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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 all the issues that we have, we are most concerned with those that relate to us. Of all our concerns, the biggest one relates to our destiny. Each of us has a different opinion on the concept of destiny. Some people, when faced with hardship, complain bitterly about their ill fate. Others believe in destiny and that our circumstances, be they good or bad, are predetermined. Some people accept their difficult situations. Others are content with what they have; they are optimists and live carefree lives. Regardless of whether we find ourselves in a rut or on cloud nine, we should not be passive and simply accept our destiny. We should create our own destiny. When we talk about the Buddhist perspective on life and destiny, there are four areas to discuss.

I. Why Do We Each Have Our Own Destiny?

Many events in our lives can change our destinies. For some people, their lives are changed because of one person. For others, their lives are turned around because of a dollar. There are some others who took a different course in life because of an event. Even a word or a thought can cause dramatic changes in people's lives. The impetus, though trivial in itself, can cause a tremendous impact. It is like a pebble thrown into the sea. A pebble may be small, but the ripples that result when it is thrown into the sea can permeate the entire surface. Similarly, a single person or a single thought can alter the course of one's destiny.

A. How One Person Can Change Our Destiny

When Wu Sangui of the Ming Dynasty learned that the rebel bandit Li Zicheng had kidnapped his beautiful mistress Chen Yuanyuan, he was enraged and asked the tribe of Manchus for assistance. He opened the gates of the Great Wall of China and led the Manchus into the country. Although Wu Sangui

defeated the bandits and reclaimed his mistress, his destiny was forever changed, and he went down in Chinese history as a traitor. The Han people again came under foreign rule; Chinese history was re-written. In another instance, Edward VIII, the Duke of Windsor of England, abdicated his throne for the sake of Mrs. Simpson. In “forsaking his country for the love of a woman,” his life was completely changed. Likewise, 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, thereby were establishing a bright future for himself.

There are countless examples of how people have changed their lives because of their love for a certain person. Some parents sacrifice their entire lives for the sake of their children. In Chinese history, there is the legend of Mrs. Wang Chuner who remained a widow her whole life in order to raise her son. When her son became a successful government official, she was able to enjoy the fruits of his success. There are also many children who give up their futures to care for their aged parents. In order to respect their parents’ wishes, they put aside their own ambitions, live

out the rest of their lives quietly, beside their parents, and forsake an otherwise promising career. In China, many loyal government officials and soldiers were willing to repay the favors of the emperors and their lords by giving up their lives. During the Period of Warring States, a warrior named Yu Rang wished to repay his late lord Zhi Bo for understanding and giving him opportunities. Yu Rang swallowed charcoal to alter his voice, painted his body to disguise himself, and assassinated Zhao Xiangzi, his late lord's enemy. Afterward he turned his sword on himself. There are also untold cases 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.

B. How a Dollar Can Change Our Destiny

Just a dollar can change our destinies. The legendary Henry Ford left home at an early age to seek

his own career. With the one dollar his father gave him, he built an automobile empire. He created the world famous Ford Motor Company and made a name for himself in history.

During the Second World War, a young Chinese soldier saved a woman from suicide by pulling her out of the water. Instead of thanking him, the woman cursed at the young soldier. After the soldier's patient inquiry, the woman then told him her tragic life story. As it turned out, her husband was framed and was sent to prison for something he did not do. Alone and penniless, she was left to tend to her husband's sick parents and their three young children. To buy medication for her ill mother-in-law, she pawned all her possessions for a silver dollar. When it rains, it pours—she was tricked by the pawn shop owner with a fake coin. She had no way out but to die.

The young soldier felt very sympathetic and said to her, "What a tragic story. I have a silver dollar with me; please use it to take care of your family. Please give me the fake silver coin so that others will not fall into the same plight."

Putting the fake coin into his pocket, the young soldier hurried off to report for duty. During a fierce

battle, he was struck in the chest. The bullet happened to hit and leave a dent on the fake coin, and 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 saved the woman and her family—he also extended his own life.

The power of money, even as little as a dollar, is immense. 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 other people’s success, 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 they disrupt the safety and peace of society, they end up in prisons or even lose their own lives. One such example is Xie Gaohua, the convicted killer who planted a bomb inside the Datong Department store. In contrast, throughout history, there are also many people who would rather maintain their

moral standards than to bow to the power of money. Among Chinese historic figures, Tao Yuanming refused to kow-tow for five Chinese pecks of rice (approximately thirteen pounds of rice in total), and Qian Lou, though completely destitute, would not lower his moral standards to those of corrupt officials.

Money can change people's lives. Since we all have different views on money, we use it differently, which results in many drastically different circumstances and destinies.

C. How One Event Can Change Our Lives

In addition to people and money, events can also have an effect on human destiny. 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 one hand, how much pain was inflicted on human unity due to misuses of explosives by certain power hungry individuals. On the other hand, the Nobel Prize has been a catalyst for so much social progress and advancement in world civilization. How much good it has bestowed on us! Other events

like this can bring about both great blessings and massive calamities.

Tanaka, the former Japanese Prime Minister, fell from the height of power to common criminal due to 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. One event can bring us extraordinary glory; it can also cause us deep embarrassment. We should always exercise caution!

I have an unforgettable personal story, the events of which cemented 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 healthy. However, when I was about 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 in any food for almost a month or two. I do not know how it happened, but somehow my master heard the news. He sent me half a bowl of pickles. Of course, in comparison to

the economic standards of today, there was nothing particular about half a bowl of pickles. In those impoverished times, those pickles were like gourmet food. I can still remember how grateful I was. My eyes filled with tears as I ate the half bowl of pickles. As I felt the unspoken love of my master, I vowed to myself, “Master, to repay your kindness, I will dedicate my life to promote Buddhism and to spread the Dharma so that all sentient beings may benefit from it.” That half bowl of pickles gave me boundless strength—my faith in Buddhism has been unshakable, and I have willingly been able to deal with whatever hardships that have come my way.

There are countless examples of past venerable masters who changed their destinies because of an event in their lives. The Sixth Patriarch Huineng emerged out of his shell of ignorance while pounding rice. Master Xiangyan Zhixian was enlightened while tilling the soil. Countless Chan masters saw through the subtleties of Chan teaching at the sight of flowers blossoming and wilting. Countless Buddhists have achieved clear understanding at the sight of the rising sun and of the moon. Countless traveling monastics extinguished the flame of anger and hatred in their

minds when looking at the beautiful mountains and clear rivers. If we can carefully reflect on the events around us, we may see them in a totally different light.

D. How One Word Can Change Our Lives

Before becoming a monk, Chan Master Danxia of the Tang Dynasty had originally planned to travel to the capital for the National Exam. On the way, he met a monk who advised him, “Taking the examination for government positions can only bring you worldly fame and fortune. You’d be much better off going to study Chan instead. You may then attain emancipation from the mundane world.” Having heard these words, he changed his mind and went to the temple to become a monk and study Chan. Eventually he became an eminent Chan master. These words were like the stroke of a club, waking him up from his worldly dreams and opening up an entirely new world for him.

The Buddha had two famous disciples, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana. Before they became Buddhist monks, they were Brahman leaders. One day, while they were meditating, a Buddha’s disciple by the

name of Asvajit passed by them during his alms round. He was reciting to himself the 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 light of the morning emerging from total darkness. At this very moment, they seemed to see through the world. From overhearing a single verse, their wisdom bloomed, and they were able to finally understand the truth of the universe. Dear audience, when you just heard the verse, “All phenomena arise out of causes and conditions; all phenomena cease due to causes and conditions,” what did you feel? To us, it may seem ordinary. To those two wise men, however, it was an explosion; it was a key. It shattered all confusions and it opened up the truth of the universe. After they heard those words, they converted from Brahmanism to Buddhism. They became disciples 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 Chan Master nonchalantly replied, “Just let it go.” After the encounter, Zhaozhou did not quite feel satisfied with his answer. When great calamities occur as the world undergoes the decaying processes, will our bodies still exist? Because he was not pleased with his reply, “Just let it go,” the eighty-year-old Zhaozhou put on his shoes and journeyed over many miles to seek the answer. Later, people would often refer to this episode affectionately as follows, “For the one sentence of ‘Just let it go,’ the monk traveled over thousands of mountains.” There are many people whose lives have 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 pain. “Kind speech” is one of the Four Means of Embracing; we should speak kind words frequently. Using kind words reflects well on us and is a form of generosity toward others.

E. How a Single Thought Can Change Our Lives

Our lives can be changed by a person, a dollar, an

event, or a word. A thought can also turn us one hundred and eighty degrees. One thought can enable us to become a sage or stay an ignorant fool. It can make a person reach all corners of the universe, from heaven to hell. Therefore, it is extremely important to focus our minds and practice right mindfulness.

Mr. Zheng Fengxi, one of the Ten Most Outstanding Youths in Taiwan, was handicapped from birth. He used his hands in place of feet and was the subject of ridicule by his young ignorant playmates. However, due to his determination, “I have to stand up,” he was able to finish his college education. He is a model of someone who struggled hard to improve himself. Helen Keller was blind and deaf. She grew up in a world of silence and darkness. In order to repay her teacher’s patience and mentoring, she worked incessantly to improve herself and became a respected and courageous individual. Although she could never master talking, she was nevertheless able to tour the world giving speeches through the use of sign language. With her public engagements, she raised the world’s consciousness to the plight of the disabled. Royalty and world leaders were honored to hear her “speak.” Helen Keller, with her endless ef-

forts, brought hope and light to millions of blind and deaf people. She became a symbol of hope for the unfortunate!

Throughout Buddhist history, innumerable masters endured numerous hardships just because of a single thought of devotion. They dedicated their lives to spreading the Dharma. In the Tang Dynasty, there was the legendary Master Xuanzhuang. As a young monk, he realized there was a shortage of translated Buddhist scriptures in China, so he decided make a pilgrimage to India to bring more Buddhist scriptures back to China. Because of this single thought, he traveled to India and lived there for eighteen years. He later returned to China with numerous sutras and became the renowned “Master of the Tripitaka.” His idea changed his life and opened a new chapter in the history of Chinese Buddhist. His contribution was a bright spot in history and his influences are forever timeless.

Master Jianzhen of the Tang Dynasty was deeply impressed by the sincerity of student monks who traveled from Japan to China to learn about the Dharma, and consequently his thought of bringing Buddhism to Japan was born. Over the course of

twelve years and through seven attempts, he grew older and became blind, but he still would not give up his idea. After many hardships, he finally succeeded in reaching Japan and promulgating the Vinaya there. Even today, Japanese architecture is modeled after Chinese, and 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 the whole country. The Master’s exemplary act of “never forgetting your initial determination to attain enlightenment,” gives us a whole new dimension in understanding the phrase “missionary courage.”

II. What Controls Destiny?

We all lead different lives with various circumstances. Sometimes, when we witness someone else’s success, we inevitably think of our own misfortunes. We become discouraged and complain, “It is all a

matter of timing, luck, and destiny.” When we are melancholic about our misfortunes, we blame others, gods, and complain about divine arrangements. In reality, our destinies are not in others’ hands. What then controls our destiny? It is ourselves. Yet, how can we actually control our own destinies?

A. 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 in the present and for millenniums ahead. Our habits can influence our lives. When our deep-rooted habits develop into habitual forces, they become obstacles to our enlightenment. A person with a hot temper often yells at others. If this becomes habitual, he will not have many friends who will help him and thereby diminishing his chances to succeed. Some people are addicted to gambling and indulge in extravagance. They squander their family fortune, break up their own families, and destroy their own lives. Others like to lie and cheat; they betray the trust of others. Although they may be able to scheme their way to some temporary gratification, they will soon become iso-

lated when no one will trust them again.

Some of today's juvenile delinquents actually come from well-to-do families. They develop bad habits and actually consider stealing a hobby. They even go as far as robbing and killing others. Not only do they harm the welfare of others, they also ruin their futures. Bad habits are like narcotics; before long, they have perverted our minds, corrupted our lives, and destroyed our happiness. How can we not be careful?

B. Superstitions Can Control Our Destiny

Although we may think that superstition is a unique product of Eastern culture, it is also found in the West. There is a common belief that Friday the 13th is a day on which people should avoid doing anything except staying at home. Since thirteen is an unlucky number, Friday the 13th is considered a "Black Friday." Even though there may be great business opportunities waiting, some people may miss them because of their belief in this superstition.

There are many superstitions in our society. A high-rise should not have a fourth floor because the number four in Chinese sounds similar to the word

‘death,’ and living on the fourth floor would bring bad luck to its occupants. Travelers should never stay in room number nine of a hotel because the Chinese word nine also reminds people of death. Superstition has other far-reaching impacts on our lives. Some people read their horoscopes before they do anything. Are horoscopes really reliable? Although some people pick lucky days for their weddings, their marriages 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 on their chests and backs to ensure good fortune. If fortune tellers are so reliable, can they foresee their own futures? During the Chinese New Year, it is customary to sweep the floors of the house towards the inside, and 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 these women to miscarry. The truth is, the *Diamond Sutra* is a sacred scripture. Reciting the Sutra will not harm the baby; it is good “prenatal” education for the baby, and only gives the baby wisdom which will grow. There is another strange custom in Taiwan.

When an unwed daughter passes away, she can still be married off. There are many nice young men who would rather marry a memorial tablet instead of a living woman. Superstition is like a rope that tightly binds our hands and feet until we cannot move. Superstitious acts are like dark clouds casting heavy shadows, shrouding the radiance of our true nature and impacting heavily on our futures.

C. Emotions Control Destiny

Not that long ago, newspapers in Taiwan reported of an affair between Li Wenbin, the chief of Luzhou village of Taipai County, and an actress. Since the case had to be settled in court, an otherwise private emotional dispute became public knowledge. This dispute not only cast a pall on his future but also on his family honor. Throughout one's lifetime, it is usually the pulls and tugs of relationships that impact one the most. Lots of people ruin their futures because of rocky emotional relationships. There are numerous examples of happy families torn apart by infidelity. If one cannot handle emotions and relationships appropriately, grave misfortunes will follow.

It is said in a sutra, “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 bondages of their family, of their friends, or of their loved ones. They are mired in pain. To free ourselves from these shackles, we must use the right wisdom and open up our minds. We should be in control of our passions and not be controlled by them.

D. Power Controls Destiny

Power poses an important influence on our destinies. People usually want power right after wealth. There is a saying, “The combination of wealth and power is like a tiger getting wings.” The desire for power can, however, corrupt our true nature. Too many people have lost 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 our lives profoundly.

Regarding the command power exerts over our destinies, we can address the issue in the following areas:

1. Divine Power

Some people have to seek directions from gods in whatever they do, be it planning for a funeral, a wedding, or other celebrations. They have to seek divine assistance before they have any peace of mind. They do not care about the morality of their actions, of the righteousness of the people they are dealing with. They believe that as long as the gods will it, it can be done. They blindly follow what they believe are gods' directions, without thinking things over for themselves. They completely rely on their gods to make decisions for them. Like the saying, "Care not about the mortals, but only about divine consent," these people hand over their lives to their gods with both hands and willingly become slaves to their gods. This is the utmost folly. According to Buddhism, even gods cannot escape the force of karma and the cycles of rebirths; how then can they have the authority to control our destinies?

2. Political Power

Political power controls the lives of the masses. 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 much better off than those living in Third World Countries, suffering under despotic, autocratic, and dictatorial rule. We are very fortunate indeed.

3. Family Power

The encouragement of family members can make a child grow strong and ensure that the child walks on the path to success. Family relationships, however, can become excess baggage in a child's cultivation. When I was preaching in Penghu thirty years ago, the niece of a retired mayor gave a very well-received speech on Buddhism. She was a young girl of about seventeen or eighteen years of age, 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 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 aging aunt.” Another opportunity had slipped away. After another ten years, she was in her fifties, the waning years of her life. The aspiration and vitality of youth had gone with time. Her life had been sacrificed for the love of her family. In our society, many young talents are stifled by the obligations of family. Real parental love gives a child room to grow and to mold his/her future. Exercising undue control over a child’s life can lead to a life of regret.

4. The Power of Desires

Desires can exert a frightening hold on our lives and destinies. Desires often enslave us and lead us by our noses. When we see someone else’s big mansions and fancy cars, our greed takes over our thinking. Even though these luxuries may be beyond our means, we may resort to stealing, swindling, robbing, and other unlawful means to gain such luxuries. Desires can tempt us to break the law and threaten our society.

There are numerous stories of crime in newspapers; they are examples of human tragedies of people who have succumbed to the power of their desires.

E. Karma Controls Destiny

The greatest power that controls life is karma. Karma is the product of our acts, including our speech, our thoughts, and our actions. They are collectively called the “karma of the body, speech, and mind.” It is said that “All wholesome and unwholesome deeds have their consequences; it is just a matter of time.” Karma can be divided into wholesome or unwholesome karma. We have to face the consequences of our acts, be they wholesome or unwholesome, when the time comes. Karma determines destiny without exception. Although karma controls our lives, we in turn control our karma. If we can modify our conduct, if we can refrain from unwholesomeness, and if we can do wholesome deeds, our destinies will be bright and smooth.

Apart from wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, there are other types of karma. Karma that just affects a single individual is called “individual karma,” while karma that affects the whole commu-

nity is called “collective karma.” For example, people who are born and raised in Taiwan have the same collective karma. Although everyone in this saha world has the same collective karma, some live in Asia while others live in America. There are skin colors of yellow, white, brown, and black. These differences arise because of our own individual karma. Apart from individual and collective karma, there are 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. Our future, however, has yet to be decided and is called undetermined karma. Our future will be determined by our deeds of today. Karma has a great deal of influence over our lives.

Karma controls destiny, but how does it work itself out? According to a sutra, it is said that the weightiest collective karma will be actualized first. Karma can also be played out through our habits or through our strongest recollections. From a time perspective, some of the karma from our acts in this lifetime will ripen in this life, while others will ripen

in the next life, or even a few lifetimes from now. This can be compared to planting fruit trees. Some fruit trees bear fruit the year we plant the tree, 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 fruits, 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 control our destinies, 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 be careful of our speech and actions, we can still change a destiny of misfortune into a life of brightness and beauty. How, then, can we alter our destinies? What are the methods available?

A. Views and Perspectives Can Change Destiny

After his enlightenment, the Buddha revealed to

us the truth of suffering and also taught us the way to eradicate sufferings by following the Noble Eightfold Path. The most important element of the Noble Eightfold Path is Right View. Only when we have the right view do we have a benchmark for the other seven elements. Only then will we not go astray. Right view means correct understanding and perspectives. Correct perspective is the most critical factor in improving one's cultivation and building one's 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 re-wrote European history, brought on a great human tragedy, and altered the course of German history. The country was separated into East and West Germany until most recently. According to Buddhism, someone with shortcomings in his/her behavior is corrigible; however, someone with wrong views can bring great calamity to the 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 his 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, progressive, and optimistic, no matter what obstacles we may face, we will fight to tread a new path. We can taste the joy of living in the midst of sorrow. However, if we are passive, regressive, and pessimistic, our outlook will be gray and miserable. To such a person, life is superfluous. From this, we can see how our views and perspectives can alter the course of our lives and destinies. A generous person will have an enriching 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 good destiny, we have to cultivate the right view and perspective.

B. Beliefs Can Change Our Destiny

A life with beliefs is like a voyage with a destination, a journey with directions. It gives purpose to a task, and helps us to expeditiously work toward our goal without wasting any effort. The power derived from having beliefs is like a motor that gives us the energy to proceed and to change our destinies.

We cannot overestimate the importance of beliefs, yet beliefs are not limited to religion. The passion that artists have for their art is like a belief. They are willing to put in all their effort to create a masterpiece. We can open books on the history of human civilization and read 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 belief of “utmost loyalty” to his country changed his life and became a model of unswerving allegiance in Chinese history. Even today, he is still worshipped as a folk hero and his influence on people can still be felt today.

A country’s destiny is determined by the beliefs and principles of its citizens. If we can all follow the *Three Principles of People* (by Dr. Sun Yat-sen) and work together to build our country according to its ideals, it will not be long before our country becomes prosperous and strong.

Of all beliefs, religious belief 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 can give us the courage to endure the most serious setbacks. It opens our hearts and minds to bear the apparent unfairness in life, and it raises our destinies to a whole new dimension.

C. Building Good Relationships Can Change Destiny

No man is an island; we are all members of so-

ciety. Our lives are intertwined with the public at large. Our daily necessities are produced by the cooperation of different levels of society. Our knowledge is the result of the patient teaching provided by our teachers at school. Without them, we would remain ignorant. Even when we finally work in society, we need the help of our colleagues and the mentoring of our superiors before we can reach our potential and be able to make a contribution. If we want to be effective and successful, we need to maintain friendly relationships with others. In Buddhism, the phrase “building good relationships” means constructing amiable social connections with others.

A sutra says, “Before learning the Buddhist teachings, work to establish good relationships with others first.” If we want to build a multitude of good relationships with others, we should be friendly and helpful. When our relationships with others become more established, we will be rewarded with great convenience in doing any task. When you help others, you are really helping yourself. When we give to others, we are actually giving to ourselves. Because there is no duality between self and others, and we are all one, it is only through fulfilling others that we can

fulfill ourselves. Thus, bodhisattvas look at helping sentient beings as a means of cultivation. It is through building Dharma relationships with all sentient beings that bodhisattvas reach Buddhahood. Building good relationships does not only change our destiny, it is also an important gateway for entering into the Buddhist teachings. In our daily lives, 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 relations broadens our horizon and paves the way for a good destiny. With such benefits, why should we not do so?

D. Upholding the Precepts Can Change Our Destiny

In addition to views, beliefs, and building good relationships, upholding the precepts can also change our destinies. 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 can change a life of misery into a happy and healthy one.

In a sutra there is a story of how the act of protecting life altered one's destiny. Once, there was a merchant who went shopping in the market. There he saw a little caged turtle staring at him with teary eyes. At that very moment, a thought of compassion arose in his heart, and he decided to buy the turtle. He took the turtle to a pond and set it free. After sometime, when the merchant was out on business, he was robbed by bandits while traveling on a mountain road. The bandits took all his money and pushed him into a lake. Just as he was drowning, he felt a support under his feet. With the help of this support, he was able to make it safely to shore. When he stopped to glance back, it was the little turtle that he had saved earlier, together with his companions, coming to repay the merchant for his life. If we can refrain from killing and protect the lives of all sentient beings, our blessings will most definitely grow.

Everyone has a destiny. It is controlled by many factors. How can we break loose of these controlling factors and build our own lives? To do so, we must have right view, a strong faith, build a multitude of

good relations, and uphold the precepts. In this way, we are not under the thumb of our destinies, but can freely master them.

IV. The Buddhist View on Life and Destiny

Destiny is such a wondrous mystery. What is the Buddhist view on the subject then? There are four points to address.

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

Although Buddhism believes in the existence of destiny, it differs from the pre-determinism of other religions. Buddhism teaches that all existence arises out of causes and conditions, and that existence is empty without a separate independent self-nature. Thus destiny is also dependent on causes and conditions, and is without an independent self nature. We can rely on planting good seeds to alter the course of our misfortunes. There is a famous tale of a young sramanera (novice monk) which illustrates this point well.

Once, there was an old Arhat master. In his samadhi (meditative concentration), he saw that one of

of his favorite young disciples had only seven more days to live. He thought to himself, “Why does this good child only have seven more days to live? This is most unfortunate! I can’t tell him this. How will he withstand such traumatic news?”

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

The sramanera, not knowing what was going to happen, felt his master was acting oddly. Nonetheless, he packed, happily said goodbye to his master, and went on his way. Seven days went by, and the sramanera had not yet returned. The Arhat, who had severed all defilements, was still concerned with the welfare of his sramanera. He was grieving the very fact that he would never see his young disciple again when the sramanera suddenly returned. The Arhat was shocked. He held the sramanera’s hand, looked him over carefully, and asked, “How’d you manage to return safely? What have you done in the last few days?”

The sramanera shook his head in puzzlement and replied, “Nothing.”

The Arhat continued further, “Think carefully. Did you see anything? Do anything?”

“Oh, it’s coming back to me now. 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 sramanera replied earnestly. His dark eyes gleamed with the light of happiness.

After the Arhat listened to the sramanera, he went into meditation to see into the destiny of the young sramanera. Not only was he not going to die young, his life was extended a hundred years. By a single thought of compassion, he saved the ants’ lives and changed his own destiny.

Besides compassion, merits can also change a life from unwholesomeness to wholesomeness. Some people feel that because of their heinous crimes, they are beyond help and there is no way they can turn their lives around. This is not the case at all. Buddhism believes 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 sins, 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 deadly sins 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 our destiny. It can eradicate the unwholesome karma, giving room for our wisdom and blessings to grow. Dirty laundry can be cleansed with pure water. A filthy body can be washed clean through bathing. A sinful mind can be sanctified with the Dharma water of sincere repentance, returning it to its original state. There is a saying, “Repent of your old sins 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 the originally pure true nature shine through. Repentance is a very important form of religious service in the Buddhist liturgy.

Many venerables of the past have set examples for us on how to conduct repentance services. Examples include the “Compassion Water Repentance Service,” “Emperor Wu’s Repentance Service,” and the “Three Modes of Repentance of the Tiantai School.”

Our destiny is not unalterable. It can be affected by compassion, merits, and repentance. The accumulation of merits and virtues can bring 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, he will suffer setbacks. We should heed the saying that goes, “When you live in safety, watch out for disaster!”

B. 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 Buddhism believes that our fate is determined by causes from the past, it emphasizes more what can be done now to build a better future. The past cannot be changed, and brooding over it does not do us any good. The present and the future

are in our hands. If we can make use of the present properly, a bright future awaits us. Thus, according to Buddhism, one should not wallow in past regrets, but should actively pursue an infinitely hopeful future.

How do we change a life of misfortune into one with beautiful future? To do so, we have to improve our character, have a transformation of 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 our deep-seated bad habits, soften our hot tempers, and open ourselves 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 him/her to lead a vibrant life. When one’s corporal heart has problems, one has to turn to surgery. 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 our destinies; repentance and making amends are the medicines for building new futures. A lot of 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 can always leave some room to maneuver, to retreat and ponder, we will find that the world is much bigger and wider than we ever imagined.

C. Buddhism Does Not Encourage People to Resign Themselves to Fate, but Teaches People to Build Their Own Destiny

In the midst of misfortune, some people think that their ill fate is the gods' design, and that it is useless to struggle. They became glum, frustrated; and passive. They put their precious future into the hands of their imagined gods and willingly become enslaved. Buddhism, however, believes 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 Buddha provides a good example that we can emulate.

Before achieving Buddhahood, the Buddha was a prince enjoying unparalleled worldly pleasure and respect. Still, he was not satisfied with the palace lifestyle and refused to be a mediocre ordinary person.

He relinquished his fame, wealth, family, and 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 has also opened a new door for all sentient beings seeking a right happy future for them.

Human destiny is not fixed and unchangeable. Heaven cannot turn us into a saint, nor can it make us lowly and humble. It is said that, "There is no natural Sakaymuni Buddha." All saints and sages accomplished their merits on their own accord. If we work diligently, the life of wisdom is just ahead of us.

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

Confucius once said, "It was only when I was fifty that I knew what heaven had planned." If a sage like Confucius could only see the truth of the universe after he had reached 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 us how to eradicate all our spiritual ills. The Buddha's revolution is achieved not by hurting others, but by self-reflection. The Buddha's revolution is not aimed externally, but internally; it is achieved by battling our desires. It is only when we work courageously to transform ourselves that we can truly have a bright future.

Most of us fall into the trap of criticizing others' shortcomings and excusing our own. The Buddha taught the Dharma for several decades, giving us numerous methods to wash 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 cultivation is none other than 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 will join the ranks of Buddhahood in the ultimate emptiness