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Buddhist Perspectives on Spiritual Practice

Buddhism in Every Step 31

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Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem

Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is the first task for becoming a Buddhist. If a student of Buddhism has not actually taken part in the ceremony for refuge in the Triple Gem, then even in offering incense and performing a bow, such a person would merely be expressing some respect and interest in Buddhism, and cannot be considered a true Buddhist follower. Similarly a student who hasn't registered will never be anything more than an auditor. By taking refuge in the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, one demonstrates for oneself that they will faithfully practice Buddhism, becoming a disciple of the Triple Gem who no longer believes in other religions. Therefore, taking refuge in the Three Gems indicates that the object of one's faith has been determined.

Why should we take refuge in the Triple Gem? Simply put, the Triple Gem represents a lamp shining in the midst of darkness, a boat for crossing the bitter seas of suffering, a rain shower for quenching a burning house. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem, means to find sanctuary within the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and to rely upon them.

In this world, children must rely upon their parents, for only then will their lives be made secure; the aged must rely upon a sturdy cane, for only then can they walk safely; seafarers must rely upon their compass, for only then will their return voyage be assured; and those in the dark must rely upon a bright lamp, for only then will their direction be clear. The Triple Gem is like our parents, so when a child feels bullied, even though his or her parents are not nearby, all the child needs to do is call out "Mama" and no one will dare try and take advantage, because the child has a mother. In the same way, in this world there are many wicked ways, bad people, and bad things that happen, but with the Triple Gem as our support, our lives will find a sanctuary of safety.

The Triple Gem is like our compass that can guide us through the vast sea of people and sail into a safe harbor for shelter from a storm. Everyone knows that when it gets dark, it is time to head home. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem and constantly reminding

ourselves of the merits of the Triple Gem, will enable us to rely on the divine protection of the Triple Gem and its merits, and by availing ourselves of such a precious raft, we may transcend the course of life and death and bravely cross the bitter sea of suffering, so that we may return to our true selves, the original home that is truly ours. Therefore, taking refuge in the Triple Gem allows us to find a place where we can settle down and live in peace within this present world of ours, providing us a home to which we can return in the future.

After one has taken refuge in the Triple Gem to become a Buddhist, there must also be a life of faith through practice; for there can only be experience through practice, and only strength through faith.

In speaking of faith and taking refuge, as a matter of fact, the Buddha never insisted that we have faith and take refuge. The reason why we have faith in Buddhism and take refuge in the Triple Gem is more importantly to affirm and find ourselves, because everyone possesses Buddha nature. Thus, there is one great, famous saying within the Buddhist teachings: "Take refuge in oneself and in the Dharma, and nothing else," which means we must take refuge in ourselves and find ourselves, and not take refuge in something else; we must not let someone else lead us by the nose.

Buddhists take refuge in the Triple Gem, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The Buddha is like a bright light with which one can dispel the darkness and bring in hope; the Dharma is like pure water, with which one can moisten the earth and grow all things; the Sangha is like a field of merit, in which one can sow seeds of merit for others in a wide, extensive manner.

However, after taking refuge, most Buddhists usually do not avail themselves of good knowledge by listening to the teachings. They only pray to the Buddhas for protection, and as such, they have only taken refuge in the "precious jewel of the Buddha." Some intellectuals are only interested in studying the Dharma, but they neither worship the Buddha nor honor the Sangha. As such, they have only taken refuge in the "precious jewel of the Dharma." Some people study Buddhism by only seeing which Dharma master has a connection with them and staying close to that one. They neither listen to the teachings nor worship the Buddha. As such, they have only taken refuge in the single precious jewel of the "Sangha." Strictly speaking, none of these are true disciples of the "Triple Gem." For true disciples of the Triple Gem should, upon taking refuge, venerate the Buddha, listen to the Dharma, and honor the Sangha. In particular, they must have a correct un-

derstanding and view, must have deep faith in the Law of Cause and Effect, and must "not do anything non-virtuous, and do all that is virtuous." Only in this way will they obtain the contentment of the Dharma; and only in this way will they reap the benefits of faith.

In short, Buddhism explains how everyone has Buddha nature. Buddhists don't have to adopt any particular attitude, except they must have compassion. Thus, believing in Buddhism can expand our mind and spirit; it can raise our lives to a higher level; and it can enable us to understand how to create broad connections for positive future and how to be compassionate and loving. Studying Buddhism, undertaking the practice, and taking refuge in the Triple Gem, represent how one becomes a Buddhist, enabling one to obtain unsurpassed benefit and merit.

How to Practice

For lay practice, a simple and appropriate format for Dharma practice can be devised depending upon the temporal and spatial conditions of one's own time and environment. For example, if you like to meditate, then when you wake up in the morning, don't get out of bed right away, but sit in bed and meditate for five minutes. Or in the evenings before

going to sleep, don't lie down so quickly, but sit in bed and meditate for five minutes. And what can you do for that five minutes? It would be best if you didn't think of anything at all. Sometimes while sitting in meditation for a while, you might dose off; that's alright. Some people say that not thinking about anything is very hard; in that case, focus your thoughts and concentrate on a visualization; you can visualize a clear light, the Buddha, or good deeds

If you feel sitting quietly in bed without moving is no good, then you can recite *The Heart Sutra* or the *Dharani of Great Compassion* for two or three minutes; that's very easy. Or perhaps you are lying in bed and cannot fall asleep then you could do a "recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name in ten breaths," where you continuously recite "namo Amitofo" or "Amitofo" for ten breaths. In reciting throughout the breath, it does not matter how many times you recite Amitabha Buddha's name, how loud your voice is, or how quickly you perform the recitation; just recite it according to your own breaths. To continuously recite Amitabha Buddha's name over the course of ten breaths, is called the Ten Recitation Practice, and the aim here is to calm the confusion within the mind through one's breathing.

In order to make the practice easier for lay followers, we have recently compiled prayers in the

Pearls of Wisdom series. Each chapter takes about four to five minutes to recite. During the mornings and evenings, you can pray for the well-being of people from one hundred different professions, and that way your compassionate mind will be infused into their work, making a connection with them. This is another form of practice, which is the best way to practice by oneself at home.

Additionally, if you have a Buddhist shrine at home, you can offer incense in the morning, and bow to the Buddha three times, or you can perform a salutation, or offer a flower as well. But what's important here, is the consistency of the practice that you don't skip the practice no matter how busy you are, for this demonstrates that the Buddha is in your mind. After such practice becomes a habit, you will come to realize that the Buddha is always with you, that the Buddha is always in your mind. And as time goes on, you will be able to generate great faith and resolve; this is what practice means.

Using the Dharma in our Everyday Lives

In Buddhism, there is the saying "One seems enlightened in speech but becomes confused when situations arise." Sometimes we think about how we should do things this way or that way, but when the

actual circumstances present themselves, we don't know what to do. Thus when we usually speak of practice, it means slowly increasing our strength, so that we become able to do as we say.

Cultivation is one of the most important activities in life. Torn clothes must be mended; broken furniture must be repaired; disheveled hair must be combed straight; and long fingernails must be cut short. Whether it be the articles of our daily life or our own appearance, everything must be repaired, mended, improved, and revised. Even pots and pans must be patched, and broken shoes and torn socks must be mended and sewn. When there is deviation or transgression in one's conduct, then there is a greater need for cultivation.

Cultivation means correcting one's conduct. Cultivation does not necessarily mean going into the mountains to pursue deep contemplation, nor does it necessarily mean living by oneself as one keeps a correct meditative posture. Nor is cultivation merely the practice of chanting sutras, reciting a mantra, reciting Amitabha's name, or practicing Chan meditation. If one chants scripture and worships the Buddha every day, but still one's mind is full of desire, anger, ignorance, and attachment to self, how can an un-Dharma-like practice lead to a Dharma-like result?

Practice is certainly necessary, but the cultivation of the mind is even more important. When one's conduct is correct but one's thoughts are not, the outer appearance is there but not the inner reality. This is what happens when practice fails to include the cultivation of the mind, thus making it impossible to really resolve the fundamental problem. When practice also means being able to cultivate the mind, then there's a seamless oneness between inner thought and outer appearance. When one's "sincerity within is expressed outwardly," then all matters are fulfilled and all practices are completed.

Conduct or mind, we should apply the practice concretely to our own lives. How we eat and dress, how we shelter and transport ourselves, whether moving about or at rest, sitting up or lying down; even how we conduct ourselves and deal with matters, make friends and interact with others, and how we think and feel throughout the day, morning and night; all present opportunities to cultivate. For example: in wearing clothes, there is certainly a need to look sharp and dignified, but even old and worn clothing if kept clean and neat would do as well; this is how to cultivate the way one dresses. Having delicious food for three meals a day is everyone's desire, but one can also appreciate the unique flavor of plain and simple fare; this is how to cultivate the way one

eats. Living in a great house with grand rooms is fine indeed, but even small rooms in a simple abode could also be like heaven; this is how to cultivate the way one shelters oneself. Having a car waiting for you as you step out the door is a quick and efficient means of transportation, but without a car one can still walk easily along the road; this is how to cultivate the way one transports oneself.

In work, one labors hard and bears responsibilities, doing one's best to complete the job; as a person, one should endeavor to truly fulfill the ideas of honesty and fairness; these are all examples of how one cultivates oneself. To be sincere and amicable in one's interactions with others and in how one handles matters is how one practices in one's everyday life. Those who are merchants, for example, may seek a profit from their investment, while selling honest goods at a fair price without cheating the young or the old; those who are government officials should serve the people, maintaining the people's trust and abiding by the law; this too is how one practices in everyday life.

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

The practice of cultivation means first of all to become a good person. If someone is mean and vindictive, untrustworthy, immoral, greedy, stingy, and underhanded, and yet does not seek to rid themselves of these character flaws, it is like failing to clean a pot or a pan, for the dirt and grim remains. How can such vessels be used to serve delicious food for one's nourishment?

This is what is meant by the expression, "When the characteristics of human beings are perfected, Buddhahood is attained." The practice of cultivation in everyday life seeks to refine one's character, so that one does not betray the principles of heaven and the ways of humanity. As it is generally described, conducting oneself properly means being honest, trustworthy, respectful to one's parents, and true to one's friends. Being able to do as you say and to develop your own potential will allow you to slowly "transform circumstances through one's mind," and naturally bring it into full play.

We always tend to focus on outside influences, what Hu Shi describes as being led by the nose. But if we are able to slowly train our own minds, so that we can affirm and master the mind in all its thoughts, not "falling prey to the influence of external circumstances," then we will enable the strength within the mind to increase; to not be swayed by external cir-

cumstances is the true meaning of strength.

Respecting Life

In the past people liked eating beef, but now we have the mad cow disease; in the past people liked eating pork, but now there is hoof and mouth disease; and in the past people liked eating chicken, but now we have avian influenza. Couldn't one say that animals are using their own lives to protect their very existence?

For a long time now, humanity has recklessly been destroying the ecological environment of this planet, so now isn't Nature striking back at humanity? Examples include dust storms, holes in the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, and even earthquakes, floods, mudslides, and so on. How can humanity fail to realize the gravity of all these warnings that threaten our very survival? How could humanity act so self-righteously in wreaking havoc upon the plants and animals of this universe for the sake of its own existence?

Conduct that is harmful to life cannot be considered reasonable and proper. Buddhism advocates refraining from the killing of living things. This in itself is a form of compassion. Going from not killing living things to protecting them promotes equality in the right to life. This is most compatible to the eco-

logical conservation of which the whole world is concerned, and it is also the most positive way to emphasize environmental protection.

Buddhism's deep respect for life can be demonstrated by the following verses:

*Human flesh and the flesh of animals;
Though the names differ, the essence does not.
We all belong to the same nature,
We merely vary in bodily form.
If I left others to suffer in pain,
Since the sweet and fat are what I want;
No need to wait upon the Lord of Death's
judgment;
I know myself what such deeds will cost.*

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

To not kill living things means to not encroach upon the lives of others. The Confucians have the saying, "Having seen it alive, we cannot bear to see its death; having heard its cry, we cannot bear to eat its flesh. Thus, the gentleman stays away from the

kitchen." These speak of a heartfelt respect and loving concern for life.

The Sutra on the Collection of the Six Perfections, records how the Buddha, in one of his previous lives, was born the king of deer and sacrificed himself to save a mother deer. This act moved the local king to set aside a preserve for animals where hunting and killing were forbidden. King Asoka, who appeared not long after the Buddha's nirvana, had planted vast tracts of forest for the protection of sentient beings, and he established animal hospitals; he also ordered that royal cooks could not kill living things. Such acts as these are the finest examples of how Buddhism cares for life. Now if people today were to establish shelters for animals, where they could get medical care and rest in old age, and so forth, these too would represent positive acts for the care of living things.

Modern vegetarianism has gained widespread popularity, for vegetarian food is not only beneficial to one's health, it also nourishes the compassionate mind. The compassionate mind is one that cannot bear the suffering of sentient beings. Ordinarily, in our everyday lives we do feel pain when we at one time or another accidentally cut or burn our thumb, and yet there are some people who kill chickens, slaughter pigs and cows, and eat fish live, to suit their

own tastes in food. At such times as these, have they ever appreciated the pain these animals feel going to their deaths? And so it is said:

*A finger burned in boiling water,
Delivers a shocking pain to the whole body;
A needle prick into one's skin,
Feels as if knives are cutting all over one's skin.
When fish die, they look to us in sorrow,
And when chickens die, they weep before the
blade.
Such sad weeping is clear in every case,
It's just those that hear it recognize it not.*

Raising pets is also a modern fashion, and yet it is said:

*People kept in jail,
Sob in sorrow all day long;
Birds kept in a cage,
Cry in sadness all the day through.
Upon hearing such woeful crying,
A mournful feeling weighs heavy in the heart.
Why not free them from their cage,
And let them soar high in flight.*

A bird locked up in a cage is very much like

some poor prisoner; abusing animals in this way is not in keeping with the protection of life. Not abusing animals is also protecting life. This includes such things as not carrying chickens and ducks by hanging them upside down, not whipping horses and cows, not shooting at wild birds, and not catching fish and shrimp with a hook, etc. But in this modern society of ours, ponds stocked with fish and shrimp are opening up all over. Although people say they are simply taking pleasure in fishing in and of itself and have no intention to kill, even in letting go what they catch, they have already done harm to fish and shrimp. This is killing the weak and small with enticing bait, delivering more pain to other living creatures; now where's the pleasure in that?

Actually, aside from not killing living things, we must actively protect life. The real significance of protecting life lies in giving one a way out. Saving life enables one to offer others convenience, relief, and freedom from suffering, generate good karma, and further the good work of others. Only by saving life, protecting life, can we show respect for life, and only in this way, will our own lives have dignity.

Killing Living Beings

Some people say, kill a pig and you will come

back as a pig; kill a chicken and you will come back as a chicken; so now if I kill a person, does this mean I will be reborn as another person? But such a rationalization is quite incompatible with the Law of Cause and Effect, and is in fact a horrible distortion. The substance of cause and effect is in no way so mechanical. After you eat your rice, is what you excrete still rice? If a student breaks a rule, the teacher may punish him by having him sit in a corner or even have him stand or kneel for a long period of time. But in terms of cause and effect, is it alright for the student to punish the teacher with sitting in the corner, or have the teacher stand or kneel for a long time as punishment?

The caterpillar has a causal relationship with the butterfly, but it is not necessarily a butterfly. Seeds planted at the same time in a field will produce shoots of varying height. Therefore, the relations between "karmic effects through causes and conditions" go from "cause" to "effect," but within this process, "conditions" as a mitigating factor cannot be overlooked.

Consider killing a mosquito in order to stop it from going on and biting someone else. In biting someone else, the mosquito is able to maintain its life with a drop of that other person's blood, but would you end its life for a mere drop of blood? Is it better to

let it live, or is it better to kill the mosquito in order to spare someone the loss of a drop of blood?

There is a story about a group of people waiting on the riverbank to cross on a ferry early one morning, for they all had business to conduct on the other side. When the ferryman came, he pushed the ferryboat down the sandbank and into the river; and in so doing, many small fish, shrimp, and crabs in the sand were crushed to death by the boat.

The ferryman punted the ferry and delivered his passengers to the other shore. Since the boat was small and there were many people, there were some who had to stay behind for the next trip. Among those who stayed behind, there was a scholar and a Chan master. As they waited for the ferry, the scholar asked the Chan master: "Monk, monk, did you see that? When the ferryman pushed the boat into the water just now, a good many small crabs, fish, and shrimp were crushed to death. Please give me your explanation. Was it really the wrongdoing of the passengers, or that of the ferryman?"

Frankly speaking, there is no easy way to answer this question. Because on one hand, you could say it was the wrongdoing of the ferryman, but he was just doing his job of ferrying people to the other shore and had no intention of killing living things. If, on the other hand, you say it was the wrongdoing of the

passengers, but they were just trying to cross the river, and had no intention of killing living things either. But clearly, many living things were indeed crushed to death under the boat. So whose wrongdoing was it really?

The Chan master's answer was very profound; he said: "It's your wrongdoing, scholar."

The scholar grew angry upon hearing this: "How could it possibly be my wrongdoing? I am neither the ferryman, nor was I a passenger in that boat; how could it be my wrongdoing."

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

What the Chan master said makes a lot of sense, for in this world often times a lot of trouble is stirred up over basically nothing, simply because some people meddle too much in affairs. Many times, if we just keep to ourselves, then there wouldn't be so many problems. But we often obsess over a very natural turn of events, unable to leave well enough alone, and thus we come to think about it too much, which is actually a deviant state. For example, the Buddhist scriptures state that, "When the Buddha gazes upon a bowl of water, he sees eighty-four thousand bugs." Now does that mean we shouldn't drink the water? Of course not. Eighty-four thousand bugs in the water there may be, but we drink it anyway. Because we

must drink water, and we have no idea at all that it contains eighty-four thousand bugs.

Some people get a shot for a cold, but when the needle is inserted, so many cells and minute organisms are destroyed. How could one be so heartless? We're not. When we undergo acupuncture treatment, we do not think about the germs being killed, we just want to be healthy. For a Buddhism based on people, peoples' health is important; and for a Buddhism that emphasizes the mind, a pure mind brings about a pure land. Therefore, even though there is conduct which leads to the killing of living things, if there is no intention to do so, in terms of karmic effect, this is an entirely different matter from killing out of anger.

People are cremated after death, and during the cremation process, many parasitic organisms within the firewood and the body are burned to death by the flames. Does that mean the precept against killing living things was transgressed? No, because our starting point was a wish not to see the body become putrefied, and so our purpose was the cremation, the holding of a funeral service, and not the burning to death of so many parasitic organisms. We had no intent to kill which is most significant. In our minds there was no thought of killing living things. Sometimes the karma created by the mind, the energy manifested by the mind, are very important. If we have

have no intention to initiate an action, then even if the action itself is wrong, the degree of wrongdoing is mitigated.

Karma and Illness

Having life, having a body, we naturally suffer from illnesses. Some people live to seventy or eighty and are very healthy, while others are already quite sickly by the age of twenty or thirty. Naturally, the results of our own karma play a role in all of this.

Though it is difficult to avoid some form of suffering in this human life of ours, there are also methods for relieving suffering. So when someone becomes sick and if his illness is cured by taking medicine, this then goes to show, that there are ways to eliminate the karmic effects of one's actions.

As for the principle behind the elimination of karma, let me offer an analogy: If you put a pinch of salt into a cup of water, it will be very salty. But if you put a pinch of salt into a tub of water, not only would it not be salty, the water will actually taste much better. Therefore, on one hand there is the karmic obstacle and on the other there is willpower. The amount of water represents the capacity of one's compassionate mind. If I have merit, this merit can reduce the power of karma.

Here is another example: I have a field and the seeds in this field have grown into shoots of grain, but weeds too have grown up along with them. What should I do? I must slowly pull out the weeds. But if the weeds are cut without pulling the roots, they will grow again in the springtime rains. The weeds are taken out only to grow once more, and there will be no end to the required weeding. But it doesn't matter, for after the grain shoots have grown tall, even if some weeds still exist underneath, they can no longer interfere with the growth of the grain shoots.

What this means, is that it is no easy task to remove all at once the karma we created in the past. But if the grain shoots of our merit grow tall, why should we be perturbed about some weeds of negative karma underneath?

Therefore, there's no need to fear karmic obstacles. As long as one performs more good deeds and does one's best to accumulate merit, there will be a way to eliminate unwholesome karma. It's just that many times people accumulate merit only to lose it later. Just as a cup with a hole in it leaks water, so too one's merit will disappear.

Why would merit leak away? These leaks are represented by afflictions, emotions, harmful thoughts, anger, greed, and delusion. Just as when we're are doing a good deed, we suddenly become

upset over some small matter, and end up speaking harmful words or thinking negative thoughts. In this way, even if we perform an act of charity, its merit would also be greatly reduced. Therefore, we must always be careful regarding the three karmas of the body, speech, and mind, and not create more unwholesome karma, otherwise our merit will leak away.

When caring for the body some people employ herbal therapy, others employ physical therapy, qi-gong, drug therapy, or psychotherapy, diet therapy, or even water therapy, heat therapy, steam therapy, and so on. The only requirement is that a specific treatment be prescribed for a given illness. As the saying goes, "there are numerous expedient approaches." An ailment can have so many different kinds of treatment, and why not? Therefore, if illness can be cured by various methods such as qigong, this too is consistent with the principles of karma. As long as the approach is appropriate, there's no need to make too many mental associations.

Terminal Illness and the End of Life

There are some patients that cannot be saved no matter how hard the doctor tries. But in not trying, the doctor then feels unable to just let the patient die

without doing something. In such cases, it's best to let nature take its course. I have seen many patients in hospitals who simply could not live any longer. To keep them alive with oxygen tanks, injections, blood transfusions, and the like, in reality is just adding to their suffering.

I feel that death is a natural thing; it's nothing to worry about. Because life itself cannot be extinguished; what dies is only the physical body; it's like someone immigrating to another country. As most Chinese people see it, it's better to live badly than die well, that is, they would rather suffer their entire lives so as to put off dying. This is a mistaken view.

In Taiwan today, there are such institutions as the "Institute of Life-and-Death Studies" founded by Fo Guang University and Nanhua University. Currently research into life and death has become a popular subject in Taiwan, to the point where our students volunteer to provide service for the dead at funeral homes. Having graduate students provide service for the dead will certainly enhance our estimation of death, so that death will no longer be a source of fear for people.

Someone asked me, since people who do not believe in religion will die, as will people who do believe in religion, why should one believe in religion? One should know, that people who believe in

religion, realize both the noble aspirations and the cultivation from their belief in religion, which can increase their own wisdom and power to face the questions of life and death. They are able to recognize that life and death are natural things. For example, death is then something like going home, what is called "looking upon death as a return home." Now wouldn't that make us feel calm and happy? Since ancient times, the various forms of Dharma practice, if employed wisely, enable one to not only be without the sorrows and sufferings of life, but also be without worry and fear in the face of death.

In short, old age, sickness, and physical debilitation are natural phenomena; sometimes death is like a lamp burning out of oil, so there is no need to fear death. Life and death are one and the same, life is not just living and death is not just dying. Just like the Buddha, we also "come into existence when conditions are present, and pass into extinction when conditions are absent."

Cyclical Existence

To believe in the cycle of birth and death is more beneficial to us; not to believe in the cycle of birth and death means that we have no future, which is something very sad. Each one of us is willing to put in

the effort now, because we believe that life is a part of the cycle of birth and death, and so we each have hope for the future.

The cycle of birth and death is the continuous cycle of karma through "cause and effect." A "cause" will produce an "effect," and that "effect" will go on to become another "cause." The continuous cycle of "cause and effect" is the cycle of birth and death. Just as a clock goes from one o'clock to twelve o'clock, it does not just stop there, but starts over with one o'clock again, and goes all the way to twelve. Running over and over again in a continuous cycle is what is meant by the term "the cycle of birth and death."

When most religions talk about human life, their answer to the question, "Where do humans come from?" is always linear— from here to there, with both a beginning and end. But Buddhism talks about cyclic existence through cause and effect, something that has neither a beginning nor an end. For example, in life there is birth, old age, sickness, and death, but there is no need to fear death, for you will be reborn after death. But don't be too happy about being reborn either, for with birth, there is also death.

A seed buried in the ground will sprout and produce fruit when the right causes and conditions appear. This is the results of karma. And so as we

discuss cyclic existence and cause and effect, we must realize that "conditions" play an important role here. That is to say, no matter what we do and no matter what we attain, the influence of conditions is always present in this process. This is the relationship between causes, conditions, and effects.

Why do people drink water? Because they are thirsty. If you are thirsty, what happens after you have a drink of water? By drinking water you're no longer thirsty. This is cyclic existence produced through cause and effect.

In this universe, it's not a question of whether or not you believe in cyclic existence or not. Cyclic existence produced through cause and effect is an inevitable and real phenomena, for it is in accord with the truth. The truth is what meets the conditions of universality, inevitability, and equality. For example, it is not the case that there is cyclic existence for males and none for females. Male or female, young or old, rich or poor, high or low, it does not matter, for everyone is subject to cyclic existence. It matters not whether one has money or lacks money, or whether one occupies a high or low position in society, everyone is subject to cyclic existence. Therefore, it fulfills the conditions of universality, inevitability, and equality; this is what truth means.

"One reaps what one sows," this is the meaning

of cyclic existence. The world undergoes the cycle of formation, abiding, decaying and extinction; time manifests its procession of spring, summer, autumn, and winter; and human life has its stages of birth, old age, sickness, and death. All of this constitutes cyclic existence.

Humans eat green vegetables and the various grains, and what is excreted becomes fertilizer. This very fertilizer nourishes plants and trees, which then supply what humans need. People feed lambs and pigs so they provide us with food to eat. There is between each other a cycle of existence. Water is turned into steam by the heat of the sun, and when this steam encounters cold air, it condenses into rain; flowers and fruit wither away into seeds, which are planted to produce flowers and bear fruit. A river of springtime waters flows to the east, but where does all this water end up? There will still be a time when this water returns.

Cyclic existence is circular; cyclic existence is hope. Cyclic existence can bring a good future, but it can bring unfortunate outcomes as well. We see how one political party replaces another in government or how great families rise to prominence or fall into obscurity; each and every case demonstrates how cyclic existence operates in our world.

There is the popular saying in the world that

"success makes one a king, while failure condemns one as a bandit;" but each of these outcomes resulted from some previous cause, so we need not envy the successful. Wealth and riches do not exceed three generations, and an empire rarely lasts more than a thousand years. This is the meaning of the phrase, "When we see others die, we feel anxious and tense as if on fire; but not because we are pained at the other's fate, rather we worry that we will be next." Because of cyclic existence, we know that there is cause and effect; and because of cyclic existence, we come to realize impermanence.

The wheels of a train are always turning, for they are moving forward; the propeller of a steamship not only propels the ship forward, but it can also go left or right. Because we fall into affliction, generate karmic action, and experience suffering, the bonds of this "affliction" always keep a tight hold upon human life. And though we need not fear the results of our karma as we transmigrate through this cyclic existence of birth and death, we still cannot avoid the suffering of cyclic existence.

There is a four-line verse that goes: "Know the causes in your past lives by looking at what befalls you in this; know your future outcome by looking at what you are doing now." This is the best demonstration I can give about the nature of cyclic exis-

tence.

Buddha Nature and the Soul

Human existence is not limited to the physical body, for there is also an inner spiritual force that upholds our lives. This spirit is what is generally referred to as the human "soul." It's just in Buddhism we do not call it a "soul." Buddhism considers the "soul" to only encompass the sixth consciousness. Actually, there are many levels to human existence: there is the eighth consciousness, and above that there is the *adana* consciousness, and above that there is the tathagatagarbha, all the way to Buddha Nature. With the intelligence and understanding of the mind consciousness we would only be somewhat smart and clever. Beyond this mental faculty there is also an eighth consciousness, which constitutes the true essence of ourselves; this is the real subjectivity of our life. Therefore, Buddhism does not focus on the "soul", because the soul is a superficial concept, rather, Buddhism emphasizes the true mind.

As a matter of fact, this is not only the case in Buddhism; even Daoism believes in the "integration of divinity with humanity," for when a person dies, the spirit is not extinguished. This too is the human "soul". There are people who have heard, seen, or perhaps sensed how deceased relatives have returned

home in the dark of the night. Experiences such as these I would imagine have happened to many people. But here's the thing: you hear about it, but I have not; you tell me about it, and I say "How could that possibly be?" In this way, it becomes an argument. But this is a subjective experience of an individual; you've heard about it and so you certainly believe such is the case; even more, you become attached to it.

As for research on the human "soul", there are those now in both the East and the West who are enthusiastically pursuing such investigations with the belief that in the future this whole matter will certainly become perfectly clear. However, we should have faith that the human "soul" exists, regardless of whether or not it is true. If the "soul" exists, then there is still a future, there is still hope, and there is still a world of the spirit. But if you say there is no "soul", then that means after we die, there is nothing whatsoever; there would neither be any hope nor any future. This is simply too horrible to contemplate, and so the Buddhist saying goes, "Better to give rise to a view of existence as grand as Mt. Sumeru, rather than give rise to a view of emptiness as trifling as a mustard seed."

The Buddhist discussion of the "soul" should not be confused with superstition. This is similar to

Confucius "not discussing strange occurrences, feats of strength, civil disorder, or supernatural beings." Indeed, Buddhism has never emphasized "strange occurrences, feats of strength, civil disorder, or supernatural beings," for the truly superstitious are the average members of society. As for certain inexplicable phenomena, Buddhism will sometimes try and account for them and accept them for what they are, but by no means would Buddhism sanctify such things. Just as in the case of whether or not the "soul" exists, Buddhism would never sanctify the soul. Whether the "soul" exists or not, the existence or non-existence of a teacup, a table, or a building, is not of any particular importance to me, for my relationship with those things is not very close.

Yet at the same time, we need to affirm the mundane world; we accept it without negating it. Most people in society live a lay lifestyle and cannot do without money and material things; thus Humanistic Buddhism does not consider "money to be the root of all evil." On the contrary, it encourages its followers to obtain wealth and prosperity by engaging in right livelihoods. Humanistic Buddhism approves of being in possession of wholesome wealth, because it is only with wholesome wealth that beneficial activities can be undertaken. Nor does Buddhism reject proper loving relationships, for not only

does Buddhism hope that husbands and wives will love and cherish each other, but wishes that all those with love in the world, can marry and have a family. Therefore, Humanistic Buddhism hopes that everyone can carry out the "Three Goods" of "doing good works, saying good words, and keeping good thoughts," filling the mind with truth, goodness, and beauty. One can then expand one's own magnanimity, so that one is without envy or hatred. In such a process, one naturally comes to a point where the mind encompasses all of space and becomes one with the entire cosmos.

Although there are those who say "the soul is not extinguished and the spirit does not die," but as an analysis on the nature of human life, it does not go far enough. For ultimately, to go far enough is to recognize the "true impermanence is mind-only, nirvana is tranquility" which means to transform the eighth consciousness into the "great mirror-like wisdom." Only this constitutes our original face.

Understanding the eighth consciousness is not something that can be easily gained in terms of knowledge. The great mirror-like wisdom of the eighth consciousness is only realized through spiritual practice and direct experience. If we are able to transform the eighth consciousnesses into the "four wisdoms," where the first five consciousnesses be-

come the "wisdom of the fulfillment of deeds," the sixth consciousness becomes the "wisdom of profound observation," the seventh consciousness becomes the "wisdom of equality in nature," and the eighth consciousness becomes the "great mirror-like wisdom;" at such a time, not only would we possess a "soul", but Buddha Nature itself would be completely manifested. Now wouldn't that make your life complete?

Non-Duality

The *Chapter on the Entry into Non-Duality* of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* records how one day the lay Buddhist Vimalakirti gave notice that he was ill, and Manjusri Bodhisattva led a host of many great bodhisattvas to pay Vimalakirti a visit and inquire after his health. After some conversation between Vimalakirti and his visitors, there was a sudden change of topic when Vimalakirti posed the question, "I ask you all: how does a bodhisattva enter into Non-Duality? Let each one give an answer to the best of one's knowledge."

In turns, each one of the thirty-one bodhisattvas gave their answer to this question based upon their own understanding. Finally, when no one had anything more to say, Vimalakirti thereupon asked

Manjusri Bodhisattva: "Manjusri, how does a bodhisattva enter into Non-Duality?"

Manjusri Bodhisattva answered: "According to my understanding, when all phenomena are no longer subject to either word or speech, indication or knowledge, and have passed beyond all questions and answers, this then is the entry into Non-Duality." What he means here, is that the ultimate truth cannot be investigated or examined through such methods as logical reasoning, analogy, induction, or deduction. Rather, it must be experienced directly as an inward discovery. Concrete application is the only way to enter the Doctrine of Non-Duality.

After he had spoken, Manjusri Bodhisattva then asked Vimalakirti: "Now let me ask you: how does a bodhisattva enter into Non-Duality?" Vimalakirti kept silent and did not answer. Everyone was surprised, only Manjusri Bodhisattva with his superior wisdom understood its profound mystery, and so he exclaimed to all in praise, "Excellent, excellent! Only when there is no longer speech or words, can one truly enter Non-Duality."

What he meant was, since Non-Duality cannot be explained or characterized, how can it be expressed in language? If it could be expressed in spoken words or written language, it would not truly be the entry into Non-Duality. Therefore, Vimalakirti's

"keeping silent," means that the unsurpassed, profound path cannot be spoken of in words, or explained in writing; it transcends the limitations of these forms and explores the original source directly. This then is the bodhisattva's entry into Non-Duality.

How can we concretely experience Non-Duality in our actual lives? In terms of "non-duality," are birth and death two things? From the perspective of Non-Duality, birth and death are one: with birth there must be death and with death, there will be another rebirth; birth and death are of one, non-dualistic essence. Are existence and non-existence two things? Actually, existence and non-existence are one. Consider a cup filled with water: this cup is only a temporary manifestation. The cup is made of paper; paper that came from wood, that in turn came from a tree; that grew from an assemblage of such causes and conditions as sunlight, air, water, and earth from the universe. Therefore, there is only one thing in the universe, and that is called "dependent origination"—only through causes and conditions can anything come into being, and without causes and conditions, not even this world would exist. Causes and conditions are what constitutes the truth, what constitutes being non-dualistic.

See how the water in the great ocean is stirred into waves by the wind. It looks like the water and the

waves are two things, but in reality, they are one: the water is the wave and the wave is the water. Earrings, bracelets, necklaces, gold watches, are all made of gold, and so the gold represents a single basic essence, while the various forms of jewelry made from it represent the various different kinds of temporary manifestations.

There is only the one mind and no other distinctions. "I love you and am willing to die for you; I hate you and wish that you would die right now"—it is because of the distinctions made by our own minds that create such a huge difference between love and hate. But from the perspective of truth, there is neither love nor hate; all things being equal in the dharma realms, everything is the same. This is the Doctrine of Non-Duality.

Chinese culture pays particular attention to the sense of propriety, justice, honesty and sense of shame, but many are now influenced by Western thought, and have embraced such applied sciences as physics and chemical engineering. Just as traditional values and modern innovations are joined, substance and application must be combined, for substance and function are one and not two; they are not separate from one another. Even the mundane and supra-mundane are also non-dual, as is affliction and nirvana, existence and non-existence. Existence is not

necessarily existing, nor is non-existence non-existing. This is what is meant by "wondrous existence is engendered in emptiness," there can only be "existence" when there is "non-existence;" and there can only be "existence" when there is "emptiness." For example if a house is not empty, no one would be able to live in it. If emptiness is not empty, then how could it contain all the myriad phenomena? Therefore, only through "emptiness" can we realize the ultimate meaning of "existence." We must cut off the polarities of "emptiness" and "existence" and return to the Middle Way. The Middle Way is the dharma realm of one reality. It is the truth in its real sense.

What does Non-Duality mean? The "thundering silence" of Vimalakirti— this is Non-Duality. What is non-dualistic refers to the supramundane Dharma of the Buddhist teachings, which teaches that "affliction is enlightenment," for in principle these are "non-dual." For example, the pineapple and persimmon with their originally sour taste can ripen and change into sweet fruit with the help of gentle winds and warm sunlight. It is apparent that sourness is sweetness, and sweetness cannot be without sourness. Thus, "affliction is enlightenment;" this is the supramundane Dharma.

The supramundane Dharma's view of the world

is to explain enlightenment in terms of principle. But when one has yet to achieve enlightenment, one cannot keep to principle to the exclusion of phenomena. We can use principle to explain phenomena, and clarify principle through phenomena; being able to achieve the "interpenetration of principle with phenomena," is thus the true meaning of "non-duality." If we can apply the philosophy of the "Non-Dual Doctrine" to our own lives, we would naturally be able to realize the "oneness of individual and others' existence" and the "non-duality of self and others!"

The Nature of the Pure Land

Buddhism in China is represented by the Eight Mahayana Schools, four of these are practice oriented, and they are the Chan, Pure Land, Esoteric, and Vinaya schools; while the other four, the Huayan, Tiantai, Mind-Only, and Three Treatises schools, tend to emphasize the study of doctrine.

Humanistic Buddhism is not a particular school or sect, rather, Humanistic Buddhism represents the original teachings of the Buddha. From the very beginning of his forty-nine year career of expounding the Dharma, the Buddha did not give teachings to ghosts or demons, nor did he preach to those in the

animal or hell realms; all of his teachings were for the benefit of beings living in this human world; so it is only fitting that the Dharma given to human beings should be called "Humanistic Buddhism."

One generally speaks about the Pure Land out of a wish to see everyone gain rebirth in the Pure Land. It does not matter if one speaks of the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, the Huayan Pure Land, the Amitabha Pure Land, or even the Pure Lands advocated by other sects, for they all derive from the teachings of the Buddha; this is absolutely clear. But if I were to ask you all a question: in what realm after all does the Buddha now reside? Or to which Pure Land he has gone? Does Amitabha Buddha reside in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss? Where did he really go? You would say: Of course he is in the Pure Land!

Actually, is not necessarily true that only Amitabha Buddha can have a Pure Land, for everyone who has a pure mind has a Pure Land. It is just we Buddhists speak of the "Pure Land," while the Christians talk about "Heaven."

There may be those who will make comparisons: What is the difference between Heaven and the Pure Land? While others may even ask about all the Pure Lands, for there are many. Among all of these many Pure Lands, which one is the best?

The idea that "Buddhas follow the same path"

appears in many Buddhist scriptures. For example, the Sutra of the Medicine Buddha states that by reciting the name of the Eastern Medicine Buddha of Pure Crystal Radiance, one can attain rebirth in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss as well. The same principle applies to getting a job in some unit of the Hong Kong government; one can do so by studying at a Hong Kong University, but anyone who has studied at the Chinese University of Hong Kong or the Hong Kong Polytechnic University can also work for the Hong Kong government. So Buddhist followers need not become obsessed about this or that Pure Land. As long as you have attained a certain level of practice, you will obtain rebirth in whatever Pure Land you desire.

There are also those who often ask where the Pure Land and Hell are really located. Well, the Pure Land is located in the Pure Land and Hell is located in Hell; that is one way to put it. In another sense, what we mean by pure land, heaven, hell, or the animal realm, are all to be found in this human world of ours. If you go to the market place to buy groceries, you will see how all the chickens, ducks, and fish have all had their intestines cut open and the stomachs flayed to be hung on hooks or suspended upside down. Is this not the Hell of Sharp Knives or the Hell of Boiling Oil? In contrast to this, there are those who

live in sumptuous mansions and enjoy all the material joys and comforts of air conditioning, refrigerators, and so forth; is such a condition not the same as heaven or the pure land? Therefore, hell and the pure land are right here and can be seen in this human world of ours.

The pure land and hell exist in our own minds. Throughout the day in the mind of each and every one of us, we can sometimes experience heaven and sometimes hell. For example, when we get up in the morning, our minds are free of cares and concerns; we can go to the park for exercise and a jog, enjoying the fresh morning air. Isn't this heaven in this world? But when we get home and go sit at the dining table: asking "Is there anything good to eat?" This generates the mind of desire, which is the state of mind for a hungry ghost. And if the meal is not to our liking, we slam down the chopsticks and push away the bowl; now we're angry. Isn't this mind of anger like being in hell? Sometimes we even curse or beat others in ignorance; are these not the same behaviors as animals? Thus, in the midst of our daily lives, our minds sometimes attain the state of Heaven, while at other times we experience the state of beings in hell, hungry ghosts, and animals. There's no telling, during the twenty-four hours in a single day, just how many times we slip in and out of heaven and hell.

The Tiantai School even promotes the idea that "one thought contains three thousand worlds," while the ten dharma realms are to be found in our very own minds.

In general, if our minds engender a single pure thought, a single compassionate thought, or a single charitable thought, then there is the pure land; but if we experience greed, anger, cruelty, or false understanding, then there is hell. In this sense then, don't we spend all of our days going back and forth between good and bad, right and wrong? Thus, "Humanistic Buddhism" embraces all the Buddha's teachings, for whatever the Buddha taught is "Humanistic Buddhism." To borrow a phrase from the Buddha: What Buddhist path could possibly exist without this human world of sentient beings?

Humanistic Buddhism is also not the invention of some individual. It is neither the Buddhism of the Sixth Patriarch nor the Buddhism of Venerable Master Taixu. Fundamentally, we must look to the Buddha's original intent as the source of Humanistic Buddhism. At this present age in history, Humanistic Buddhism more aptly fits the spiritual capacity of modern people, and this is because the Dharma taught in the past was perhaps one-sided. Many people in the past encouraged the monastic form of Buddhism. For example, they wanted others to renounce the world

and give up everything, saying things like "only irreconcilable foes become husbands and wives," "children come as punishment for past misdeeds," "money is the root of all evil," and so forth. This kind of thinking is appropriate for those who have joined the monastic order, but what about the members of the laity? If the laity cannot possess anything whatsoever, then how will they live? What possible meaning can their lives have without wives and children, without money, honor, and material comfort?

Therefore, what we mean by "Humanistic Buddhism" today is this: that beyond our faith and adoration towards the Buddha, we must rely upon the Buddhas and bodhisattvas or gods and deities, so as to develop an abiding interest and concern for society and its sentient beings. This is what is meant by Humanistic Buddhism. And Humanistic Buddhism must begin with this abiding interest and concern for humanity. Now if we did not promote Humanistic Buddhism and failed to undertake activities that benefited humanity, choosing instead to merely recite the name of Amitabha Buddha so that whenever anyone went to the Buddha hall, they would only worship the Buddha and recite Amitabha Buddha's name, would you do so? Therefore, Buddhism cannot simply emphasize the recitation of Amitabha Bud-

dha's name and the worshiping of the Buddha; otherwise it will lose its function of bringing liberation to sentient beings.

The whole point of Buddhism is to bring liberation to all sentient beings, and in order to do so, Buddhism must first adapt to the needs and spiritual capacity of sentient beings. For example, if you don't like reciting Amitabha Buddha's name, then you can sit in meditation. If sitting in meditation is not your habit, then you can bow to the Buddha. If you don't want to bow to the Buddha, that's fine, you can be a vegetarian. If vegetarian food is not to your liking, that's OK too, we can talk about Buddhist ideas and discuss the Dharma, or one can even chant Buddhist hymns or listen to music. It's even OK not to believe in the Buddha, you can just emulate the Buddha's practice instead, and thereby motivate all of society on Buddhism's behalf, to perform good deeds like the Buddha.

Thus, the Humanistic Buddhism we promote today, adheres to the needs and spiritual capacity of all, and is pluralistic and multi-functional. It adapts to you based upon whatever form of practice you find suitable. The Buddhism that can realize the Buddha's "modifying the teaching based upon the audience's capacity," constitutes Humanistic Buddhism, and the establishment of a pure land in this world.

Buddhism and China

More than fifty years have elapsed since the Chinese communists established their regime, and the political situation now is already quite stable; not only has the economy opened up, but it is growing rapidly. The lives of the people have improved, and Mainland China's international position is more highly valued. Establishing a rich, powerful, and content nation takes more than political stability and economic prosperity. Things like forging the bonds of social order and raising the moral character of the people are all factors that cannot be overlooked. In this area, religion can indeed play an important role.

On the importance of religion, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen has said, "Buddhism provides the benevolence to save the world, and Buddhist studies is the mother of philosophy. The Dharma can make up for shortcomings of the law. The law protects us from trouble that has happened before, while the Dharma protects us from trouble that is yet to be." In and of itself, Buddhism possesses the capability to transform society, and such Buddhist teachings like the law of karma, rebirth, the five precepts, the ten wholesome acts, kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity all lend support to the social order. Through its effective ap-

plication of dispelling wrong views with right ones and removing ignorance with enlightenment, Buddhism can exert a positive influence to cure social ills, and this influence will bring an invisible, internal stabilizing force to society and the nation.

I once went to the Golden Triangle and the San Khampaeng Hot Springs in Thailand to teach the Dharma and provide relief. There were some Chinese people there who had become homeless refugees due to the troubles of war. They said to me, "We can do without food, but we cannot be without faith; the poverty and emptiness of the spirit is harder to bear than the hunger for food."

Therefore, for the future billion plus people living on Mainland China, if the Dharma can indeed support the nation and bring peace to its people, and thereby bring about a transformation, then this would be of more importance than any tangible wealth. I hope the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party will be able to see the value of religion, and use Buddhism as a good remedy for purifying society and the hearts and minds of the people. This is extremely important.