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The Buddhist Perspective on Life and Destiny

Buddhism in Every Step 5

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The Buddhist Perspective on Life and Destiny

Of life's myriad affairs, we tend to busy ourselves with those having a direct bearing upon us. Of these concerns, destiny holds universal import; however, notions of its sphere and workings are quite divergent. When facing hardships, some bitterly resist their ill fate, maintaining that all circumstances—good or bad—are predetermined. Others—the carefree optimists—unquestioningly accept difficult situations, passively content with what they have. Whether we find ourselves at the top or the bottom of what appears to be life's wheel of fortune, we have to neither resist nor accept destiny. The Buddhist perspective on life and destiny spins for us a different choice. This booklet reveals a penetrating view of the wonderful workings of life and destiny.

I. Why Do We Each Have Our Own Destiny?

Life and destiny are affected by many things. For some, one person can change life. For others, a dollar can turn destiny around. For still others, one event can alter life's path. Even a single word and a momentary thought can cause dramatic changes. An impetus—though seemingly insignificant—has the power for tremendous impact. Like a tiny pebble that is thrown into the vast sea, the resulting waves can ripple across a wide area of water. Similarly, a single person, item, event, word, or a single thought can alter the course of destiny.

How One Person Can Change Our Destiny

When Wu Sangui of the Ming dynasty learned that rebel bandit Li Zicheng had kidnapped his beautiful concubine, Chen Yuanyuan, he was enraged and asked the Manchus, the warring tribe to the north, for assistance. He opened the gates of the Great Wall of China and let the Manchus into the country. Although Wu defeated the bandits and reclaimed his concubine, his life was forever changed. He was thereafter declared a traitor. Due to the actions of this one man, the Han people came under Manchu rule, and Chinese history was forever altered. England's Edward VIII, Duke of Windsor, is another example of one individual's ability to alter the destiny of many.

In 1936, King Edward abdicated the throne in order to marry Wallis Simpson, a divorced American woman. (A queen with two living previous husbands was opposed both by the English people and the Church of England.) In “forsaking his country for the love of a woman,” his life was completely changed. Zhou Lingfei, the grandson of the famous Chinese author Lu Xun, fled China so that he could marry Zhang Chunhua of Taiwan. In so doing, he opened up many opportunities for his life and established a bright future for himself.

Parental love also sways destiny. Some parents sacrifice their entire lives for their child. In Chinese history, a legendary story tells about Wang Chuner who remained a widow for the rest of her life so that she could devote herself to raising her son. When grown, he became a successful government official, and Wang enjoyed the fruits of her son’s success. Children are also known to give up their futures to care for an aged parent. In order to honor the parent, some put aside their own ambitions, spending their lives quietly tending to the parent’s needs and forsaking the dream of a promising career.

Devotional love changes destiny, too. Chinese history is replete with accounts of loyal government officials and soldiers who showed devotion to their emperors and lords by repaying their favors with their very lives. During the Period of Warring States,

a warrior named Yu Rang wished to repay his lord Zhi Bo for the lord's generous care and support. Yu swallowed charcoal to alter his voice, painted his body to disguise himself, and assassinated Zhao Xiangzi, his lord's enemy. Afterward he turned his sword on himself.

There are also many untold instances of women who have made tremendous sacrifices for the men they love; yet their lives ended in tragedy because their significant others were irresponsible. For example, there was a woman named Huo Xiaoyu who was fiercely in love with Li Yiqing. She thought they would live happily ever after; little did she know that Li Yiqing would one day abandon her. Often, we change our destinies because of a single person. Often times, we tend to let one individual affect our own life; this person may be someone who is kind and caring to us, or someone who is jealous or hateful towards us. Because of these instances, our life and destiny forever change by it.

How a Dollar Can Change Our Destiny

A dollar can affect destiny in surprising ways. In 1879, Henry Ford, the American automaker and production innovator, left home while still in his teens with just one dollar in his pocket given to him by his father. This was the start of a career that would culminate in

an automobile empire. The world-famous Ford Motor Company altered history by changing the way people travel, conduct commerce, and manufacture goods, and it made the man himself a household name.

During WWII, a young Chinese soldier saved a woman from suicide by pulling her out of the water. But instead of thanking him, the woman cursed the soldier. Upon the soldier's patient inquiry, the woman told him her tragic story. Her husband had been framed for a crime and sent to prison. The woman was left to tend to their three young children and her husband's ailing parents. To buy medication for her mother-in-law, she pawned all her possessions for a silver dollar. Sadly, the coin she received was a fake. Duped by the pawn shop owner, widowed and penniless, she saw death as her only recourse.

The young soldier was quite touched by her story and said sympathetically, "What a tragic story. I have a silver dollar with me. Please use it to take care of your family. Give me the fake silver coin so that others will not fall subject the same plight."

Dropping the fake coin into his pocket, the young soldier hurried off to report for duty. Later during a fierce battle, a bullet hit him in the chest. The bullet struck the fake coin, leaving only a dent. His life was spared. Clapping his hands, the young soldier exclaimed, "Well worth it! This coin is priceless!" Because of the young soldier's single thought of

compassion—using the dollar coin to save the woman and her family—his own life was extended.

The power of money—even as little as a dollar—is immense, and this power is used for both good and ill. There is a saying, “A dollar can subdue a great warrior.” For the sake of money, some people are willing to break the law, thereby creating a lot of trouble for themselves. Many young adults today do not appreciate the hard work that goes into earning a dollar. They are envious of the success of others, but are unwilling to work for their own. They just want a “fast buck,” and may even resort to all kinds of crimes, including theft, robbery, burglary, and murder. Not only do these youths disrupt the safety and peace of society, they end up in prisons or even lose their lives. In contrast, throughout history there have also been many people who chose to maintain their moral standards rather than kow-tow to the power of money. Among the Chinese historical figures, Tao Yuanming refused to kow-tow for five Chinese pecks of rice (approximately thirteen pounds), and Qian Lou, though completely destitute, would not lower his moral standards to those of corrupt officials. Even a dollar has the power to make change. Since views on money differ, its uses vary. This results in the widely divergent effects of money on life and destiny.

How One Event Can Change Our Lives

In addition to person and money, events also have an effect on human destiny. Thomas Edison invented the light bulb and became a world-famous and well-respected inventor. As he “lit” up the world for all humankind, he freed us from the torment and inconvenience of darkness. Alfred Nobel perfected modern explosives. On the one hand, much pain has been inflicted on people and societies due to misuses of explosives by individuals. On the other hand, the Nobel Prize has been a wonderful catalyst for much social progress and advancement in world civilization. How much good it has bestowed on us! Events like these can bring about both massive suffering and great blessings.

Kakuei Tanaka, the former Japanese Prime Minister, fell from the height of power to the depths of a common criminal because of bribery. Although he was once the most powerful politician in Japan, not even he was above being convicted and sent to jail. In the United States, the Watergate scandal unseated the late President Nixon from the most coveted position in the world. A single event can bring extraordinary glory, yet events can also cause deep embarrassment. A single act cannot be taken for granted.

I have an unforgettable personal story, the events of which secured my devotion to the cause of Buddhism. Even today, I am moved to tears when

I recall the incident. I was brought up in a temple and had always lived a life of bare necessities. I had always been in good health. However, when I was seventeen or eighteen years old, I fell very ill. I vomited and had diarrhea. My life was in grave danger because I could not hold down food for almost two months. I do not know how it happened, but somehow my master heard the news. He sent me half a bowl of pickled vegetables. Of course, in comparison to the economic standards of today, there was nothing particular about half a bowl of pickled vegetables. But in those impoverished times, those pickled vegetables were like gourmet food. I can still remember being overcome with gratitude. My eyes filled with tears as I ate. As I felt the unspoken love of my master, I made this vow to myself: “Master, to repay your kindness, I will dedicate my life to promoting Buddhism and spreading the Dharma so that all sentient beings may benefit.” That half bowl of pickled vegetables gave me boundless strength—my faith in Buddhism has been unshakable, and I have willingly been able to deal with all hardships that have arisen.

There are countless examples of masters whose destiny has been changed because of one event. Sixth Patriarch Huineng emerged out of his ignorance while pounding rice. Master Xiangyan Zhixian became enlightened while tilling the soil. Countless Chan masters have seen through the subtleties of the

Chan teachings at the sight of flowers blossoming and wilting. Countless Buddhist practitioners have achieved clear understanding at the sight of the sun and the moon. Countless traveling monastics have extinguished the flame of anger and hatred in their minds when looking at the beautiful mountains and clear rivers. If we reflect deeply on the events around us, we will see them in a totally different light and will understand how events affect life and destiny.

How One Word Can Change Our Lives

Before becoming a monk, Chan Master Danxia of the Tang dynasty had planned to travel to the capital for the Imperial Exam. On the way, he met a monk who offered him advice. “Taking the examination for a government position can only bring you the worldly freedom of fame and fortune. You’d be much better off studying Chan instead. Then you could work toward liberation from the mundane world.” Having heard these words, Danxia changed his mind and entered a temple to become a monk and study Chan, eventually becoming an eminent Chan master. Those words were like a club to the head, waking him up from his mundane dreams and opening him up to a whole new world.

The Buddha had two famous disciples, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana. Before they became Buddhist

monks, they were Brahmic teachers. One day, while they were meditating, a follower of the Buddha by the name of Asvajit passed by during his alms round. He was reciting a verse the Buddha had taught him: “All phenomena arise out of causes and conditions; all phenomena cease due to causes and conditions. Honorable Buddha, my great teacher, has always taught thus.” When Sariputra and Maudgalyayana heard these words, they both felt as though they had just seen the first rays of morning light piercing through a cage in the darkness of night. At that very moment, they seemed to see the world clearly. From hearing this single verse, their wisdom blossomed, and they were able to finally understand true reality. To some, Asvajit’s verse may seem ordinary. To those two wise brahmins, however, it was like an explosion, or a key turning. It shattered their delusions and opened up the truth of the universe. After hearing those words, they became followers of the Buddha and attained the fruit of arhatship.

Once, someone asked Chan Master Zhaozhou, “When the universe is annihilated, does the body still exist?” The master replied matter-of-factly, “Just let it go.” After this encounter, Zhaozhou did not quite feel satisfied with his answer. When great calamities occur as the world undergoes decaying processes, will our bodies still exist? Because he was not pleased with his reply of “just let it go,” the eighty-year-old

master put on his shoes and journeyed many miles in search of the answer. Later, people would affectionately refer to this episode as follows: “For the one sentence of ‘just let it go,’ the monk traversed a thousand mountains.” There are many people whose lives have been changed because of a few words from their parents, friends, or loved ones. Sometimes, a few words of encouragement can lift us out of the depths of depression. At other times, a few words of criticism can sink us into the pit of despair. Kind speech is one of the four means of embracing, so we should speak kind words often. Using kind words reflects well on us, and is it a form of generosity.

How a Single Thought Can Change Our Lives

Our lives are affected by a person, a dollar, an event, or a word. A thought can also turn us one hundred and eighty degrees. One thought can create a sage *or* an ignorant fool. It carries a person to all corners of the universe and from heaven to hell. Thus, it is extremely important to focus our minds and practice right mindfulness.

Zheng Fengxi, one of the Ten Most Outstanding Youths in Taiwan, was handicapped from birth. He used his hands in place of feet. When very young, he was subjected to ridicule by the other children. However, due to his determination to “stand up,” he

was able to complete college. He is a model of someone who struggled hard to improve himself because of a thought. Helen Keller was blind and deaf. She grew up in a world of silence and darkness. Because of a thought to repay her teacher's patience and mentoring, she worked incessantly to improve herself, and she became a respected and courageous individual. Although she could never quite master speech, she was nevertheless able to tour the world giving talks through the use of sign language. Through numerous public engagements, she raised the world's consciousness about the plight of the disabled. Royalty and world leaders were honored to hear her "speak." Helen Keller, with her endless efforts, brought light to millions of blind and deaf people. She became a symbol of hope for the unfortunate!

Throughout Buddhist history, innumerable masters endured countless hardships just because of a single thought of devotion. They dedicated their lives to spreading the Dharma. During the Tang dynasty, the legendary Master Xuanzang realized there was a shortage of translated Buddhist scriptures in China. He made a pilgrimage to India in order to bring Buddhist scriptures back to China. Because of this single thought, he traversed India for eighteen years. He later returned to China with numerous sutras and became known as the Tripitaka Master. One idea changed his life and opened a new chapter

in the history of Chinese Buddhism. His contribution remains a bright light in history, and his influence is forever timeless.

Master Jianzhen of the Tang dynasty was deeply impressed by the earnestness of student monks who traveled from Japan to China to learn about the Dharma and find a qualified precepts master. Consequently, after meeting these monks and seeing their sincerity, the thought of taking Buddhism to Japan was born. Over the course of twelve years and through seven attempts, he grew older and became blind, but he remained steadfast to his idea. After many hardships, he finally succeeded in reaching Japan and promulgating the Vinaya there. Even today, Japanese architecture is modeled upon Chinese styles, and many Japanese customs are similar to Chinese ones. The use of chopsticks and agricultural methods, such as sowing and transplanting, were introduced by the Chinese. Master Jianzhen was credited with bringing the Chinese way of life to Japan, and he was honored as the “father of Japanese culture.” The one thought of spreading Buddhism to Japan opened up a new path for him, helped to develop Japanese Buddhist culture, and altered the lifestyles of an entire country. Jianzhen’s exemplary act of “never forgetting your initial determination to attain enlightenment” adds a whole new dimension to understanding the term, “missionary courage.”

II. What Controls Destiny?

We all lead differing lives with varying circumstances. Sometimes witnessing the success of others brings to mind our own misfortune. We despair and complain, “It’s all a matter of timing, luck, and fate.” When we are sad about our plight, we blame other people or the gods. In reality, destiny is not solely in the hands of others. On what is destiny really founded? It is founded on us—our lives. But how can we ourselves actually be the basis of destiny?

Our Habits Control Destiny

There is a Buddhist saying, “Defilement is difficult to sever; the force of habit is even harder to change.” Bad habits cause us endless misery now and for millennia to come. Our habits influence our lives. When deep-rooted habits develop into habitual forces, they become obstacles to enlightenment. A hot-tempered person might often yell at others. If this becomes habitual behavior, friends will leave. Without the support of friends, the chances of success diminish. Some are addicted to gambling or engage in extravagances. Fortunes are squandered, families are broken, and lives are destroyed. Some lie and cheat, betraying the trust of others. Although they may be able to scheme their way to some temporary gratification, they will soon become isolated when no one will trust them.

Some of today's teen criminals actually come from well-to-do families. These youths develop bad habits and actually consider stealing a hobby. They even rob and take lives. Not only do they harm the welfare of others, they also ruin their own futures. Having bad habits is like abusing drugs; before long, such unwholesome ways have perverted the mind, corrupted lives, and destroyed happiness. How can we not be careful about our habits?

Superstitions Can Control Our Destiny

Although superstition is very prevalent in Asian culture, it is also found in the West. In the West there is a common belief that on Friday the 13th people should avoid doing anything except staying at home. Since thirteen is an unlucky number, Friday the 13th is considered "Black Friday." Even though there may be great opportunities waiting, some people miss them because of their belief in this superstition. There are also many superstitions in Chinese culture. High-rise buildings do not have a fourth floor because the number four in Chinese sounds similar to the word for death. Living on the fourth floor is thought to bring bad luck to the occupants. Travelers should never stay in room number nine of a hotel, because the Chinese word for nine also reminds people of death.

Superstition has far-reaching effects on life. Some people read their horoscopes before they make any decisions. Are horoscopes really reliable? Although a couple will pick a “lucky” day for a wedding, the marriage might still end in divorce. Parents want to have the fortunes of their newborns told. They only feel reassured if their newborns wear gold and silver charms to ensure good fortune. If fortune tellers are so reliable, can they foresee their own futures? During Chinese New Year, it is customary to sweep the floor of a house toward the inside, not the outside, because people fear that money will be swept away. Some people say pregnant women should not recite the *Diamond Sutra* because the Sutra is too powerful and may cause the women to miscarry. Truth is, the *Diamond Sutra* is a sacred scripture. Reciting the Sutra not only will not harm the baby, it is good “pre-natal” education for the baby, and only gives the baby wisdom that will grow. There is a custom in Taiwan that, even though an unwed daughter has passed away, she can still be married off. There are many nice, young men who could marry a living women but instead marry to a memorial tablet due to superstition. Superstition is like a rope that tightly binds our hands and feet until we are unable to move. Superstitious acts form a basis for destiny and are like dark clouds casting heavy shadows, shrouding the radiance of true nature and impacting heavily on the future.

Emotions Control Destiny

Some years ago, newspapers in Taiwan reported an affair between Li Wenbin, the chief of Luzhou district of New Taipei County, and an actress. Since the case had to be settled in court, an otherwise private, emotional dispute became public knowledge. This dispute cast not only a pall on Li's future but also on his family's reputation. Throughout life, it is usually the pulls and tugs of relationships that cause the most impact. Lots of people ruin their futures because of rocky emotional relationships. There are numerous examples of happy families torn apart by infidelity. If emotions and relationships are not cared for appropriately, grave misfortune follows.

The sutras say, "One will not be born into the saha world if one does not have strong passions." Some people can resist fame and glory, but they cannot free themselves from the emotional attachments of family, friends, or loved ones. They are mired in pain. To be freed from these shackles, we must have the right wisdom and an open mind. We should be in control of our emotions and not have our life and destiny determined by passion.

Power Controls Destiny

Power has an important influence on destiny. Power is usually considered second only to wealth. There is

a saying, “The combination of wealth and power is like a tiger getting wings.” The desire for power can corrupt. Many people lose themselves—their most valuable possession—in the midst of glory and power. After they have a taste of power, they no longer can taste the true flavor of life. Power changes lives profoundly.

Destiny is founded on many types of power. Here are four examples.

1. Divine Power

Some people seek direction from gods in whatever they do, be it planning for a funeral, a wedding, or other celebrations. They need divine assistance before they have peace of mind. But they seem to give little thought about the morality of their actions and of the righteousness of the people with whom they deal. They believe that as long as the gods will it, it can be done. They blindly follow what they believe are the directions of the gods without thinking things over for themselves. They completely rely on the gods to make decisions for them as in the saying, “Care not about mortals, but only about divine consent.” These people hand over their lives to the gods with both hands and willingly become slaves. This is the utmost folly. According to Buddhism, even the gods cannot escape the force of karma and the cycle of rebirth. How can they possibly be the masters of destiny?

2. Political Power

Political power affects society. If we open a history book, we can obviously see the disparity between the lives of those who lived under the rule of a wise and judicious king and those under a tyrant. When we examine today's societies, those who live in open, democratic, and developed countries are generally better off than those suffering under despotic, autocratic, and dictatorial rule.

3. Family Power

The encouragement of family members helps a child grow strong and ensures that the child becomes successful. Family relationships, however, sometimes become excess baggage. When I was preaching in Penghu, Taiwan over thirty years ago, the niece of a retired mayor gave a very well-received speech on Buddhism. She was a young girl around eighteen years old, and was very attractive and talented. When the audience saw her great potential, they encouraged her to study in a Buddhist college to learn more about Buddhism. She replied, "No, I can't. Father said that I should stay home and care for Grandmother." For her grandmother, she gave up the opportunity for a higher education. Twenty years later when she was a middle-aged woman, under her tender care, her grandmother passed away peacefully.

A forty-year-old still has a lot of time left. Some people once again encouraged her to seize the opportunity to study Buddhism. She replied hesitantly, "Mother and Father said I should care for my elderly aunt." Another opportunity had slipped away. After another ten years, she was in her fifties, the waning years of life. The aspiration and vitality of youth had gone with time. Her life had been sacrificed for the love of her family. In Chinese society, many young talents are stifled by the obligations of family. Real parental love gives a child room to grow and to mold his or her future. Exercising undue control over a child's life can lead to a life of regret.

4. The Power of Desire

Desire can exert a frightening hold on life and destiny. Desire often enslaves us and lead us by our noses. When we see the large mansions and fancy cars, greed overtakes reason. Even though these luxuries may be beyond our means, we may resort to stealing, swindling, robbing, and other unlawful means to gain them. Desire can tempt us to break the law and threaten society. Newspapers carry crime stories daily, reporting the tragic facts about people who have succumbed to the power of desire.

Karma Controls Destiny

The greatest power that is fundamental to life is karma. Karma is the product of our acts, including speech, thoughts, and actions. These are collectively called the “karma of the body, speech, and mind.” It is said that “all wholesome and unwholesome deeds have consequences; it is just a matter of time.” Karma can be divided into wholesome and unwholesome karma. We have to face the consequences of our acts, be they wholesome or unwholesome, when the time comes. Karma determines destiny. Although karma determines life, we in turn control karma. If we can modify our conduct, refrain from unwholesomeness, and perform wholesome deeds, then destiny will be bright.

In addition to wholesome and unwholesome, there are other types of karma. Karma that only affects a single individual is called “individual karma,” while karma that affects a whole community is called “collective karma.” For example, people who are born and raised in one country have the same collective karma. Although everyone in this saha world has the same collective karma, some live in Asia while some others live in America. The skin color differences of yellow, white, brown, and black arise because of individual karma. Apart from individual and collective karma, there is also “determined karma” and “undetermined karma.” While some are born

into wealth, others are born into poverty. Which family we were born into is beyond our control because it has been decided by our determined karma. The future, however, has yet to be decided and is called undetermined karma. The future will be determined by the deeds of today. Karma has a great influence on our lives.

Karma is a foundation of destiny, but how does it work? According to the Buddhist teachings, the weightiest collective karma will be actualized first. Karma can also be played out through our habits and through our strongest recollections. From a temporal perspective, some of the karma from the acts in this lifetime will ripen in this life, while others will ripen in the next life, or even in a few lifetimes from now. This can be compared to planting fruit trees. Some fruit trees bear fruit the year the tree is planted, others bear fruit only after a few seasons. Regardless of whether we have to wait one, two, or many years, if we want to harvest nice, juicy fruit, we have to diligently sow the seeds. Similarly, if we want to enjoy the rewards of wholesome karma, we have to plant the seeds of wholesome karma.

III. How to Change Destiny

Although habits, superstitions, emotions, power, desires, and karma can direct destiny, we can still

change them. All these controlling factors, from habits to karma, are nothing but our own doing. If we can maintain right mindfulness and take care with our speech and actions, we can still transform a destiny of misfortune into a life of brightness and beauty. How, then, can we direct destiny?

Views and Perspectives Can Change Destiny

After his enlightenment, the Buddha revealed the truth of suffering and also taught the way to eradicate suffering by following the Noble Eightfold Path. The most important practice of the Noble Eightfold Path is right view. Only when we have the right view do we have a benchmark for the other seven practices. Only then will we not go astray. Right view means correct understanding and perspectives. Correct perspective is the most critical factor in improving cultivation and building a career. It is also a cornerstone for social progress, economic prosperity, and world peace. Take the example of Hitler. Although he was an intelligent man, he lacked the right view and right understanding. Besides having an ambition to rule the world, he also built many concentration camps and even found pleasure in the torture of millions of innocent human beings. His corrupt knowledge and false views rewrote European history, brought on a great human tragedy, and altered the course of

German history. The country was divided into East and West Germany until most recently. According to Buddhism, someone with shortcomings in behavior is corrigible; however, someone with wrong views can bring great calamity to society and is much more difficult to reform.

Although there are many factors leading to personal success, a correct perspective is a key ingredient. For example, a parent complains about a lazy son. The son may have no regrets; instead he may compound the situation, “You said I’m lazy. Fine then, I’ll become a complete failure to get back at you.” He gives up and willfully becomes a failure. Another person, in a similar situation, might look within and amend his ways. He works hard to become a success in order to change others people’s opinions of him. Two people, in a similar situation with differing views, yield totally different results. Taking it a step further, if we are positive and optimistic, no matter what obstacles we face, we will strive to tread a new path. We can taste joy while living in the midst of sorrow. However, if we are passive and pessimistic, our outlook will be gray and miserable. To such a person, life is superfluous. Views and perspectives can alter the course of life and destiny. A generous person will have an enriched destiny; a miserly person will have an impoverished destiny. If you can look at the world with compassion, life is joyful, the

world is beautiful, and the saha world is the Pure Land. If you look at the world with hatred, even a pure and pristine Buddha land will be transformed into a house on fire. For a joyful destiny, we have to cultivate the right view and perspective.

Beliefs Can Change Our Destiny

A life with faith is like a voyage with a destination—a journey with direction. Faith gives purpose to a task, and helps us to work expeditiously toward a goal. The power derived from faith is like a motor that gives the energy to proceed and to change destiny.

The importance of faith cannot be overestimated, yet faith is not limited solely to the sphere of religion. The passion that artists have for their art is like faith. Artists put all their effort into creating a masterpiece; they believe in their work. We read books on the history of human civilization, detailing how numerous scholars and philosophers have dedicated their lives to their ideals and principles. The numerous schools of thinkers of the Early Qin dynasty and the recent Russian Nobel Literature Prize laureate, A. I. Solzhenitsyn, are good examples. The legendary General Yue Fei of the Song dynasty believed in ultimate loyalty to his country, and ultimately he sacrificed his life for belief. His faith in “utmost loyalty” to his country changed his life, and he became

a model of unswerving allegiance in Chinese history. Even today, he is still worshipped as a folk hero, and his influence is still strong.

Of all belief, religious faith is the most powerful. With a strong religious faith, a person can accept the misfortune and duress of life with grace and ease. Religious faith provides the courage to endure the most serious setbacks. It opens the heart and mind to bear the seeming inequities of life, and it raises destiny to a whole new dimension.

Building Good Relationships Can Change Destiny

We are all members of society, and our lives are intertwined through community. Our daily necessities are produced by the cooperation of different levels of society. Our knowledge is the result of the patient teaching provided by educators. Without them, we would remain ignorant. Even when we finally enter the workforce, we need the help of colleagues and the mentoring of superiors before we can reach our full potential and make a contribution. If we want to be effective and successful, we need to maintain friendly relationships. In Buddhism, the phrase “building good relationships” means creating amiable affinity and social connections with others.

The sutras say, “Before learning the Buddhist teachings, work to establish good relationships.” If

we want to build a multitude of good relationships with others, we should be friendly and helpful. With well-established relationships, we will be rewarded with great convenience in doing any task. When we help others, we are really helping ourselves. When we give to others, we are actually giving to ourselves. Because there is ultimately no duality between self and others—we are all one—it is only through fulfilling others that we can fulfill ourselves. Thus, bodhisattvas view helping sentient beings as a means of cultivation. It is through building Dharma affinity with all sentient beings that bodhisattvas reach Buddhahood. Building good relationships does not only change destiny, it is also an important gateway for entering into the Buddhist teachings. In daily life, a friendly smile, a word of encouragement, a helping hand, and sincere concern can all bring great joy to others and help to strengthen friendly relations. Building good affinity broadens our horizon and paves the way for wholesome destiny. The benefits from building good relationships surely determines life and destiny.

Upholding the Precepts Can Change Our Destiny

In addition to views, beliefs, and building good relationships, upholding the precepts also directs destiny. Refraining from killing prolongs a short

life span. Refraining from stealing transforms poverty into wealth. Refraining from sexual misconduct builds family harmony. Refraining from lying brings a good reputation. Refraining from intoxicants protects our health and our mental faculties. Observing the precepts changes a life of misery into a happy and healthy one.

One of the sutras tells the story of how an act of protecting a life altered destiny. Once, there was a merchant who went shopping in the market. There he saw a little teary-eyed turtle staring at him from its cage. At that very moment, a thought of compassion arose in the merchant's heart, and he decided to buy the turtle. He took the turtle to a pond and set it free. Sometime later, when the merchant was out doing business, he was robbed by bandits while traveling on a mountain road. The bandits took all his money and pushed him into a lake. As he was drowning, he suddenly felt something firm under his feet. With the help of this support, he was able to make it safely to the shore. When he glanced back from the safety of the dry land, he saw the little turtle that he had saved earlier, together with his companions. They had come to repay the merchant for saving the turtle's life. This simple story depicts how upholding the precepts can alter destiny. If we can refrain from killing and, instead, protect the lives of all sentient beings, our blessings will most definitely grow.

Everyone has a destiny. It is directed by many factors. How can we control these factors and build our own lives? We must have right view, a strong faith, build a multitude of good relations, and uphold the precepts. With a clear understanding of what determines destiny, we are freed to direct the destiny of our own lives.

IV. The Buddhist View on Life and Destiny

If we understand destiny, we see it as a wonderful part of life. The Buddha taught to look on destiny in four ways.

Buddhism Believes Destiny Is Not Fixed; Instead, It Is Alterable

Although the existence of destiny is recognized in Buddhism, the view differs from the pre-determinism of other religions. The Buddha taught that all existence arises out of causes and conditions, and that all phenomena are empty of any separate, independent self. Thus, destiny itself is dependent on causes and conditions and also without an independent self. This means that we must rely on planting good seeds in the present in order to alter the course of misfortune. There is a well-known tale of a young, novice monk that illustrates this point well.

Once, there was an elderly master. In his meditative concentration, he saw that one of his favorite young disciples had only seven days to live. He thought, “Why does this good child only have seven days to live? This is most unfortunate! How can I tell him what I have seen? How will he withstand such traumatic news?”

Early the next day, the master contained his sadness and asked the novice monk to come before him. “My good child, you haven’t seen your parents in a long time. Go home and visit them.”

The novice monk, not knowing what was going to happen, felt his master was acting oddly. Nonetheless, he packed his robes, happily said goodbye to his master, and set off to visit his parents. Seven days passed, and the novice monk had not yet returned. The master, who had severed all defilements, was still concerned with the welfare of his novice monk. He was grieving the very fact that he would never see his young disciple again when the novice monk suddenly returned. The master was surprised. He held the young disciple’s hand, looked him over carefully, and asked, “How did you manage to return safely? What have you done these past few days?”

The novice monk was puzzled. He shook his head and replied, “Nothing.”

The master continued questioning. “Think carefully. Did you see anything? Do anything?”

“Oh, I remember. On my way home, I passed by a pond and saw a colony of ants drowning. So I picked up a leaf and ferried them all to shore,” the novice monk replied earnestly. His dark eyes gleamed with the light of happiness.

After the master had listened to the novice monk, he went into a deep meditation to see into the destiny of the novice monk. Not only was he not going to die young, his life was extended a hundred years! By a single thought of compassion, the novice monk had saved the ants’ lives and changed his own destiny as well.

Besides compassion, merits can also change a life from unwholesomeness to wholesomeness. Some people feel that because they have committed unspeakable crimes, they are beyond help and there is no way they can turn their lives around. This is not the case at all. The Buddha taught that even the gravest karma can be abated. This can be compared to a handful of salt put into a glass of water. The water will be too salty to drink. Yet if the salt is poured into a basin or a tank of water, it will not be salty at all. The salt of our harmful deeds, no matter how strong, can be diluted by the plentiful water of good merit even to the point of being palatable. In a neglected field where weeds have grown among the rice seedlings, if we work diligently to eradicate the weeds, the rice seedlings will have a chance to grow. Once

the rice seedlings of merit are tall and strong, even if a few weeds grow here and there, the harvest will still be bountiful. Even the karma of the most unwholesome deeds can be modified by the strength of virtue and merit.

One of the ten great vows of Samantabhadra is to repent of all unwholesome deeds. Repentance is a way to alter destiny. It can eradicate the unwholesome karma, giving room for wisdom and blessings to grow. Dirty laundry can be cleansed with pure water. A filthy body can be washed clean through bathing. A mind of unwholesome thoughts can be purified with the Dharma water of sincere repentance, returning the mind to its original state. There is a saying, “Repent of past unwholesome deeds according to your circumstances and conditions, and do not commit new ones.” If we are sincere and steadfast in our repentance, we can remove the filth of our defilements and let our true nature—which is originally pure—shine through. Repentance is a very important form of religious service in the Buddhist liturgy. Many venerables of the past have set examples for how to conduct repentance services. Some examples include the Compassion Water Repentance Service, Emperor Wu’s Repentance Service, and the Three Modes of Repentance of the Tiantai School.

The Buddha taught destiny is not fixed. It can be altered by compassion, merits, and repentance. The

accumulation of merit and virtue can create a new life out of the most hopeless situation. On the other hand, if a person with a good destiny does not know how to treasure it, setbacks will occur. We should heed the saying, “Even when safe, be mindful of disaster!”

Buddhism Regards the Past as Important, but Places More Emphasis on the Future

In Buddhism, the law of cause and effect spans throughout the past life, the present life, and the future life. Although the Buddha taught that destiny is determined by causes from the past, he placed great emphasis on what can be done in the present to build a better future. The past cannot be changed, and brooding over it does no good. Only the present and the future are in our hands. If we can make use of the present properly, a bright destiny awaits us. Thus, according to the Buddha, we should not wallow in past regrets, but actively pursue an infinitely hopeful future.

How do we change a life of misfortune into one with a beautiful future? To do so, we must improve our character, transform our heart, learn to turn around, and make amends. There is a common saying, “It is easier to move mountains than to change one’s character.” If we can change deep-seated bad habits, soften hot tempers, and open up to others, our

destinies will improve accordingly. In this modern age of organ transplants, someone with heart disease can receive a new heart that will enable a continued vibrant life. When the corporal heart has problems, surgery provides a remedy. When our spiritual heart is defective, we need to change it into a heart of virtue, kindness, and righteousness before we can have a healthy life.

Character modification is the prescription for changing destiny; repentance and making amends is the medicine for building a new future. Headaches and sorrows arise because we do not know how to turn around. We just know how to blindly push forward, forcing ourselves unknowingly into a small corner. If we always leave some room to maneuver, to step back and ponder, we will find that the world is much bigger and wider than we ever imagined.

Buddhism Teaches People to Build Their Own Destiny

In the midst of misfortune, some people think that their ill fate is the design of the gods, and that to struggle is futile. They become glum, frustrated, and passive. They put their precious future into the hands of their imagined gods and willingly become enslaved. The Buddha teaches that destiny is within our own control. Nobody, not even the gods, can dictate

our destinies. We are our own masters; we are the architects of our own future. The life of the Buddha provides a good example.

Before becoming enlightened, the Buddha was a prince enjoying abundant worldly pleasure and respect. Still, he was not satisfied with palace life, and relinquished fame, wealth, family, and even loved ones. He chose to seek the path of Truth on his own, and in so doing, he built a boundless life for himself. The Buddha's enlightenment also opened the door to the relief of suffering for all sentient beings seeking a bright, happy future.

Buddhism Not Only Encourages Us to Be Content, but Also Hopes That We Can Improve the Future

Confucius said, "It was only when I was fifty that I knew what heaven had planned." If a sage like Confucius saw the truth of the universe only after reaching mature, middle age, we must understand that it is not an easy task to accept life as it is. Buddhism takes this a step further and teaches us that in addition to accepting life with grace, we must also take steps to improve our future.

The Buddha is a great religious teacher with concern for all beings. He is also a courageous and moral revolutionary. The Buddha openly protested the ills of the caste system and taught how to eradicate all

spiritual ills. The Buddha's revolution was achieved not by hurting others, but by self-reflection. The Buddha's revolution was not aimed externally, but internally; it was achieved by battling desire. It is only by working courageously to transform our life and destiny that we can truly have a bright future.

Most of us fall into the trap of criticizing the shortcomings of others and of excusing our own. The Buddha taught the Dharma for decades, teaching numerous methods of washing away the defilements of our hearts and minds to help us return them to their clear, pure original state—our true nature. The process of Buddhist practice is the cleansing of our hearts and purification of our lives. When the sky is clear, the moon will naturally shine through. Similarly, when we are purified, we, too, will realize the Buddha that is in all sentient beings. We will know the true emptiness of all things that allows for all possibilities in life and destiny.