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The Essence of Buddhism

Buddhism in Every Step 3

Written by Venerable Master Hsing Yun
Translated from the Chinese by Amy Lam

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Amy Lam

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The Essence of Buddhism

Fellow students,

I am very happy to have this opportunity to speak with you. Today's topic is "The Essence of Buddhism." Essence means truth and also refers to the fundamental Dharma. Sometimes we say the doctrine of the Three Dharma Seals (also known as the Three Characteristics of Existence) is the essence of Buddhism, or that Dependent Origination is the essence of Buddhism. Other times we say that it is emptiness (*sunyata*) or the Four Noble Truths. What, then, is the essence of Buddhism? Actually, all of these concepts are the fundamental truths of Buddhism.

After the Buddha attained enlightenment, his first discourse, given at Isipatana (modern Sarnath) near Varanasi (modern Benares), was on the Four Noble Truths. This is the well known “First Turning of the Dharma Wheel” in Buddhist history.

In Buddhism, those who attain enlightenment by listening to and learning about the Four Noble Truths and Dependent Origination are known as *sravakas*. Most people have the impression that *sravakas* are only concerned with their self-enlightenment. Because *sravakas* practice the Four Noble Truths, some people have the misconception that the Four Noble Truths *only* pertain to self-enlightenment. Actually, the Four Noble Truths are the fundamental teachings of Buddhism; they were realized, experienced, and taught by the Buddha himself. According to the Buddha’s teaching, the true nature of life and the universe is none other than the Four Noble Truths: suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering. The Four Noble Truths form the foundation of Buddhism from which all Buddhist scriptures are derived. The *Avatamsaka Sutra*, a Mahayana scripture, even has a special chapter de-

voted to the Four Noble Truths. Thus, all Buddhists should learn the fundamental teachings of the Four Noble Truths.

The word “Truth” in the Four Noble Truths carries with it the meanings of investigation and reality. The First Noble Truth is the “truth of suffering,” which is to see, through wisdom, that the world of the three realms¹ is like a burning house, full of suffering and lacking in joy. The Second Noble Truth is the “truth of the cause of suffering,” which is to realize, through wisdom, that the afflictions of greed, hatred, and ignorance are the causes of birth, death, and suffering. The Third Noble Truth is the “truth of the cessation of suffering,” which is to attain the true nature of nirvana through wisdom. The Fourth Noble Truth is the “truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering,” which is to find the way to transcend the world of suffering to real happiness. The First and Second Noble Truths denote the causes and effects leading to the state of delusion in the mundane world. The Third and Fourth Noble Truths refer to the causes and effects leading to the state of enlightenment in the

¹ The world of desire, the world of form, and the world of formlessness. This is where the cycles of existence of all beings in six realms take place.

supramundane world. The Noble Eightfold Path is the cause, which when practiced, will lead to the effect, the cessation of suffering. In the next section, I will describe the components of the Four Noble Truths in their respective order.

I. The First Noble Truth: The Truth of Suffering

Personally, I have always believed that we should have a joyful, optimistic, and positive outlook on life. We should not constantly talk about suffering, walk around with knitted eyebrows and sad expressions, and be consumed by depression and misery. Some people may wonder: if we should seek joy in life, then why does Buddhism dwell so much on suffering?

The purpose of talking about suffering in Buddhism is for us to realize that all kinds of suffering exist in this world. Once we know the real nature of suffering, we can find a way to end our suffering. Thus, understanding the existence of suffering is only part of the process. Learning how to put an end to it, thereby attaining liberation, is the ultimate purpose of discoursing about suffering in Buddhism.

Some of you may ask, “Why does Buddhism say that life is full of suffering? I am not hungry for fame and wealth, nor am I hampered by love and emotion. My life is filled with happiness.” According to Buddhist scriptures, there are many forms of suffering. There are three forms of suffering, eight types of suffering, one hundred and eight kinds of suffering, and even boundless and countless forms of suffering. All of them can be classified into either physical or mental suffering. Some people have less desire for material comforts; they are able to withstand the hardships of extreme weather and accept the pain of impoverishment. There are those who can rise above the attachment of emotions, handle the agony of being separated from loved ones, and tolerate the hassle of dealing with people they do not like. No one, however, is free from the pain that occurs at the end of one’s life when the five aggregates disintegrate. Therefore, it does not make a difference whether or not we discuss suffering; everyone will experience some kind of suffering during his or her lifetime. If we can fully understand the sources of suffering and find ways to overcome them, we can then free ourselves from the deep sea of suffering and enjoy real

happiness in life. What are the causes of suffering?

A. The Causes of Suffering

1. Disharmony between material objects and oneself

The first cause of suffering is the disharmony between material objects and oneself. For example, if we live in a small house with many people, we may feel cramped and our crowded living conditions become a source of suffering. If the thickness of our pillows are uncomfortable, we may not be able to get any sleep, causing us to become restless and then short-tempered. To a student, even the height of the desk or the brightness of a light can be a distraction and a source of discomfort. Therefore, dissatisfaction with such material things in our everyday lives can give rise to suffering.

Not only can external material things be a source of suffering, but one's skin, hair, and nails, if not taken care of properly, can also become filthy and become a source of distress. There is a Chinese proverb that says, "Our hair is like three thousand strands of trouble." Our lives are inextricably connected to material things.

2. Disharmony between others and oneself

The disharmony between other people and oneself can be the greatest cause of affliction. For example, we cannot always be with the people we love, yet we have to deal with people we dislike.

Due to differences in our views and the ways in which we handle situations, conflicts arise and suffering ensues. Sometimes, even when we are careful and try not to offend others, we still feel insecure when we see people whispering in a group because we assume that they are criticizing us behind our backs. Disharmony in our relationships with other people can diminish our aspirations and result in a sense of dejection and apathy. Thus, it is essential to establish harmonious relationships when we deal with others.

3. Disharmony between one's body and oneself

Some people say, "Health is wealth." Even if we possess all the treasures in the world and have unparalleled talents, we cannot accomplish anything without a healthy body. The body's cycle of aging, sickness, and death is a natural phenomenon that no one can escape. A healthy person will become weak

one day. A beautiful complexion will wither with age. Although we may flaunt our strength when we are young, our bodily organs will nonetheless start to deteriorate with the passing of time. Our eyesight will degenerate and our movements will slow down. Even a minor cold can confine us to bed for several days. A minor toothache can make us toss and turn in our sleep. Due to the disharmony between one's body and oneself, different kinds of suffering occur one after the other.

4. Disharmony between one's mind and oneself

The mind likes to take control and is like a king who rules over all his subjects. It is also like an untamed horse running wild, not willing to be controlled. When greed, hatred, and ignorance appear in our minds, though we try hard to keep them under control, they resurface time and time again. Our efforts seem so futile. Suffering arising from the disharmony between one's mind and oneself can exceed the suffering brought about by disharmony in the body. When the body becomes ill, we can cure it with medicine, but when the mind is sick, even the best physician may not know what to do.

We often hear people complaining to others: “You’re not listening to what I am saying!” Actually, the one who is not listening is not someone else, but our own mind. We often cannot stop our mind from wandering or creating mental afflictions. In this sense, our own mind can be our most formidable enemy. If we are constantly at odds with our own mind, suffering is inevitable.

5. Disharmony between desire and oneself

As human beings, it is impossible for us to be completely without desire. Desires can be wholesome or unwholesome. Wholesome desires are those such as wanting to become a sage or a Buddha, to excel in one’s career, to serve one’s community, or to benefit one’s country and fellow human beings. On the other hand, coveting material comforts, grasping for power and position, or craving the pleasure of a love affair are unwholesome desires and can lead to one’s downfall. Even wholesome desires, when not managed properly, can become overwhelming burdens, giving rise to numerous sufferings. How much more damaging are unwholesome desires! Thus, an important ingredient of success is knowing how to transcend one’s material desires.

6. Disharmony between one's view and one-self

View refers to our way of thinking and our perceptions. While a lack of material things is tolerable, isolation due to one's views and solitude of the spirit are the most difficult to bear. Since ancient times, many seekers of truth have found themselves having to travel the path of Truth alone. In fact, the Buddha almost considered entering into nirvana immediately after his enlightenment due to concern that living beings may not be able to understand the Truth he had realized.

What typically can make us suffer are those views and concepts which are seemingly correct but are actually erroneous. During the Buddha's time, some ascetics emphasized all kinds of self-mortification. Some stood upside down in the forest; some sat dangerously close to fires; some submerged themselves in water; some refused to eat; and some went about naked. They tried to use every type of method to torture their bodies so that they might gain liberation. Because of their erroneous views and false understanding, these ascetics inflicted physical pain on themselves unnecessarily.

False views and understanding can cause us much suffering; they are the main stumbling blocks to our realization of the Truth.

7. Disharmony between Nature and oneself

According to history, our first human activities were struggles between Nature and ourselves. Since ancient times, the amount of suffering brought upon us by Nature has been incalculable. Natural disasters include hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, and floods. Too much rain has caused floods, completely covering low-lying areas. Too little rain has caused droughts, cracking the soil and making it impossible to plant crops. The sufferings we experience because of the disharmony between Nature and ourselves are clear and direct.

The real root of suffering, whether caused by external factors such as material things and nature, or by internal factors such as the mind and our views, can be traced to our attachment to *I* and *mine*. According to Buddhism, the source of all suffering is the illusive *I*, which is but a combination of the five aggregates. The combination of the five aggregates—form and consciousness, together with the three mental activities of feeling, perception, and

mental formation—constitutes life. The combination of these five factors exists only as long as the appropriate conditions are present. Nothing can exist unless the conditions for its existence are appropriate. Ordinarily, we live as if the body, which is made up of the five aggregates, can exist eternally. We cling to the body as the real self, creating all kinds of cravings, which in turn lead to endless suffering. If we can see through the illusion of the “self” and realize the wondrous truth of emptiness, then we can transcend all suffering. The *Heart Sutra* says, “[The Bodhisattva] realizes the emptiness of the five aggregates and overcomes all suffering.”

How can we realize the emptiness of the five aggregates and overcome all suffering? If we can realize the “selfless” nature of all things, (i.e., all things do not have an independent, permanent “self”), then we can realize the emptiness of the five aggregates. Once this is realized, suffering will be overcome. Let me illustrate what this means by the following example.

Soccer is a very popular sport in the western world. Spectators at soccer matches often number in the tens of thousands. Among the spectators at one of

these matches was a man who was smoking while watching the game. He was so absorbed in the game that he did not realize his cigarette was too close to the man next to him and it burned a hole in his neighbor's clothing. "Ouch, that hurts!" the neighbor yelled. The smoker then realized what he had done, and quickly apologized saying, "I'm so sorry!" The person whose clothing was burned was so caught up in the excitement of the game he said, "It doesn't matter. I'll buy another one later." How would you describe the neighbor's state of mind? He was so focused on the match that he was in the state of "non-self." At this particular moment, watching the match was all that mattered to him. Even having a hole burned in his clothes was not worth a fight. If he were not so caught up in the game, such an incident would have developed into a big fight. But, when both parties focused all their attention on watching which side was winning or losing, the concept of "self" no longer mattered. Imagine, just a soccer match is enough to capture our attention, so much so that we can forget the "self" and pay little heed to a burning pain. If we can always realize the emptiness of the five aggregates, we can definitely overcome all

suffering.

The existence of suffering is an undeniable truth. Thus, Buddhism continues to emphasize this fact and even goes one step further to find a way to overcome this problem. Actually, all modern studies, such as economics, medicine, and politics seek to improve our living standards and minimize human suffering. But, ordinary social welfare endeavors, such as aiding the poor and needy through the provision of food and clothing, can only give momentary relief. It cannot eradicate the roots of suffering. Buddhism not only emphasizes the eradication of our present suffering; more importantly, it teaches us how to eradicate the roots of suffering and liberate ourselves from the endless cycle of birth and death. Suffering in Buddhism is not pessimistic acceptance; it is something to be overcome and transcended positively.

B. The Way to Overcome Suffering

1. Strengthen our minds

Someone may say, “Since I don’t believe in Buddhism, I’m not free from the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death. However, even though you believe in Buddhism, you’re still subject to the

same suffering. What then is the use of believing in Buddhism?" This is true; believing in Buddhism cannot prevent birth, aging, sickness, and death. But, when faced with such suffering, we will have greater strength to overcome it. When we come face to face with death, we will be able to accept it more openly and gracefully.

Many of the great Arhats of Buddhism chose to live in the forest, by the water, or even in cemeteries, in order to realize their Buddha Nature. Many of the noble followers of Confucianism chose to leave the hustle and bustle of city life to lead a simple, honest, and tranquil life without any worldly desires. Most people find such a lifestyle difficult to accept, but these sages lived their simple lives happily and willingly. Why? This was because they had such high aspirations for themselves. They had great confidence in their ideals, so they had the strength to endure the hardships and suffering that ordinary people cannot.

A proper understanding of religion will give us the strength to overcome hardships willingly. Many people pray to all varieties of gods, asking for protection, money, wealth, health, and all the things that

they deem “good” in life. This type of belief can only encourage greed. When these people cannot get what they want, they end up in despair. Some might even blame the gods for their suffering. This kind of belief system, which is based on greed, cannot give people strength.

True Buddhists should not make unreasonable demands from the Buddhas or bodhisattvas. Instead, we should follow the way of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and be willing to dedicate ourselves to the benefit of all beings. If we have this kind of belief and spiritual understanding, then we will have the strength to overcome the afflictions caused by misfortune and other difficulties. If we can accept with equanimity when others are either nice or hostile to us, and if we can look at worldly matters be they good or bad, in the same way, then we can confront suffering with ease and calmness. Buddhism may speak of suffering in life, but I personally feel that life is full of joy. Why? Although suffering exists in actuality, if we can use our strength to deal with it, then we can understand the real meaning of joy. The fruit which ripens after diligent cultivation tastes particularly sweet. The cultivation of a correct and strong faith is

an important key that aids us in transcending suffering.

2. Eradicate the root of suffering

While the cultivation of a strong faith can aid us in transcending the pain of suffering, the eradication of the fundamental suffering of life and death is the ultimate goal of practitioners. We should not be complacent just because we can deal with suffering through our willpower, mental adjustment, and thinking. Even when we have control over the minor afflictions of life, if we are not completely free from birth, aging, sickness, and death, then the fundamental suffering due to the impermanence of the five aggregates, still exists. A Chinese proverb says, “To catch a gang of thieves, one should catch their leader first.” Therefore, we must eradicate the root of suffering in order to attain eternal joy.

The root of suffering is “self”: self-attachment, self-love, and self-view point. Because of “self,” we seek nice things to satisfy our needs, a pursuit that gives way to greed. When our greed cannot be satisfied, aversion and hatred arises. When we cling to our deluded views without understanding the facts and truth, ignorance comes into being. Because of “self,”

the fetters of greed, hatred, and ignorance follow us like shadows. How can we eradicate the root of suffering? If we can understand the truth of “non-self,” then the root of suffering can be eradicated. “Non-self” does not mean that we have to destroy our lives; Buddhism is not pessimistic! Buddhism does not deny that life has value and meaning. “Non-self” means to free oneself from self-attachment, self-love, and self-desire. It does not mean we should destroy everything, or give up everything. Even if we were to commit suicide, death would only occur to the illusive physical body, not to our clinging of “self.” Actually, “non-self” in Buddhism has the meaning of wisdom, Dependent Origination, great compassion, and real emptiness. It is through letting go of the attachment to “self” and erroneous views that we can realize the Ultimate Truth. It is only when we can eradicate the small “ego-self” that is associated with greed, hatred, and selfish desires that we can manifest our true, pure, and joyous nature. The noble men and women who realize the true nature of “self” do not leave the multitude. They still drink tea, eat meals, deal with other people, and handle matters; they still live normal lives. The only difference is that they

have a pure state of mind in their daily and spiritual lives. They have given up all kinds of obsessions and have realized the real nature of things. They are free from the suffering caused by impermanence and have experienced eternity.

The “self” that we cling to so dearly is just like an ephemera. Our life lasts only for a few decades; it is illusory and changes constantly. The real “self” transcends time, space, and relativity. It is free from afflictions and is pure. The key to freeing ourselves from suffering and attaining joy is to expand the small “ego-self” and realize “eternal” life. This is something that we need to attend to urgently.

II. The Second Noble Truth: The Truth of the Cause of Suffering

In our lives, we create many kinds of unwholesome karma because of our ignorant urges and cravings. This karmic retribution will give rise to the fruit of suffering. Thus, our suffering is caused by our own karma. Karma refers to the actions committed by our body, speech, and mind. We will be subjected to the effects of whatever actions we have done. Karma does not disappear; it only accumulates. However,

karma is not necessarily all bad. There is also good karma. Whether we taste the fruit of suffering or of joy depends on the karma we have sowed.

Karmic retribution and the Law of Cause and Effect are both special concepts that are common among Indian philosophies. They are also great teachings in the history of Buddhism. Karma can create a bright future in our life and give us hope. Perhaps someone may ask, “Didn’t you just say that karma is the cause of suffering? Now, why do you say it gives us light and hope? Is this not contradictory?” If you can truly understand the function and doctrine of karma, you will not have doubts about what I have just said.

The real meaning of karma is, “Everyone is responsible for his or her own actions.” Throughout history, there has always been one inexplicable question that has confounded philosophers and ecclesiastics alike: what is the origin of life and the universe. Various theories have been proposed to explain the origin of the universe and human life, such as the theory of natural elements and the theory of evolution. The Christian religion maintains that the world was created by God. Brahmanism in India

holds the view that everything is evolved from Brahma. These religions, and others, attempt to explain the initial creation of the universe and life forms, and to establish a set of laws in which everything is controlled by a god. But, Buddhism teaches us that humans themselves, not someone else, are in charge of their own destinies. Even God or Brahma cannot escape the Law of Cause and Effect. In Buddhism, karmic retribution is created by oneself, not by deities. The happiness or suffering in one's life and the brightness or darkness of one's future is not bestowed by gods, but determined by the effort that we have made. Wholesome fruit is produced from the seeds of our wholesome deeds. Likewise, unwholesome fruit is produced from the seeds of our unwholesome deeds. No one can give us fortune or misfortune. We create our own good and bad actions; no one else controls us. Thus, we can see that Buddhism has a great deal of respect for free will. It is a religion that believes in self-discipline, and that one will reap the results of one's own actions.

Mr. Hu Shi said, "Whatever harvest one wants, one must first plant accordingly." Karma is like a seed. We have to sow the kind of seed that will produce the

type of fruit we would like to harvest. Similarly, our actions will determine our karmic effect. Karma presents equal opportunity and is perfectly accurate. A person will not be exempt from karmic effect just because he/she is rich or powerful. A common proverb says, “Everyone is equal under the law.” Likewise, karmic effect is equally applied to everyone regardless of position, gender, status, or wealth. Everyone will receive his or her just desserts and render his or her own karmic retribution. No one can take someone else’s place, whether it be husband or wife, father or son, teacher or student, or friends. Our karmic retribution is a clear record of the results of our actions. Its accuracy is so perfect that even today’s modern calculators and computers cannot be compared with it. When everyone understands the concept of cause and effect, the morals of society will improve, crime will decrease, and it will not be difficult to establish a joyous and peaceful society. Therefore, the concept of cause and effect plays a very important role in purifying our minds and raising the morality of society.

Someone may ask, “You said that one will reap the fruit of one’s action. One person I know has done many bad things in his life. He has not only gone

unpunished but enjoys all kinds of honor and wealth. On the other hand, another person I know has done many good things, but misfortune seems to follow him. How does the Law of Cause and Effect work in these kinds of situations?” Actually, this is the Law of Cause and Effect. Why? The Law of Cause and Effect is like planting seeds. Some plants will become lush and green in one year. Some will take several years to grow. Likewise, some karmic results will ripen in this lifetime, some will ripen in the next lifetime, and some will not ripen for many lifetimes to come. Karmic retribution may be immediate or delayed, but we cannot refute its real existence. There is a proverb in Buddhism that says, “Good begets good, evil begets evil. All causes will give rise to results; it is just a matter of time.” The Law of Cause and Effect is absolutely fair. It is only a matter of time. This is why we talk about the cause and effect of the past, present, and future lifetimes.

Some of you who have received a higher education may react by saying, “This is the 21st century; our technology and civilization are highly advanced. Why should we believe in superstitions like cause and effect?” Actually, the Law of Cause and Effect is the

most scientific and accurate of all the natural laws. The Law of Cause and Effect controls every single minute of our lives; we cannot live apart from it. For example, when we are hungry, we eat. After we eat, we are not hungry anymore. When we are tired, we rest. After we rest, we will be full of energy. Every little part of our lives, even our mental activities of perception, emotion, and volition, play out according to the Law of Cause and Effect. Therefore, if we seek a joyous life, we should sow good seeds. Then we will taste the sweetness of our own good fruit.

When the first experiment involving test-tube babies was successfully performed, the entire world was shocked. Although a test-tube baby is not conceived inside the mother, it still requires the father's sperm and the mother's ovum, together with the support of science, in order to grow. A successful test-tube baby still requires all the right conditions to be present; thus this method of conception is totally consistent with the Law of Cause and Effect. A test-tube baby is merely the result of an alternative type of reproductive method.

There is nothing in this world that can escape the Law of Cause and Effect. Once unwholesome

karma is done, a bad effect will surely follow. Although the arising and the accumulation of bad karma can bring us suffering, we will have brightness and hope once the retribution is over. It is just like a person who borrows money from many people and thus is heavily in debt. After he/she repays all his/her debts, he/she will be free. It is just like a criminal who is freed after serving his/her prison term. A person who has committed many bad deeds can still have a beautiful future after he/she has borne the fruit of his/her karmic retribution.

The Dharma says, “All phenomena are impermanent.” Bad karma is also impermanent and empty, without an innate self-nature. If we stop creating bad karma and keep producing good karma, we will be free from suffering one day and we will attain true joy. Thus, the Law of Cause and Effect is neither pessimistic nor fatalistic; rather, it is optimistic and progressive. If we want to free ourselves from the depths of the sea of suffering, we must first eradicate the cause of suffering and then cease to generate any more bad karma. Then a life of joy will not be out of reach. Therefore, a full understanding of the original cause of suffering is absolutely necessary to achieve a

life of joy.

III. The Third Noble Truth: The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering

If someone asks you, “Why do you believe in Buddhism? What is the purpose of believing in Buddhism?” How would you answer? If you ask me, my answer may frighten you, because I believe in Buddhism for the sake of seeking “cessation.”

When we mention “cessation,” people immediately think of annihilation, extermination, or emptiness and they become frightened. In the history of Buddhism, there have been many cases in which the meaning of the Buddha’s teaching was misinterpreted due to incorrect translations. These mistakes became obstacles to the propagation of Buddhism. For example, the “cessation” mentioned in the Four Noble Truths does not take on the literal meaning of annihilation and extermination. The real meaning of “cessation” is to rid oneself of the affliction of delusion and discrimination so that one’s true nature—suchness—is revealed. Thus, cessation in this case is not pessimistic nor destructive, but positive, creative, and constructive.

“Cessation” means the ideal state where complete eradication of greed, hatred, and ignorance, is achieved. The quiet, peaceful state of nirvana will appear only when the fire of sensual desire is extinguished. The doctrines of prajna-wisdom and emptiness are similar to “cessation.” They suggest that we should eliminate our ignorance, greed, and craving in order to uncover our prajna-wisdom. When we talk about emptiness, some people may react by saying, “Buddhism talks about emptiness. So I suppose that it means heaven and earth are both empty; people and the self don’t exist. So, emptiness pulls people into an illusive and aimless world of nothingness. This ‘emptiness’ sounds horrible to me.”

Actually, the doctrine of emptiness in Buddhism does *not* mean nonexistence or nihilism. There is infinite existence contained within emptiness; there would be no existence without emptiness. Ordinarily, our concept of existence (*bhava*) is illusory and fictitious, whereas the concept of emptiness in Buddhism means true existence and wondrous reality. Why does emptiness become non-empty and cessation become non-extinguished? I will use an example to illustrate this.

If we want to organize a lecture, the first question we need to consider is “Where should we hold the lecture?” If there’s no space, it’s not possible for us to organize the lecture. Usually, when we want to organize something, we have to consider five factors: people, subject, time, place, and object. Place means space. Space has a very intimate relationship with our lives. For example, your pocket can hold things if it has space. You can put money in your purse if it is empty. Your nose, ears, mouth, stomach, intestines, and pores are empty; therefore, you can breathe, absorb nutrients, metabolize, and maintain your life. If all these spaces were blocked, people would not be able to survive. Because there is emptiness, there is existence. If there were no empty space, we could not construct buildings. This is what is meant by “real emptiness will give rise to wondrous reality.” Thus “cessation” and “emptiness” do not mean nothingness. The cessation of illusion and the elimination of the unreal are the prerequisites for the manifestation of true, wondrous existence.

Cunzi, the great Confucian scholar, suggested that one needs to go through three stages to cultivate the mind. They are humility, single-mindedness, and

stillness. Humility means that one should maintain an appropriate “space” within one’s mind and not be stubborn or condescending. If one has space within, new knowledge can be easily absorbed and others’ suggestions are readily accepted. Progress will surely follow.

It says in one of the sutras, “If one wishes to know about the Buddha’s state of mind, one should expand one’s mind like empty space.” We have all seen space, but who can clearly describe its form and shape? Is space rectangular in shape, square, or circular? Space is everywhere. The space that fills a cup will take on a cup-like shape. The space of a rectangular box is rectangular in shape. Since space does not have any definite, fixed form, it can take on any form. Emptiness transcends the relativity of existence and “non-existence.” If we can expand our mind like space, to infinity, we will understand the Buddha’s state of mind.

Attaining Buddhahood means the realization of the true nature of prajna-wisdom and emptiness, and the truth of nirvana and cessation. Cessation means the extinction of birth and death and the severing of the cycle of rebirth. The cycle of rebirth is the reason

for our suffering which we must endure through long periods of anguish. Therefore, only by eradicating the cycle of rebirth—which we are caught in because of our desires—will we attain the ultimate freedom of no birth and no death. Hence, if we wish to be free from the pain of suffering, we must solve the problem at its root, that is, to extinguish all of our mundane desires.

When you hear that Buddhism advocates that people should eliminate all mundane desires, you may fear that once you believe in Buddhism you are no longer free to marry, have children, make money, have a high position, or enjoy worldly pleasures. All these worries are unnecessary. Buddhism is a religion that seeks peace and joy. It does not renounce normal living; what it rejects is overindulgence in material enjoyment. In fact, when one believes in Buddhism, one can still marry, do business, and live a normal life. In Buddhist literature, there was a layman named Vimalakirti who was married and very well-to-do. Yet he did not become a slave to material desire. In a sutra, he is described thus, “Although he led a secular household life, he had no attachment to the three realms; though married, he always practiced pure

living.”

There are those who say that Buddhism rejects affection. In reality, Buddhism strongly emphasizes affection; what Buddhism seeks to eliminate is selfish affection and desire. One should transform selfish affection into compassion and selfish desire into wisdom. The affection advocated by Buddhism is devotion, not possession. It promotes the compassion of giving, not wanting. The love advocated by Buddhism is love for all sentient beings, not just one specific being. The bodhisattva's compassionate act of aiding all sentient beings is the manifestation of this selfless affection in its highest form. Affection that embodies compassion and wisdom will not go away. Some people seek out romantic love all their lives. Although love may bring about happiness, it can also be a source of suffering. When we read the newspaper, we see that crimes of murder occur every day. When we examine the underlying causes of these crimes, we often see that relationships and money are usually the main causes. Love without wisdom and compassion is a very dangerous trap.

Perhaps you believe that the joy of life is nothing other than the possession of love and money.

Buddhism advocates that people should eliminate selfish affection and greed for money. In that case, what kind of happiness can one attain by believing in Buddhism? Actually, Buddhism does not eschew money itself, nor does it advocate that “money is a poisonous snake.” Being poor is not a sin, nor is being rich loathsome. In fact, according to the Mahayana bodhisattva path, as long as wealth does not make one greedy, and as long as position can benefit the propagation of Buddhism, the more wealth or the higher position one attains, the more beneficial it is. Wealth and position can be very useful in promoting Buddhism. Wealth in itself is neither good nor bad; the key lies in the way it was created and is used.

Ordinarily, people have the misconception that, according to Buddhism, one is supposed to renounce “having.” This simply is not true. Actually, Buddhism places emphasis on “having”; however, the object and the method of “having” are different from that of general perception. In Buddhism, one strives to “have” joy for all beings, not just for the benefit of oneself. The method for accomplishing such a goal is through the mind of non-attachment, that is, to have everything by not possessing anything. I often say

that we should consider “not possessing” as “having” and emptiness as existence, and that existence and “having” are founded on emptiness and “not possessing” respectively. After all, without emptiness, there is no existence; “having” occurs only when there is “not possessing.” “Possessing” is limited, measurable, and computable; whereas, “not possessing” is limitless, immeasurable, and boundless. In our lives, there are two kinds of worlds. The one before our eyes is a narrow “world of possessing.” Because of their ignorant, sentient beings fight for the sake of their possessions. They do not know that when they turn around, they will find that there is another larger and wider world behind them. This other world is the “world of not possessing” and will be realized only if one’s selfish desires and emotions are eradicated. In this world of “not possessing,” birth and death are eradicated, desires are extinguished, and all relativity, differences, and illusions no longer exist. It is a completely liberated and carefree state of being. This is the state that all Buddhists should strive to attain.

When can this state of liberation be attained? Does one have to wait until one’s physical body is

dead and life is no more? No. This state was attained by the Buddha as he sat on his Diamond Throne, underneath the bodhi tree. If we work diligently, we can attain this state just as the Buddha did.

What is the state of an enlightened being? In the eyes of most people, an enlightened person often behaves very strangely. For example, in the records of Chan Buddhism, the enlightened Chan masters had different ways of expressing themselves when they were enlightened to the Way. Some disciples laughed madly, and others struck their masters; the masters did not mind such behavior, they actually approved of it. This kind of behavior was completely unacceptable to ordinary people. However, to an enlightened being, expressions such as these denote the nature of Chan.

IV. The Fourth Noble Truth: The Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

What is the Path? It is very comprehensive. The four immeasurable states of mind, the four universal vows, the three studies, the five precepts, the ten wholesome conducts, the seven limbs of enlightenment, the Noble Eightfold Path, the thirty-seven

practices to enlightenment, and the six perfections are all considered as the Path. Due to a lack of time, I am only going to discuss the Noble Eightfold Path today.

The Noble Eightfold Path refers to the eight correct steps that will lead to the cessation of suffering. These steps are right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The Noble Eightfold Path appears to be very simple, but to understand it thoroughly is not so easy. Let us take a look at each of the elements in the Noble Eightfold Path.

A. Right Understanding

Right understanding is what enables one to maintain his or her faith in the truth when faced with inequalities or difficulties. Worldly knowledge can be both good and bad. Sometimes it is not reliable and can mislead us. Let us take a look at the Chinese character for ignorance (*chi*). It is made up of two characters: *zhi*, which means knowledge and *bing*, which means ailment. When knowledge is corrupted, it turns into ignorance. Some people are extremely clever, but when they do bad things, it is doubly de-

structive! For example, Hitler and the First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty are two well-known historical figures who were clever, yet diabolic. As we can see, a person's profound knowledge is not necessarily in direct proportion to his/her morality. Knowledge is like a sharp knife. If not used properly, it can hurt others. Therefore, it is very important for us to know how to transform knowledge into wisdom and right understanding.

Transforming knowledge into wisdom and right understanding is not easy. The principle is the same as in taking photographs. The focus, distance, and shutter speed must be adjusted accordingly before one can take a clear and beautiful picture. Similarly, one can see the true nature of life and the universe as it really is, only if one has the right understanding. If one lacks the right understanding when observing this earthly world, serious mistakes will be made. It is like peering at flowers through a heavy fog or like blind people touching an elephant.

The teachings and methods of practicing Buddhism are many to suit the various needs of people. All individuals should cultivate their practice according to their own capacities. For example, all

sentient beings should cultivate the right understanding. Those practicing the Sravaka and Pratyekabuddha paths need to understand the concept of Dependent Origination. Those aspiring to the Mahayana bodhisattva path need to comprehend the wisdom of emptiness. Then finally, Buddhas are the enlightened ones who have realized prajna-wisdom. This sequence of practicing right understanding, Dependent Origination, emptiness, and prajna-wisdom is similar to the gradual progression a student makes in his or her education from primary school, middle school, and high school, to undergraduate and graduate studies. When we are at the primary stage of studying Buddhism, we should develop the right knowledge and understanding. When we are at the secondary level, we should observe the truth of Dependent Origination. At the advanced level we should contemplate the wisdom of emptiness, and at the final stage we should cultivate prajna-wisdom. These are the progressive stages of cultivation. The stages that we arrive at depend on our own effort. Regardless of the level we are at, we all must begin with right understanding. Thus, right understanding is very important and is the first step we should take

when studying Buddhism.

B. Right Thought

Right thought is right volition, decision, and contemplation. It means not having thoughts of greed, hatred, and ignorance. These three poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance are the main obstacles on our road to enlightenment. They continually occupy our minds and contaminate our pure nature. It is not easy to be rid of these three poisons. We have to exert effort constantly to maintain the right thinking needed to overcome these three poisons and enter the path of Buddhahood.

C. Right Speech

Using right speech means that we should not lie, slander others, use harsh language, or utter frivolous speech. A common proverb says, “Disease enters through our mouths; disaster springs forth from our mouths.” Our mouth is a very sharp ax. If we say something inappropriate, we will not only hurt others but also ourselves. Thus, it is very important that we choose our words wisely.

D. Right Action

Right action means that we should not kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, or take intoxicants of any kind. Besides abstaining from doing unwholesome deeds, we also need to actively perform wholesome deeds.

E. Right Livelihood

Right livelihood refers to the proper way of making a living; abstaining from unethical jobs such as operating gambling houses, selling alcoholic beverages or instruments that can kill; and operating slaughterhouses. Also, part of right livelihood is having well-disciplined habits such as getting an adequate amount of sleep, food, exercise, rest, and work. Right livelihood not only promotes efficiency and health, it also enables us to have a joyous family life and a stable society.

F. Right Effort

There are four right efforts: 1) to not produce unwholesomeness that has not been produced; 2) to eliminate the unwholesomeness that already exists; 3) to nurture wholesomeness that has not yet been pro-

duced; and 4) to maintain and multiply the wholesomeness that already exists.

G. Right Mindfulness

To have right mindfulness is to keep one's attention, awareness, and mind focused on the four foundations of mindfulness: 1) the body is impure; 2) sensations will always result in suffering; 3) the mind is impermanent; 4) all dharmas do not have a substantial self.

If we always contemplate upon impermanence, suffering, and non-self, we will not be greedy for the triflings of this world. We will strive diligently for the Truth.

H. Right Concentration

Right concentration refers to the four stages of meditative concentration (*dhyana*). What it really means is that we should concentrate our volition and thoughts through meditation.

If we can fully master the eight elements of this Noble Eightfold Path, we will reach Buddhahood more smoothly.

So far in this talk, we have learned about the Four

Noble Truths, which can be compared to the process of curing a disease. What causes a person to get sick is the Second Noble Truth- the cause of suffering. After determining the root of the illness, we prescribe different methods for curing it, which is the Fourth Noble Truth- the path that leads to the eradication of suffering. When the correct prescription is applied, thus curing the disease, it is the Third Noble Truth- the cessation of suffering. We must cure our physical illness with medicine, whereas the sickness of our minds must be cured with Buddhism. When we look at the Four Noble Truths through the principles of curing a disease, we can see they are completely in accordance with science, illustrating that Buddhism is very logical indeed.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha started teaching what he had realized. The first time he taught the Dharma, he turned the Wheel of Dharma three times. The first turning was instructive; he taught about the content and definitions of the Four Noble Truths. He said, “Thus is suffering, which is oppressive; thus is the cause of suffering, which beckons; thus is the cessation of suffering, which is attainable; thus is the path, which is practicable.”

The second turning of the wheel was “encouraging.” The Buddha persuaded his students to practice the Four Noble Truths, to eradicate afflictions and attain enlightenment. He told them, “Thus is suffering, you should know; thus is the cause of suffering, you should end; thus is the cessation of suffering, you should actualize; thus is the path, you should practice.”

The third turning was “realization.” The Buddha told his students that he himself had realized the Four Noble Truths. He encouraged all sentient beings to put forth their effort and strive to realize the Four Noble Truths just as he had done himself. The Buddha told them, “Thus is suffering, I have known; thus is the cause of suffering, I have eradicated; thus is the cessation of suffering, I have actualized; thus is the path, I have practiced.” From the emphasis the Buddha put on the Four Noble Truths, we know they must be very important.

The Four Noble Truths are the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. They have been practiced for over two thousand years. Their content is profound indeed; however, it is not possible for us to talk about their profundity in such a short period of time. Today

I was able to give you only a brief introduction and plant the seed for your future investigation of Buddhism. Thank You!