

Fo Guang Shan
International Translation Center

Ten of Life's Common Concerns

Buddhism in Every Step (A8)
（英文版）

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Ten of Life's Common Concerns

This booklet addresses some of life's common concerns from a Buddhist perspective.

I. Facing Poverty and Wealth

We are all human beings, but why are some of us wealthy and others poor? Moreover, how do we determine what is poverty and what is wealth? Some of us live in beautiful mansions with the best of material comforts. Others toil their whole lives, yet they can barely provide enough to feed their families. Why? In short, this is all because of the fruit or outcome of our wholesome and unwholesome karma accumulated from our previous lives.

Concerning the wealthy and the poor, the rich may not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, but they can be equally distressed by problematic human affairs. For those who are poor, even though each day is difficult, they still manage to

get through each day; without money, they can still stand tall and have peace of mind. This speaks to the Chinese expression "being poor without being poor in aspirations." In other words, wealth and poverty do not constitute the absolute condition for happiness in life. From the Buddhist perspective, wealth and poverty do not determine the nobility of one's character.

Take the example of washing a soiled object with water. Before and after the washing, it is still the same object. This implies that the decades of our lives are like an illusive dream, a reflection on a water bubble. What is poverty, wealth, misery, and happiness solely depends on our inner experience and perception. Therefore, some find enjoyment in the simplest of foods, while others with wealth rivaling that of a nation can still be full of worry, distress, and mental afflictions. On a deeper level, if our heart contains the entire universe, even if we have no place to stand, we can still experience the greatest sense of wealth and contentment!

The life of the Buddha is the best illustration of this. He was just as happy with a simple robe as he was with a royal garment. He enjoyed the food that he collected from his alms rounds as much as the food that was offered to him when he was the guest of honor. He could sleep under a tree and yet was equally at ease in a royal palace. Sometimes he lived

in solitude, and at other times he lived in the company of his followers and bhiksus. The Buddha was always at ease with his circumstances. The distinctions of rich and poor, coarse and fine, or fame and rejection had no bearing on his inner peace. This is the Buddha's greatest wealth.

The great contemporary monk Hongyi also led a life of equanimity. He never complained about anything. He lived a simple life of little want and great contentment. Whether it was a worn-out handkerchief, a simple plate of pickled vegetables, or a spartan bed, he was equally appreciative. Many thought he must be miserable given his meager subsistence, but Venerable Hongyi truly enjoyed what he had. One day, the famous scholar Xia Mianzun visited him while he was finishing his lunch of rice and pickled vegetables. The venerable showed such delight that Xia Mianzun exclaimed, "Only someone wise like the venerable can truly relish such simplicity."

There was once a wealthy business tycoon who lived in a luxury high-rise. He had a friend who, even though he worked hard, had little money. He was quite happy, however, for he had a loving wife who adored him and greatly appreciated his efforts to provide for their family. Although the wealthy man was very successful, he was frequently distressed by the constant obligatory socializing that his business deals called for, as well as the relentless struggle to

maintain power and fame. He was quite envious of his friend's simple lifestyle and loving relationship. He thought, "Why am I so wealthy and yet so unhappy? My friend may be poor, but he and his wife seem so happy. What is their secret?

One day, someone told him, "Do you want to sell them your misery? Just give them two hundred thousand dollars. They will become miserable in no time." He was tickled with the suggestion and decided to give his poor friend two hundred thousand dollars, a small fraction of what he had. The poor couple was ecstatic. They thought the money was the best thing that could happen to them. When night fell, they began to worry about how to safeguard their newfound wealth. Should they put it in the drawer? Someone might steal it. How about under the mattress? That did not sound like such a good hiding place. Worried about their fortune, they hardly got a wink of sleep that night. After a few days, they began to argue how to best use the money. The wife wanted to do one thing, while the husband wanted to do something different. Their fighting almost destroyed their marriage. Upon reflection, they realized that all their problems started the day they were given the money, so they decided to return the money to their wealthy friend.

This is, of course, a parable, but there is a valuable lesson here. Wealth and fame can also

sometimes increase mental afflictions and endanger life. Historically, one of Confucius' students, Yan Hui, was said to have lived a life consisting of "a bowl of rice, a gourd of drink, and an abode on a humble lane." Many could not tolerate such subsistence, yet Yan Hui would not change his life of joy one bit. One of the Buddha's disciples, Mahakasyapa, practiced a life of poverty and often spent his nights by tombstones without much of a thought. All these examples simply explain that wealth cannot be measured by the amount of money that one has. It is one thing to be poor in a monetary sense; it is quite another to be lacking spiritually. The store of treasure within our hearts and minds is inexhaustible; the question is whether we are willing to uncover it. If we are willing to mine and uncover our treasure within, then we are wealthy in the truest sense of the word.

II. Handling Gains and Losses

Throughout our lives, we are continually faced with many gains and losses. When we receive a promotion, we immediately feel elated. Once others take advantage of us, we become dejected and miserable. Due to the various factors beyond our control, many of us lead a life apprehensive about gains and losses. In a way, life is like a roller coaster that goes up and down. While it is said that we should not be

overjoyed by gains and distressed by losses, how many of us can truly live accordingly?

The sixth patriarch of the Chan School of Buddhism once said, "No phenomena will be obtained. Then you can establish all phenomena." If you reflect upon the ups and downs in your career, are they really as critical as you once thought? Our lives span no more than a handful of decades. What have we really gained? What have we really lost? Fame and fortune are as permanent as a fleeting dream or the autumn frost. It is often said, "We came into this world empty-handed, and we will leave empty-handed." What can we gain? Regarding life's gain or loss, *The Heart Sutra* says it well:

No eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind;
No form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or dharmas;
No eye consciousness so unto no mind consciousness;
No ignorance and extinction of ignorance.

When we can move beyond form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and dharmas, then we can see into emptiness and realize that there is really nothing to be "gained." In the world of emptiness, there is no gain or loss to be had. When we understand this, we are better equipped to deal with the ups and downs of

life. This illustrates that our entire life has been spent pursuing that which has no shape and form and the duality of self and others, right and wrong; these are not true "gains." "Bodhi cannot be gained physically, cannot be gained mentally, but through the elimination of all forms." Gains and losses can only exist on the premise of substantiality. On the premise of emptiness, there are no gains or losses. Concerning issues of gains and losses, we should think in this light.

If we understand the philosophy of "emptiness," what will our life be like? Suppose that we were cheated out of money or robbed; normally we would be very upset. But once we understand the philosophy of "emptiness," we realize that, without exception, all phenomena arise from causes and conditions; all phenomena exist based on dependent origination, without an independent, inherent self. Though we were robbed, perhaps because we owe a debt from a previous life, let us look at it as paying back the debt we owed. If we can think in this way, we can be free from the mentality of being apprehensive of gains and losses.

Suppose you used to be very famous and held a high position in society, but due to slander, your reputation was suddenly ruined. In such times, you can think: "Without a high position, I'm relieved of all pressures. Let's return from glamour to simplicity." In this way, fame and social standing can both

be let go of. This is the application of the philosophy of "emptiness." If we can see through things in this way, we can maintain a serene composure, even when aging and sickness arrive.

I really enjoyed listening to monastic chanting when I was a young child. When I joined the monastic order, I was quite disappointed to find out that I did not have the natural ability to chant. Chanting was a very important part of my monastic duties at that time. Many of my peers were given special recognition because of their chanting ability. I felt I was not living up to the requirements of being a monk. Upon further reflection, I became convinced that there were other ways I could contribute. I could help others through my writing. I began to write articles and publish books. The proceeds from my work helped me buy the land upon which Fo Guang Shan now stands.

Therefore, nothing in this world is absolutely "bad." Was my poor ability to chant "bad" for me in the long run? If I had the ability to chant well, at most, I would be a monk who can chant. Because I can't chant, I have devoted my energy in other directions. The end result was that "because of one's disaster, one gained a great fortune." When we encounter certain losses, there is no need for despair, because we might gain something else. What is important is to know how to understand and apply ourselves.

III. Repenting and Eliminating Unwholesome Karma

When I talk to retired military men, I often feel a sense of conflict within them. Some of them have said to me, "When I was in the military, I killed my enemies without mercy. Now when I think back on what I have done, I wish things had been different." We are only human, and we are bound to make mistakes. The important thing is to be repentant of our mistakes. There is a Buddhist saying that captures the power of repentance well: "Lay down the slaying knife; immediately become a Buddha."

Through repentance we are "washed clean" of our mistakes. When our clothes are dirty, we wash them to get rid of the dirt. When our bodies are filthy, a bath helps us feel clean again. When children do something wrong, we want them to be honest about their mistakes and make amends. Likewise, when we make mistakes, we have to be remorseful. The following *gatha* is often recited in repentance services to help us repent our wrongs:

All my unwholesome karma of the past
Is the result of greed, hatred, and
Ignorance since beginningless time
Committed with my body, speech, and mind;
For all these, I now seek repentance.

Some argue that our unwholesome karma is created by temptations in the environment, a lack of knowledge or moral principles, or oppressive life circumstances. In contrast, the Buddha taught that the sources of our unwholesome karma are our greed, hatred, and ignorance since beginningless time and that greed, hatred, and ignorance are generated through our body, speech, and mind. Living in this day and age does not help either. Modern societies are filled with an atmosphere of tension, competition, and conflict, making it difficult to experience the happiness of peace and harmony within. Therefore, it is no wonder that incidents of murder, stealing, sexual misconduct, deceit, harsh words, and false testimony continue to recur without end. How can we eliminate these unwholesome karmas?

Buddhist sutras give us some guidelines. Human beings cannot be without faults; karma is created even with the arising of an intention or a thought. What should we do once we have committed wrongs? First, we should openly expose our unwholesome karma and resolve not to repeat it. It is not enough to admit our wrongs privately; we need to openly confess to the Buddha or to someone who can guide us. After going through a process of sincere and poignant repentance and receiving the rightful punishment of our conscience, the purity of our nature can return. Second, we should believe in and

receive the strength and support of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, to evoke our own purity within, so that we will not repeat our mistakes. *The Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva Sutra*[1] states, "If someone who is bound and shackled, regardless of their guilt or innocence, recites the name of Avalokitesvara, the shackles will be broken, and he will be free." This speaks to the great skillful means of the Bodhisattva to eliminate the unwholesome karma of all sentient beings.

A field that is not cultivated will not yield a harvest. If the field is frequently tilled and fertilized (the mindfulness of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas), crops will grow and ripen, and then weeds (mental afflictions) will not be able to have a hindering effect. Similarly, someone who harbors great faith and merits, even if there is some unwholesome karma of the past, can temporarily forestall karmic retribution.

Amitabha Buddha provides us with an expedient means to be reborn in his Pure Land even though we may still carry our karma. When we die, we will not be able to take anything with us, except our karma. Amitabha is like a vessel of great compassionate vows. Our unwholesome karma is like a rock, which would ordinarily sink to the bottom of the sea. But when placed on the vessel, we can be ferried to the other shore. Therefore, if we have faith in the power

1. The Sanskrit name of the sutra is *Samantamukhaparivatro namavalokitesvara-vikurvana-nirdesa*.

of Amitabha's great vows, we can be saved. This is something we can rely on.

On one level of understanding, our body, speech, and mind create our unwholesome karma. If we investigate this at a deeper level, we come to see that even unwholesome karma is empty without any inherent nature of itself. If the mind repents, unwholesome karma can be eliminated. In a flash of enlightenment, unwholesome karma can turn into impermanence. It is stated in the sutras:

When defilements arise, extinguish
[them in] *the mind;*
When the mind ceases, defilements also
cease.
The extinction of both the mind and defile-
ments are empty.
This is called true repentance.

How can we acquire a new life through repentance? How do we transform hell into heaven, mental afflictions into bodhi, defilements into purity, the Saha into a pure land? This is determined by how we dispel our false views, which essentially is whether we can genuinely repent. After repentance, we also need to engender aspirations, learn from the spirit of saints and sages, and make the four universal vows:

Sentient beings are infinite;
I vow to liberate them.
Afflictions are infinite;
I vow to eradicate them.
Dharmas are inexhaustible;
I vow to study them.
Buddhahood is supreme;
I vow to obtain it.

The four universal vows are the embodiment of the Mahayana bodhisattva spirit. Through them, not only can we diminish our unwholesome karma, they are also our greatest source of strength as we walk on the path of bodhi to Buddhahood.

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IV. Diminishing Mental Afflictions

We all have our share of headaches and heartaches. Physically, we all have to face aging, sickness, and death. Mentally, we have to deal with problems arising from greed, hatred, and ignorance. The Chinese have a saying that aptly describes our predicament: "Heaven and hell sometimes end; the threads of sorrow continue forever." Our afflictions are as deep as the dark blue sea and are as dense as the trees in the forest. Our afflictions are the source of our delusions and unwholesome karma, propelling us through the cycle of birth and death.

Mental afflictions, however numerous and varied, all stem from one cause—attachment to the self. Because of wrong views stemming from this attachment, countless mental afflictions are generated. To cultivate Dharma, we first need to learn how to overcome these mental afflictions. The main sources of all mental afflictions are greed, hatred, and ignorance. To eliminate mental afflictions, we must be concerned with how to eliminate the three poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance.

Wang Yangming, a famous Confucian scholar of the Ming dynasty, once said, "To catch the bandit in the hills is easy; to arrest the thief in ourselves is tough." Fortunately, the Buddha teaches that we should "diligently practice precepts, meditative concentration, and wisdom in order to extinguish the fires of greed, hatred, and ignorance." Because of the habitual tendencies of our minds, we tend to focus on our own interests rather than that of others. But if we apply the power of upholding precepts, we will refrain from harming others, even at the expense of sacrificing our preferences. Thus, we can see that upholding precepts can be an antidote to greed. As for our various inner desires and our doubts and resentments in our day-to-day life, we need to apply the practice of "meditative concentration" in order to maintain an unbiased and pure mind and to be free from the snares of our mental afflictions. In regard to

ignorance, the antidote is wisdom. The wisdom we speak of here is not the same as worldly knowledge because knowledge is not always wholesome. When we do not allow our inner prajna wisdom to manifest, when our dealings in the day-to-day affairs are in discord with the Dharma, and all our actions are driven by emotions and a selfish worldly understanding, that is called ignorance. In Buddhism, wisdom is cultivated by listening, contemplation, and experiential practice. It is a method of observation and reflection on reality. Only through this method can we extinguish the great ills of greed, hatred, and ignorance.

Many of us have heard of the saying, "Do no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil." This is a good start. Our sensory organs—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—constantly make contact with the outside world and make discriminations; consequently, we develop many mental afflictions. When we are vigilant of the three doors of karma,[2] we are removing the conditions for the three poisons to arise. In this way, our actions can be more wholesome, and mental afflictions can gradually decrease.

My maternal grandmother was a very religious woman. She began her lifelong vegetarian practice when she was seventeen—the same time she began her practice of reciting Amitabha's name. She was

2. The three doors of karma are body, speech, and thought.

a very compassionate woman and had a lot of influence on my decision to join the sangha. She had three sons with families of their own, but unfortunately all of their children died very young, around three or four years of age. My grandmother was never bitter about this misfortune, but this was not because she did not feel the loss. She was a Buddhist in the truest sense of the word. She realized that when there is birth, there is also death, and we reap what we sow. The birth of her grandchildren was the culmination of causes and conditions; their departure, too, was the result of conditionality. The human lifespan is not that long to begin with, and we should not excessively grieve over the loss of our loved ones. Many of us choose to believe in the law of conditionality when things are going well for us, but we question its validity when tragedy strikes. My grandmother truly knew how to put sorrows into perspective. She was an inspiration to me.

V. Handling the Demands of Life

In this day and age of cell phones and pagers, we often see people talking on a cell phone while occupied with other tasks. Life is so filled with deadlines and schedules that every second counts. It is easy for us to forget why we busy ourselves. Some people say it is a blessing to be busy and feel needed, but we have

to be careful that we are preoccupied for the right reasons. Some people only focus on themselves and cannot give others the time of day. Others give their jobs their all and neglect their own families.

It is an art to manage time. We have to manage our time so that we can balance the demands of material and spiritual needs. We have to look out for ourselves, yet we should also have others' well-being in mind. We must work for the present as well as for the future. If we can strike a balance in all these areas, then we are managing our time well.

The United States is a country for young people. Society moves at a rapid pace, and elderly people, often unable to keep up, frequently withdraw. What kind of life can we expect when we get old? While there is hardly enough time to do everything when we are young, the opposite is true when old age sets in. My suggestion is that we all should develop the habit of reading when we are still young. Then when we are less mobile, we can always sit back with a good book. We have to keep the mind young by keeping it busy and engaged. When our eyes are tired, we can recite Amitabha's name. When we are mindful of Amitabha, he will always be in our hearts.

Actually, we do not have to wait until we are old to start reciting Amitabha's name. It is a practice that is applicable to the old as well as to the young. When we are busy, we can recite Amitabha's name to

calm our minds. Amitabha stands for "infinite light" and "infinite life," a good anchor during the ups and downs of life.

VI. Building a Spiritual Foundation

We all have to deal with heartrending problems sooner or later in life. What keeps us going in times like these is the hope that things will all work out and look better in the future. In Buddhism, hope is powered by two forces. The first force is generated by the strength of vows. A good example is Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's ten great vows:

1. To pay homage to all Buddhas
2. To praise the Tathagatas
3. To extensively give offerings
4. To repent all unwholesome karmas
5. To rejoice in others
6. To implore the turning of the Dharma Wheel
7. To implore the presence of Buddhas in the world
8. To always learn the Dharma
9. To always oblige to the needs of sentient beings
10. To transfer merits and virtues to all sentient beings

Vows have immeasurable strength because they embody hope, not only for the one who makes the vow but also for all sentient beings as well. The merit from vows also facilitates good causes and conditions to help us follow through with our vows.

The second force is generated by the support and guidance of the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. When we are young, we depend on our parents for all our needs. When we grow up and live on our own, we expand our support circle to include trusted friends as well. Some people also like to seek help from deities, but they do not realize that the heavenly realm is still within the six realms of existence and that deities are still subject to the cycle of birth and death. When their lifespans are exhausted, the deities age and become helpless too. In this world of impermanence, the Buddha teaches us to seek support, or take refuge, in the Triple Gem. The Buddha, the fully enlightened one, shines on us like a light, helping us see our way. His teachings, the Dharma, are like corrective lenses that help us see through our delusions and understand the truth about life and the universe. They are the tracks on a railroad, keeping us on course so that we may reach our destination. The sangha is the body of individuals who have renounced secular life and are committed to practicing the Dharma. Even though they may not have attained enlightenment, they are our teachers. It is said in the

sutras that we are the sick, the Buddha is the skillful doctor, the Dharma represents medicine, and the Sangha are caring nurses. *The Way to Buddhahood* by Venerable Yinshun contains an appropriate verse:

People seeking refuge everywhere,
Seeking refuge in all the ten directions,
Finally realize that the ultimate place of refuge
Is to be found in the most auspicious Three Treasures.

Friends may come and go, but the Triple Gem is always ready to extend a helping hand. The compassion of the Triple Gem together with the strength we gain from pledging vows forms the foundation of mental well-being.

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VII. Letting Go of Loved Ones

Separation from our loved ones is one of the eight sufferings we all have to endure. *The Way to Buddhahood* says, "Those with fame and high status can fall. Those who are together may be scattered." There is nothing more heartwarming than a happy family enjoying each other's company, sharing the good times as well as the bad. But children grow up and will eventually move out from under

their parents' wings. Sickness and death can also take our loved ones away from us. Moreover, in this day and age of disposable relationships, it seems that the family structure is also treated as being disposable. Spouses turn on one other; siblings treat each other as total strangers.

We should all treasure our relationships with our family and friends. Without the necessary causes and conditions, we would not have been brought together. However, while we treasure our relationships, we should not become overly attached to them. We need to let go when our children grow up and leave us.

There are a few things we can do to help us cope with separation when it becomes a reality. We should have a variety of interests to keep us busy so that we do not have to measure our happiness by how often our children visit. When our relationship with our children changes, we can build new relationships too. If we have our own individual support circle, then we are less inclined to be demanding of our children's time and attention. Last but not least, we should find happiness within ourselves and not in external elements.

What happens when our loved ones die and leave us forever? During the time of the Buddha, there was an elderly woman with an only son. She loved her son dearly and had always hoped that he would look after her when she became old and dependent.

Unfortunately, her son fell ill one day and died shortly thereafter. The woman was in anguish. Grief-stricken, she carried the body to where the Buddha was staying in hopes that he could bring her son back to life. The Blessed One took pity on her and said, "If you want me to bring your son back to life, there is a way. You have to first bring me a small mustard seed, but not just any mustard seed. This mustard seed must come from a house which has not known death." The mother thought that she could turn back time. Hopeful, she went from house to house, trying to find one where no one had died. Everywhere she went, someone in the family had once passed away. She searched in vain and finally, after knocking on all the doors, she went back to the Buddha and told him what had happened. The Buddha gently explained, "From time immemorial, man has lived and died. Such is the law of nature. You should not be heartbroken with your son's death." The elderly woman became enlightened.

When there is life, there is also death; when there is union, there is also separation. We should treasure our relationships while they last and let go of them when separation becomes inevitable.

VIII. Being Charitable

Some people look at wealth as the ultimate measure of success and the solution to all problems. Our wealth, regardless of its size, will not last forever. In fact, the Buddha once said that our wealth does not belong to us, but to five masters. The five masters are flood, fire, theft, corrupt government, and prodigal sons. Floods and fires can destroy in an instant what took years to build. We often read in newspapers how scam artists target older people and cheat them out of their life savings. Government policies and war can change the landscape of wealth, while spendthrift children can squander a fortune, however large. While we say, "This is mine," or "I possess this," the relationship we have with our wealth is actually much more tenuous.

We came into this world empty-handed, and we will leave the world the same way. The sutras say, "We cannot take anything with us; only karma follows us everywhere." While this may sound obvious, many of us do not necessarily take it to heart. We think that while we may not take our wealth to our graves, we can still leave it behind for our children. Unfortunately, the process of dividing up the inheritance is a common cause of rifts between once loving siblings. In fact, the bigger the inheritance, the more bitter the feud. We think we can plan for our children's future, but life can throw us many curves. We

should not be consumed with providing for the next generation; the best thing we can do for our children is to give them a sound education and teach them right from wrong.

The important question regarding wealth is not how much we have, but what we do with what we have. Wealth by itself does not have any ethical value. It is up to us to put it to good use, such as helping the poor and spreading the Dharma. Many philanthropists set up scholarships to help needy children through college. It is their way of giving a little back to the world.

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IX. Facing Aging and Sickness

Whether we are rich or poor, young or old, we all get sick. Even a simple illness like the flu can keep us in bed for a few days. While it may be an inconvenience, we can all deal with it. The true test of our inner strength is when we face debilitating sickness. I remember when I was in my twenties, I came down with a serious case of rheumatism. I was so ill that I could not walk. As I lay on the bed, even small movements would cause excruciating pain. When I finally saw a doctor, he told me that my rheumatism was a very severe case, and they might have to amputate my legs. When I heard the prognosis, I did not feel sorry for myself. I thought, "I have already dedicated

my life to spreading the Dharma. If I were to lose my legs and could not travel, I would have more time to read and write. I could continue my work through my writings." I was not afraid of how I might see myself or what others would think of me, so I was not bothered by the possibility of having to lose my legs.

When Norman Cousins[3] was diagnosed with a crippling illness in 1964, he did not give up hope. Instead, he looked at life in a whole new light and treated himself with "laugh therapy." He went on to live a healthy life until the late 1990s. Helen Keller was both blind and deaf. She was not deterred by her handicap and became an inspiration for our time. Very often, we are handicapped not so much by our physical ailments but by our mental moroseness.

How can we avoid the feeling of hopelessness when we are faced with life-altering sickness and change? Let me offer three suggestions. First, we need to remain positive even when we are sick. We all handle stress differently. Some people complain about even the slightest pain, while others can endure a lot more. It is important that we do not let the body dictate how the mind feels. When the mind is not focused on the pain, the body will in turn feel better. Second, we should approach health in a holistic way and not become totally reliant on medication.

3. Author of *Anatomy of an Illness As Perceived by the Patient*.

Although modern medicine has made many advances, it still has its limits. Some people run to the doctor for the latest in drug therapy at the first sign of illness. As a result, some antibiotics have been so overly prescribed that they have begun to lose their effectiveness. In addition to medical intervention, we also need to examine our way of life to see if we are eating properly and exercising enough. Third, we need to be at ease with our circumstances. While we try our best to take care of our sickness, it is equally important to be at ease with sickness itself. After all, sickness is an inevitable part of life. We all have to face it, but we need not succumb to helplessness.

X. Transcending Life and Death

Although we humans have life, our body does not last forever, and the death of the physical body is inevitable. Death and life are relative. While we all know that death follows life, I would like to add that life also follows death. Death marks the end of one life and the beginning of another. Many of us do not have the slightest idea regarding the age-old questions of where life comes from and where death leads. While we are alive, we take life for granted. Most of us are so preoccupied with making a living that we do not think much about life itself. However little we understand life, we understand death even less.

How should we look at life and death? The Buddha teaches us that existence is without beginning and without end. That which we call "life" is the culmination of causes and conditions, and as such, it is continually changing. Like the water in a fast running river, it is never the same water. As soon as some water flows away, more comes to take its place. This impermanence is an inherent characteristic of the phenomenal world. Look around us. We go through birth, aging, and death. Likewise, the inanimate world is marked with becoming, existing, and ceasing. The sutras say, "Mount Sumeru[4] may be tall, yet it will disappear one day. Despite the great depths of the sea, it will become dry when its time is up. Though the sun and moon shine brightly, they will cease to exist before long. The great earth may be strong and may hold all that there is, but when the fire of karma burns out at the end of the kalpa, it, too, cannot escape impermanence." When we see this truth, we will no longer fear death and rebirth. We will understand that death and rebirth are like moving from one house to the next.

The Buddha has shown us many ways of dealing with life and death. The Pure Land practice of the mindfulness of Amitabha Buddha is a direct and suitable method for many of us, but it is by no means

4. In Indian culture, it is believed that Mount Sumeru is the central mountain of every world.

the only method. When the great master Cihang was alive, he had one disciple whose Dharma name was Luhang. He was a retired military man and liked the simplicity of Pure Land practice. He repeatedly pleaded with his teacher to recite Amitabha's name with him so that he might be reborn in Amitabha's Pure Land. One day when he again approached his teacher on this matter, the master said, "You really want to be reborn in Amitabha's Pure Land? Good, let's go." He then sat down and passed away. When the other students realized their teacher was not breathing, they all blamed Luhang for causing their teacher's death. After half an hour of commotion, the venerable began to breathe again. He then remarked, "We are free to choose which school we want to practice." It is not important which school of Buddhism we follow, as long as we practice.

This story shows that what is important is not how many of the Buddha's teachings we understand but how well we put into practice in our daily lives those teachings that we do understand.