixty years have elapsed since the Chinese communist regime was established. The political situation is quite stable. Not only is the economy now free, it is rapidly growing. The quality of life has improved, and China has solidified its position in the international community. But establishing a rich, powerful, and happy nation takes more than political stability and economic prosperity. The formation of social order and improvement of the moral character of the people are also necessary. Religion can play an important role in these factors.

Dr. Sun Yat-Sen once remarked on the importance of religion: "Buddhism brings the benevolence that

saves the world. Buddhist studies are the mother of philosophy. The Dharma can make up for shortcomings of the law. The law protects us from problems that have happened, while the Dharma protects us from problems that are yet to be.” Buddhism possesses the capability to transform society. Buddhist teachings such as karma, rebirth, the five precepts, the ten wholesome actions, kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity all help bring social order. By replacing wrong views with right ones and removing ignorance with enlightenment, Buddhism can exert a positive influence that cures social ills. This influence is an invisible force that stabilizes society and the country.

Once, I went to the San Khampaeng Hot Springs in Thailand on a religious and relief mission. Some refugees in the region said to me, “We can do without food, but we cannot be without faith. Poverty of the spirit is harder to bear than the hunger for food.”

The Dharma can help bring peace to the billions of people living in China, thereby bringing about a transformation for the whole nation. This is more important than any tangible wealth. I hope that the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party will be able to see the value of religion and use Buddhism to purify the minds of the people of society.

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