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Common Questions *in the Practice of* Buddhism

Chan Master
Sheng Yen



Common Questions
in the Practice of Buddhism

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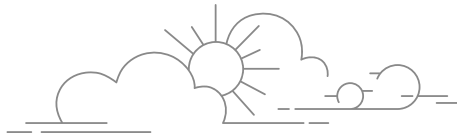
A Journey of Learning and Insight

Chan and Enlightenment

The World of Chan

Liberated in Stillness and Motion

Common Questions
in the Practice of Buddhism



Chan Master Sheng Yen



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Preface to the English Edition

MASTER SHENG YEN (1930–2009) was born into a farming family that toiled near the banks of the Yangtze River and its unpredictable moods. The boy who became one of the great Buddhist masters of the 20th century knew hardship from the beginning: in his second year of life the overflowing banks of the surging river washed away his family's farm and home. As a result they had to pull up stakes and move, this time even closer to the river's unforgiving banks!

Some might say that this was a sorrowful beginning to life, but seen another way his early encounters with human suffering, and how he and his family refused to succumb to misfortune, were in fact auspicious for his future. In order for his family to survive, they each had to give everything of themselves for the benefit of family and neighbors. So from early on, though he was probably not yet able to articulate it, he was already intimate with Buddhism's Three Marks of Existence – impermanence, suffering, and selflessness.

Yet, it did not take long for him to put his youthful wisdom to the test – at age thirteen, through a series of more-or-less accidental encounters, he left home and became a monk in a Chan monastery near Shanghai. The rest, as they say, is history. When he succumbed to a prolonged illness in 2009, he had established and built thriving Chan Buddhist centers in Taiwan and America with affiliated centers in several continents, and founded the Dharma Drum

lineage of Chan Buddhism. Were that not enough, he authored over 100 books covering pretty much the entire landscape of Chan Buddhism, from scholarly commentaries to books which can best be described as *upaya*, or “expedient means” for ordinary sentient beings to find their path out of the cycle of suffering. This book, *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism* (學佛群疑) is a shining jewel of wise and compassionate expedient means for us sentient beings to utilize and share with others.

The seventy-five questions from practitioners and answers to them from Master Sheng Yen comprise a unique buffet from which monastics and laity can savor and digest useful insights about these questions regarding what it means to be a practitioner of Buddhism. And for those new to the path or not yet committed, along with *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, this is an excellent introduction to the path trod before us by centuries of great masters of the past, beginning with the Buddha.

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This book is the result of close collaboration between several people, some who gave of their time and talents despite career obligations, and surely there are some who are unknown to us. Our thanks to all of them.

Our thanks to the Sheng Yen Education Foundation for putting its resources behind the transcription, translation, editing, design and publication of this wonderful addition to Master Sheng Yen’s already extensive library of his books in English.

Thanks to Ven. Guo Chan whose gifts of karmic affinity brought together the several practitioners who collaborated on preparing the manuscript for publication. Her sunny disposition is an inspiration to those that know her. Speaking of karmic affinity, Ven. Guo Chan expresses her thanks to Ven. Chang Ji, Iris Wang, and Pat Hickey, all of whom offered important guidance, advice, and encouragement on the translation and publication of this book.

COMMON QUESTIONS IN THE PRACTICE OF BUDDHISM

Thanks to Hue-ping Chin, Ph.D., for her selfless dedication in translating the seventy-five articles, despite carrying a full academic schedule as a professor at Drury University. This was her first venture into translating for Master Sheng Yen, and in his behalf we offer her our gratitude.

Thanks to Jerry Wang, Ph.D., for his patient and meticulous bilingual review of each chapter as they gradually came into being. Prior to *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism*, Jerry had already translated two other books by Master Sheng Yen.

Thanks to Wei Tan, Ph.D., who gave so much of his time to review the final manuscript, improving it in many ways both visible and less visible, like a jeweler skilled at polishing an already precious but rough diamond.

Thanks to Shaun Chung, he of many skills, for the book's cover design, layout, and typography.

Thanks to the many other people who have contributed to making this manuscript possible, but whose names are unknown to us at this time. In particular, we thank the people who helped to publish the original Chinese edition of this book; as well, we thank the person or persons who meticulously transcribed the original Chinese text into digital format as a key step towards achieving this English translation.

TRANSFER OF MERIT

May sentient beings benefit from this presentation of the Buddha's inexhaustible Dharma, may they find comfort and ease within its aura of wisdom and compassion.

Ernest Heau
Editor

Author's Preface

CONSIDER *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism* to be a sequel to *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism* (written during 1963–1964), since they share similar writing style, objectives, and readership. Since 1976 and after, *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism* has been very popular and welcomed by readers in both Taiwan and overseas. Many readers urged me to write a sequel in similar style, while exploring an even deeper and wider range of topics. I also felt the need to do so, and I often wished to have some quiet time to concentrate on selecting and writing in depth on 100-or-so topics in about 100,000 words, on issues not fully addressed in *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*. However, because of my busy schedule and frail health, my wish remained unfulfilled.

In the spring of 1987 a lay practitioner, Mr. Zhang Ming, who every few months printed and distributed 1,000 to 5,000 copies of *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, persistently urged me to write another book similar to *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*. I replied: “My health is a concern and my mind is no longer as sharp; I cannot think of any topics to address. It would be better if you could come up with 100 questions, and I will try to answer them.”

I thought this would settle the matter; but much to my surprise, about ten days later, Mr. Zhang brought me a huge pile of notes containing several hundred questions. Evidently, he had solicited those questions from Buddhist friends and relatives. If I just gave an answer according to the questions he brought me, I would need only ten or fewer sentences to answer each of

them. However, that mode of answering the questions would not have been adequate for the readers' understanding, so I was not inclined to do it that way. Therefore, I was hesitant to get started.

After a little more than a month, Mr. Zhang came over again and asked me: "How come I have not seen your answers in *Humanity Magazine*?" I responded: "I'm still contemplating what style I should use to answer these questions." I then asked the editor-in-chief of the monthly *Humanity Magazine* to categorize all the questions by certain major themes; he selected more than 30 questions and also added more than 10 of his own. Later on, I also thought of more than 20 additional questions. All together, these became the content of this book.

Most of my answers to the questions were dictated to and written down by one or the other of my disciples in Taiwan after morning services. Others were done in similar manner at the Chan Meditation Center in New York, with the help of Ms. Ye Yun, who worked at a radio station. Only a few of the answers were handwritten by me. On and off, it took a year-and-a-half to complete writing this book. In the resulting draft, there were inconsistencies in the choice of words and vocabulary. Now, during the final compilation and editing before publication, I am taking this opportunity to review them carefully twice, to give them some needed polishing, supplementing, and revision. This book contains intellectual knowledge, as well as practical views for use in life. It is based on fundamental principles of Dharma as taught in the sutras and the commentaries on the sutras, using plain and simple language to answer some of the real and practical questions in everyone's life.

Sheng Yen
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October 6, 1988

Taking Refuge in the Three Jewels

QUESTION

If someone believes in and practices Buddhism, should they also take refuge in the Three Jewels?

ANSWER

Yes, they should. But first, we should clearly distinguish between believing in Buddhism and worshipping deities and spirits as practiced in folk religions. Someone who believes and practices Buddhism should fully accept the Three Jewels, namely, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. They are called jewels because we treasure them and because they are inexhaustible. Once we accept them they are forever with us; neither water nor fire can destroy them, nor can thieves take them away. One can enjoy their benefits forever, and no other treasures in the world can compare with them.

The Buddha Jewel refers to the completely enlightened being, Shakyamuni Buddha, who attained buddhahood with complete virtue and perfect wisdom. All sentient beings are able to reach buddhahood, but in human history, there has been only Shakyamuni who attained buddhahood. Nevertheless, we pay respect to all buddhas in the past, present, and future.

The Dharma Jewel refers to the principles and methods that guide us to attain buddhahood. Since the Dharma consists of the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, we honor him as the Original Teacher. In terms of doctrine the Dharma consists of the Tripitaka: the three canons consisting of the sutras

(sermons), the vinaya (rules of conduct), and the shastras (commentaries). To that we add the commentaries and records of the patriarchs. All these are the principles that guide us in practicing Buddhism.

The Sangha Jewel refers to people who are studying and practicing Dharma, helping others studying and practicing Dharma, and protecting and upholding sentient beings who study and practice Dharma. The Sangha includes bodhisattvas, arhats, and not-yet-lightened bhikshus (monks) and bhikshunis (nuns). Ordinary people like us seldom recognize enlightened bodhisattvas and arhats even when we see them. Most of what we see is the not-yet-enlightened Sangha. Therefore, monks and nuns constitute the core of the Sangha Jewel.

The Sangha Jewel is the teacher, the Dharma Jewel is the text, and the Buddha Jewel is the discoverer and creator of the text. Only when all Three Jewels are present can there be the complete Buddhism; accepting only one or two of the Three Jewels is not true Buddhism. Having faith in only the Buddha Jewel is not different from those who blindly worship spirits and ghosts; practicing the Dharma Jewel alone is similar to a scholastic pursuit; and believing only in the Sangha Jewel is no different from having godparents. Taken singly, these are not true Buddhism.

Therefore, taking refuge in the Three Jewels is like students getting registered for school; it marks the beginning of Buddhist learning and practice. Only when students have officially enrolled are they accepted to attend classes. It is then the students' obligation to attend classes, and the school's responsibility to teach them. Similarly, going through the refuge-taking ritual is essential for those who believe in and practice Buddhism. It is also like a marriage, an inauguration, or school enrollment, where people make vows and commitments, and accept oversight by others. This is in order to be prudent and to affirm their commitments.

Certainly, people can study Buddhism without taking refuge in the Three Jewels; no one would consider them evil. However, without taking refuge one consciously lacks commitment and would tend to make excuses, hesitate, and vacillate. At some crucial moment, one would waver and say: "I'm not a Buddhist yet. I don't quite need to follow the precepts and rules of Buddhism." Consequently, they would easily forgive themselves. Needless to say, they are foregoing measures to avoid certain vices and bad habits such as laxity, overindulging in leisure, wicked morals, improper speech, and freely walk away with things. If they had taken refuge in the Three Jewels, they would be more vigilant and cautious to keep themselves within bounds. They would also receive guidance, encouragement, and advice from teachers, the sangha, and peers, hence transforming one's character, strengthening one's mind, sustaining one's diligence, and leading one's practice on to the right and normal path.

Dear reader, please do not consider taking refuge in the Three Jewels as trivial, or consider yourself not qualified, just because you do not thoroughly understand the Dharma and how to practice it. On the contrary, simply because you already know that the Dharma is worth believing in and learning, you should quickly come to take refuge in the Three Jewels. If you think you are not yet adequate to be a Buddhist, it is even more urgent that you take refuge. After taking refuge, you will have the support of your fellow Buddhists, many buddhas and bodhisattvas. The Dharma-protecting heavenly beings are there to help and uphold you, with respect to every aspect of your thoughts, life, and habits. Especially if you lack willpower or confidence, once taking refuge in the Three Jewels, your willpower will be strengthened, and your confidence will increase.

Seeing Through Red Dust

QUESTION

Must one “see through red dust,” as the saying goes, before one begins to practice Buddhism?

ANSWER

Actually, “see through red dust” is not a Buddhist phrase. In this expression, “red dust” (*hongchen*) refers to the mortal world, so the phrase really means “seeing through the world of mortal beings.” The phrase originated in Chinese literature and describes the phenomenal world as like red dust dancing in the air, implying a scene bustling with life. In his *Ode to the Western Capital*, the historian Ban Gu of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 BCE–220 CE), writes of “the rumbling sound of the city echoing from the outer city walls, generating hundreds of flowing dust streams; red dust converging from all directions, merging with smoke and clouds over the entire city.” It describes the prosperous western capital of Chang’an, full of people, lots going on, abundant wealth, luxurious and bustling with noise and excitement. Lu Zhaolin’s poem, “Some Old Sentiments about Chang’an” also mentions “Soft branches of the willows and locust trees hang down, brushing against the ground, while red dust clouds the sky on this auspicious day.” In the Song Dynasty (960–1279), Cheng Hao’s poem “Autumn Moon” says, “... with the red dust kept thirty miles away, the white clouds and red leaves float leisurely.” Chapter One of Cao Xueqin’s *Dream of the Red Chamber* says, “Near the city gate of Chang

Men is the center of red dust; it is the place for the most rich, noble, distinguished, and admired people.” So, it is evident that “red dust” implies the bustling scenes of the worldly bureaucracy and wealthy lives of mortal beings.

Since ancient times, to “see through red dust” was used by Chinese literati who were influenced by the Daoist principle of nature and *wuwei* (literally “non-action”); it was also used by those who were weary of the illusory, extravagant life style, and who yearned for the life in the countryside and woods. Therefore, “seeing through red dust” means to retire from the bustling, ever-changing smoky and cloud-like life, to withdraw into nature, enjoying the freedom of a plain life in the woods and hills.

Buddhism has often been misunderstood in China. Most people relate escaping from urbane reality and retreating into the woods and mountains as being the result of Buddhist belief and practice. In reality, there are no such terms as “red dust” or “seeing through red dust” in Buddhadharmā. What we have in Buddhism are the “six dusts” (Sanskrit *gunas*): sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought, corresponding to the “six roots,” or sense organs, of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. In addition to the six dusts as the external conditions, the six roots as the internal sensorial organs, we also need the six consciousness functions corresponding to eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind in order for body-mind phenomena to emerge. Since the mind changes with the external environment, the six roots can be influenced by the six dusts to cause one to do good or bad deeds, thus creating karma as it is called in Buddhadharmā. It should be noted that one can create bad as well as good karma.

By creating bad karma, one could fall through rebirth into one of the three lower realms: hell, hungry ghosts, and beasts. By creating good karma, one could be reborn as a human, or ascend into a heaven to enjoy karmic retribution as a heavenly being (*deva*). However, whether falling or ascending, one would still be subject to the bitter cycles of birth and death in the

mortal world. In order to be liberated, one must recognize that the six dusts are illusionary, unreal, and changeable.

The *Diamond Sutra* describes the world of the six dusts as “a dream, a mirage, a bubble, a shadow.” If one can thoroughly understand the illusory and unreal nature of the six dusts, one would achieve liberation and enlightenment. If one’s body and mind remain among the world of the six dusts, without being afflicted or tempted, then one would not generate vexations, and can be considered a liberated being. It is evident then, that the six dusts of Buddhism refer to the environment of our body and mind. A flourishing, wealthy, and honored career certainly belongs to the six dusts, and so is the life of a simple hermit. Therefore, there is a saying in Chan, “The great hermit hides from view in the midst of the city, while the lesser hermit hides in the woods and mountains.” This means that when the mind is occupied and the body is constrained, regardless the environment one lives in, one would not be at ease.

The wilderness and the mountains, roaring wind, torrential rain, ferocious animals, aggressive raptors, poisonous insects, the so-called barren mountains, unruly rivers, rude women and tricky men, can all cause weariness. On the other hand, when the mind is unhindered, whether one lives in a palace or a mansion, in a cave or a thatch hut, it would be all the same.

Generally, when Chinese people say that they have “seen through red dust,” they most likely mean that they have shaved off their hair and become a monastic. It could be because of thwarted aspirations, business failure, broken marriage or family, and one has no self-confidence, or the courage to make a comeback. Having come to a dead end, totally disheartened, one would be content with the temporary ease and comfort inside a Buddhist monastery, dragging out an existence. As the saying goes, “to finish one’s waning life with the green bell and red wooden fish as companions,” referring to Buddhist ritual instruments. This is very negative, pessimistic, and even downright sad!

Though there are indeed people like this in Buddhism, it is absolutely not the common way or right way to become a Buddhist and to practice Buddhism.

Entering the gate of Buddhism and becoming a Buddhist is not the same as becoming a monastic. There are two types of Buddhist practitioners: lay people who practice at home (*zaijia*), and those who leave home (*chujia*) to be monks or nuns. Only a small proportion of Buddhists become monastics, while the great majority will practice at home. Monastics devote their life to offering their body and mind completely to the Three Jewels and to all sentient beings. To offer to the Three Jewels is to promote Dharma and to prolong Buddha's wisdom; to offer to all sentient beings is to embrace them and liberate them from suffering. One practices letting go of that which is most difficult to part with, and persevering through that which is most difficult to endure. That is the proper goal for monastics. It is hard to let go of the desire for fame and for wealth, but one must release them. It is hard to persevere through the difficulties encountered when carrying on the Tathagata's work and relieving the suffering of sentient beings but one must endure them. Therefore, the notion of "seeing through red dust" has no real relevance to the mission of a monastic.

People who leave home to become monastics come from all levels of society. It is not about escaping reality; rather, its aim is to harmonize and purify the human world. In other words, the goal is to transform the world through the liberating power of the Buddha's Dharma. If studying Buddhism leads one to leave the human world to live in isolation, it would violate Buddha's intentions. To study and practice Buddhism as a lay person is to live by the five precepts and the ten virtues, and to do one's best in sharing oneself with family, society, and country. Therefore, having studied Buddhism, lay people should be even more diligent in engaging with society and fulfilling their responsibilities. This is why in Mahayana Buddhism there are the two images of bodhisattvas who leave home (monastics) and bodhisattvas who practice

at home (lay people). Monastic bodhisattvas are represented by the simple demeanor of bhikshus and bhikshunis, while lay bodhisattvas are represented by the happy and virtuous bearing of kind and dignified heavenly beings.

So, when we look at the basic meaning of “seeing through red dust” as rather negative and practicing Buddhism as being very positive, we see three types of people. The first are most people: they love this world, feel attached to it, and have difficulty letting go of things. They contend for fame and wealth, are infatuated with food, drink, and sex, living a life of hedonism and dreaming, constantly fretting without truly understanding why they were born, or where they will go after death. When alive they cannot put things down, when dying they have a hard time leaving. Therefore, Buddha called them pitiable.

The second type is negative and world-weary people: they are angry or cynical about the world, or feel unappreciated. Hence, they want to escape the world stage and become recluses. Or they are pessimistic and feel helpless about life, and if they did not take their own life, they would end up escaping reality and living with sadness and sorrow.

The third type is those who can take on responsibility and also let things go. They witness hardship and suffering in the world, as well as the danger and frailty of world affairs. They bemoan the state of the world and pity the fate of mankind, and determine to embrace sentient beings, in order to save them from suffering. Even if they have to cross mountains, wade through rivers, or go through fire and hot water, they would do it without any hesitation. This is the archetype of those venerated as sages and saints by later generations.

From the Buddhist perspective, the first type is the basic nature of ordinary people; the second is similar to the basic nature of those inclining towards striving for individual liberation; the third is akin to the basic nature of Mahayana practitioners. However, with the guiding light of Dharma, even though the people of the first group are plain and ordinary, they will gradually

acquire wisdom and see the world clearly, decrease vexations, and lessen calamity for the community.

People in the second group, those striving for individual liberation, would at least not be cynical or depressed; they will practice and worship actively, to be sooner liberated from the cycles of birth and death, setting for others a model of redemption through self-motivation and self-reliance.

People of the third type are rooted in the spirit of the Mahayana path. The guidance and cultivation of Dharma endows them with unlimited life and the endless compassionate vows to generate the aspiration of enlightenment, and to walk the bodhisattva path lifetime after lifetime, spreading Dharma among people, and transforming the world into a Buddhist pure land. Their goal is to liberate not only people, but all sentient beings. They are not frustrated by obstacles, nor will they be fanatic out of convenience; they work diligently and quietly to cultivate causes and conditions. They understand that success is not totally dependent on them, but that does not stop them from working tirelessly and improving themselves. This kind of approach to practicing Buddhism has no connection with “seeing through red dust.”

Requirements for Practicing Buddhism

QUESTION

Is special knowledge and advanced learning required to practice Buddhism?

ANSWER

This is an ambiguous question that can easily cause confusion. First of all, we basically agree with Confucius' saying, "People can be taught to act, but not necessarily to understand." This implies that ordinary people, especially those who are not too knowledgeable, are more likely to follow simple instructions on a single subject, practice diligently, and gain great benefit. Therefore, people who are limited in learning, or are even illiterate, can indeed benefit from learning Dharma. Master Huineng (638–713) is a good example; according to legend, he was a woodcutter who never received any formal education, and yet ultimately became the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School of Chinese Buddhism. But based on the content of the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* and research by scholars, although Huineng was not a learned scholar, he could not have been illiterate. Moreover, if illiterate, he would be the only illiterate master in the history of Chinese Buddhism to become patriarch of a school with such far-reaching impact.

From Shakyamuni Buddha to the later patriarchs in China, there were many learned scholars with comprehensive knowledge and inner understanding of the five learnings (Skt. *pancavidya*) of language, logic, medicine, arts and crafts, and spirituality. Very intelligent people do not need formal

education or specific cultural training; they have a natural ability to understand, and when they grasp one thing, they will grasp many other things. They can grasp the underlying principle and have a thorough understanding of the whole; so, they do not need to seek the unifying principle through separate studies of the myriad individual objects and phenomena. It is as Master Yongjia (665–713) claimed in his “Song of Enlightenment”: “[To sever the roots of karma] ... no point searching for branches or plucking leaves,” and “I only made trouble for myself counting the sands in the sea.” This is to stress that understanding the fundamental principle can solve a hundred other problems; there is no need to frivolously split hairs. To study the Dharma is to understand the principles and the bases; to emulate the Buddha is to unveil one’s true nature in buddhahood. Therefore, studying the Dharma does not require knowledge and high learning. Yet, even after realizing one’s nature and achieving enlightenment, one should still be fully equipped with knowledge of the Dharma and the sutras, and to continue to enhance one’s knowledge, a vehicle for benefitting sentient beings.

People of moderate intellect need to follow the Dharma and the sutras, and visit and learn from enlightened masters to acquire the principles and direction for their practice; otherwise it would be like a person groping around in the dark. Before finding an enlightened master or after meeting one, one should use the Dharma and the sutras as the basis to know if the teacher is qualified. If the teacher follows the Dharma and sutras, delves deeply into the principles of Dharma, and thoroughly understands its meanings, then they would be a good teacher. If a person vilifies the Three Jewels and the patriarchs and great masters, or interprets the Dharma and the sutras based on their own speculations and experiences, they would be not a good teacher or even be a depraved one.

Therefore, if you don’t yet know how to identify a good teacher, you should first study the sutras extensively and have a correct understanding

of the Dharma before looking for one. A good teacher can enhance your study and practice by inspiring you in a critical manner, much like the way an artist brings a picture of dragon to life by a special touching up of its eyes. If the master can give you timely guidance, resolving the myriad questions you have accumulated with some critical words, then that teacher is right for you. If you visit a master when you have no knowledge of Dharma, you would likely consider the master an ordinary person. If you already have a good understanding of the Dharma, even if you fail to find a teacher after traveling all over the world, you will be still on the right track without going astray. As long as you stay on the right path, what you need is to gradually chip off the layers of preconceptions and the ignorance in your mind. It may take some time through the dark tunnel to see the light, figuratively speaking, but you are still in a better and safer place than following an unqualified teacher.

For people who due to time constraints and circumstances, mainly practice reciting the Buddha's name, it is sufficient to practice reciting "Namo Amitufo" ("Homage to Amitabha"). However, generations of patriarchs and great masters in the past, such as Huiyuan (334–416) at Lushan, as well as Tanluan (476–542) of the Northern Wei Dynasty; Daochuo (562–645), Shandao (613–681) and Jiakai (d.u.) of the Tang Dynasty; Lianchi (1535–1615) and Ouyi (1599–1655) of the late Ming Dynasty; and Yinguang (1861–1941) of the early Chinese Republic, were all well-learned in Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and were profound thinkers in Buddhist history. How can we say that it is enough to only chant the Buddha's name, without the need to study the Dharma and the sutras? How do we know that just chanting would lead us to the Pure Land without understanding the principles and meanings of Dharma? And how many kinds of Pure Land are out there?

Although people of most modest intellectual capacity may indeed just follow instructions without being able to ask deep questions, it is important for those who are intellectually curious, and who frequently help others

study, practice, and believe in the Dharma, to understand its principles and meaning. If one does not understand the Dharma and the sutras, how could one influence others? It would be like the blind leading blind, practicing in the dark without direction, not knowing right from wrong, without a clear mind, or with an impure purpose. How would this kind of practice benefit oneself and others, while enabling one to attain rebirth in the Pure Land?

Whether one is meditating, chanting, or practicing an esoteric or ordinary method, one should do it with concentration. It would be distracting to contemplate the Dharma and sutras while engaging in meditative practices, nor should one constantly reflect on the Dharma to check on one's practice; these would be diversions and obstacles. Studying sutras, however, is essential to identifying and clarifying direction and goals before starting the practice, and to confirming if one is on the right track and is ready to guide others.

Practicing Buddhism at Home

QUESTION

Are there any taboos concerning practicing Buddhism at home?

ANSWER

There are many dos and don'ts in folk beliefs that are not orthodox Buddhism, but which are often mistakenly considered Buddhist taboos. For instance, in folk beliefs, it is not recommended to clean out the incense burner daily, thus leaving joss stick residue and ashes that litter easily and increase risk of fire. Actually, in our monasteries, there is an incense burner in front of every Buddha statue, and every morning we clean and empty each burner, keeping them clean and fresh as if they were being used for the first time.

It is also common that during their menstrual cycle, many female lay practitioners would abstain from entering monasteries to light incense in front of the Buddha, recite sutras, meditate, or chant mantras. These are actually taboos of low-level spirits and deities, who covet blood and have insatiable desire when they sense blood. It is said that their appetite can easily be aroused when they sense bloody things nearby, but that menstrual blood is not clean and is thus insulting and mocking, causing them to react adversely. Therefore, as the belief goes, women in their menstrual cycle may draw negative consequences if they enter ancestral halls, temples and palace halls where spirits and deities are worshipped. But the fact is, female Buddhist novices, bhikshunis, and lay disciples have always been living, working, and

visiting the monasteries. They are near Buddhist statues, sutras, and various Dharma instruments on a daily basis; yet they have never encountered any harm because of the so-called clashes with the supernatural beings during their periods.

Another folk custom is to consult fortune-tellers to select auspicious dates and good locations for setting up altars and Buddha statues at home, and to invite experienced people to conduct the ritual to initiate the statues (*kaiguang*). From a “do as Romans do” perspective, this is understandable since the initiation ritual signifies prudence, and selecting a good time and location means seeking blessings and harmony. However, from the Buddhist perspective, the buddhas and bodhisattvas are omnipresent and universally responsive; the Three Jewels and divine guardians are everywhere. In this case, there is none of the sort of imagined problems present in folk beliefs. However, it would be fine, if you just select what you think is the most honorable location for the altar, and simply a sincere and respectful mind in choosing an appropriate time to place the Buddha statue.

Some people think that they should not recite certain sutras or mantras at home, or in a certain two-hour time period, or that there is a certain time period where they can recite certain sutras or mantras. Actually, except for certain esoteric Buddhist sects, all sutras and mantras can be recited at any-time, anywhere, as long as it is done with sincerity and a respectful mind. Certainly, it is encouraged that it be done in a quiet and clean place; the reciters should first purify themselves by washing hands and rinsing mouths, burn incense, and pay homage to the Buddha.

Where some family members practice Buddhism, but others believe in folk deities, is it all right to place the statues of the Buddha and folk deities on the same altar? This should not be a problem, to just place the Buddha statue in the middle, flanked by bodhisattva statues. Statues of deities (*shen*) can be positioned beside bodhisattvas to protect the Three Jewels, and to

offer an opportunity for the folk gods to be near the Three Jewels to learn the Dharma and cultivate good karma. After a family member changes his or her beliefs to Buddhism and obtains permission from the other family members, one should light incense, give offerings, pray to the deities, and then store the non-Buddhist statues away. This is to avoid having too many idols and cluttering the altar.

Many people don't know how to dispose of incense ash, damaged sutras, statues, and other Buddhist paraphernalia; some of them even send these items to a monastery. Actually, you only need to burn the damaged items in a clean container at a clean and quiet place; then bury the ashes and remains underground. If the items are metal, you can store them away and handle them later as an antique or for recycling.

Flowers, fruits, food, tea, and beverages placed in front of Buddha statue are perishable items that should be changed daily. If the food and fruits are still edible, don't waste them; offer them to family members or use them in other ways. If the items become rotten and inedible, they should be discarded.

There is no specific rule about the number of offerings we put on the altar. It can be even or odd numbers. For the sake of balance and symmetry, you may arrange an even number of offerings, but if there is concern over limited resources, finance, location and space, it would be fine to have an odd number of offerings. With respect to quality and type of offerings, it all depends on one's financial situation, and one should provide offerings within one's means. There is no need to either skimp or be ostentatious.

The best times to practice is early morning and evening, when you are more relaxed and can focus and be devout. Of course, you can practice at other times to suit your work schedule. It is better not to place Buddha statues in bedrooms, or to meditate, prostrate, read or recite sutras in bed. If you have only one room, you should ordinarily cover the statue with a clean cloth, and before practice, clean and tidy up the bed and the room first, and then

remove the cloth. If there is absolutely no place to practice, you may sit in bed to practice. In summary, one should practice with a peaceful and respectful attitude to attain a solemn and dignified state of mind.

Once we have taken refuge in the Three Jewels, we should no longer seek refuge in other religions or temples and centers associated with folk beliefs, but we should still respect them. When entering a non-Buddhist church, temple or shrine, we should bow our head and join our palms to show respect. We should no longer treat other beliefs as the objects of devotion, but they can serve as objects of our outreach. One word of caution: it is not advisable for one who has not attained a clear understanding of Dharma to read or study other religions; this is to avoid confusion and being misguided.

The Proper Lifestyle for Practicing Buddhism

QUESTION

Should people give up their current lifestyle in order to practice Buddhism?

ANSWER

Not necessarily; it depends on the situation. While one should abandon meaningless enjoyment as a lifestyle, reasonable enjoyment can be maintained. What does this mean? There is a saying: “A Buddha statue needs a layer of gold; a person needs proper attire.” The layer of gold is to inspire sentient beings; attire should be proper according to one’s role. A person’s lifestyle reflects their status, position and perspective. In situations where one needs to conform to the occasion with dignity and etiquette, if one’s means allows, one can show proper bearing and solemnity. Yet one should not indulge in luxury when resources are limited, finances are weak, or the social environment is depressed. Even if a person were wealthy, they could still forsake enjoyment to be in harmony with the public during difficult times. Mahatma Gandhi of India was an example of this.

On certain occasions, for common courtesy or safety or to meet with dignitaries, one may need to dress formally according to time of day and use private transportation. In Japan and the West, there are dress codes for funerals, weddings, and various formal gatherings, and working or casual attire is obviously not appropriate. Therefore, dressing according to the occasion is not considered enjoyment.

Karma, the law of cause and effect, is highly emphasized in Buddhism. One's well-being in life is retribution for the cumulative acts from previous lives. So, partaking in pleasure and enjoyment is like withdrawing money from one's own bank account – the more one withdraws, the less balance remains. Eventually the account will be depleted. The more pleasure one partakes in, the fewer blessings remain; eventually one could use up all the blessings. Therefore, a person who enjoys good fortune in this life should cherish their blessings, and continue cultivating blessings, to eventually arrive at the full bliss of virtue as well as good fortune. It is not enough to just enjoy good fortune.

This is why from the beginning the Buddha advocated that monastics should not possess material things. There are three reasons: first of all, it is to eliminate greed; secondly, to cherish one's blessings; and third, to reduce one's attachment to the physical body. These principles apply to monastics as well as lay practitioners.

As soon as one leaves home to become a novice, he or she should comply with the precepts and refrain from wearing ornate articles and perfume, singing, dancing, purposefully going to shows, lying on grand, luxurious beds, wearing jewelry, and accumulating money or valuable goods. Except for money which they must handle, lay practitioners should also follow the above precepts. If one cannot completely observe these precepts at all times, they should do so at least on the six fasting days in a month, when lay people live as monastics, to let go of enjoyment and preserving karmic blessings. What does "enjoyment" entail on these occasions then? It includes things we eat, use, wear, live in, sit and sleep on, and all the recreational avenues.

Such practice conforms to the principle of conserving over acquiring. To give is to cultivate karmic blessings, while letting go of enjoyment is to conserve blessed karmic retribution.

However, according to Buddhism, there were 32 marks of Shakyamuni Buddha's incarnation body, all noble features indicating good fortune and virtue, dignity and wisdom. According to legend, Buddha was offered golden silk robes as alms. It was also said that an elder patron Anathapindika made an offer to the Buddha the use of an elaborate mansion with a gold-paved floor. Many virtuous lay elders at the time offered fine cuisine as well as the use of magnificent and ornate villas for the Buddha and his sangha. Buddhist history records many instances when the Buddha delivered sermons at legendary gardens and courtyards.

Amitabha Buddha's Western Pure Land, as described in the Pure Land sutras, is a glorious and magnificent place. And, in the *Avatamsaka (Flower Ornament) Sutra* (Chinese *Huayan Jing*), the young Sudhana visited fifty-three bodhisattvas for spiritual guidance, some of whom had magnificent abodes, including mansions and palaces. Among the abodes he visited was Maitreya Buddha's great pavilion. That is because good fortune follows the lives of the great virtuous ones and may manifest as material wealth, just as some lowly people have rough complexions and poor physique, while some noble people have dignified physique and smooth skins. This has to do with the retribution karma they were born with; it has nothing to do with abandoning or craving enjoyment.

When we speak of enjoyment and pleasure, we are not referring to honoring guests or conforming to social decorum. We are talking about satisfying cravings for food and delicacies, showing off wealth, dressing up and preening, seeking envy and attention, visiting night clubs, dance halls, brothels, spending money as if it were dirt, indulging in sensual gratification and excitement. Buddhists should certainly refrain from these kinds of behaviors.

The Buddhist View on Diet

QUESTION

What is the Buddhist view on diet?

ANSWER

When Buddhism first appeared in India, there were no specific dietary customs and rules for practitioners. Since religious practices were prevalent in India, most people of faith must have followed generally similar dietary customs. In the early stage of Buddhism, bhikshus and bhikshunis obtained their food by walking door to door through the village, carrying an alms bowl. This manner of subsisting is described by the saying “an alms bowl for food from a thousand households.” To treat everyone equally and to seize opportunities to cultivate karmic relations, the monastics did not choose from whom to receive food; neither were there dietary taboos over whether the food was clean or unclean, sacred or not sacred.

In today’s Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, where Theravada Buddhism is prevalent, this traditional custom practice has been preserved. Monastics cannot be picky or fastidious about their food; they accept whatever is given by the almsgivers. They wouldn’t even refuse fish or meat, as long as it was not slaughtered for their sake. This is why there is no mandatory vegetarian diet in Theravada Buddhism. If one can follow it, a vegetarian diet is encouraged and emphasized in Buddhism. This is due to the belief in practicing compassion towards animals, not necessarily for health and

economic reasons, as embraced by many vegetarians today. In fact, eating meat not only impairs compassion; it is also harmful to health. Therefore, some Mahayana sutras, such as the *Brahma Net Sutra* (Chn. *Fanwang Jing*; Skt. *Brahmajala Sutra*) and the *Shurangama Sutra*, forbid eating meat and stress the importance of a vegetarian diet.

The Buddhist vegetarian diet entails abstaining from eating certain pungent vegetables (*hun*) and food of fleshy smell (*xing*). Vegetables with pungent and offensive odors include garlic, scallions, garlic chives, leeks, etc. According to the *Shurangama Sutra*, “Eating raw pungent vegetables may create anger; eating cooked pungent vegetables may lead to lust.” Therefore, there is a rule for monastics that, after consuming pungent vegetables, one should sleep alone, stay a few steps away and downwind from others, or gargle until there is no pungent odor anymore. The main purpose of abstaining from eating certain pungent vegetables is to avoid disturbing others. Furthermore, before reciting sutras, one should also avoid consuming pungent vegetables to prevent the ghosts and spirits who may be present from arousing anger and greed. Food of fleshy smell refers to animal flesh or fish. Chili pepper, black pepper, five-spice, star anise, fennel, Chinese *toon*, and cinnamon are considered spices, not pungent food; therefore, they are not on the forbidden list.

Abstaining from alcohol is an important Buddhist precept. In some religions, not only is alcohol permitted, it is also used ritually. Since wine-making does not harm animals, and alcohol can often be used medicinally, some religions do not forbid it. However, Buddhism highly emphasizes wisdom, so we believe that alcohol use can easily alter one’s temperament and personality. Not many people can be clear-minded and self-controlled after much drinking. Therefore, to stay clear-minded and to enhance diligence in attaining the goals of practice, one must abstain from alcohol. Confucius allowed that drinking would be acceptable for the general public if one does not lose self-control. Therefore, if a lay Buddhist practitioner cannot abstain from

alcohol, he can forsake the no-drinking precept and can still be considered a follower of the Three Jewels. If alcohol is used in cooking, as long as there is no residual fragrance and intoxicating power, it should not be a concern.

In restaurants where meat is served, or at home where some eat meat and some are vegetarian, it would be ideal to use separate sets of cookware and utensils. Since the scents of meats and vegetables are very different, they will affect the eaters differently; for the sake of different preference, it is necessary to keep the food separated and unmingled. However, Sixth Patriarch Huineng after attaining enlightenment, traveled in disguise with a group of hunters. At mealtimes, out of compassion to sentient beings, he ate only the vegetables from mixed dishes and avoided the meat. So with restrictive living conditions, it would also be acceptable to cook vegetarian meals in cookware that was used for meat.

Regarding tobacco products and narcotics, it would be permissible in Buddhist rules with physician's prescription. Neither tobacco nor alcohol consumption will be considered a violation of precepts if they are used in this kind of circumstance. Certainly one should not use health as an excuse to fulfill one's craving for tobacco, alcohol and narcotics. In some places, smoking tobacco is a way to cope with miasma; therefore, the use of proper amount of tobacco is permitted for monastics living in the areas where miasma is widespread. Otherwise, for the sake of dignified bearing, bhikshus and bhikshunis should abstain from smoking. Smoking for stimulation, out of habit, or boredom is not permitted by the precepts. In tropical areas, chewing betel-nuts can prevent respiratory diseases, but again, if not for health reasons, chewing betel-nuts is undignified and harmful to the image of monks and nuns.

Of course, tobacco and betel-nuts are not staple foods; moderate consumption for health reasons is allowed, but they can also cause harm to health when used excessively. For example, excessive alcohol can lead to alcohol

poisoning; nicotine damages lungs and leads to cancer; betel-nut juice can damage one's teeth. Therefore, Buddhists should refrain from consuming these items, unless absolutely necessary.

With regard to eggs, they are in the fleshy smell category because they can become chicks, and they also contain animal scent. Therefore, one who has taken a strict vegetarian vow should not consume eggs. Although mass-produced eggs are now sterilized and do not contain life, they are obviously not of plant origin. While eating sterile eggs does not violate the precept against killing or harm one's compassion, from the vegetarian point of view they should be avoided.

Dairy products do not belong to the fleshy smell category. Since cows and goats consume grass and grains, their milk does not emit pungent flesh odor. Also, consuming milk does not involve killing or harming the animals. When cows and goats are raised for milk, the process does not harm the growth and development of the young animals. Therefore, during the Buddha's time, people consumed milk in five ways: as milk, cheese (curds), whey, butter, and cream. These are common food staples and well-needed nutrients, so they are not forbidden to Buddhists. Today, due to the increasing demand for dairy products, many dairy farms and processing plants adopt mass-production techniques, and abuse the animals' biological nature and living conditions. For these reasons, some animal protection groups advocate against dairy consumption. Therefore, based on principles of compassion and animal protection, Buddhists need to be cautious when purchasing dairy products, to consider their source, and whether the animals are raised humanely.

The Precept against Killing

QUESTION

What is the meaning of the precept against killing? What are the boundaries?

ANSWER

In principle, the precept against killing applies mainly to human beings; thus, to kill a human being is the most serious evil, while killing animals is a lesser evil. Although all sentient beings are considered equal, only humans commit malicious deeds, or “black acts,” and may thereby fall into the hungry ghost or hell realm; but humans also perform virtuous deeds, or “white acts,” and may thereby ascend to the heavens, transcend the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness, or even ultimately attaining buddhahood.

With a few exceptions, animals know neither good nor evil; they act on instinct and receive their karmic retribution without awareness or intention of good or evil. It is fair to say then, that humans are instruments and vessels of the Dharma and only they can practice and advocate the Dharma. Hence, not killing human beings is fundamental to the no-killing precept. Moreover, the crime of killing a human being must include three conditions: 1) knowing that the victim was a human being, 2) the killing was premeditated, and 3) being the prime cause of death of the victim. Otherwise, it would be considered harmful injury or wrongful death, not murder.

Regardless of age or social status, whether fully or partially formed, and whether conscious or unconscious, as long as the object is certainly human,

we should not kill it. Therefore, it is not permissible to abort a fetus, to use euthanasia on oneself or others, or to deliberately terminate someone who is in a vegetative state; these are all considered killing human beings. (For more detailed discussion, refer to my book, *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*, and my editorial in *Humanity Magazine*, Issue No. 36.)

The medical profession advocates organ donation and transplants, such as transferring corneas, kidneys, and other organs, from living or recently dead donors to a living recipient. This is admirable and worthy of encouragement. Of course, if a donor donated their organ before passing on, they would certainly have given consent; and even if the donation occurred after death, it still would have required prior consent. If a deceased person's organ were harvested without permission, and the deceased still had some lingering attachment to his body, it could generate sadness, distress, hatred, and anger, and might even affect his rightful rebirth, or alter his or her path to the Pure Land.

From the Buddhist perspective, the consciousness of a person who has died from natural causes would still be active for up to twelve hours, and is still capable of some sensation. A person who has just been pronounced clinically dead is not necessarily considered fully passed away in the Buddhist view. However, when a person wills their organs to be donated, it is a selfless act of a bodhisattva. Therefore, if a deceased person had left a will donating their organ(s), it should be permissible to harvest it.

In daily life, to keep our living environment clean and hygienic, we need to deal with cockroaches, flies, ants, mosquitos, and even mice and rats. This dilemma also existed during the time of Buddha. When a bhikshu tried to clean a long neglected lavatory which was infested with insects, they were unsure how to proceed. Buddha instructed him to "drain off the filthy water, clean up the lavatory." The bhikshu hesitantly replied, "But that will harm insects." Buddha responded, "The intention is to clean up the lavatory, not

for the purpose of harming the insects.” Relieved of his worry, the bhikshu proceeded as the Buddha instructed.

This example says that to maintain a hygienic environment we have to engage in the action of cleaning. Since the purpose and intention is not to harm insects or worms, the act itself is not considered as intending to kill. Of course, we should not employ chemicals to purposefully kill off insects. Instead, we should use sweeping, cleaning, and repellants to prevent insects from infesting our homes. If we keep the living environment clean, tidy and insect-proof, there may still be some insects but not too many.

On a farm it is hard to totally avoid harming insects. Even when not working in the fields, while walking and engaging in various activities, we can inadvertently harm insects. So we should often recite the name of Amitabha Buddha to wish that these ignorant and innocent beings will be reborn into higher realms, or even the Pure Land. This is not violating the precept of not killing. Certainly, trying our best to prevent or reduce harm to insects is compassionate, while harming and killing them knowingly without remorse is a lack of compassion.

As for snakes, aggressive beasts, and venomous creatures, they have been affected by their karmic forces from previous lives. Although they may cause harm to others, their aggression is not premeditated and is without malice; therefore, it is not considered accumulating bad deeds, and they deserve our sympathy and protection.

Nowadays, not only can we prevent wild animals from being harmed, we can further set aside sanctuaries to protect them from extinction. We can also control their populations to prevent calamity to humans and the environment. This will cultivate mercifulness and kindness among human beings, and fulfill our responsibility of preserving the natural ecosystem.

Generally, beginners in Buddhism do not have a clear understanding of the term “sentient beings.” Furthermore, some claim that plants also have

consciousness and feelings; that therefore, “no-killing” should also be applied to plants. However, in Buddhism, there are different levels of being alive; plants are beings without feelings or emotions, while many animals do. There are three levels of living beings, the highest being human, which possesses three characteristics: living cells, reflexive nervous systems, and thoughts and memories. Plants are considered the lowest level of living beings, possessing only living cells, without a nervous system or memory. They can respond to conditions to grow or wither, but do not have feelings of suffering and happiness, nor thoughts or memories. That is why they are called “non-sentient beings.” Animals are sentient beings and are between humans and plants. Some higher level animals, such as canines, chimpanzees, horses, and elephants have memories, but they have limited abilities for logical thinking.

The lowest level animals are those with no memories or thoughts, but which have a nervous system; hence, they can feel pain and are fearful of danger and death. Consequently, even ants and insects intuitively know to avoid and escape from danger and harm, but not so with plants. Hence, the precept of not killing applies to animals, but not to plants.

Because of the belief that primitive spirits and ghosts sought shelter among trees and woods, out of compassion and to avoid offending them, the Buddha asked his monastics not to cut down trees or grass. This was to protect the habitat of the ghosts and spirits, not because there was a precept against cutting down trees and grass.

From a biological standpoint, microorganisms, such as germs and bacteria, are distinct from the animal and plant kingdoms. They do not possess nervous systems, thoughts or memories, and do not belong to the realm of sentient beings. They are more like plants that can move around; in that sense, destroying these microorganisms is not considered killing.

Regarding aquatic organisms, besides germs and bacteria, there are some higher levels of biological species. Although these species do not have

nervous systems, they can be considered to be animals. During the time of Buddha, monastics needed to filter water to pick out the bigger and visible organisms, and ignore the tiny ones. This was compassionate, because they felt compelled to save something that was moving and visible to their naked eyes. If they could not tell whether something was sentient or non-sentient, they could just let it be.

The main reason for advocating non-killing is the compassionate belief that all sentient beings are equal, and endowed with the right and freedom to exist. We human beings are afraid of being harmed and afraid of death; all sentient beings have those feelings. Despite differences of kind and hierarchy, all sentient beings want to live; in that respect, there are no differences between the rich and the poor, the high and the low. If everyone embraces this spirit of equality and compassion, we would have a harmonious, peaceful and collaborative world, where people live together without prejudice, with mutual respect and love; there would be no one suffering from willful harm by others.

The sutras say that killing leads to karmic retribution, and that one repays killing others with one's own life. There is also the saying, "take half of a pound, return eight ounces." Karmic retribution is clearly described in the sutras; yet we should not be guided only by the fear of karmic retribution. There is certainly karmic retribution; however, it is not absolutely unchangeable. The important point is to cultivate a merciful and kind spirit, a compassionate mind, and the bodhisattva spirit to transform the world.

Freeing Captive Animals

QUESTION

Why and how should we practice freeing captive animals?

ANSWER

The practice of freeing captive animals, or “*fangsheng*” in Chinese, originated in the Mahayana sutras. It has been widely practiced in China as well as Tibet, and has spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. The practice is based on compassion for all sentient beings as equals, and the belief in karmic retribution from rebirths through many lifetimes, known as samsara. There is a common saying, “take half pound, return eight ounces.” If one can stop killing animals, and furthermore, set captive animals free, then naturally, one’s charitable deeds, as well as their good retributions, will be manifold. Stories of such causes and their efficacious results have been recorded countless times throughout history.

One example was in 1974, when South Vietnam was taken over by the North Vietnamese Communist regime. When waves of refugees fled the country, they suffered different destinies. The less fortunate ones failed to cross the borders in time, and were captured and returned. Some drifted on the open seas and drowned. Some thought they had the good fortune to reach another country, but were sent back because no regime would accept them. However, according to the refugees who did escape, if one could not manage to flee Vietnam, they would buy and release captive birds or fishes, or ask

overseas relatives to do it for them. It would take only one or two instances of this before successfully leaving the country became a reality.

There is a story recorded in Volume 2 of the *Sutra of Miscellaneous Treasures* (Skt. *Samyuktaratnapitaka Sutra*; Chn. *Za Baozang Jing*): when a master observed that a novice's life would end in seven days, without giving any explanation, he instructed the novice to go home and return in seven days. On his way home, the novice noticed a crack in the dike of a pond, causing water to rush towards an anthill nearby. The ants were scurrying to find safety, but they were not as quick as the water. Seeing that a great number of ants would drown, the novice took off his outer robe and filled it with sand to plug the crack in the dike, thus saving many ants. After seven days, the novice returned to see the master. Upon seeing the novice, the master was amazed, and asked the novice what happened during the seven days. The novice felt nervous, and assumed the master suspected him of having violated his vows or committed some wrongdoing. So, he said that nothing had happened. The master was an arhat, and using his divine eye, he saw that the novice had done a small but good deed in saving those ants. Because of his good deed, this novice transformed a premature death to longevity, and was able to live a good, long life.

The most familiar Buddhist stories about the origins of freeing captive animals are from two sutras. One is the *Brahma Net Sutra*, in which it says: "When compassionately freeing captive animals, Buddhists should see all the males as our fathers and all the females as our mothers, since they give us life in every rebirth. Therefore, all six types of sentient beings in the desire realm (hell, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, angry spirits, and devas) are our parents, and killing and eating them is like killing and eating our own parents, as well as our former selves. All water and earth are our former bodies, and all fire and wind are our present selves; so freeing captive animals frequently will enhance life in every rebirth. Whenever we see animals about to be killed, we

should do our best to rescue, protect, and relieve their pain and suffering; we should often teach, advocate, and explain the bodhisattva precepts to others and bring salvation to all sentient beings.”

The second sutra, the *Golden Light Sutra*, contains an account in Volume 4 of Shakyamuni Buddha in a past life when he practiced the bodhisattva precepts as a man named Elder Flowing Water. One day, he walked by a large pond during a drought. Someone, in order to catch fish, had blocked the water upstream from flowing over a cliff into the pond, causing the water level in the pond to drop rapidly. Elder Flowing Water saw that tens of thousands of fish, big and small, were on the verge of dying, yet was unable to break the dike to let the water flow over the cliff. In order to save the fishes, he pleaded with the king to dispatch twenty elephants to carry water in leather sacks to the pond, until the water level was up. He then fed and ultimately saved the fishes in the pond.

While the *Brahma Net Sutra* provides the theoretical basis for *fangsheng*, the *Golden Light Sutra* offers the base for creating *fangsheng* ponds. Other Mahayana sutras, such as the *Six Paramitas Sutra*, Volume 3, contain stories of redeeming and releasing water animals. Tripitaka Master Xuanzang’s (602–664) *Record of the Western Countries in the Tang Dynasty*, Vol. 9, also mentions a story of the Goose Pagoda. According to the legend, there was a small temple in Magadha where several bhikshus lived. They originally did not observe the precept against eating the three classes of “pure meat,” meaning meats that were not seen, heard of, or suspected to have been slaughtered specifically for one’s own consumption. One day, a bhikshu did not receive his share of meat from alms; just then, a flock of wild geese flew over him. The bhikshu pleaded loudly, “Today a bhikshu has not been provided for; shouldn’t you bodhisattvas know it’s about time to act?” Upon his plea, the flock of geese dropped to the ground and died.

These bhikshus initially did not have faith in Mahayana Buddhism, or believed that those geese were bodhisattvas; he was mocking the Mahayana faith with a joke. Unexpectedly, the flock was actually bodhisattvas manifested as geese, to effect a change in the bhikshu's beliefs. The bhikshu felt ashamed and spread the words, "These geese are bodhisattvas! Who would dare to eat them? From now on, we will follow the Mahayana way and not consume the three classes of pure meat." They then built a stupa to entomb the geese.

It is evident that freeing captive animals originated from the precept against killing, and a natural progression from not killing animals to freeing them. Not killing animals only prevents evil; it is a passive way of doing good deeds. Freeing captive animals, on the other hand, is an active way to practice good deeds by saving lives. If we only refrain from doing bad deeds, and not practicing doing good deeds, then it is not the essence of Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore in China, since the Northern Qi (550–577) and the Liang (502–557) dynasties, the governments advocated no-killing and encouraged meatless diets. The practice of freeing captive animals began to spread from the imperial courts to commoners, and from monastics to lay people, and vegetarianism became fashionable. To demonstrate benevolence, later dynasties designated days when animal slaughter was prohibited. From the central to the local governments, animal slaughter was prohibited and freeing captive animals was conducted for reasons such as praying for rain or avoiding calamities.

During the Liang Dynasty, Emperor Wu issued an edict to prohibit animal sacrifice for ancestral worship. Master Huiji (456–515) went from house to house, burning his arms to beg for money to buy back captive animals and set them free. In the Sui Dynasty (581–618), Master Zhiyi (539–598) of the Tiantai School initiated the building of a *fangsheng* pond; he recited the *Golden Light Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra* for the fishes that were set free, and

purchased a variety of feeds for the fishes and turtles. During the time of the Emperor Xuan in the Chen Dynasty (557–589), Xu Xiaoke, the chancellor of State Education, composed the “Inscription on Releasing Captive Animals by Master Zhiyi of the Xiuchan Monastery at Tiantai Mountain.” These were the earliest records in which the terms “fangsheng pond” and “fangsheng fair” were mentioned. Thereafter, the practice of freeing captive animals was very popular from the Tang (618–907) to the Song (960–1279) and the Ming (1368–1644) dynasties. During the time of Emperor Su of the Tang Dynasty, provincial inspector Yan Zhenqing (709–784) composed “The Preface to and Inscription on Fangsheng Pond under the Heaven.” In the Song Dynasty, Masters Zunshi (964–1032) and Zhili (960–1028) also actively promoted freeing captive animals.

Among eminent monks who advocated freeing captive animals, Master Lianchi (1535–1615) of the late Ming Dynasty was most active. In his *Bamboo Window Journal*, there are several essays regarding *fangsheng*, such as “Tathagata Does Not Condone Killing,” “On Meat-Eating,” and “On Vegetarianism.” And in *Bamboo Window Journal II*, he wrote “On Wearing Silk and Eating Meat,” “Stop Killing to Prolong Life,” “Fangsheng Pond,” “Physicians Should Refrain from Taking Life,” and “Eating Meat for Health.” In his *Bamboo Window Journal III*, he included essays, such as “Killing Is the Worst Evil,” “Killing Is Not for Humans,” and “Humans Should Not Eat Flesh of Sentient Beings,” to encourage freeing captive animals and refraining from killing. In addition to essays on vegetarianism, he also wrote “Rites of Fangsheng” and “Guidance on No-Killing and Fangsheng” to serve as the basis for *fangsheng* rituals.

In modern times, there is the six-volume *Illustrations of Protecting Lives*, written by Master Hongyi (1880–1942) and illustrated by Feng Zikai. There was Cai Niansheng, also known as Lay Buddhist Yunchen, who devoted his life to promote non-killing and freeing animals; he compiled *Animals Are Also*

this Way (Chn. *Wuyou Rushi*), a collection of stories of animals that exhibited spirituality and feelings.

Today, with advanced technology, dense populations, and shrinking habitats, it is difficult to have absolutely safe and reliable places to set up *fangsheng* ponds or sanctuaries. Besides the prevalence of fishing and hunting through netting, trapping, shooting, and trawling, there are natural constraints in the environment itself. In Taiwan and the United States, there are only preserves or sanctuaries for wild animals. In addition, there are people who, out of compassion or to protect the environment, call on the public not to hunt or kill animals randomly and excessively, to preserve the interdependent ecological balance, as well as to rescue endangered species from extinction. Although differing in approach, these actions resonate with *fangsheng*.

If we simply release captive animals to sanctuaries without limitation, they will soon reach saturation, and then there will be actions by some to regulate growth through methods such as controlled breeding and quota killing. So, where should we go to release animals? Released fish could be caught or netted again, and released birds could be shot or trapped. Moreover, fishes and birds sold at pet stores are seldom feral, and tend to be commercially bred in hatcheries, aviaries, and kennels. Many of these animals lack the skills to survive in the wild, and being released actually can be harmful to them. Released small fish would be taken by big ones; big fish would be caught and taken to a restaurant's kitchen. Furthermore, birds and especially fishes have their own habitats; certain fishes exist where water quality, depth, and current of the water are critical. It would be problematic to release fresh water fish to the sea, and ocean fish to fresh water.

Birds bred in aviaries have never lived in the wild and have not acquired the skills of finding food on their own; for example, they may not be aware of which fruits and berries in the woods could be edible. Therefore, if we release

them into nature, they could starve or be preyed on by other animals. Under these circumstances, do we still need to practice freeing animals? This is certainly an unfortunate reality. The constraints of the natural environment make freeing captive animals more difficult today. Yet, the essence of the practice lies in the spirit of wishing to prolong the lives of the released animals. As to the question of how long their lives could be extended, we should do our best through research, deliberation and stewardship when releasing them.

For instance, when releasing birds, we should first consider their species as well as where and when to release them for the safest and most effective results. To release fish, turtle and other water creatures, we should first study and observe their origin, traits and way of life, then select the best time, and release them to the safest place we can find. If we cannot do this with 100% certainty, 50% is still not bad. Even if they get caught the next day, we tried our best to do it right. The goal is to inspire and increase our compassion and to relieve the suffering of all beings. As for the released beings, they have their own karmic causes and effects, but we certainly should free animals without intending that they be recaptured and slaughtered. Furthermore, we can offer Dharma talks to the released animals, and explain taking refuge in the Three Jewels, and pledging their wills to their own salvation. We can wish that they will leave their animal forms and be reborn as human beings, eventually reach the heavenly realm, live in the Pure Land, cultivate bodhi-mind, deliver innumerable sentient beings, and achieve buddhahood. All we can ask of ourselves is to always do our best, with all our hearts and minds.

Buddhists Engaging in Business

QUESTION

What attitude should Buddhists have about engaging in business?

ANSWER

Some people may have the common belief that one cannot be in business and still be totally honest. It is like the old saying, “When Old Wang sells melons, he has to boast how sweet they are [otherwise no one would buy them].” If it is so, then should Buddhists be in business? Does engaging in business violate the precept against lying? Some others may ask, “Shouldn’t Buddhists be generous instead of acquisitive? Still, the purpose of engaging in business is to make money. So isn’t doing business contrary to the Dharma?” Also some may ask, since Buddhists should practice no harm to others, what should they do when their profit comes at someone else’s loss? And should Buddhists engage in speculative investments like stocks, bonds, and real estate? Others may even ask, if Buddhists trade in foods that end up as feed for livestock, isn’t that indirectly assisting in animal slaughter? All these are issues that absolutely need to be faced and examined.

During the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, there were four castes in India: Brahmin, the religious class; Kshatriya, the political and military class; Vaishya, the merchant class, and Shudra, the laboring class, which included those who worked in slaughter houses. Shakyamuni Buddha did not encourage people to engage in Shudra occupations, but allowed, and even highly

praised, all the other endeavors. This implied that engaging in business and industry was considered appropriate for Buddhists.

As for the belief that being in business means lying and taking advantage of others, this deserves further examination. Lying and cheating are not the necessary methods for business dealing; they are the results of people's habits and mentality. The proper business ethics should be quality products, reasonable prices, honesty, and reliability. Only by being trustworthy and reliable can a business grow and last. Otherwise, why do so many stores and businesses boast of their decades or century-old brand names?

I once said, "If you do business with a devout Christian, you don't need to worry about being cheated." In contrast, if a Buddhist businessperson needs to cheat or lie to attract customers, then not only is that incorrect business ethics, it also the wrong Buddhist attitude. For sure, some merchants set their prices arbitrarily high, knowing that customers would bargain. But others in the same business set firm prices that impress customers as honest, without taking advantage of the elderly or the young. In fact, Buddhists should lead the way in practicing honesty. Their business may be slow in the beginning, with less profit, but after a while its trustworthy reputation will attract good business and profits.

Generally speaking, Chinese people think about "rearing a son for one's old age, storing grains against hunger." It is natural to hope that starting a business with a small investment will return manifold profits, safeguard one's livelihood, and leave a vast fortune to the heirs. However, times have changed and attitudes are different now. Modern entrepreneurs should not focus on benefitting just themselves; rather, they should use their wisdom and talent for the common good and the wellbeing of society and mankind. This is "giving back to society what you gained from society," with achieving success as the goal, and benefiting mankind as the ideal, doing it so that all your endeavors are without greed.

Ordinary people with limited intellectual and physical abilities may not be able to contribute substantially to society, but they should at least have some kind of livelihood, and if possible, maintain a family and even employ a few people in a business. This is about working together and meeting the needs of many in the society. Therefore, everyone should contribute their abilities, whether financial, intellectual or physical. Buddhists in business should never focus only on their own interests, brushing aside the benefits of others. Since society is the collective causes and conditions of people, developing social relationships will lead to mutually beneficial effects. If we engage in business, we should have an attitude of benefitting self as well as others, earning the profit we deserve, and sharing the profits reasonably. We should not spend the money only on our own material enjoyment, and not indulge in reckless spending out of vanity. If we avoid those things, we will not be earning a profit just to satisfy greed.

According to the *Sujata Sutra*, lay people should allocate their income into four areas: living expenses, capital for business, cash for emergencies, and interest-earning accounts. In the India of the Buddha's time, this was a rather safe and reasonable arrangement. Today, a cash account which also earns interest can be viewed as a single area. In addition, we should also consider taking out a portion from the income for three other purposes: supporting parents; helping relatives, friends, subordinates and servants; and making offerings to the Three Jewels. The first four accounts are to secure livelihood, the last three are to provide for parents and support of social welfare and religious organizations.

The Dharma tells us to engage in right livelihood, which means an occupation that benefits oneself as well as others without causing harm. If so, then how could a Buddhist make money in a business which might incur loss to others? Of course, if a business is poorly managed or repeatedly loses money, the owner would consider selling or transferring it to others. Since everyone

has different management ideas and styles, different social connections, and different knowledge and capability, the same business under different management can lead to different results. A business may lose money under one manager but be profitable under another. Basically, we should not have the intention of hurting others by passing to him the hot potato. Instead, we should wish him to take over the business and make it profitable.

At the same time, do not think that others will fail simply because you have, and do not think that others will be negative about something because you are. As long as you do not falsely advertise your products, once someone is willing to take over the business, they will likely earn a profit. Even if unfortunately, the buyer loses money, it was not your intention, and the loss would not be related to you. In short, as Buddhists, whatever our profession, we should treat others with sincerity and honesty. But as far as the consequences of any business transactions are concerned, since they are no longer our responsibility, we should not feel obligated about the outcome.

Stock and real estate transactions are considered legitimate investment vehicles recognized by all governments in the world. Stocks represent shares of ownership issued by large enterprises through the financial markets to raise capital for operation and growth. This is a way to develop commerce and industry and promote economic prosperity of the society. It is considered an appropriate investment. One problem is that some large stockholders may try to manipulate prices of the stocks to control the ups and downs of the market; this is unethical. Furthermore, only people with large amounts of capital can try to manipulate the market; ordinary investors, who can only trade by following the ups and downs, will unavoidably take considerable risks. In an economically mature and stable society, manipulating the stock market is illegal. Even investors with large amounts of capital would not speculate in or manipulate the market, as they could suffer severe negative consequences, and incur more harm than good.

Investing in real estate is a legitimate and normal business. What people usually criticize are land speculation and monopolistic control of prices. These are not considered normal business conducts and Buddhists should avoid them accordingly. However, if one engages in the real estate in a legitimate way and at reasonable prices, there is nothing unethical about being in that business.

In addition, as far as lending money to earn interest is concerned, depositing money in a bank or credit union is also a way of investment. Similarly, people lending small amounts of money to each other to meet the needs of someone's cash flow, or pooling money to invest in business, is considered a mutually beneficial behavior, which can promote economic growth and prosperity. These activities should be encouraged. Yet, lending money at extraordinary high interest to satisfy greed is like trying to pull chestnuts out of the fire – highly risky. Oftentimes lenders could even lose their capital. Buddhists should not be tempted to lend money at high interest rates – not only does it not guarantee results, but also exploits others and lacks mercy. It's better not to do it.

As for livelihood, it was said that in ancient China there were 360 trades, but nowadays there are probably more than 3,600. There are no strict rules as to which professions Buddhists should avoid, but in principle they should avoid any profession associated with killing, prostitution and such activities, stealing, gambling, unscrupulous undertakings, and selling drugs. For example, a movie theatre that exclusively shows films with themes that encourage sexual misconduct or thievery is certainly not permitted for a Buddhist; but if it shows films of education, arts, and entertainment, it is regarded as an appropriate business.

As for selling grains and food, as long as the products are sold ultimately for human consumption, or to be processed for other industrial purposes, it is all right – even if the grains are bought to feed animals for human

consumption, we are not involved directly in the slaughtering. Of course, if we know clearly that the grains and feeds are for animals that are destined for human consumption, we should consider some other business. All in all, Buddhism does not condone the slaughtering business or being in it; therefore, any business related to killing animals should be avoided.

Feelings and Affection in Buddhist Life

QUESTION

What is the proper role of feelings and affection in the lives of Buddhists?

ANSWER

In Chinese, the term “*ganqing*” refers to the feelings and affectionate relationships between men and women, parents and children, and among friends; as such, it includes romantic love, parental love, and friendships. Buddhists are ordinary people, so it is natural that they have parents and friends, and except for monastics, they may also have spouses. Buddhism refers to sentient beings as “beings with feelings,” and as sentient beings we experience the three affectionate relationships mentioned above. So, it is ultimately human beings who should practice the Dharma, and everyone who practices begins as an ordinary person. Therefore, their engagements and interactions must be in accordance with affection, reasons, and laws. If Buddhism only speaks of detachment from desires, it would be difficult to bring ordinary people into the gate of Buddhism. Furthermore, if Buddhist teaching is devoid of feelings and affection, it would be difficult for people to cultivate Buddhism and transform themselves.

In Buddhadharma, “compassion” seems to differ from “feeling and affection”; however, the foundation of compassion lies in the relationships of affection between people. Some would call it love, but just as love can be conditional or unconditional, there is also selfish love and selfless love.

The compassion of the Buddha and bodhisattvas is selfless, while the love between humans involves a sense of self. The love between parent and child is unconditional, while romantic love and friendship can be conditional. Buddhadharma aims to use love as the basis to cultivate selfless compassion.

While buddhas and bodhisattvas are selfless, ordinary sentient beings are not; therefore, it is necessary for sentient beings to cultivate and gradually transform from self-centered love to selfless compassion, and from conditional love to unconditional love. Thus, Buddhism does not ask people to leave feelings and affection behind right from the beginning. So, how should Buddhists handle feelings and affection? The family is the foundation for affectionate relationships; its ethical principles flow from the bond between parents and children. It starts out from the relationship between the spouses, continues with other immediate family members and from there it evolves and extends outward to relatives and friends. Affectionate relations thus become necessary due to the bond in the family and the emerging of friendships in our social activities. An old Chinese saying goes, “Depending on parents when at home, relying on friends while away.” There is another saying, “When there is harmony between husband and wife, they will live to a ripe old age of marital bliss.” These are the relationships based on affectionate feelings.

Without love a family would be like a machine that may break down anytime because it lacks lubricating; without love serious damage may result. The purpose of Buddhadharma is nothing more than educating and cultivating lay people to transform conflict into harmony. Therefore, Dharma has the two constant teachings of wisdom and compassion. Wisdom derives from reasoning, while compassion arises from emotions; using wisdom to guide compassion will transform one’s emotional life from chaos to order, and conflict to harmony. If feelings and affections become separated from wisdom, emotions can run rampant and cause harm to oneself and others.

The *Shrigalavada Sutra*, known in the Chinese Tripitaka as *Six Directions Homage Sutra* (Chn. *Liufangli Jing*), recounts that in the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, there was in India a religious practice that instructed followers to face specific directions during worship. Once, the Buddha saw a young man named Shrigala piously facing six different directions as he worshipped. The Buddha asked Shrigala what he was worshipping. The young man replied that his father worshiped in the six directions when he was alive, so Shrigala was just continuing to do so. The Buddha told him that Buddhists also worshipped in six directions: to the east to revere parents, to the south to respect teachers, to the west to be considerate toward a spouse, to the north to love and care for children, to the position below to show concern to servants and subordinates, and to the position above to show respect to monastics. This custom expresses the attitude and duties that individuals should have towards the important people in their lives. All of these are within the nature of feelings and affections, and they are the basis of ethics in human relationships. When one can handle emotions and live a normal life with feelings, it is the beginning of practicing Buddhadharma.

In the chapter “On Buddhahood” in the *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra*, there is a conversation between Vimalakirti and Sarvarupasamdarsana Bodhisattva. The bodhisattva asked Vimalakirti, “You have parents and a wife at home and dependents and relatives, as well as subordinates and friends. Isn’t that burdensome?” The bodhisattva was implying that Vimalakirti was a bodhisattva, yet he had family and relatives, so how would this free him from worldly concerns? Vimalakirti replied, “My mother is wisdom; my father is the instrument to deliver sentient beings; my wife is Dharma joy from my practice; my daughter represents compassionate mind, while my son represents kindness and honesty. I do own a home and family; but they symbolize emptiness. My disciples are sentient beings; my friends represent various methods of

Dharma practice. The attractive women performing around me are the four convenient ways of gathering and transforming sentient beings.”

This chapter in the sutra speaks of the great variety of people and matters in a lay practitioner’s living environment. Vimalakirti did not feel burdened or restrained by them; on the contrary, he showed great compassion and great wisdom. He lived a life full of feeling and affections like other ordinary people, yet he encompassed an inner world of liberation and freedom.

As one can see, Buddhists don’t need to reject feelings and affection in their lives; rather, it depends on whether one can guide their feelings with reason and merge reason with feeling. If we can guide our emotions with rational wisdom, then life will be richer and smoother and we will achieve success one way or another; it will certainly benefit oneself as well as others. The so-called Dharma guidance and principles of wisdom are to teach us how to handle sentimental issues; they are not asking us to abandon, reject, or loathe emotions and feelings. Yet, if we misplace our emotions and feelings, it would bring puzzlement or release emotions without control, it would create suffering.

For instance, parents naturally love and protect children; but overindulgence can harm them. There is love between men and women; but extra-marital or complicated premarital affairs will not only bring about problems in family life, but also create conflicts in society. Besides, in terms of relationships among relatives and friends and between teachers and students or master and servants, affection between them should also be based on reason. Otherwise, it would generate anxiety and disturbance. Buddhaharma does not oppose feelings and affections in life; rather, it gives us guidance to lead a life of feelings based on reason and in accordance with common laws.

Funeral Services for Buddhists

QUESTION

What is the proper way to conduct funeral services for deceased Buddhists?

ANSWER

Services for deceased Buddhists should include rites such as sutra chanting, Buddha name recitation, and the like. However, in Chinese communities today, monastics are only tasked with chanting sutras and are not considered to play a central role in the service. Memorial services involving family members and the public are conducted by ritual masters from the funeral service providers. Therefore, actual Buddhist rites have become something of an embellishment in funeral services.

In a proper Buddhist funeral, besides ritual masters, monastics who recite sutras for the dead should be central to the service. Attendees should have a copy of the sutra and participate in the recitation. It would be better if the recitations consist of short sutras and verses, such as the *Heart Sutra*, the *Mantra for Rebirth in the Pure Land*, *Praise to Amitabha Buddha*, and the *Transfer of Merit Verse*. There is no need to sing; reciting would be fine enough; otherwise, those who cannot sing might feel left out. After the recitation, a monastic could eulogize the deceased emphasizing their deeds, works of charity, and practice of Buddhism, followed by a short sermon. On the one hand, these will serve to deliver the dead towards rebirth in the Pure Land, and on the one hand, console and enlighten the family, relatives, and friends.

If both a memorial service for family members and a memorial service for friends and the public are to be held, it would be better to have them on the same day, when everybody is present. It is not necessary to arrange these services on separate days as that merely prolongs the funeral and heightens the importance of some individual or organization. If such memorial services are to be held on the day of funeral, they should be conducted prior to the formal burial rite.

A Buddhist burial rite should be simple yet solemn; it should not last more than an hour-and-a-half. One hour should be enough. As to having Chinese or Western musicians or honor guards, that is an extravagance and a vanity; for non-Buddhists, this may be a way to console the deceased, but for Buddhists, it may disturb the deceased in their single-minded quest for rebirth in the Pure Land.

Since ancient times, there have been no specific rites regarding Buddhist funerals. Yet in China, there were sets of rules and rituals to be conducted in the dying moments and after death, such as bathing, changing clothes, setting up memorial plaques, keeping company with the deceased, moving the body into the coffin, funeral, burial, and holding seven-day and 100-day memorial services.

According to the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism, starting from the dying moments, it would be good if practitioners whether lay or monastic, could keep company with the dying person, speak about Dharma, recite sutras, and chant Buddha's name. This is *zhunian* – assisting the dying to focus on Dharma. This should be done for twelve hours after the person passes away. Afterwards, the body would be moved, bathed, dressed and *zhunian* should continue to be done in place of the traditional practice of keeping company with the deceased. In addition, whenever a rite is performed, it is important to teach Dharma to the deceased to help them focus on attaining rebirth in the Pure Land. Certainly, it would be best if monastics could speak about the

Dharma to the deceased. If not, lay practitioners who are more experienced and versed in the Dharma could do the same.

The body of a deceased Buddhist can be handled in different ways: 1) *zuokan*, in which the body is placed in a seated position inside an upright box and cremated. Rites for this method include sealing the box and igniting it at the time of cremation; 2) *zuogang*, in which the body is placed in an urn and buried in the earth. Sealing the urn constitutes the major rite for this method; 3) keeping the body in a coffin, to be later cremated or buried, with the sealing of the coffin constituting the major rite. If there is a cremation, the urn containing the ash is placed in a stupa in a monastery or cemetery. Some choose to have the urn buried in a gravesite. Whether cremation or burial, the process should be accompanied by sutra recitation, chanting the Buddha's name, and transferring merit, to replace the custom of family members taking turns to show their grief, and playing funeral music.

In the agrarian society of the past, people would prepare for elders a coffin ("longevity wood") and burial garments ("longevity clothing") for their use in the future, believing that doing so would bring blessings, longevity, and good luck to the family. In today's industrial society and urban environment, it is no longer practical or necessary to have this kind of custom.

A Buddhist funeral should be simple, solemn, and dignified. Especially through the duration of funeral, animals should not be slaughtered to feed family and relatives, and liquor or meat should not be placed on the altar for the dead. Hence, in my hometown in Jiangsu province, meals served during a funeral were referred to as "tofu meals" because we offered to relatives and friends who came, strictly vegetarian meals with bean-curd variances as the main ingredients.

Fresh flowers, fruits, and vegetarian dishes can be placed on the altar. Flower garlands, baskets, and banners should be limited to avoid extravagance. It would be enough to have only a few flower baskets, banners and

plaques expressing the condolences of family members, friends and relatives. There is no need to be lavish or extravagant.

When relatives and friends make offerings of money, if the family is destitute, they could keep just the needed amount for the funeral and livelihood, and offer the remainder to the Three Jewels, which would support promoting the Dharma, and benefitting sentient beings. They could also donate to charities. The merits would benefit the deceased, helping them move on, be liberated from sufferings, and attain higher rebirth in the Pure Land.

When people pass on, it is natural for the survivors to feel grief. When Shakyamuni Buddha was approaching *parinirvana*, except for the enlightened great arhats, many of his disciples wept. However, the custom of crying and weeping to honor and glorify the deceased is often insincere. It would be better if Buddhists conducted Buddhist rites instead of grieving insincerely.

Conducting Buddha Activities for the Deceased

QUESTION

What Buddha activities should be conducted for the deceased, and how should they be done?

ANSWER

Foshi (Skt. *buddhakarya*) means “Buddha activities,” and concerns practicing and advocating Buddhism. The main objects of the activities are people, and the activities include conducting liturgy practices, listening to Dharma talks, expounding the sutras, almsgiving, upholding precepts, cultivating samadhi, practicing the Noble Eightfold Path and the Six Paramitas.

In Chinese society, most people do not have a proper understanding of Buddha activities. Usually, people only think of Buddha activities when a family member, relative, or friend passes on, and only as some sort of compensation or redemption. These so-called rituals of deliverance entail inviting monastics to recite sutras and conduct repentance chanting for the deceased.

When this kind of affair is conducted, family members mostly act as “employers” of the monastics and do not directly participate in the chanting. Often, while the rituals are going on, family members would stand aside socializing, or even playing mahjong. To them, the rituals are just accessories to their mourning. This practice is virtually a folk custom, and it is disrespectful not only to Buddhadharma, but also to the deceased. It cannot be called conducting Buddha activities.

Buddha activities should be conducted with sincerity, respect, solemnity and dignity. It would be better for the family to themselves lead the sutra recitation, repentance prayers, and chanting. When necessary, monastics can be invited to instruct and lead as teachers. The site should be void of chaos, noise, and messiness. Buddha activities are not just rituals within a funeral service for people to watch. All family members, relatives, and friends should engage in the practices if possible, and do their best to follow the sutra recitation, or at least to listen, accompany others in the practices and participate in prostrating. Sincerity and respect from the family and relatives would move the buddhas and bodhisattvas to use their power and the merits of Dharma to assist and guide the deceased. Conducting Buddha activities is a way to invite the deceased to listen to the Dharma in order to defuse their karmic afflictions, and to help them transcend death and be delivered from suffering. If family members, relatives, and friends are indifferent to the Buddha activities, not participating, or not showing proper etiquette, the effects of the practices could be drastically reduced.

Buddha activities should be conducted within forty-nine days after death. Generally, a person with extraordinarily bad karma would fall straight into the three lower realms. A person with an abundance of virtuous karma would ascend to heaven immediately, while a person who cultivated pure conducts [in accordance to Pure Land practices] would be reborn in the Pure Land. Otherwise, within forty-nine days the deceased would wait for causes and condition to ripen, in order to be reborn in accordance to their karma and conditional factors.

Deliverance practices conducted before the deceased is reborn may transform the force of bad karma into the foundation for good karma; they may open the mind of the deceased and dissipate old habits, helping them to transcend to heaven, or even be reborn in the Pure Land. If unfortunately, one has already descended to the three lower realms, the power of the

accumulated merits from the Buddha activities may help reduce suffering and pain for them, and improve their outlook.

Even if the deceased has already ascended to heaven, the activities can still enhance their enjoyment of fortune and bliss. If he or she has already been reborn in the Pure Land, the activities may help to elevate the status of their rebirth. Even after the forty-nine days period, Buddha activities can still be conducted and the power of deliverance and salvation will still reach the deceased. However, if the deceased has already been reborn, there would be no way to alter the realm of their rebirth.

According to *Kshitigarbha Sutra*, one must pay homage and make offerings to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as recite and uphold the teachings in various sutras, in order to deliver deceased family members. According to *Ullambana Sutra*, one should practice almsgiving and make offerings to monastics. In general, with money and belongings that the deceased leave behind, family members and relatives should try to make offerings, support the Three Jewels, aid the poor, and benefit society. They should do this by treating all sentient beings equally, enabling them to alleviate suffering and gain happiness and bliss. These are all ways to help the deceased to transcend death, be delivered from suffering, and be reborn in the Pure Land.

For forty-nine days, starting when the deceased passes on, it would be best to chant the Buddha's name continuously. This would help the deceased focus on the Dharma. If the deceased practiced Pure Land when alive, then Amitabha Buddha's name should be chanted either in groups, or by individuals taking turns. If the deceased did not adhere to a specific school, it would still be correct to recite Amitabha's name to help him or her transcend; if he or she followed a specific school, recited a certain sutra regularly, or venerated a certain buddha or bodhisattva, it would be best to use the methods of that school to chant and transfer merit.

By traditional Chinese custom, it is best if Buddha activities were conducted daily in the first forty-nine days after death. Otherwise, the first seven days, three days, or even just one day after the passing; or on every seventh day for seven weeks would be acceptable. Depending on the family's collective energy and resources, the number of days can be more or less. If there are insufficient resources for engaging monastics to conduct Buddha activities, even if there is only one family survivor, they should still recite sutras for the deceased. If one does not know how to recite sutras, at least one could chant the Buddha's name. As for burning paraphernalia made of paper or bamboo, such as houses, furniture and vehicles, as well as sutras and mantras, paper money, imitation silver sheets, and the deceased's clothing, these are folk customs that have no relevance to Buddhist ritual. However, we cannot completely reject the practices, since they sometimes serve as condolences to the deceased and as ceremonial objects in funeral rites.

From the point of view of Buddhadharma, any lavish, extravagant funeral is excessive or superfluous. Rather than waste the money of the deceased and the efforts of the family in a vain display of condolences, it would be better to support the Three Jewels, promote Dharma, help the poor, benefit sentient beings, and transfer merit to the dead; these kinds of acts would be more consistent with the Dharma.

In summary, funeral services should strive to be dignified, solemn, and respectful, simple and proper. Otherwise, they would not be Buddha activities but merely exercises in familial vanity. It is surely not appropriate to bury exquisite clothing and precious objects with the deceased; aside from being a waste of valuable resources, it does not benefit the departed person.

Lay People Receiving Gifts from Monasteries

QUESTION

Is it proper for lay people to receive gifts from monasteries?

ANSWER

According to the vinaya, the rules for monks and nuns, any item that has been offered to the monastery by the faithful “from everywhere,” cannot be used as a personal gift to others or for personal purposes, regardless of whom the item is given to, and for whatever reason. Such an action violates the precept against stealing, and is considered stealing “things for all monastics as a whole everywhere,” or at least “things for monastics locally.” The so-called “things for all monastics as a whole everywhere” are items belonging to all monastics no matter where they are, while “things for monastics locally” are things which belong to all residing monastics in a specific monastery. For a monastic, stealing things belonging to “monastics locally” is worse than stealing personal items. Monastics, therefore, should not take or use shared items for personal purposes, and certainly should not give any shared items to lay people.

When a monastic, hoping to solicit more support and offerings from laypeople, gives gifts to them, whether it is a personal or shared item in the monastery, he or she violates the precept against “contaminating others” (Skt. *kula-dusaka*); this means that a monastic with a polluted mind who gives a gift to a lay person, also contaminates that person.

There are two circumstances in which a lay person may receive gifts from monastics. First, in hardship and sickness, a lay person may accept things and aid from monastics. One kind of aid that may be given is material or monetary; the other is spiritual assistance in the form of Dharma. Since one can accept the Dharma, they can certainly accept material support as well, to overcome hardship. Then, they in turn may make offerings to the Three Jewels and help others. In the history of Chinese Buddhism, this kind of philanthropy and activity was quite common.

Next, lay people who work in the monastery and also support a family should be paid accordingly. Volunteers committed to serve the monastery but who find it inconvenient to bring food in to cook for themselves, can certainly receive food and overnight lodging from the monastery. Some great Chinese masters in the past especially reminded us that workers in the monastery should be offered better food and even higher wages. That's because life in monasteries usually tends to be plain and hard, workers might not be used to the simple diet, causing them to be unhappy and resentful. As for surplus items in the monastery, if there's no specific target to be given to, or when they cannot be sold, they may be given to lay people who would happily accept the gift to avoid it being wasted or discarded.

The way of life in the monasteries of India and China was quite different: Because of the alms-begging tradition in India, there was no kitchen in monasteries and therefore no cooking. In China, monasteries have always been stocked with food, and monastics cook for themselves. Especially when there is a Dharma assembly or services, participants would also have meals in the monastery. As distinct from monasteries in India, in countries where Mahayana Buddhism is practiced, such as China, Korea, Japan, etc., it was quite common for lay people to eat in the monastery when attending Dharma assemblies or services. This custom has its practical reason. In the beginning, lay people might have gotten together to cook meals for themselves in the

monastery; later, monasteries took over the cooking, but the expenses still came from lay followers.

All this is to make it convenient for lay followers; it is also one of the ways to make Buddhism more accessible to the community. But if the monastery's only function is to provide meals for the people without teaching Dharma or conducting Buddha activities, the temple would become just a popular vegetarian restaurant. Then, it would have misplaced its priority, like putting the cart before the horse.

Setting up a Buddhist Altar at Home

QUESTION

How should lay Buddhists set up an altar at home?

ANSWER

This is a frequently asked question, which also implies another question: Is it necessary for lay Buddhists to set up an altar at home? If so, how should they do it? The answer really depends on the individual situation. If the dwelling is small, or if you live in a dormitory, share a room or a house with co-workers or classmates, it would not be convenient to set up an altar. In such cases, if you worship regularly at a fixed time, you may place a sutra where you would normally place a Buddha statue. In this situation, it is not necessary to burn incense or candles, or offer water or flowers. Before and after worshipping, it would be appropriate to bow with joined palms, and prostrate to show respect and sincerity. If your roommates or housemates are also Buddhists, it would certainly be all right to set up a common altar or a worship room. If you are the only Buddhist, then you should not be so particular as to insist on setting up an altar; as it may court others' resentment and dismay.

If you are the only Buddhist in the family, it's also necessary to follow similar guidelines as if you live in a dormitory; otherwise, it may create discord in the family. Don't let your Buddhist practice lead to ill feelings and resentment toward Buddhism within the family. If the whole family believes

in Buddhism, or you are head of the household, or both spouses practice, and there is space, it would be the best to set up an altar or a worship room. When setting up an altar in the living room, select the side of the room where the main furniture would normally be. There should be no window behind the statue, and the statue should face a door or window, so there would be plenty sunlight, and the altar is clearly in sight when people enter the door.

The altar is the heart of a home; it should generate a sense of stability and security. As for the locations and directions suggested by geomancers, they can be used as reference for consideration; but one should not be superstitious and feel constrained by them. It would be fine as long as the Buddha statue does not directly face the bathroom, the stove, or a bed. If you set up a worship room, choose a quiet quarter where children or pets don't roam in and out easily. The room should not be a place for receiving guests, chatting or entertaining; it should be used only for worshipping, chanting, and Chan practice, not for anything else. However, if there are already non-Buddhist pictures, plaques, and statues used for worshipping, such as Guangong, Matzu, earth gods and ancestors, we should not do away with them right away, just because we now practice Buddhism. They should be removed step by step, gradually.

The first step is to place the Buddha statue in the middle of the altar, flanked by statues of the non-Buddhist deities, and ancestors' memorial plaques. It is not necessary to set up an incense burner and candle holders. The reason for this arrangement is because all benevolent deities and ancestors will protect, support, and be drawn to the Three Jewels. After the altar is set up, they can also become disciples of the Three Jewels and benefit from the Dharma. The next time you move the altar or worship room, you may then remove those non-Buddhist deity statues and store them away as keepsakes. As for the ancestors' plaques, they don't need to be placed or worshiped at

home; they can be moved to the hall of rebirth in a temple or monastery. If one insists on continuing to worship them at home, they can be either placed on the level below the Buddha's statue. Or, they can be moved to another location onto a smaller altar and be worshiped separately.

In larger temples, for instance, there are halls of rebirth specially for placing ancestors' plaques. Smaller temples usually allow ancestors' plaques and longevity plaques to be placed along the side walls of the main hall. In this way, it not only expresses our prudent filial piety and reverence to our ancestors, but also shows our sublime faith to the Buddha. In such a way, it distinguishes our sublime faith to the Buddha from the filial piety to our ancestors.

At home there's no need for multiple statues of the Buddha and bodhisattvas, as that would add to clutter. One statue of the Buddha can represent all buddhas, and one bodhisattva statue can represent all bodhisattvas. Apart from statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, most families choose one from among Guanyin Pusa (Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva), Amitabha Buddha, and the Medicine Buddha.

If you have both Buddha and bodhisattva statues, then the Buddha statue should be placed in the middle or on a higher level in the back of the altar, while the bodhisattva statues are placed on the sides or at lower positions in front. In other words, the Buddha statue should stand out to show his revered prominence. The size of the statue should be in proportion to the scale of the altar and the worship room, not too big or too small. If a statue is small but made from one of the seven precious treasures (gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate, ruby, carnelian), then a specially carved, multi-leveled shrine can be used to set off the statue's unique grandeur.

After acquiring a new Buddha or bodhisattva image or statue, many people would hold an initiation ("opening light") ceremony to consecrate it.

However, from the Buddhist point of view, such a ceremony is not necessary. Buddha and bodhisattva images and statues are tools for practice. We use them as objects for reverence. Although the buddhas and the bodhisattvas are omnipresent, without statues and images, we won't have a focus to receive our prostrations, offerings, and respect. It is through such reverential practices that we receive benefits of cultivation and responses from the buddhas and the bodhisattvas. But the most important thing is our faith, sincerity, and a sense of respect, not the statues or images themselves. Therefore, an initiation ceremony for the images and statues is not that important.

When Shakyamuni Buddha was still living, he went to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Devas for three months to give sermons to his mother. His disciples missed him, so they sculpted his image for worship; yet, there was no account of any initiation ceremonies. In subsequent generations, sutras, images, Buddhist articles, pagodas and even temples, became representations of Buddha's presence and his continuing transformation of the world. Nevertheless, solemn ceremonies often generate deep respect and faith in people. Gradually, many kinds of rituals related to worship and offerings came into existence; the initiation ceremony was one of them. Therefore, to this day, when a temple installs a new Buddha statue, followers gather together to have an initiation ceremony. Similar to a new firm opening for business, or a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new building, a ceremony is a way to make a solemn announcement to the public.

However, when individuals set up Buddha and bodhisattva statues at home, there is no need for an announcement, hence, no need to hold an initiation ceremony. As long as you set up the statues with sincerity and respect, and make daily offerings of incense, flowers, and fruits, keeping the offerings and the altar fresh, clean, and tidy, you will have a sacred and holy atmosphere to induce the dedication of practitioners. To keep the indoor air

fresh and clean, the incense burned at home should be of refined grade with delicate, light fragrance. When burning incense at home, it's good to burn just one stick at a time. Do not pollute the air in the house with too much incense. Natural sandalwood and agarwood incense are of great quality; it is not good to use synthetic chemical or animal-based incense sticks.

In the worship room of a modern home, candles can be replaced by light bulbs. It is necessary to clean the offering table, incense burner, candle holder often, and keep them dust free, and free of withering flowers and rotting fruits. Every day we should set a specific time to conduct the practice, at least burning incense and offering water every morning and evening. Before leaving and after returning home, we should prostrate to Buddha to express our gratitude, respect, and remembrance.

Holding Buddhist Liturgy Practices at Home

QUESTION

How should Buddhists hold liturgy practices at home?

ANSWER

When doing liturgy practices at home, the main thing is to be consistent in doing it at fixed times. Ideally, the sessions should include making offerings, prostrating, meditating, reciting the Buddha's name, reading and chanting sutras, making vows, and transferring merit. Making offerings means placing incense, flowers, lamps, fruits and other foods, as well as clean water, before the Buddha statue. If conditions allow, these items should be replaced daily to keep them fresh. We should never allow the offerings to become rotten, polluted, or wither. The principle is to keep the altar clean, tidy, and solemn.

We should designate a specific time each day to conduct the same service. It's better to choose a time when our minds are clear and our bodies are relaxed. Usually, it is in the morning after washing up and before breakfast, or after dinner following a brief rest. These are the two best times for liturgy practice. These two routine sessions will take one to two hours daily in total, but need not be more than four hours. Spending too much time for services may interfere with regular family life and work. If these time periods are not feasible, we can also choose any other designated times in the morning or afternoon for liturgy practice.

These liturgy sessions are called “regular liturgy practices” or “daily liturgy practices,” and should be held without interruption each day. It should be habitual, like our other daily routines: brushing teeth, washing up, eating breakfast, cleaning the house, etc. The purpose is to harmonize our body and our mind, to nurture our body and cultivate moral character, as well as to vigilantly and diligently improve ourselves. Buddhist practice at home is not about formalities; rather, it is about being persistent in helping ourselves to attain peace, health, and happiness. Besides the values of self-cultivation and introspection, such practices will bless us with the support and protection of the buddhas, the bodhisattvas, and the heavenly Dharma protectors.

The exact contents of the services can be flexible, as long as it is the same every day. The contents can be determined by the time available and one’s preferences; however, one should always offer water and incense, as well as prostrate before the Buddha. For sessions conducted alone, it is not necessary to use Dharma instruments, such as the so-called “wooden fish” (*muyu*) or the bell, nor is it necessary to chant. But if it won’t bother others, one can use a small *muyu* at home.

For the morning service, after making offerings and prostrating three times, we should chant the *Great Compassion Dharani* (Skt. *Mahakaruna Dharani*) three to seven times, recite the *Heart Sutra* once, recite the phrase “*Mahaprajnaparamita*” (Great Transcendent Wisdom) three times, then chant the name of either Amitabha Buddha or Guanyin Pusa forty-eight or 108 times. This should be followed by reciting Samantabhadra’s Ten Great Vows or the Four Great Vows, and lastly, the Three Refuges. Then, chant the Transfer of Merit: “May we all eradicate the three hindrances and vexations; may we all attain wisdom and enlightenment; may we all be free from calamities and obstacles; and may we all tread the bodhisattva path lifetime after lifetime.” Prostrate three times to conclude the morning service.

The evening service should be conducted in the late afternoon or after dinner with the same offering and prostration, followed by chanting the *Amitabha Sutra* or the *Verses of Repentance* once. We can recite the *Great Compassion Dharani* seven times, or we can recite the *Heart Sutra* once and the *Mantra for Rebirth in the Pure Land* three times, and then chant the name of Amitabha Buddha or Guanyin Pusa forty-eight or 108 times. We then continue by reciting the Four Great Vows, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Admonition, and the Transfer of Merit: "May the merit from this practice be extended to all sentient beings, for their liberation from the suffering of the three realms and to bring forth bodhi-mind in all." And then prostrate three times to conclude the evening service.

Practitioners are different in pace. Moreover, some chant well while others don't know how to chant. Therefore, unless the condition allows the use of Dharma instruments together with chanting, it would be enough to just recite sutras or mantras without instruments. The number of times we recite a sutra or a mantra can also be adjusted according to the pace of our recitation and the time available.

If there is enough time, we can consider extending the session to forty-five minutes or one hour. Before the morning service and after the evening service, we can also meditate for twenty-five to thirty minutes. It is best to learn meditation from a proper teacher whose methods are safe. At the least, we should sit in an upright posture, relax the body and mind, silently recite the Buddha's or a bodhisattva's name with a pace which is neither too fast nor too slow, and do so single-mindedly.

If not used to sitting meditation, one can prostrate to the Buddha or bodhisattvas a fixed number of times, or for a fixed duration. Meditating, prostrating or reciting without intention or praying for something is the best and safest way to practice; otherwise, it would be easy to generate illusory

images, sceneries, and hallucinations, which may induce obstacles in one's mind and body. True Buddhist practice is not conditioned on achieving anything, though it does have its purpose; the practice itself is the purpose.

If one wants to extend the time period of daily services, but has no intention to meditate or increase the number of kinds of practice, then in the morning after the usual offerings and routine practices, one can recite the *Shurangama Mantra* and the *Ten Small Mantras*. After the evening service, add recitation of "Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva's Universal Gate" chapter from the *Lotus Sutra* or the *Great Compassion Dharani* for twenty-one or forty-eight times.

At home, when not otherwise occupied, you can choose a certain time of day to pay homage to the sutras, first by making offerings and then prostrating upon reading each word. As you prostrate, recite the two-sentence prostration verse associated to the sutra. For example: when making prostration to the *Lotus Sutra*, recite "Homage to the Lotus Sutra of Wondrous Dharma; homage to the buddhas and bodhisattvas in the Lotus Sutra assemblies."

If one wishes to pay homage to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, then one should recite: "Homage to the Mahavaipulya-buddhavatamsaka Sutra; homage to the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the Avatamsaka assemblies." If one pays homage to the *Diamond Sutra*, recite: "Homage to the Prajnaparamita Diamond Sutra; homage to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas at the *prajnaparamita* assemblies." For the *Amitabha Sutra*, recite: "Homage to the Amitabha Sutra Expounded by the Buddha; homage to the buddhas and bodhisattvas in the oceanic assemblies of the lotus pond."

For the "Universal Gate" chapter, there are two ways to pay homage: first, since it is a chapter in the *Lotus Sutra*, the homage can be conducted as for the *Lotus Sutra*. In the second way, one can recite, "Homage to Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva's Universal Gate Chapter; homage to the great merciful and

compassionate Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva who delivers sentient beings from sufferings and hardships.” Accordingly, paying homage to the *Kshitigarbha Sutra* and the *Medicine Buddha Sutra* can be conducted similarly.

While paying homage to sutras, one usually uses a large-print edition of the sutra and a strip of yellow paper or sandalwood stick as marker. Following each word, move the marker along. When you finish a passage or section where you want to stop, either write down the finished word and section number, or place the strip of paper at the word or section just finished as a marker for the next session. However, after each service, the sutra book must be closed; it should not be left open or lying loosely around. After completing paying homage to a sutra, one may again pay homage to the same sutra in future sessions. One can also pledge to pay homage to tens, hundreds, or thousands of sutras, or to just focus on the same sutra one’s whole life. The key is to pay homage as many times as possible.

Before liturgy practice, or before vowing to perform daily liturgy practice, or to pay homage to sutras, it is all right to express a purpose, perhaps to gain certain benefits in this or future life, or for achieving certain merits. After a session, one may also make vows and wishes, but during the service, one should have absolute concentration, without holding any wishes and desires. The best attitude is to hope for all sentient beings to depart from suffering and to find joy and contentment, not to pray for one’s own benefits. This would be the bodhisattva way. Practicing without seeking anything for ourselves is the ultimate merit.

Avoiding Calamity and Achieving Longevity

QUESTION

How does one avoid personal calamity and cultivate longevity?

ANSWER

In Buddhism, karmic causes and effects are natural forces working towards a balance in our lives. Disaster and good fortune are both forms of retribution based on the causes and effects of our actions. The reward for good deeds is good fortune, nobility, and longevity, while the result for bad deeds is calamity, illness, and hardship. So the best way to avoid personal calamity and achieve longevity is to do good deeds and avoid doing evil.

The basic principle for preventing calamity and cultivating longevity is to repent past misdeeds, and to vow to change for the better. Any karmic retribution that one deserves should be willingly accepted; and as one begins to repent and vows to change, some not yet received retribution may change accordingly. It is like a trial in which the accused admits guilt, expresses remorse, and is willing to comply with the law, and as a result, the judge may reduce the sentence. In the old days, there were examples of “redeeming oneself with good service”; today there can be probation without a jail term, delaying the sentence, or settling out of court. This analogy shows how remorse can change consequences, even though there has been wrongdoing.

In the spirit of repentance, those praying to disperse misfortune and prolong life should not engage in bad deeds. Performing Buddha activities

– reciting sutras, repentance prostration, giving alms, and making offerings, are also ways to disperse misfortune and prolong life. This is to use Dharma to enlighten our karmic debtors and foes in our past lives that have fallen into the realm of ghosts and spirits, enabling them to leave suffering and to not seek repayment of old debts. Furthermore, due to the power of our vows, the factors in forming karmic retribution for latent events will also change. However, if we continue doing bad deeds, they will resonate as causes for calamity. On the other hand, if we give up bad deeds and embrace the good, they in turn will disengage calamitous factors and thus dissipate future calamity and misfortune. Therefore, making vows, studying Dharma, and cultivating good deeds will change one's destiny.

Certainly, this involves the inconceivable power of Dharma. According to the sutras, one who accepts the Three Jewels will have thirty-six benevolent devas as guardians. Therefore, one who has taken refuge and prays to avoid calamities and to prolong life, will indeed be protected by devas. Since time without beginning, the cycles of good and bad karmic causes and effects continue without end. It is extremely complex: feelings of gratitude and resentment are all interweaved regarding who owes what to whom. Ordinary people, even arhats, have difficulty comprehending this, but if we can be guided and shielded by the power of Dharma and the guardian devas, some of our originally deserved karmic retribution can possibly be averted.

Just as a wealthy man should not harass an impoverished person for prompt payment of a small loan, one's karmic debt also diminishes when karmic foes are liberated from suffering. When karmic foes are liberated, the mutual hatred they harbor will dissipate, and they won't be seeking settlement from each other. In principle, this is how calamities are prevented and lives are prolonged.

Relying on Empowerment

QUESTION

What is the function of empowerment (*jiachi*) and how does it work?

ANSWER

There are many levels to the teachings of Buddhism, from folk beliefs, advanced levels of religious doctrine and philosophy, to the ultimate reality without form or characteristics. The level of an ultimate reality which is without marks is the root and foundation of Buddhism wherein real liberation is detachment from desire and freedom from pursuits, reliance, and attachment. One does not attach to extremes of having or not having, of good or evil, love or hatred, gain or loss. That is why Buddhadharma is said to be boundless or “without sides”; it is the ultimate freedom. Therefore, there should be really no need to pray for or bestow empowerment.

However, this is a world where ordinary people reside; though they understand rationally that the state of no-desire and no-attachment is ultimate liberation and freedom, when they encounter afflictions of body and mind, calamity to family members, or setbacks in their career, they automatically pray for support from outside, seeking empowerment from deities, and help from the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Although empowerment is not exactly what Buddhadharma is about, Buddhism does not oppose or negate belief in empowerment; it accepts empowerment as something the masses need, and as an expedient means for introducing them to Buddhism.

The effect of empowerment comes from the powers of mantras, vows, and the mind. Someone with a profound mantra practice can connect with spirits and deities through the resonating power of the mantras, to aid and support others. Someone who harbors a great vow can move the buddhas, the bodhisattvas, and the guardian devas for support and assistance. Furthermore, someone with strong and focused mind can directly affect the attitude of the receivers and strengthen their determination. Many common mottos such as, “turning bad luck into good,” “dispelling calamities,” and “curing illness,” are effected through the power of the mind.

The efficacy of empowerment is to transform the mind of the receivers, so as to strengthen their mind. The so-called divine empowerment helps the receivers calm their mind, and rest their body to overcome crisis. It is also to strengthen their courage and perseverance to face reality; it is not to encourage them to escape reality or avoid debtors. Of course, through empowerment one can cushion the impact of a crisis, and use it to alleviate damage to a minimum.

At the level of the folk beliefs, however, the empowerment comes from others instead oneself; it is to use the mind, will, and mantra of those bestowing empowerment to directly relieve the receiver’s troubles. This is the common belief and hope of the general public, since it does not require engaging in cultivation, or paying the necessary price to resolve their crisis. This is also why belief in ghosts and spirits is so popular. However, most of the time, using empowerment only averts disaster temporarily; it will not permanently solve one’s problems. It is like being sheltered by some authority figure to escape debtors or gangsters, but when the protective forces withdraw, disaster will return with greater intensity.

Buddhadharma is quite different: If one is troubled and hindered by injustice and misdeeds, or has old debts from past lives, he or she can, with the empowerment giver’s power of compassion and perseverance, persuade

and defuse hatred, stubbornness, and desire for revenge. It will help them stop feeling wronged and be redirected to a life of doing good deeds. The receiver of empowerment will then live free from disaster and have good fortune. Afterwards, however, the receiver should embrace the Three Jewels, practice and uphold the Dharma, and do good deeds for sentient beings; otherwise, they may again accumulate bad deeds, and endure suffering.

Some people chant the *Great Compassion Dharani* with an offering of water to be blessed. Others transfer the great power of mantras, vows, and blessings to prayer beads, Buddhist ritual objects, or ordinary items, and turn them into something auspicious that has power to heal, divert evil, safeguard homes, and bring blessings. The power of these blessed items are derived from the mantra vows, the empowerment giver's own power derived from their practice and upholding of Dharma, their good fortune and high virtues, and their diligent effort.

However, the duration and effect of empowerment on people and items at the receiving end vary according to the empowerment giver's power. The effects are akin to resonance extending from the givers to the receivers, so long as one cultivates and practices in accordance to certain teachings, the effects can be achieved by anyone who wishes to give; but for the receivers, the effects are created totally by external forces. If the receiver does not practice or cultivate, it would be like borrowing money from the bank – it may be good fortune for a while, but the borrower will later encounter more problems, and accumulate more debts. Therefore, relying on empowerment is an expedient means, not the fundamental way to solve problems.

Taking on Karmic Retribution for Others

QUESTION

Can a great practitioner take on the karmic retribution of others?

ANSWER

Some have said that it's possible for a great practitioner to take on the karmic retribution of others with whom they have karmic affinity. For instance, during the Yunmen Monastery incident in 1951, revered Master Xuyun (1840–1959) was severely tortured and beaten during interrogation by Communist troops. He was near death with cuts and bruises all over his body, and some people said that his suffering was for all of the people in Mainland China. It has also been said that when a certain great reincarnated lama died from such-and-such disease and suffered such-and-such pain, it was to take on the karmic retribution for all mankind. Or a certain great ascetic had lain in snow, sat under scorching sun, or afflicted his own body to seek peace and good health for certain peoples or for all people. These interpretations sound right but are actually wrong; at least it is not the orthodox view of Buddhadharma.

The cause and effect of karma that Buddhadharma talks about applies equally to all sentient beings. Individual committing separate deeds would receive individual retribution; group of people collectively committing the same deed would receive collective retribution. Committing bad karma would incur negative effect, while committing good karma would result in positive reward. For example, when everybody has food to eat, everyone will be full;

when no one has food to eat, everyone will go hungry. When only one person gets to eat, it won't make others full, and when one person does not eat, it won't make others hungry. Therefore, nobody can work on transcending birth and death on behalf of others; and each person is responsible for dissolving his or her own misdeeds. The *Kshitigarbha Sutra* says: "Father and son are close yet they take separate paths, and even when they meet again, one won't take retribution in the other's place."

A great practitioner's power can definitely affect others. When a great practitioner lives in a certain area, everyone in that area benefits from his or her presence. And when there is a great practitioner in a certain era, everyone living in that era benefits. The great practitioner's will power, as well as their persuasive speech and deeds, leads the masses to do good and avoid evil; the great practitioner will even soften the spirits and ghosts to accommodate and cooperate. However, the appearance of a great practitioner is the reflection of the virtuous blessings of sentient beings during that time period and location. It should not be taken as the great practitioner appearing to take on karmic retribution for others.

When a great practitioner encounters misery and illness, there are two possible explanations: First, a sage or saint appears in this world as an ordinary person and lives as an ordinary being, and their sufferings make them relatable to ordinary beings. It is also through their sufferings that they can move and touch ordinary beings. Second, their plights are the results of their own karma. Even buddhas and arhats receive retribution in their final stage of life, not to mention a great practitioner who is still an ordinary sentient being in his or her stage of practice.

Of the second reason, in some cases the bad fortune that great practitioners encounter might be due to their diligence in practice, causing demons to fear them. Or some old nemesis and debtors from a previous life who

had fallen into the realm of spirits and ghosts might become worried as a result, fearing that the great practitioner will be liberated, and they would lose control of him and not get their debts repaid. This could lead to disaster and disease for the great practitioner. It could also be that the power of a practitioner's practice was such that, instead of rebirth in the hell, hungry ghost, or animal realm, they were reborn as a human, and had calamities and diseases common to humanity; this is called "heavy misdeeds, light retribution." So, the miseries and diseases suffered by great practitioners are useful phenomena, but not for the purpose of eliminating karmic effects for others.

The notion of accepting retribution and dissolving karmic obstructions on behalf of others has its source in theistic religions. For instance, in Christianity, Jesus accepted crucifixion to redeem the sins of men. In Chinese folk belief, bodhisattvas can dissolve karmic obstructions on behalf of others. For example, since the Medicine Buddha has the epithet "one who helps to avert disasters and prolong life," he must presumably be able to dissolve karmic obstructions on behalf of sentient beings. Likewise, they believe that Kshiti-garbha Bodhisattva entering the hell realm to deliver sentient beings is also an act of dissolving karmic obstructions on behalf of others. Some people take vegetarian or monastic vows, or vow to reduce one's own lifespan and "loaning" it out in order to help their parents or family members to avert disasters and prolong life. These actions and ideas are well-intentioned, but they have no relevance to the cause and effect principle which is fundamental to Buddhism.

We can only benefit sentient beings by doing virtuous deeds, upholding precepts, and practicing diligently to transfer the power of our merits to all sentient beings. It is like a mirror reflecting sunlight into the darkness, thus transforming the dark. But the blind still cannot see because they lack the sense of sight; only those with functioning vision can see the reflected light.

Likewise, only those who have virtuous roots have the capacity to receive help from great practitioners. Therefore, Buddhism disapproves of meaningless asceticism and superstitions such as “loaning lifespan to” others.

Some believe that great practitioners or psychic mediums connected to spirits can help others to dissolve karmic retributions, heal the sick, ward off ghosts and demons; these beliefs are accepted at the level of folk religion. But Buddha stated that fixed karma cannot be changed, and any deserved retribution has to be accepted. Although the power of folk religious belief has a certain influence, they cannot solve the fundamental problem at all.

Using the power of mantras and spells or of mind power, practitioners may temporarily block off the effects of another’s bad karma; however, when trying to do too much or doing it with great difficulty in marginal situations, the performer may encounter reaction which may lead to illness, or even death. It is like using flimsy plywood panels to seal off a flash flood, and instead, being washed away by the flood. This certainly is not dissolving karmic retribution on behalf of others; instead, they suffer the retribution of their own actions. Although the intent was to help others put off retribution, one is actually attempting to violate the cause-effect principle; while the net of heavenly justice seems to have a large mesh, it still lets nothing through, as no bad deed can be made without corresponding retribution. To violate the law of nature is to violate the karmic principle of cause and effect.

Whether through mind power or incantation, a positive result requires the source of external power and the receiver to cultivate virtuous roots and transform their mind. This convergence can lead to resonating effects which can be reasonably explained in principle, but it is not just a matter of one person dissolving karmic retribution on behalf of another.

Reciting Mantras

QUESTION

Is reciting mantras as a practice useful?

ANSWER

Yes, the usefulness of reciting mantras should be affirmed. A mantra is composed of special syllables, words, or phrases, which signify the power of certain buddhas, bodhisattvas, or deities [to help sentient beings]; they also serve as means for devotees to pay homage. As such, mantras have been used since the time of primitive religions.

At the level of folk beliefs, mantras usually came from deities through a so-called psychic medium which was thereafter adopted by the culture. Whether in the East or the West, there have been mantras handed down, used, and believed in. Among the Chinese, mantras are often used together with written talismans. Written talismans are symbols that represent the power of a specific deity. When people encounter minor misfortunes, by resorting to what we in modern society call “folk healing,” therapeutic effects may be derived through the power of talismans and mantras of folk belief, achieving the aim of eradicating evil, averting bad fortune, and finding blessings.

During the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, a few disciples also adopted mantras of similar nature, but the Buddha disapproved their use. After Buddha entered *parinirvana*, the Buddhist population became more diverse. Some

who originally were practitioners of spells and magic later converted to Buddhism, and became bhikshus and bhikshunis. In Volume 27 of the *Four Part Vinaya* (*Caturvargiyavinaya of the Dharmaguptaka School*) and Volume 46 of the *Ten Recitations Vinaya* (*Dasadhyayavinaya of the Sarvastivada School*), there are records of using mantras for healing. Yet, according to fundamental Dharma, one should visit a physician when sick, repent when in misfortune, always keep good intention, and perform good deeds. These are supposed to be the best ways of turning bad luck into good, reconcile past resentments, and clear up old grudges to dispel karmic obstructions. Therefore, in principle, Buddhism does not attach importance to the use of such mantras. (For further discussions on this topic, please refer to my book, *The History of Indian Buddhism*, Chapter Twelve, Section One).

However, simply chanting some specific words repeatedly can generate the effect of a mantra. Although this may be attributed to be the power of a certain deity, most importantly, it is due to the power of the concentrated mind of the chanter. So, the longer one persists in the practice, the stronger the effect. If one can recite the same mantra repeatedly with complete concentration, it is possible to unite body and mind, and transform the state of mind from thoughts to no-thought, a state of meditative concentration.

Therefore, latter-day Buddhism was not against the practice of mantras. Furthermore, another Sanskrit word for mantra practice, “dharani” has the root meaning of “upholding or encapsulating.” In other words, a single mantra or dharani may encapsulate all other teachings. Any mantra, as long as it is practiced persistently following correct instructions, will generate significant effects. The reason is because one-minded practice of mantra has with it the functions of upholding the precepts and cultivating samadhi, and can therefore generate compassion and wisdom. As a result, one can remove attachment and thus eradicate karmic obstructions; ultimately, one can resonate with the power of the original vows made by buddhas and bodhisattvas.

So, is there such a thing as the “king of mantras or dharanis”? From the perspective of encompassing [all of the Dharma], any mantra that is efficacious in one’s practice can be taken as the “king of mantras.” Therefore, any mantra can be beneficially recited, except for evil teachings and evil mantras which are used to hurt others for one’s own gain, or for the purpose of revenge, retaliation, and venting of anger.

In the early days of Chinese Buddhism, the practice of mantras was not stressed. Reciting mantras was considered sundry practice. During the Wei and Jin dynasties (220–420), the *Peacock King Mantra* was rendered into Chinese. During the Tang Dynasty under the reign of Emperor Gaozong, the *Great Compassion Dharani* was rendered into Chinese. These were the initial introductions of esoteric Buddhism into China. Not until the Song Dynasty, when mantra recitation was promoted by Master Siming Zhili (960–1028) of the Tiantai School, did it become popular. Though the *Shurangama Mantra* was already practiced in China in the late Tang Dynasty, it was not until after the Song Dynasty, as the *Shurangama Sutra* became more popular, that the mantra received more attention and was recited in all temples. Later in the late Ming Dynasty, the text in the “Daily Recitation of Chan” began to contain many mantras.

The Buddhism that was introduced to Japan during the Tang and Song dynasties did not commonly practice mantras; hence, besides the esoteric sects in Japan, mantras were not emphasized there either. Their Pure Land sect focused on reciting the name of Buddha; the Zen sect stressed Zen meditation; the Tendai sect specialized in *shikan* (Skt. *shamatha-vipashyana*; Chn. *zhiguan*). Japanese Buddhists found it curious that modern Chinese Buddhists engaged in mantras practice together with other Dharma practices. However, there were many examples of positive effects among Chinese people through the practice of the *Great Compassion Dharani*. Therefore, we should not oppose practicing mantras.

Nowadays, among the mantras used in Buddhism, most of them are invocations of the names of heavenly deities and gods, and the honorifics representing their power. This is owing to the Mahayana belief that any strength and benefit derived from virtuous and merit-generated deeds can be viewed as the manifestation of the Buddha's and bodhisattvas' presence and power. Therefore, all kinds of deities and mighty beings in the realm of spirits are also viewed as representatives of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Mantras used in Buddhism naturally contain the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as the phrases expressing our commitment to the Three Jewels. For instance, "*Namo fotuo, namo damo, namo sengqie*" is the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit mantra paying homage to the Three Jewels of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. As to dharanis such as "*Namo Guan Shi Yin Pusa*," which is the Chinese name for Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, the meaning is clear to Chinese Buddhists.

Seasoned practitioners of mantras do emphasize the sound of mantras, and it would be best to pronounce mantras in their original Sanskrit, since each syllable has its distinct meaning and function in Sanskrit. That's why some people say that it is better to pronounce the first syllable in "Amitabha" as "ah" instead of "oh" as conventionally done by many Chinese. While that exhortation is not unreasonable, we should keep in mind that all Dharma and mantra practices are based mainly on the power of the mind; sound is secondary. For many hundreds of years, Chinese have pronounced "Amitabha" as "Omitufo" and it has never led to ill consequences, malfunctions, or loss of merit. Today, Tibetan, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Chinese Buddhists all recite the *Great Compassion Dharani*; although they pronounce it differently, similar benefit can still be gained.

As to the claim that mantras can only be transmitted secretly or esoterically, that is true for tantric practices that are considered higher order practices in Tibetan Buddhism, such as Yoga Tantra and Anuttarayoga Tantra.

They have specific rituals and procedures and emphasize mental guidance; therefore, it would need to be transmitted directly from guru to disciples, on and on. On the other hand, ordinary mantras do not require such a process.

Today, many pseudo-Buddhist sects and self-proclaimed gurus who worship deities and spirits, make claims of secret transmissions of esoteric practices. This phenomenon also exists in many non-Buddhist sects in India. For example, the Transcendental Meditation has its own esoteric mantras. In Taiwan, the Yiguandao Sect also practices with a five-word mantra. However, in ordinary society the popularization of these kinds of esoteric practices is not considered healthy.

Buddhism and Belief in Predestined Fate

QUESTION

Does Buddhism believe in the saying, “One cannot escape one’s predestined fate”?

ANSWER

Buddhism does believe in the principle of karmic cause and effect, but it does not believe in predestined fate (*jieshu*). Cause and effect can be altered: the causes created in the past aided by the deeds and conditions of the present can change the effects. However, Buddha said, “Certain types of fixed karma cannot be altered, and serious karma cannot be salvaged.” Fixed karma is created by committing extremely bad deeds, such as the five heinous sins: killing one’s father, killing one’s mother, killing an arhat, shedding the blood of a buddha, and disrupting the harmony of sangha. Slandering the Three Jewels, murder and robbery, arson and breaching dikes, raping, etc., are all also serious crimes; the consequences cannot be changed. Because these misdeeds not only destroy others’ lives, but also affect the long-term stability of the society, they must subject to retribution.

There is the ancient saying, “To understand the kalpa of killings and wars, just listen to the cries from the slaughterhouse in the middle of the night.” Too much killing inevitably leads to wars; killing and fighting among people leads to turmoil and the chaos of war, resulting in abandoned buildings and cities, and a land swarming with famished refugees.

A kalpa involves an enormous time span measuring in eons. When bad deeds accumulate to a certain level, certain kinds of disaster will occur, some regional, some national or even worldwide, depending on the number of people who had committed the deeds and the severity of the deeds. Misdeeds committed in this life won't necessarily incur retribution in this life. For example, people who commit certain misdeeds in a previous life could experience retribution for those misdeeds in some future life, but the retribution would be in a similar environment, and similar to what they would have received in the previous life.

As for the word “*shu*” in “*jieshu*,” it is not a Buddhist term. By itself, *shu* originally meant “number” or “count” but has been used since antiquity to imply divination or predestination. In the chapter on “*Buju*” of the anthology *Chuci* from the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the poet Qu Yuan wrote: “*Shu*, divination of destiny, has things it cannot predict, and divinities have at times been not quite omnipotent.” In *The Book of Documents*, the chapter “*Dayu Mo*” says: “The heavenly mandate (*lishu*) has fallen upon you.” In addition, in his essay, “Letter to Cao Changsi” from the anthology titled *Wen Xuan*, Yingqu said, “Things that grow in the spring will prosper, those that flourish in the fall will wither; it is the natural cycle (*shu*). Of what use is regret?” These are all doctrines of natural or heavenly principles or justice, fate, or simply the flow of energy. Combining these kinds of notions with the Sanskrit term “kalpa” or *jie*, prefigured the development of the concept of *jieshu*.

In Chinese *jie* means “kalpa,” a time span of many eons, which can be small, medium, or great. Proportionally, for example, assume that the longest lifespan of human kind is 84,000 years and the shortest is ten. If from the lifespan of 84,000, we reduce one year with the passing of every 100 years to reach the lifespan of ten, and then reverse the process, increasing one year of lifespan every 100 years, to reach the lifespan of 84,000 again, the elapsed

time is a small kalpa. A period of twenty small kalpas is a medium kalpa. The world that all sentient beings inhabit can be divided into the four stages of formation, stasis, dissolution, and nothingness. If each stage lasts a medium kalpa, the four medium kalpas then form a great kalpa.

According to Buddhist scriptures, only during the stage of stasis are there active sentient beings; during the other three stages, sentient beings would have moved to other worlds. Yet before they relocate, at the beginning of the dissolution stage, there would be natural disasters of fire, floods, and wind. These are called “kalpa catastrophe” (*jienan*), predestined catastrophes that can totally destroy the material world as well as the realms of meditative abiding.

The sentient beings that have not departed from this world before the dissolution stage arrives are thus entrapped in the kalpa and cannot escape from the catastrophes. After the kalpa catastrophe, the consciousness of beings who have not completely received their karmic retribution as a vessel of life will be reborn into another world to continue receiving retribution. If one has completed receiving their retribution, then they will move on to the Buddhist Pure Land before the arrival of another kalpa; they will forever transcend the three realms of samsaric existence, and will never be subject to the suffering of the kalpa catastrophe again. This is called “departing the ocean of suffering.” Of course, without practicing Buddhadharma, it would be impossible to break away from this kind of kalpa catastrophe.

As to the folk beliefs about *jieshu* or predestined catastrophe, though they are somewhat related to Buddhism, most people only know that they will be some catastrophe, but do not know what they really are, or why; people know that it is impossible to escape from them, but don't know how to transcend them. After enjoying a period of peaceful and stable life, people would lose the sense of vigilance against calamity and develop a lifestyle that is luxurious and corrupt, with declining morality and decaying ideology. Then, some

prophecies would spread, forewarning the public that there would be natural disasters and man-made atrocities and wars, that there would be many deaths, and so forth. There would be even more alarming statements claiming that only very few would actually survive the catastrophe.

Some prophecies would indicate that these are irreversible. However, there would also be some prophecies urging the public to immediately rectify their attitude and habits, exhorting them to avert evil and embrace good, repent and be saved, in order to save the world from the approaching kalpa catastrophe. These prophecies will likely come mostly from conscientious advocates of folk religions, and there would be some that come from Buddhists as an expedient way to educate the public.

Some people, based on the concept of the kalpa-predestined event, would argue that it would make sense to have demonic mass murderers. They rationalize that it is not the murderers who want to kill; instead, it is because the murdered need to be “taken care of.” Otherwise, there would be no other way to complete the cause-effect retribution of good and evil karma. This kind of argument needs to be corrected. Saying that a demonic killer’s existence is in response to people’s fate of destined catastrophe is to liken it to an executioner’s carrying out the law by terminating a criminal’s life. [In other words, the demon killer’s deeds are not a violation of the law and are not a crime.] However, the fact that the killer is deemed demonic indicates that he or she is committing crimes, not carrying out some sort of divine order. Only natural disasters and a kalpa catastrophe that is beyond human control can be called “divine destiny.” Therefore, demonic killers commit very severe bad karma and will be subject to very severe retributions.

Natural disasters generated from fire, flood, and wind, though harmful to people, are considered natural retributions; they contain no demonic psyche or bad intention from human beings. The suffering from natural disasters is considered direct retribution to those with corresponding karma. Therefore,

in Buddhist scriptures there are accounts of natural disasters of fire, flood, and wind, but no statements about a devil or devil's representatives carrying out the retribution on sentient beings. While some victims of the demonic killers may have deserved the retribution, it was also likely that they were victims of the demonic killers' momentary anger or extreme emotional state. Worse yet, such a theory may lead people to trample and harm others in the name of divine justice. This is not only unjust, but is also an excuse for common criminals to commit crimes. Thus, Buddhism does not agree with the argument that demonic killers kill people in the place of natural phenomena.

In order to escape from kalpa catastrophes, people need to practice Buddhadharma. By upholding the five precepts and the ten virtues, one can avoid sufferings in the three lower realms and that of armed conflicts and wars, fire and flood, and hell. Meditation practice can temporarily relieve one's vexations. If one attains enlightenment and gains wisdom, one will be able to transcend the desire, form, and formless realms, and avoid the painful cycles of birth and death.

Those who lack the confidence to consummate the practice of the five precepts and ten virtues, as well as to cultivate samadhi and wisdom, should still often recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, and vow to be reborn in his Pure Land. Unfortunately, sentient beings tend to only fear the results of cause and effect, while not knowing how to keep away from bad causes. The best way forward is to avoid doing bad deeds and doing good deeds in the here and now, broadly cultivate the field of blessings, practicing Dharma, generating bodhi-mind, and striving towards buddhahood. By doing so, one then can avoid the kalpa catastrophes in the future.

Convincing People to Believe in Karma

QUESTION

How does one convince people to believe in the karma of the three periods?

ANSWER

It is commonly believed that to have a first-hand understanding of the karma of the three periods (*sanshi yinguo*), one must rely on the power of recalling past lives to see the past, and the power of the divine eye to see the future. This notion seems to be right but is actually wrong. The so-called “karma of the three periods” consists of the time spans of the past, the present, and the future; it can be long or short, recent, or ancient. A very long period is counted as an *asamkheya kalpa*, that is to say, innumerable kalpas; and there are past, present, and future *asamkheya kalpas*. It takes sentient beings three *asamkheya kalpas* to attain their vow to attain buddhahood.

Next, using the much shorter measure of a great kalpa [which is equal to eighty small kalpas], we see there are past, present, and future great kalpas. Further, using the even shorter measure of the human life cycle, there are the past, present, and future lifetimes. Then, down to the miniscule units of time, there is the past instant, the present instant, and the future instant – all briefer than the blink of an eye. Without transcending birth and death, all sentient beings cycle continuously through infinite past, present, and future, endlessly through time. So, if we only look at karma in view of three consecutive lifetimes, it will be too narrow a focus.

As we all know, within the present life there are also past, present, and future, during which times we experience karmic causes and effects; therefore, we should be able to deduce the limitless karma of the three periods. However, the issue is that karma in the present life is based on our memory, which we can accept and believe because we have experienced it. The karmic causes and effects of previous and future lives are outside our memory and experience, and difficult to accept and believe. Therefore, many people resort to seeking supranormal powers or help from ghosts and deities. It is only when they see life events in past and future lives through these means that they truly believe without doubt.

While supranormal power and the power of ghosts and deities do exist, they are very limited. Although they can help people to know about their past and future lives, their sphere of access is very short and recent. They cannot help people to know the countless events of the boundless past and of the boundless future. As a result, you would still not be convinced about the earliest beginning and the latest end; or whether there is even a beginning and an end. So, doubts about karmic causes and effects of the three periods still exist.

Buddhadharma thoroughly solves the question not by resorting to supranormal power or the power of deities or ghosts to reveal the past and future, but to make us understand the following: “To know the causes you created in previous lives, just look at the effects you have received in the present life; to know the effects you will receive in future lives, just look at the deeds you have done in the present life.” Therefore, the present life is the past life of the future life; the future of the present life will become the present life in the future; the past of the present life was the present of the past life. As long as you clearly understand and grasp this present moment, everything about karmic causes and effects in the past, present, and future is already contained therein. Otherwise, constantly pursuing, asking about, and investigating the

past and future will only increase vexations. It wastes time in this present life, and brings no benefits, either to the present or the future.

Having good fortune in the present means you committed good deeds in the past; having misfortune is the consequence of misdeeds you committed in the past. Good fortune in the future must be the results of the good deeds of the past, with additional diligent effort in the present. Future bad luck must be the result of misdeeds in the past, in addition to indolence and evil in the present. One's fortune depends on one's deeds in the past, present and future; bad fortune can improve, and good fortune can dissipate due to a person's good and bad deeds, and whether one is diligent or indolent in the present.

Because they cannot see their lives in the past or the future, some people do not believe in their existence. Actually, if one does not believe or accept certain things simply because one has not seen them, then even in this present life there are many "unacceptable" and "unbelievable" things! Take for instance the history of a nation, tribe, or family, where the deeds and works of many predecessors or ancestors were recorded. Who have actually witnessed those deeds? There are very few who have actually met their great grandparents, or great-great-grandparents; but can we deny their existence? Through biological heredity, we inherited our physical characteristics from generations of our ancestors. Likewise, we will pass that down to generations of our offspring – this is the physical body's karmic causes and effects in the past, present, and future.

We can deduce that there must have been past lives without beginning leading to the present life, and this will continue to lead into future lives. Therefore, besides the material existence of the physical body, there must be some sort of "soul" or "spirit," or what is called "consciousness" in Buddhism that passes on. Yet, for a materialist, death is like forever turning off a light – there is only material and no spirit. For mankind this view can easily develop into irresponsibility towards one's actions, and it can lead to cruel killings,

endless struggles, and unscrupulous harming of others' benefits, life, and property. Just to satisfy the interests of one person or group.

Therefore, the Buddhist teaching of consciousness in accordance to the principle of karmic causes and effects of the past, present, and future is the safest way for one to find sustenance in the future, and to point a clear direction for people to strive towards. If mankind can accept the teaching of consciousness conditioned by karmic causes and effects, our world will be a place where people co-exist and prosper without harming each other, living with mutual respect, support, and understanding. Otherwise, since all deeds have their corresponding consequences, when people fail to distinguish good from evil, and when their self-interests infringe upon others, their deeds will lead to chaos and disorder for the future world.

How Buddhism Views Fortune Telling and Feng Shui

QUESTION

How does Buddhism view such practices as fortune telling and feng shui?

ANSWER

Practices such as fortune telling, astrology and feng shui (Chinese geomancy) originated a long time ago. Based on the legends of astrology, these practices can be attributed to times before antiquity, when heaven and earth came into being. In other words, the principles governing these practices were formed when the universe began. Buddhism neither affirms nor discredits practices like fortune telling and feng shui because, while they may make certain sense, they are not the absolute truth. So it would be all right to believe in them, but not blindly to the point of superstition. It is also all right to be skeptical, as there is no harm in not believing in them. Therefore, although Shakyamuni Buddha prohibited his disciples from engaging in astrology, geomancy, and divination, he did not categorically oppose their practice.

Astrology studies the relationships between various locations on Earth and the movement of the celestial bodies. There are certain configurations that generate variations in seasonal and climatic effects, geographical settings, and conditions on our living environment on Earth. In Chinese astrology, correlating that with the time, day, month, and year of one's birth and adding, multiplying, or dividing these numbers among each other, forms the

divination principle of the Eight Characters of Birth Time. For instance, a person born in the north, in the winter of the Year of the Horse, won't have too auspicious a fate because horses have less hay to eat than in the north. In contrast, one born in the south in the Year of Rabbit, near hills and rivers, would have an auspicious fate.

However, from the Buddhist standpoint, one's good or bad fortune is based on one's karmic causes and effects: What we receive today is the retribution from the good and bad deeds accumulated from past lives. This is "innate," in that one is born with it; when compounded by presence or lack of diligent effort in this life, one's present fortune is shaped. So, the acquired elements in this life, in addition to the innate conditions, constitute the so-called good or bad fortunes.

Different causes set down in previous lives as deeds contributed to our environments or conditions in this life; these include heredity, culture, education, upbringing, and schooling, as well as the influence of siblings, relatives, teachers, friends, co-workers, classmates. All these have impact on one's fortune in life. Even if one's past deeds were bad, thus leading to a present environment that is bad, the situation may not be absolutely detrimental. As long as one pays attention to inner cultivation, physical health, intellectual growth, and cultivating wisdom, it is possible to alter one's original fate. Therefore, relying only on the Eight Characters of Birth Time to judge one's fortune may work for people of lower capacity, but it will not likely reflect the fate of people with higher capacity, especially those with the highest capacity.

Fortune telling in Chinese culture comprises two principles: fate at birth and fate according to physical features. One's fate at birth or *ming li* is read according to the Eight Characters of Birth Time, and it is innate. Fate according to physical features or *xiang li* is continuously shaped after birth. It is related on one hand, to one's physical heredity including appearances, bone structure, voice, palm lines, etc.; and on the other hand, what's cultivated or

wasted of one's innate assets – physical health, handicaps, and psychological balance in life, leading to changes in one's physical features to as life goes on. Reading of one's fate from physical features is informed by the sum of these two aspects. Hence, while fate at birth based on the Eight Characters of Birth Time cannot be altered, fate according to one's physical features can be changed at any time, according to one's frame of mind. Insofar as one's physical features are not fixed, one's destiny is also not fixed. Therefore, we can either believe or not believe in these reading of fates.

As for feng shui, or geomancy, its positive or negative impact on people is determined by the locations of celestial bodies and geographical configurations and features. As such, it is based on natural factors, as well as common sense. When we live in accord with nature, we enjoy the good things given by nature, we benefit from what the land provides; but when we act contrary to nature, the opposite happens. In principle, this is the field of applied philosophy or natural sciences. Some modern proponents of the practice have attempted to explain feng shui in term of magnetic forces and fields, and how being near the focus of these forces and moving along the field lines can be beneficial to health and mood; otherwise, so the theory goes, the results can be contrary.

“*Feng*” is wind, the vitality from the air; “*shui*” is water, the vitality from the earth, which is essential for the growth of life. When the vital elements of air and water are there, plus a location to fully absorb sunlight, those are the three essential elements of life: sunlight, air, and water, as modern day people would say. While the above may seem to make sense, according to the noted geomancer, Mr. Li Yinong, “In order to have wealth, nobility, and longevity, we need to fit well the following three elements: accumulated good deeds and virtues, the Eight Characters of Birth Time, and feng shui.”

The Eight Characters of Birth Time is the innate divination of fate at birth. The accumulated good deeds and virtues are acquired through diligent

cultivation after birth. Feng shui is only one-third of the equation. One who was born with bad fate, had an evil mind, and behaved crookedly, would not be able to find good feng shui. Or, even if he did acquire good feng shui, the place would suffer damages from natural disasters, such as flood and earthquake. Mr. Li also said, “Thirty-percent feng shui, seventy-percent effort,” meaning that feng shui must be complemented by human effort and hard work to improve the living environment. Therefore, from the Buddhist perspective, although geomancy makes certain sense, it is not the decisive factor.

Since ancient times, many patriarchs and ancestral masters have settled in the highlands and on precipitous peaks, deep in the mountains or around big lakes. In the wilderness, they cultivated the land and built monasteries to accommodate their followers in the Dharma. Many of these mountains on which monasteries were built became famous later on. These places must have been endowed with good feng shui. Having lasted thousands of years and stood tall through the changes of political regimes, the feng shui should be great. But, those patriarchs didn’t have professional knowledge of feng shui, and oftentimes there were able to bring about changes in geographical features, not artificially but naturally. As an example, in 1936 when the venerable old monk Master Xuyun, was trying to re-establish the Nanhua Monastery at Caoxi, a dike of rock and sand formed naturally in torrential rain to alter the course of the overflowing river.

In my own experience, the location of the new Chung Hwa Institute of Buddhist Culture in Beitou was chosen based on my own intuitive response to the surroundings and the location. I felt comfortable; therefore, I made the decision without consulting any feng shui experts. In the end, after inspections, many experts exclaimed, “Good! Good!” I had no background or knowledge in feng shui. What I knew was some basic principles [about the living environment] and thought that these principles should be connected to those of feng shui. Therefore, it can be said that I believe in feng shui, and

yet not necessarily so. For my own sake, I had no need for such beliefs, but for the sake and comfort of other people, there was no harm in consulting feng shui experts as a reference. However, a reference is just a reference; we should not follow or believe it blindly. Otherwise, we will suffer psychological afflictions and constraints in life.

Ironically, professional astrologists, or those considered excellent experts, can rarely find good omens for themselves; and very few astrologists can actually use their knowledge and experience to alter their own destiny! Hence, for Buddhists, the fundamental is to practice Buddhadharma and to use the Dharma to educate and guide all sentient beings. On the contrary taking fortune telling, astrology, or geomancy as professional advice is like putting the cart before the horse. Those of keen wisdom would suffer no harm dabbling into it a little. But for those of poor insight, such pursuit would be a waste of time, and would impede their normal practice; they should be discouraged from studying these kinds of externalist literature and crafts.

Reciting the Buddha's Name to Redeem Sins

QUESTION

Does reciting Amitabha Buddha's name even once redeem as many sins "as there are sands in the Ganges River"?

ANSWER

This quote comes from the *Lotus Sutra*, from the perspective of making an earnest intention to attain enlightenment. In Buddhism, the notion of redemption of sins differs from that in Christianity. In Christianity, Jesus Christ sought redemption for people's sins by dying on the cross. Anyone who has faith in Him will be redeemed of their sins. Yet, it is also believed in Christianity that whether one has sinned does not necessarily depend on one's conduct, and whether one goes to Heaven depends on the judgment of God. These are somewhat contradictory ideas regarding the redemption of sins. In Christianity, God created humans out of love for them; yet because of original sin, all people have to redeem themselves. In the end only the ones chosen by God will be summoned to Heaven, and the rest will be sent to Hell. Things such as love and punishment, good and evil, rather than being a matter of human morality, are a matter of God's great power or authority. Christianity stresses that believers will be saved, yet whether this is consistent with morality does not seem to be an issue.

Buddhadharma is not the same: the Buddha saves sentient beings by guiding and inspiring them to depart from evil and turn towards goodness, and then to progress from conditioned goodness to unconditioned goodness. The premise is to start from not creating new causes that would lead to rebirth in the three lower realms, and then to continue diligently cultivating heavenly and earthly blessings, or conditioned goodness. Further on one cultivates the bodhisattva path or even attains buddhahood, achieving unconditioned goodness. That's how sins are completely extinguished.

In the sutras it is said, "Sins are created by the mind and are originally empty in nature; when the mind is extinguished sins die out as well." Sins are created by doing bad deeds, and are also called the "filth of affliction" and the "filth of sins." A sin must include three conditions: the intention to commit the sin, knowing it is sin, and actually committing the sinful act. Take murder as an example: there is premeditated intention to kill, there is awareness of killing, and there is the actual killing. Lacking any one of the three conditions, it would not constitute capital crime. Among the three, the most important one is the intention. Without premeditation, and awareness of the act of killing, even if one person killed another, it would not be considered violating the precept of not killing human beings. For example, people who are mentally ill or insane, even if they killed someone, would not be considered to have committed murder.

When people practice reciting the Buddha's name and turn their thought towards the Buddha, they transcend the three realms of existence with this simple act. But if the subsequent thought is not on the Buddha, they would still remain in the three realms. With the mind of reciting the Buddha's name in accord with the Buddha, people would be far removed from immeasurable sinful deeds. When every thought is about Buddha, we will depart from immeasurable sinful deeds in every thought. Reciting or keeping our thought

on the Buddha perpetually, we would not receive the karmic retribution of the three realms.

Extinguishing one's sins can happen at two levels: the first is simply to remove oneself from the karmic causes of sins. The second is to not receive the retribution associated with the sins. The latter also has two levels: the first refers to those who are already liberated, but who still remain in the three realms. However, they do not consider that suffering; thus, it is equivalent to not experiencing retribution. The second is where the seeds of karmic sins did not get to sprout and thus turn into retribution after a long time. It is as if a seed of a plant was put on a rock under a scorching sun, and after a long while, loses its potency to germinate.

Rebirth in the Pure Land Carrying One's Karma

QUESTION

Is attaining rebirth in the Pure Land carrying one's karma the same as not paying one's debts?

ANSWER

“Attaining rebirth carrying one's karma” is a concept among Pure Land practitioners; however, the term itself has never appeared in any of the Pure Land sutras. Several years back, there was a debate between some tantric yogis and practitioners of the Pure Land School, regarding the issues of rebirth carrying one's karma versus rebirth having resolved one's karma. According to the *Amitabha Contemplation Sutra* (Skt. *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*) and the *Infinite Life Sutra* (Skt. *Sukhavativyuha Sutra* [longer]), when ordinary people recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, and rely on the power of Amitabha's great vow, even if they had committed very evil deeds, they can still attain rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land. Therefore, in China, Pure Land practitioners developed the concept of attaining rebirth carrying one's karma.

In general, bodhisattvas use the power of their vows to bring salvation to all sentient beings; on the other hand, because of their karmic forces ordinary people come to this world to receive retribution. As people receiving retribution, they also create more karmic deeds; hence, whether or not they have created good or bad deeds, they would not be able to transcend the desire, form, and formless realms of existence. The ones who created severely

bad deeds, however, would fall into the three lower planes of animals, hungry ghost, and hell beings and receive retribution; the ones who have created exceptionally good deeds would go to heaven and enjoy heavenly bliss. If one had created both good and bad deeds, one could be reborn to either the human or the deva realm, enduring the retribution of sufferings as well as good fortune, but it would be more suffering than happiness. To be liberated from birth-and-death and forever transcend the three realms, besides upholding the five precepts and the ten virtues, and cultivating the path of liberation, one needs to practice samadhi and wisdom to dissolve all vexations.

In contrast, the Pure Land method serves as a supreme expedient means to rely on the power of Amitabha Buddha's original vows to help transcend the three realms. Anyone who has deep faith in Amitabha Buddha, and has irrevocably vowed to be reborn in his Pure Land can be reborn there, even if one has carried serious mortal sins or limitless bad karma. Afterwards, one can continue to learn and practice the Dharma and grow in perfect wisdom.

Once reborn in the Pure Land, due to the supreme environment, not only would one never have the opportunity to create bad deeds, but due to the long period of nurturing by what one learns, the karmic seeds one carried from previous bad deeds would gradually wither, and never germinate and grow to yield any karmic retribution. This is the theory behind the so-called "attaining rebirth carrying one's karma." Certainly in Amitabha's Pure Land, one may cultivate and achieve non-regression and finally attain noble fruit; afterwards one may return to the Saha World of suffering to help other sentient beings. Such a return may take the form of actual birth or a transformed manifestation.

If the return takes the form of actual birth, the noble being will still have a physique and be in the same environment as other ordinary sentient beings. Further, he or she will experience the same kinds of suffering, pain,

and hardship as all others. However, to ordinary people these are forms of karmic retribution, whereas to these noble beings who return to the world with their vows, these are not seen as hardships. Therefore, although they attained rebirth in the Pure Land carrying their karma, they did not escape from their debts, and though they also endure karmic retribution in the Saha World, it is far different from that experienced by other sentient beings.

Thus we can see that without attaining rebirth in the Pure Land, one will forever drift in the miserable ocean of birth and death, repeatedly creating deeds and receiving retribution, over and over in cycles. These continuous cycles are “samsara.” If one were to attain rebirth in the Pure Land carrying one’s karma and returns to this world after one’s karma has dissipated, one would still experience something resembling karmic retribution, although this is not retribution in the substantial sense. Therefore, we may as well believe in the ideas of “attaining rebirth carrying one’s karma” and “accepting retribution having dissipated karma.” However, this differs greatly from ordinary beings’ karmic deeds and retributions, because the return of noble beings is a voluntary act out of their vows to liberate all sentient beings; whereas the retribution of ordinary beings is due to involuntary acts controlled by karmic forces. The latter is the result of the endless cycles of karmic causes and effects of suffering.

On the other hand, there are teachings in esoteric Buddhism that expound cultivating certain esoteric practices, or relying on empowerment of great practitioners, to dissolve all karmic obstructions in the present lifetime and attain rebirth in the Pure Land in an pure and flawless body and mind. The practice seems very attractive, but it somewhat resembles monotheism in relying on divine power to redeem one’s sins, and taking on the sins of others to atone for their sins. This is not really in accord with the concept of cause and effect in fundamental Buddhist doctrines.

*Reciting the Buddha's Name
and the State of One-Mind*

QUESTION

What does it mean to recite Buddha's name and reach a state of "one-mind without distraction"?

ANSWER

The term "one-mind without distraction" (*yixin buluan*) is from the *Amitabha Sutra*; also, the *Sutra of Buddha's Bequeathed Teaching* contains the following statement, "Concentrating the mind single-pointedly, there is nothing that can't be accomplished." Thus, "one-mind without distraction" refers to a practice of samadhi; it is also variously called the "samadhi through reciting Buddha's name," "Buddha-standing samadhi" (Chn. *banzhou sanmei*; Skt. *pratyutpanna samadhi*), or "single practice samadhi" (*yixing sanmei*). In Volume 46 of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, translated in the Jin Dynasty, titled, "Entering the Dharma Realm," there are twenty-one types of samadhi attained through reciting Buddha's name. And, in the *Amitabha Sutra*, it is stated that if one could recite the name of Amitabha Buddha continuously for one to seven days in a state of one-mind without distractions, he or she will then be delivered after death to Amitabha's Pure Land.

One-mind (*yixin*) is the opposite of scattered-mind (*sanxin*). To recite the Buddha's name while having a scattered mind is called "*sanxin nianfo*."

When reciting the Buddha's name reaches a state where the mind is unified in recitation, with no scattered thoughts, with only the name of Buddha appearing unbroken one after another, with only Buddha's name in mind, and no other thoughts, this is achieving the "continuous and succeeding pure thoughts," as described in the *Shurangama Sutra*.

According to Ming Dynasty Master Lianchi's *Subcommentary and Commentary to the Amitabha Sutra*, there are two kinds of one-mind: one-mind in its phenomenal aspect (*shi yixin*) and one-mind in the aspect of [truth] principle (or noumenon) (*li yixin*). One-mind in its phenomenal aspect means that the mind has no scattered thoughts, it matches the reciting, and each and every thought is focused on the Buddha's name. When one is aware of one's recitation of the Buddha's name, and the Buddha's name is clearly present, this is reciting Buddha's name with one concentrated mind (*yixin nianfo*), or reciting Buddha's name with the whole mind. Through reciting Buddha's name with concentrated mind, one can attain the state of "seamless practice" described in the Chan School. Going one step deeper would be the level of samadhi, where the sense of the self being forgotten is experienced.

One-mind in its aspect of principle resonates with *li*; thus one witnesses the Dharma Body of Amitabha Buddha – one realizes that Amitabha is just one's self-nature and the Pure Land is not separate from one's own mind. This is the state of "self-nature Amitabha; mind-only Pure Land." One-mind in its phenomenal aspect is at the level of meditation and samadhi; one-mind in its principle aspect is at the level of enlightenment; all of which results from integrating the practices of Chan and Pure Land. This entails using reciting the Buddha's name of the Pure Land School to attain samadhi, and ultimately, enlightenment and liberation.

Usually, when people refer to one-mind without distraction, they most likely mean wholehearted concentration. While reciting the Buddha's name,

one's mind is focused on the Buddha's name, one's mouth recites the name, one's ears hear the name, and with the mind thus undivided, it becomes one-mind. Thus, through reciting the Buddha's name with single-mindedness, one is able to attain rebirth in the Pure Land at the end of one's life.

Seeing Auspicious Signs While Practicing

QUESTION

How should those who practice reciting Buddha's name respond to auspicious signs?

ANSWER

The method of reciting the Buddha's name is a form-based practice. The *Amitabha Contemplation Sutra* was a teaching given by Shakyamuni Buddha when the evil king Ajātaśatru usurped the throne and placed his parents King Bimbisāra and Queen Vaidehi under house arrest. While under house arrest, Queen Vaidehi prayed to Shakyamuni Buddha for consolation and for his Dharma teaching. Moved by Queen Vaidehi's appeal, Shakyamuni Buddha caused to appear to her the pure and wonderful lands of buddhas in the ten directions. Since Queen Vaidehi aspired to be reborn in Amitabha Buddha's Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, Shakyamuni Buddha responded by revealing to her sixteen ways to cultivate towards rebirth in that Pure Land. Accordingly, Queen Vaidehi and her 500 handmaidens all attained forbearance of the non-arising of dharmas (Chn. *wushengfaren*; Skt. *anutpattikadharmaksanti*), and were able to transcend to the Pure Land.

The *Amitabha Contemplation Sutra* talks about the nine levels of rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Near the end of life, if one is about to gain rebirth in the Pure Land, regardless at which level, one will see auspicious signs

such as the manifestations of Amitabha Buddha and the bodhisattvas, as well as the lotus thrones. Therefore, while reciting the Buddha's name, if one perceives buddhas and bodhisattvas manifesting various auspicious signs, or the splendor of the beings and environment in the Pure Land, it would not be considered extraordinary.

In the *Kshitigarbha Sutra*, Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva was reborn as a maiden named Bright Eyed (Chn. *Guangmu*; Skt. *Prabhacaksuh*) in a previous lifetime. While meditating on the Buddha of that time, Pure Lotus Eye Tathagata, she set up a statue of the Tathagata to worship. She saw in a dream the Buddha manifesting and emitting light, and on a different occasion heard the Buddha giving her guidance. In another story, when Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva was reborn as a Brahmin woman, in order to deliver her mother, she worshipped the image of the Buddha called Enlightenment Blossom Samadhi Sovereign King Tathagata (Chn. *Juehuadingzizaiwang Rulai*). She then heard the voice of the Buddha telling her to return home to sit solemnly with concentration and recite the Buddha's name. After one day and one night, she would be able to reach the underworld of hell. She was also told that seeing the Buddha as a result of her repentance is an auspicious sign of the extinguishing of sins.

If in the daily practice of reciting the Buddha's name auspicious signs appear even though we do not seek them, it could be good but not necessarily so. Seeing auspicious signs can increase one's confidence, because one now has personally experienced the prescribed state and it felt real. Yet if one recites the Buddha's name only to see auspicious signs, then one's mind would not be pure enough. As such, auspicious sign that appear could just be illusions in an absent-minded and scattered state. When the mind is stimulated and the brain is overtired, when one is filled with too much anticipation or ardently seeks efficacious responses, it would be very easy to generate illusions. In a lighter case one could become neurotic, but more severely one

could produce hysterical and evil obstructions. One needs to be extremely cautious in such situations.

Illusions of auspicious signs may also be induced by a devoted mind or an earnest desire to succeed. On the other hand, wrong views and an impure attitude can induce demonic disturbances. From the perspective of genuine Buddhism, it is not the purpose of reciting Buddha's name to see auspicious signs. If one does perceive light, flowers, fragrances, and sounds such as magnificent scenes of the Pure Land, or images of buddhas and bodhisattvas, one should not cling to these signs, nor should one's intention be disturbed, but just keep concentrating on reciting the Buddha's name. That's the safest way to deal with this.

The case where a dying person sees auspicious signs that are not imaginary but are natural responses [to accumulated merits and virtues] will be discussed in the next chapter.

If auspicious signs appear fairly often while reciting the Buddha's name, that might not be a good thing because it could distract one's practice; even worse, it might mislead one to leave Buddhadharma to become an instrument for ghosts and deities to demonstrate their magical abilities, and to promote their deviant thoughts. If one cannot distinguish deviant from correct practice, one should just ignore any visions and just concentrate on reciting the Buddha's name. The visions will then disappear by themselves. However, if one becomes entangled with them and cannot cast them off, it would be best to seek guidance according to correct Buddhadharma from an esteemed monastic, or a meritorious lay practitioner.

Seeing Auspicious Signs before Death

QUESTION

Does seeing auspicious signs before death signify liberation?

ANSWER

It might signify liberation but most likely not. The so-called auspicious signs appearing before one's death usually refer to phenomena of seeing images of buddhas and bodhisattvas; fragrance filling the air, music in the sky, circles, spheres, and beams of light; animals calling and birds chirping in harmony; fragrant flowers blossoming suddenly, trees and shrubs changing colors; changing patterns of wind and cloud, thunder and lightning; the bodies of the dead remaining supple; even relics found after cremation. These are taken to be signs of a virtuous person who has lived a meritorious life.

Someone who was fair-minded and charitable during life is likely to see auspicious signs at death, and would become a ghost or deity of great fortune after death. If people had more blessings than guilt and have not eliminated greed and anger, they may become ghosts with great power after death. On the other hand, if people had more merit and virtue and less greed and anger, they may be reborn in one of the deva heavens of the desire realm.

If in their life a person practiced Buddhadharma and the three learnings of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom equally but still does not transcend the three realms, they would at the least be reborn in the Five Pure Abodes

(Chn. *Wujingju Tian*; Skt. *Suddhavasa*) of the form realm, or the Heaven of Thirty-Three (Chn. *Daoli Tian*; Skt. *Trayastrimsa*) of the desire realm. After being reborn in these heavens, one can still see the buddhas and hear the Dharma, make offering to buddhas in the ten directions, gather with bodhi-sattvas, and gradually transcend the three realms, and be liberated from the cycle of birth and death.

If one has taken refuge in the Three Jewels and upheld the five precepts, diligently practiced reciting the Buddha's name, and wholeheartedly wished to be reborn into the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, then, upon passing away he or she would accordingly transcend there. Of course, if one vows to be reborn to one of many other worlds where buddhas in the unbounded universe abide, that is also all possible.

Therefore, according to the above, as long as one accumulates merits and cultivates good deeds while living in the human world, one would not fall into one of the three lower planes, but be reborn in the human world or one of the heavens. Upon one's death, to a lesser or greater extent there would be some auspicious signs. Even if one were to be born in the world of ghosts, due to the power of merits and virtues, some auspicious signs could still appear at one's death. Some auspicious signs are only seen by those who are dying; some can be seen by many or even by everybody in the public; they can even be photographed or otherwise recorded. As such, they generate convincing effects in people.

As for the body remaining supple with a facial complexion as if alive, these certainly auspicious signs and the persons exhibiting these signs would transcend to heaven. Yet, they could also be signs created by powerful demons or ghosts who used the opportunity to demonstrate their magical powers. In this case, the auspicious signs are not due to the merits and virtues of the deceased. The main purpose of the signs created by the powerful ghosts is to

show off their own magical power and ability, so as to attract more followers to worship and revere them. As for other kinds of auspicious signs, we can judge them accordingly.

In principle auspicious signs are not bad; they can encourage people to avoid evil and to do good deeds but they do not necessarily mean liberation. Liberation comes from the condition in one's mind, rather than on physical and material forms. To be concerned with physical forms means that one is still at the level of attaching to conditioned and tainted forms. Only when one's mind is free of the notion of object or form is there real liberation. The *Diamond Sutra* says, "Whatever has form is illusory." Real liberation is to depart from forms and not attach to forms; as one's mind already holds no form, it is no longer important whether there are auspicious signs outside of one's mind.

But we cannot say that for auspicious signs to manifest near one's death means one is not liberated. For instance, when Shakyamuni Buddha attained *parinirvana*, many auspicious signs manifested; as well, when many eminent monks and great masters of the past were dying, there were auspicious signs. Most likely these signs were not the effects of the dying; rather, they were signs of the Dharma-protecting devas and dragons expressing their joy as well as sadness – joy that someone had attained liberation, sadness that the liberated person is departing this world. Although most auspicious signs were created by various deities through their magical powers, and the signs might be associated with the dying person, they were not that important. In addition, even though the signs might enhance others' faith and provide encouragement, it was not certain that they symbolized liberation.

On the other hand, the appearance of inauspicious signs while one is dying does not necessarily mean that one has failed to attain liberation. Great arhats such as Maudgalyayana, Udayin, and Utpalavarna, were either beaten

to death or abandoned in manure pits. These were the karmic retributions from their past deeds, and had no relationship with their liberations from their present lives.

*Delivered to the Pure Land
or Seeing Demonic Illusions?*

QUESTION

When near death how would one know whether one is being delivered to the Pure Land or just seeing demonic illusions?

ANSWER

According to the *Diamond Sutra*, “Whatever has form is illusory.” That is because ultimate reality is without appearances – devoid of phenomenal characteristics and form. Therefore, any so-called pure land that has forms and phenomena must exist in the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness; they would be pure lands on Earth or in the Heavens, but not the Buddha’s reward land (*baotu*), which is beyond the three realms. Hence, since ancient times, some great masters have considered Amitabha’s Pure Land to be an expedient land (*fangbian tu*), or a land where ordinary and noble beings abided together (*fansheng tongju tu*); in other words, they did not consider it the Buddha’s actual reward land (*shibao tu*).

However, Master Shandao (613–681) of the Tang Dynasty advocated that the Pure Land established by the power of Amitabha Buddha’s vow is a solemn land of actual reward. And if practitioners cannot realize formlessness by means of form-based practice and thus enter the land of actual reward, then they should still be able to enter it by the power of Amitabha Buddha’s

vow. However, if one transcends directly to Amitabha's Pure Land without having realized the ultimate reality, they would be able to see the Buddha's Transformation Body (Skt. *nirmanakaya*) but not his Reward Body (Skt. *sambhogakaya*). That means in the formless land of reward, the Transformation Body of form can nevertheless manifest.

Regarding the Buddha and bodhisattvas manifesting to deliver the dead to be reborn in the Pure Land, that definitely has form; and since it has form, it is illusory. Since it is illusory, why would one still desire to be born there? That is because if one doesn't go to the Pure Land, there is no guarantee that one will not do evil in the defiled world. The defiled world is an environment with more evil than good. [As such, to seek rebirth in the Pure Land] is like the mother of Mencius (372–289 BCE) who moved three times to find a good environment for her child's education; it is the same reason why one should want to transcend to the Pure Land.

How then, can a dying person tell if they are being welcomed to the Pure Land by Amitabha Buddha and other bodhisattvas or witnessing a demonic illusion? The answer is that it does not depend on what one witnesses at death; rather, it is based on one's vow and practice during one's life. In daily life, if one practices reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha single-mindedly, vows to be reborn in the Pure Land, persistently cultivates and enhances virtuous roots through performing good deeds, accumulating merits, upholding the precepts, practicing mindfulness, and learning the Dharma, as the end of life approaches one will naturally witness the appearance of Amitabha Buddha, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva. On the contrary, someone may mistake the Pure Land to be a place that shelters evil people and countenances evil practices; they may even consider Amitabha Buddha to be a deity who shields and protects wrongdoing. Such people, seeking rebirth in the Pure Land with a greedy mind, departing this world

with hatred and anger, ignorantly clinging to family ties and worldly attachments such as wealth, status and fame, though they have vowed to enter the Pure Land, their intentions are contrary to Amitabha's vow. They could very likely witness demons or ghosts in the guise of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

At this point, the best remedy is to invite a highly virtuous and learned teacher to guide this person to lay down every attachment, and to single-mindedly look forward to Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land. If they could do that, then the demonic illusions would be transformed to pure scenes.

*Zhong Yin Shen:
The State between Death and Rebirth*

QUESTION

What is the meaning of the phrase “the intermediate skandhas” (*zhong yin shen*)?

ANSWER

The phrase relates to the state of the five skandhas between one’s death and the next life. “*Zhong yin*” (Skt. *antarabhava*) literally means “intermediate state.” “*Zhong yin*” is also called “*zhong yun*” and “*zhong you*.” Both Chinese characters “*yin*” (a word used before the Tang Dynasty) and “*yun*” (a word used after the Tang Dynasty) refer to the five skandhas, or aggregates, which consist of form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness – the components of the life of sentient beings. As to the word “*you*,” it means “having” the five skandhas. All sentient beings in the three realms possess the five skandhas and are therefore also called twenty-five types of skandhas-possessing beings. The reason why people cannot transcend the three realms is because they have been confined by the five skandhas. Therefore, to liberate oneself from the cycle of birth and death is to depart from the three realms of the five skandhas.

There is a Chinese folk idea that says, “Jumping out of the three realms, no longer among the five elements.” In this saying, the Buddhist concept of

five skandhas has been changed to the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth of Chinese culture. Actually, the natural phenomena of mutual promotion and restraint between the five elements are of the physical nature. Form, the first of the five skandhas, in fact contains the entire five elements; the other four skandhas are of the world of the mind. The combination of the physical and mental characteristics determines all the phenomena of the activities of sentient beings in the three realms.

According to Volume 10 of the *Abidharmakosha Shastra*, the phrase *zhong yin shen* has five other designations, according to various characteristics:

1. *Yi sheng shen* (mind-generated body): the transformation body generated through one's will.
2. *Qiu sheng* (seeking birth): so named because it is often in search of the place to be born.
3. *Shi xiang* (ingesting fragrance): born with body sustained and nourished by the fragrance of one's favorite food.
4. *Zhong you* (intermediate existence): being in the transition stage between this decaying life and being reborn in another life.
5. *Qi* (arising): able to produce another body in the process of rebirth although it is not born of karmic connections such as parents, etc., but arising naturally.

A being of the intermediate state with blessings uses fine fragrance as sustaining nourishment; one without blessings relies on the odor of stench to survive. All beings of the intermediate state have supranormal ability and are able to see things that ordinary eyes cannot. As to how long the intermediate state lasts, one view is that one remains in the intermediate state for as long as it takes to begin the next life; another view is that the intermediate state lasts at most seven days. But after passing away one can enter the intermediate state over and over again.

The Buddhist belief since ancient time is described in the *Abhidharma-Mahavibhava Shastra*, in which the intermediate period is defined as “seven-fold of seven,” which refers to the forty-nine days after a person’s death. That’s why it is a common Buddhist practice during this period to carry out Buddha activities such as making food offerings to monastics, giving alms and performing virtuous deeds, praying for the dead to be blessed, and carrying out rituals to deliver the dead.

Simply put, *zhong yin* is the state after one has died and before emerging in another life – the intermediate state of existence. Within the three realms with its six planes of existence, all sentient beings dying in one place and being reborn in another must go through this intermediate state. However, sentient beings in the formless realm are in samadhi, and are therefore not burdened with the skandha of form; for them there is no intermediate state.

The *Maharatnakuta Sutra*, Volume 56, “Assembly on Entering the Womb” (*Ru Tai Zang Hui*), describes the forms of various kinds of beings in the intermediate state: those of hell-beings have ugly features with skins like charred wood; those of animals have a gray smoky color; those of hungry ghosts have the color of water; those of humans and devas from the desire realm have a hue of gold; and those from the form realm have bright colors.

Also, beings in the intermediate states may have variable numbers of limbs – two hands, two, four, or more legs, or even legless. However, the shape and form they would have would be similar to what they had when alive. Also, according to the *Abidharmakosha Shastra*, Volume 9, humans from the desire realm in the intermediate state have the shape and size of a young child four or five years of age, whereas bodhisattvas from the desire realm in the transition stage have the shape and size similar to adults, with excellent facial features. When the bodhisattvas enter the womb, they are illuminated by a brilliant aura of light. However, during the intermediate state, devas from the form realm retain the shape and size as when they were alive.

According to *Essay on the Meaning of Mahayana* (Chn. *Dashengyizhang*), Volume 8, most sentient beings in both the desire and the form realms experience the intermediate state. However, the most virtuous ones would be reborn directly in the Pure Land or a virtuous plane of existence without going through the intermediate state. Among the most evil and vicious, those who committed one of the five heinous sins would fall directly to hell, while others would become hungry ghosts without going through the intermediate state. Furthermore, Volume 2 of the treatise *Explanation of the Doubts on Pure Land* (Chn. *Shijingtuqunyi Lun*), offers two views. One view is that upon dying, one who is destined to be reborn in the Pure Land does not go through the intermediate state, since one would be immediately reborn from a lotus. Another view is that when one transcend from this defiled world to the Pure Land, it is to die “here” and be reborn “there”; so there is a an intermediate existence, but it is very brief, as one could pass through millions of Buddha Lands on their way to the Pure Land in a finger-snap, nourished by the scent of fragrance rice from the Pure Land. Although these are different viewpoints, they all indicate the existence of the intermediate state.

From the discussions above, we can conclude that all sentient beings in the desire and the form realms will experience the intermediate state, except for the most virtuous and the most evil, who would directly ascend or descend to their destination, accordingly. Therefore, the intermediate existence is not exclusive to any one of the six planes of existence, but when karmic causes and conditions are ripe, the one about to be reborn would be conceived or transformed into a certain type of being for the next life.

Before rebirth there are ways to alter the type of being one is to be reborn as. For instance, if during the intermediate state one hears the Buddhadharma, or one’s family conducts various Buddha activities and make offering to seek blessings for the deceased, the coming rebirth would be upwardly enhanced. On the other hand, if one clings to old grievances, with lingering disturbances

from relatives or old enemies, the coming rebirth would be altered downward, even to falling into one of the three lower planes.

Therefore, the esoteric tradition in Tibetan Buddhism especially emphasizes deliverance practices in the intermediate state, which in Tibetan is called “bardo.” Even the exoteric schools advocate assisting the dying in reciting the Buddha’s name and performing deliverance practices for seven days, for up to seven weeks after a death. To use Buddhadharma to aid those in the intermediate state is to invite them to listen to Buddhadharma so that they can resolve fixations in their mind, and to lessen vexation. Such sharing of Buddhadharma can also benefit and bring joy to ghosts and deities, thus incurring merits for the dead and bringing the effect deliverance.

Those at either extreme of virtue or evil need not go through the intermediate state because their karmic causes and conditions have ripened. It is like someone graduating from college having already made arrangements for study abroad or has already found a job. Perhaps due to family connections or better academic performance, he or she need not wait for opportunities to appear. In a way, this is similar to pigs, cows, or goats that are raised for food – from the moment of birth they are destined to be slaughtered.

In any case, if one diligently practices the Dharma, is devoted to doing good deeds, and has strong faith and unyielding vow, one need not fear falling into the three lower planes of existence. If they use the power of their faith, vows, and practice to help themselves and others, and strive to deliver sentient beings while seeking bodhi, their faith would help them transcend to the Pure Land, and their vows would keep them on the bodhisattva path of cultivation. Whether reborn in a Buddha Land or in this world, they move forward with no hesitation and without holding back. Therefore, for Buddhists who are full of faith and vows, there is no intermediate state, nor would they need others to perform deliverance practices in the intermediate state to deliver them.

Ying Ling: The Spirit of a Dead Infant

QUESTION

Do the stories about people being haunted by infant spirits have any real basis?

ANSWER

In recent years in Taiwan and some other overseas Chinese communities, belief in the presence of infant spirits (*ying ling*) has become popular. These so-called infant spirits include the spirits of aborted and still-born fetuses, or babies who died soon after birth. It is said that if these spirits are not pacified, they will create various ways to endanger their relatives as well as others with whom they hold grievances, thus, causing uneasiness in the family, and fears in society. These situations are the results of spiritual burdens brought about by birth control and premarital or unwed pregnancies. Therefore, some people constantly post large advertisements promoting services for “making offering to” infant spirits. They quote from the *Longevity Sutra* (Chn. *Changshou Jing*), claiming that they can liberate infant spirits and solve all the disturbances caused by them.

Some also claim that they can use talismans and spells to train infant spirits to be “infant soldiers” and to use them to discover people’s secrets and serve as messengers. Even more, that they can manipulate the infant soldiers to kill people thousands of miles away without leaving a trace. Sayings like these are certainly not related to Buddhism, or to any common beliefs during

any particular historical period or in a certain region. Since the stories about infant spirits have been circulated, not only the parents and families who had experienced abortions feel troubled, but also the general public who, when encountering unusual physical or mental situations, would become terribly superstitious, thinking that they might be haunted by an infant spirit. It almost seems like that there are infant spirits everywhere in our living environment, waiting to haunt people.

From the perspective of Buddhadharmā, all sentient beings are equal. Although human lifespans vary in length, their paths are the same after death, since they would all experience the intermediate state between death and the next rebirth. This would also be true for infants. After as many as forty-nine days in the intermediate state, they would be reborn as humans, devas in the various heavens, deities or ghosts, animals, or in hell. In other words, they will not stay unchanged as infants' spirits lingering and haunting the human world.

Indeed, some people are quite superstitious and nervous, believing they have discovered that people are possessed by infant spirits, and become endlessly entangled with what they believe to be a lingering grieving soul. However, most of these cases are due to psychological issues; even if there's really interference from an external spirit-force, it cannot be certain it comes from an infant spirit. In short, whether a disturbance is caused by the spirit-force of a ghost or deity, or otherwise, one simply cannot be definite that an infant spirit plays any role in this.

The anxiety and panic over the belief in infant spirits may have something to do with people's perception about young children's general demeanor. Some toddlers are difficult to reason with, and small infants are more innocent and ignorant. When they cry and whine incessantly, parents can only try to pacify and coax them. Some more difficult children would cry and fuss all day long and stay up all night, not because they were hungry or uncomfortable, but because they want company, attention, and pampering. Therefore,

when people believe that they are being haunted by infant spirits, they feel helpless, and they would assume that even if sutra chanting and Dharma sermons were offered, these infant spirits would not comprehend, or be influenced. For this reason, some cunning pretenders or opportunists boast of their ability to perform wizardry to provide deliverance to the infant spirits and to stop the haunting.

However, according to the Buddhist sutras, between dying in one life to rebirth in the next, sentient beings go through the intermediate state in which they share the similar form and shape, as their body before death, though somewhat smaller. Since infants are innocent, it would be improbable for them to seek revenge during the intermediate state. Even if the infant spirit passes through the intermediate state and is reborn in the plane of ghosts, and ghosts possess supranormal power, as such, since they are without the heavy burden of a physical body and the bondages of the five sense organs, they can easily be reached out to and persuaded. By all means, do not view infants after death as malicious spirits or evil ghosts.

According to common Buddhist practice, as soon as one dies, whether infant, young, or adult, the relatives should give offerings for the deliverance of the deceased. Offerings are made to the Three Jewels to accumulate merits and pray for blessings for the dead, so they would transcend to a virtuous plane of life or even be reborn in the Pure Land. There is no precedent about deliverance practices specifically for deceased infants or fetuses.

In the previously quoted *Longevity Sutra* which is a latter day addition to the addendum section of the Japanese Manji Tripitaka, there is a story that Buddha gave a sermon to a woman named “Inverted” (Chn. *Diandao*) who had domestic problems, and terminated the life of her fetus in its eighth month. The Buddha admonished her that the act of killing a fetus was, together with killing one’s father, killing one’s mother, injuring the Buddha, and causing disunity in a harmonious sangha, one of the five heinous sins.

To repent and atone for the guilt, she could accept and uphold the *Longevity Sutra*, recite it, or copy it either by her own effort or asking someone to do it for her. This will relieve her from receiving retribution and help her to be reborn in the Brahma heaven (Chn. *fantian*; Skt. *brahmaloka*). In this sutra, there is no mention of specific rituals to deliver the infant spirit; however, it does stress the protection of fetuses, and that killing a fetus is one of the five heinous sins. The five heinous sins commonly cited in most other sutras are killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing an arhat, injuring a buddha, and causing disunity in a harmonious sangha. Therefore, the guilt of killing a fetus has not been commonly recognized as a heinous sin in China despite being indicated so in the *Longevity Sutra*.

In Japan, where Kshitigarbha is known as Jizo, some claimed that infant spirits had prayed to the bodhisattva for deliverance; the claim, however, is inconsistent with historical records. According to records of Japanese common beliefs, the accounts of building statues in honor of Jizo for healing and longevity only appeared in the 11th century. After that, society gradually established the belief in him as a protector of infants. Thus, protecting children, granting easy childbirth, rearing children, and protecting expecting mothers has become the main emphasis in Jizo veneration. The goal is to seek and protect the safe birth of fetuses, and to enhance the safe and healthy growth of infants. It has no connection with haunting infant spirits.

As to the spread by a few of the infant spirit mischief and advocating deliverance practices for infant spirits, whether their motives are wholesome or greed for profit, it is apparent that they have nothing to do with the beliefs in authentic Buddhism.

On the Use of Psychic Mediums

QUESTION

How does Buddhism view the use of psychic mediums?

ANSWER

In ancient times a male medium was called a wizard, and female one a witch. In the study of religions, they are often referred to as sorcerers, medicine men, and magicians. In Siberia, northern Asia, and places such as Alaska, they are called shamans. They are seen as people who are able to communicate with deities, spirits, and ghosts. They are able to command certain ghosts and deities to repel other ghosts and deities; or they are able to solicit certain ghosts and deities to help people overcome various difficulties, and satisfy the various desires in their lives. Therefore, the mental and physical shortcomings of ordinary human beings create an inherent demand for the services of psychic mediums. As a result, since the beginning of human history, there has been evidence of the role of psychic mediums.

Highly advanced mediums were central figures in many religious beliefs, and were called priests or seers, and some people even thought of them as angels, or saints. Generally, these mediums do not have clear sense of right and wrong in accordance with public norms; therefore, after Christianity spread in Europe, witches and wizards were ruthlessly persecuted, and sometimes put to death. In China, witches and wizards were also viewed as the sources

of devilish messages that misguide common people; therefore, Confucius did not want to talk about extraordinary forces and disturbing spirits.

Why have mediums been viewed as extraordinary forces and disturbing spirits? It is because there is no legitimacy to the spirit force they acquire. Moreover, the worlds of these ghosts and deities do not have clear order and moral standards. Ordinarily, they urge people to act benevolently, yet, when their vested interests are contradicted and challenged, they will spread rumors, confound right and wrong, and mislead people. Therefore, since ancient times, although the beliefs in mediums in Chinese folk religion had its ups and downs, mediums never had enough appeal to be accepted as a refined and civilized practice.

From the Buddhist perspective, cultivating the good and accumulating blessings is based on observing the precepts and practicing giving, leading to blessings and rewards in the human and heavenly realms. It educates the masses from the perspective of cause and effect, that through sowing good causes, one will receive good rewards, and sowing evil causes will lead to bitter retribution. If one encounters disaster, hardship, poverty, and sickness, the best response is to repent, cultivate virtues, be kind, speak kind words, and do good deeds. As the saying goes, heaven will naturally help the good person. Due to one's diligence in cultivating good karma, one receives help from the Dharma protectors, and the sheltering and blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Thus, one would not need a medium to ask benevolent ghosts to dispel evil ones, or to use a benevolent deity to dispel deviant ones.

Mediums can be useful but they only serve as temporary aids, like skin surgery that removes the symptom of an ulcer but does not cure the condition. The result is that the cutting continues but the wound is always on the mend. Similarly, on the surface, getting help from a medium may seem to solve a problem; but in reality the problem is just a link in a chain of other

problems, and one gets stuck deeper and deeper. It is like smoking opium or injecting morphine – the addiction gets deeper and deeper. Nonetheless, the general public hardly has this self-awareness; it is like an octopus, which some scientists suggest, will eat its own tentacles to satisfy hunger. If that is true, it is a desperate solution that could eventually kill the octopus. Such temporary assistance from mediums violates the law of cause and effect and is against the law of nature.

Sometimes, through a medium's help, one may obtain unexpected momentary benefit. Yet, it is like a money lending scam which only provides illusory satisfaction. Therefore, Buddhists should not speak of deities and ghosts and serve as mediums, nor should they be on intimate terms with a medium. Instead, they should follow the guidance of Buddhadharma, seek good fortune on their own, and make the best effort to develop their own future.

Since the power of a medium comes from the spirit force of ghosts and deities, and ghosts and deities roam around without traces or regularity, any medium may be possessed by different spirit entities at different times. Soon after the spirit entities depart, the one who acted as their medium may become even weaker and less competent than ordinary people. The medium who banishes ghosts, heals diseases, eliminates disasters, and wards off evils for others, could incur bad retribution when the spirit entity abandons them. Therefore, mediums are always in fear of losing their power when the spirit entity leaves. Consequently, mediums perform rituals to invite, welcome, worship, and nourish ghosts, staying in touch with and using ghosts and spirits to achieve their goals and protect themselves.

Supranormal Powers and Unusual Abilities

QUESTION

How does Buddhism view supranormal powers and unusual abilities?

ANSWER

Buddhism acknowledges that supranormal powers do exist. Ordinary people may attain the five supranormal powers; enlightened beings who have transcended the mundane may attain six, while buddhas are capable of the three insights and the six supranormal powers.

The five supranormal powers that ordinary people may attain are:

1. Knowledge into past existences: knowing one's own past lives as well as that of others.
2. Divine eye: seeing into the future and seeing minute things and things at a great distance in the present.
3. Knowledge of other minds: knowing others' mental activities.
4. Divine ear: hearing sounds at any distance.
5. Unimpeded bodily actions: moving through space with ease, transforming things at will, coming and going without a trace, traveling thousands of miles in an instant, and producing things as easily as taking something out of one's pocket.

According to a person's depth of practice, the reach and duration of their supranormal powers will vary. However, these abilities are conditional, contaminated, and done with attachments. They have nothing to do with

the path of liberation and are certainly not the bodhisattva path. Therefore, enlightened beings must realize the sixth supranormal power – the power of the extinction of contaminants, which is to sever attachment to self and attain nirvana. In the tradition of individual liberation it means to become an arhat; in the Mahayana tradition it means to attain at least the first stage or beyond the seventh stage of the bodhisattva path.

Only buddhas are able to attain the three insights, which are: knowledge into past existences, the divine eye, and extinction of defilements. While these are three of the supranormal powers described above, they are called “insights” because only in a buddha are the supranormal powers complete, thorough, perfect, and free of obstacles; they are skillful means to deliver sentient beings, not for the purpose of manifesting occult abilities and freakish magic. It is common for heretics to assume that after having experienced responses from deities and ghosts, and being able to command them or being dispatched by them, they have achieved the three insights and six supranormal powers. This is actually a very naïve and dangerous view.

There are specific ways to cultivate supranormal powers; some develop them through practicing samadhi, and some through the use of mantras or spells. To achieve these powers through practicing samadhi, one must first learn how to concentrate, how to strengthen one’s mind power, and then use it to connect one’s bodily functions to the energy fields in the universe. One can then continue by training oneself to attune to the appropriate frequencies and enhance one’s ability of reception of and connection to these fields until the supranormal powers come into function. All these powers are within the bounds of the material world; without the material basis, these unusual abilities will not be able to manifest, nor can people train to acquire them. Therefore, fundamentally speaking, even people who advocate materialism can practice to achieve supranormal powers.

Reciting mantras to achieve supranormal powers requires a specific or several kinds of mantras or spells to connect with or command ghosts and deities, either to use them or be used by them. As explained in a previous chapter, a particular mantra or spell represents the symbol or power of a certain ghost or deity; hence, that mantra or spell will have specific responses associated with that ghost or deity.

Comparing these two ways of developing supranormal powers, the powers from samadhi would fade when the practitioner's power of concentration fades; and the powers from mantra would disappear should the user violate some taboos, or when the deities and ghosts depart. The ghosts and deities can manifest their power by attaching to a person's senses, or by whispering in their ears. Such modes of attached powers or messages are at the level of receiving external responses, not quite at the level of supranormal power. However, because one is not always aware that ghosts or deities have attached to them, it is easy for someone to conclude that their powers are the product of their own efforts.

However, having supranormal powers doesn't mean that one can violate the karmic principle of cause and effect, or change the fact of reality. One with supranormal powers can only receive information in advance or from a distance, and may be able to temporarily dodge or impede impending calamities; but supranormal power is a natural phenomenon, and therefore cannot violate the laws of nature. Hence, a person who likes to show off their supranormal powers will only mislead people without being of true help in the disorderly world; it would not benefit a chaotic society, or be useful to those at a loss. Rather, the more obsessed a person is with supranormal powers, the farther he or she strays from the normal way of life. Therefore, the Buddha forbade his disciples from misusing supranormal powers, and not all arhats had supranormal powers.

On the contrary, one might use supranormal powers to temporarily influence people in a positive manner, but they cannot keep the effects on people for long. Take Mahamaudgalyayana and Utpalavarna as examples: they were foremost in supranormal powers among the arhat bhikshus and bhikshunis, respectively. Yet, Mahamaudgalyayana was beaten to death by followers of Mrgalandika – a rival sect, and Utpalavarna was killed by Devadatta's iron fist. In the past in India and China, very few masters would use supranormal powers to promote the Dharma; among those few, after using their supranormal powers, they would likely leave or pass on to another life.

Someone who shows off their supranormal powers without restraint may eventually lose their life at an inopportune time, in a calamitous situation, for no good reason, or under horrific conditions. This is because of their violation of the cause and effect principle of karma, and the result of acting against nature.

As people know Tibet is located on a high plateau, and in the mountains are many who diligently cultivate tantra and samadhi, and practice supranormal powers. Among them are those who could command the wind and call upon rain, turn beans into foot soldiers, or send a flying sword to kill people from afar. However, in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, there were times when the survival of the Dharma was threatened, as when the Dharma faced destruction and elimination by evil kings. During these times, the powers of these practitioners of the supranormal became ineffective.

It is said that quite a few people in Taiwan claim to have the three insights and six supranormal powers. Yet, on the island in any given year we can experience typhoons, earthquakes, floods, as well as gangsters, mobs, hooligans, and robbers, who disturb social order and peace. Why are those folks with supranormal powers so powerless to prevent these calamities, showing no concern about them?

The power of karma is clearly inconceivable; therefore, one cannot avoid one's just share of the collective as well as individual karmic retribution. Blindly believing in and relying on ghosts or deities for help will only increase trouble, diminish wealth, and waste more time and energy. Hence, Confucius did not want to discuss extraordinary forces and disturbing spirits, and learned people never found them credible. In today's civilized society with widely available knowledge, one should look at everything from the perspectives of authentic Buddhadharma and explore solutions with one's wisdom and diligent effort, not superstitiously believing in the miracles of supranormal powers. That is because in reality, these so-called miracles are nothing but illusory conjuring of ghosts and deities. (For further information please refer to the chapter "The Extent and Functions of Supranormal Powers" in my book, *Knowing the Path of Learning Buddhism*.)

The Five Eyes

QUESTION

What is the meaning of the Buddhist concept of the Five Eyes?

ANSWER

In some Buddhist images, we may notice that there are three eyes on the face, with an extra eye between the eyebrows. In reality, human beings do not have a third physical eye, so in Buddhism the “third eye” symbolizes the eye of the mind. The eye of the mind implies something basic as well as something profound: the basic meaning would refer to the activities in ordinary people’s minds; as to the profound meaning, we need to talk about the Five Eyes of Buddhism, which says that in addition to the physical eye, there are four eyes of the mind – the divine eye, the wisdom eye, the Dharma eye, and the buddha eye.

The meaning of the Five Eyes refers to the mind’s progressive abilities to observe and examine the arising and perishing of phenomena, from that of ordinary people to that of buddhas. Some people refer to the eyes as the “gate to wisdom” or the “window of the soul” because of the eyes’ ability to distinguish objects and thus acquire knowledge. The more advanced one’s practice, the broader will be the range of functions of their eyes of the mind. With their physical eyes, people have limited distance and breadth of eyesight; they cannot see things too small, too large, too far, or too close, nor can they adjust well to darkness or strong light. If one could acquire the divine

eye, one would be able to observe the physical world at ease, with no hindrance due to distance, size, or brightness.

Yet, there are many levels of devas. There are devas residing on the ground (Chn. *dijutian*; Skt. *bhūmyavacaradeva*), devas residing in the air (Chn. *kongjutian*; Skt. *antariksadeva*), as well as devas in the dhyana heavens (Chn. *chandingtian*). Devas residing on the ground include ghosts and deities with blessings in folk belief, devas in the heaven of the four heavenly kings (Skt. *caturmaharajakayika*), and devas in the heaven of the thirty-three gods (Skt. *trayastrimsa*). Devas residing in air include those in the heaven of Yama to those in the heaven of the gods who have power over the creations of others (Skt. *paranirmitavasavartin*) in the desire realm. The dhyana heavens consist of the twenty-two levels in the form and the formless realms. As the levels go up, the functioning of the divine eye increases.

The divine eye can see what the physical eye cannot; besides not being limited by scope, distance, brightness of the objects, it is not obstructed by barriers or opacity, and does not rely on light to reflect images. Rather, it is the reflection or refraction of mental power. The divine eye can be acquired through karmic retribution or cultivation. Generally, all ghosts and deities have the divine eye to various degrees through retribution. With only a spirit existence, ghosts and deities are not constrained by a physical body, and thus, hindrance due to material is reduced. In general, psychic mediums are ordinary humans who host ghosts and deities, and rely on the divine eye of the ghosts and deities to see things that ordinary people cannot.

For human beings, practicing samadhi may help them gain the divine eye even though that is not the purpose of samadhi. Besides, there are specific practices to cultivate supranormal power through which people may acquire the divine eye, but acquiring that ability does not mean they have therefore attained samadhi.

Besides the functions stated above, those with the divine eye may also foresee future events and phenomena. Since a certain deed will lead to a certain karmic retribution, the occurrence of any event in our life must already have had its cause and effect established in the past. Even before a phenomenon occurs, the forces that contributed to it have already been formed which, without other intervening factors, will become a future reality. Therefore, people with the divine eye are able to see the future, and the more powerful one's divine eye, the farther and more accurately one can see.

When it comes to accuracy, the divine eye is not necessarily reliable, since when other factors come into play, the future may not occur as expected. It is like the game of Go – the more skilled player can see more potential moves, while the less skilled sees fewer. However, when two players of similar ability play against each other, none can predict in the beginning of the game exactly how it will end. Because there are too many variables in life, predestination is only local and fleeting. All phenomena arise through causes and conditions, and they change when conditions change. Therefore, Buddhadharmā is not preoccupied with cultivating the divine eye, and does not encourage people to do so.

Besides the physical eye and the divine eye, there are the wisdom eye, the Dharma eye, and the buddha eye. Arhats are said to have attained the wisdom eye through which they see the twelve links of dependent origination (Skt. *nidana*) that characterize the samsaric process of birth and death, and are liberated from the cycle of birth and death. No longer bound by the world of body and mind, they depart from the five skandhas, and transcend the three realms. Apparently, this description of wisdom eye differs greatly from common sayings such as “one who recognizes a hero has the wisdom eye,” and “one in unique possession of a wisdom eye.” In other words, the common person's reference to “wisdom eye” relates to worldly wisdom which still contains the notion of self, though it implies a more profound, sharp,

and nimble ability. The wisdom eye of the arhat, however, is selfless and without attachment.

Bodhisattvas from the first stage (Skt. *bhumi*) and beyond possess the Dharma eye, through which they can see the basic nature of all phenomena (Skt. *dharmata*), and have realized one or multiple aspects of the Dharma Body of the buddhas. This is in contrast to common belief that someone who possesses wizardry also possesses the Dharma eye or the common practice of addressing those having some knowledge of the Buddhadharmas as having the Dharma eye. In fact, the Dharma eye is related to the realization of the Dharma Body. Even “seeing the nature” (Chn. *jianxing*) cannot be regarded as having the full Dharma eye; it only convinces the practitioners of the existence and the functions of the Dharma eye.

The Dharma Body is present everywhere and at all times; it is not material, nor is it immaterial; it is not with attributes, nor is it without attributes; it is not not-with-attributes, nor is it not-without-attributes. We can say that everything is it, or nothing is it – to those with attachment, nothing is it; to the enlightened, everything is it. A bodhisattva with the full Dharma eye is a great being of Dharma Body (*dharmakaya-mahasattva*). It is a state beyond what ordinary beings can imagine.

There are two aspects of non-self, or selflessness (Skt. *anatman*; Chn. *wuwo*): one is non-self of the person, the other is non-self of phenomena. One who realizes non-self of the person and departs from grasping at the personal self becomes an arhat. Those who realize non-self of phenomena and depart from grasping at substantiality of phenomena become bodhisattvas at the first ground (Skt. *bhumi*) or beyond. In other words, an arhat departs from grasping at the personal self, attains the wisdom eye, and transcends the three realms. Bodhisattvas go further; they depart from grasping at substantiality of phenomena, realize the Dharma Body and attain the Dharma eye. Although they are still in the three realms, they are not bound by the cycle

of birth and death, and are called great beings of Dharma Body. There are some pseudo-Buddhists who proclaim that they possess the wisdom eye or the Dharma eye; actually, they do not even have the divine eye. What they experience is merely due to the movement of inner vital energy (*qi*) or spirit force they receive from ghosts and deities.

As for the buddha eye, it encompasses the functions of the four eyes discussed above. It is wisdom in its totality, the great perfect mirror wisdom (Chn. *dayuanjingzhi*; Skt. *adarsajnana*), the great complete enlightenment, or the unsurpassed bodhi.

Buddhist Prophecies

QUESTION

What is the meaning of prophesy in Buddhism?

ANSWER

The Sanskrit word *vyakarana* (“prophesy”) refers to one of the twelve categories of sutras spoken by the Buddha. It entails the Buddha prophesying that certain practitioners who had resolved to attain perfect enlightenment would definitely attain buddhahood. During the era of the monarchy, the king’s first son in most cases was destined to inherit the throne; the investiture of the crown prince was also called *vyakarana*. In ancient India, the ritual includes sprinkling the crown of the prince’s head with water from the four seas, and therefore, the successor was also commonly called anointed (“crown-sprinkled”) prince. This symbolized that he would rule all the territories and people within the four seas.

Among the Buddhist sutras, the *vyakarana* are the Buddha’s prophecies of when certain disciples would attain buddhahood. For instance, the “Vyakarana” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* foretells that 500 arhat disciples of the Buddha would attain buddhahood. In another chapter, the Buddha prophesizes that even the infamous Devadatta would attain buddhahood. The thinking behind *vyakarana* in Buddhadharma is to show that everyone can become a buddha, regardless of who they are, as long as they cultivate Buddhadharma. Then, based on that person’s capacity, method of practice, and whether they are

lax or diligent, the respective time needed for them to attain buddhahood can be foretold.

Who was qualified to receive the Buddha's prophesy? It would have to be bodhisattvas who have reached the stage of non-regression. Accordingly, the arhats who received such prophesies in the *Lotus Sutra* were actually Mahayana bodhisattvas. But such prophesies are not limited to the Mahayana. In fact, saints of individual liberation who attain the first stage of arhatship and above are prophesized to reach full arhatship with certainty. Those who attain the first stage, the "stream enterers" (Skt. *srotaapanna*), will attain full arhatship after seven more cycles of birth and death; those who attain the third stage, the "non-returners" (Skt. *anagamin*), will be reborn in one of the heavens of pure abodes and reach arhatship without returning to the human world.

The Buddha is able to thoroughly see the minds and practices of all sentient beings. When a practitioner reaches the stage of non-regression, his or her future then becomes clear. Therefore, making a prophecy about him or her is not a prediction, a guessing game, nor predestination. It is like a guide who points out to the traveler the path on a map, the distance, and the estimated arrival time. Usually teachers in school can foresee when the students would graduate after they enter the school. There is no mystery involved.

In the early days prophesy was not a feature of the Chan School nor was there any ritual associated to it. In later days, when selecting and pre-appointing successors to the abbot, monasteries started to hold a "prophesy" ceremony for the selected successor. In ancient times, Dharma transmissions and prophesies were a matter of mind transmission, with one mind affirming another. There was no ritual for this mind-to-mind transmission nor was there a need of any certification of proof. Moreover, the prophesied individual – the one who received the transmission – did not necessarily end up as the abbot. In later years, Chinese monasteries issued Dharma certificates during prophecy rituals as a means of succession planning for the abbotship.

Those who received the prophecy were not necessarily someone who had experienced enlightenment. Therefore, it is *vyakarana* in name only, without its true meaning of Dharma transmission; as such we will not further discuss this subject here.

Some practitioners [who are often pseudo-Buddhists] have had mystical experiences like to make predictions for others that are akin to Buddhist prophecies. If they only predicted ordinary occurrences in everyday life, those would be tricks performed by mediums and shamans and are not worthy of attention. If they gave prophecy to anoint their followers to become arhats or buddhas, it would be a big lie, since not being buddhas how would they be able to perform true *vyakarana*? Some of these people may proclaim themselves as buddhas, but in the Buddhist sutras there's no record of Shakyamuni Buddha prophesying when so-and-so would become a buddha before the advent of Maitreya Bodhisattva as a buddha. Since there was no record of a prophecy from Shakyamuni Buddha about these individuals, how would they be able to give prophecies for others?

Currently, many individuals proclaim themselves to be reincarnations of buddhas or great bodhisattvas. These individuals may be able to show compassion and willingness to aid sentient beings; however, ego and arrogance actually are deeply embedded in their minds. This completely deviates from Shakyamuni Buddha's Dharma; it is not considered genuine and orthodox Buddhism. Followers of genuine Buddhism should recognize the differences. Truly great practitioners would always identify themselves as ordinary persons; otherwise, they would likely be drawn to the retinues of ghosts, deities and evil forces. Shakyamuni Buddha stressed that buddhas who are active in this human world with a human body would embrace human nature and have a perfectly healthy human character. That's why Master Taixu (1890–1947) promoted the idea that “to perfect oneself as a human being is to accomplish buddhahood.”

Is the Buddha Omnipotent?

QUESTION

Is the Buddha omnipotent?

ANSWER

We can express the depth and breadth of the Buddha's wisdom and merits in one sentence: "Not knowing is to completely know, not being capable is to be completely capable." Here, "not knowing" does not mean being ignorant, and "not being able" does not mean being powerless. Existence and non-existence are two sides of the same coin; existence is to be found in non-existence, while non-existence contains existence. Only non-existence contains the whole, while existence however profound or enormous, has its limits and cannot contain everything.

The Buddha possesses complete and perfect wisdom and merits; as such he cannot be described through any form, nor can we characterize him as existing or non-existing. The Buddha's Dharma Body is the totality of the realm of all dharmas, which is why it is called the Dharma Body. The realm of all dharmas is the whole of space and time; as the Dharma Body pervades every point of space and time in the dharma realm, it has no self-center. The Dharma Body spontaneously gives rise to responses at any time and in any space, in accordance to sentient beings' virtuous roots and merits, manifesting in a way and form known as the Transformation Body. As a manifestation in a

limited region in space and time, the Transformation Body does not represent the whole, and is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. Only sentient beings that have the corresponding virtuous roots, merits, and causal conditions can come in touch with and sense the existence of the Transformation Body.

Yet this Transformation Body is not the Buddha's "original face"; it is the result of a response brought about by sentient beings. According to the *Lotus Sutra*, "The Buddha appears in the world for one great reason alone." In other words, the appearance of Shakyamuni Buddha was a response to the virtuous roots of all sentient beings in this world. Therefore, it is said in the *Lotus Sutra*, "Shakyamuni is a manifested buddha (*jifo*)."¹ A manifested buddha is the Transformation Body while the fundamental buddha (*benfo*) is the Dharma Body and Reward Body. Shakyamuni Buddha experienced all the phenomena of birth, old age, sickness and death, practicing Dharma, attaining buddhahood and entering nirvana; therefore, [as a human] he was not the ultimate true buddha. The ultimate buddha is formless and without attributes, and yet is one with all forms and attributes. This is similar to, but not the same as the pantheistic god who pervades time and space and who is loved by people, and yet cannot love them in return.

In contrast, the Buddha's Dharma Body pervades time and space; it is present in all time and space but is not limited to any point in time or space; it possesses all the strengths of wisdom and field of blessings and gives rise to appropriate responses in accordance with the needs of sentient beings. Even so, it remains unmoving, without doing anything. Therefore, as far as the Dharma Body and the Reward Body are concerned, the Buddha is omniscient and omnipotent, yet not knowing and not capable. The same cannot be said of the Transformation Body. The Buddha being omniscient and omnipotent is not the same as the "omnipotent God" or "King among kings" in theistic religions. This is because the Buddha cannot alter sentient beings' karmic

retribution; he can only educate and teach sentient beings to strive with their own effort to change their fates. However, whether such efforts bear fruit also depends on the conditions of each individual.

The sutras use the metaphor that the Buddha's compassion is like the sun which illuminates the earth without discrimination. Indeed, the Buddha's compassion illuminates all sentient beings, regardless of their karmic roots. However, the benefit that sentient beings receive can be drastically different from one to another. For instance, although a person who was born blind receives sunshine, they would never see what the sun's rays are actually like. There are insects that live underground and microbes that live in the dark, and though they enjoy the benefits of sunshine directly or indirectly, they would not know what sunshine really is. Also, although people lived in the regions where Shakyamuni Buddha taught the Dharma, many were not aware who he was. On the causal ground, as bodhisattvas all buddhas of the past, present, and future vow to liberate all sentient beings. However, while many have attained buddhahood, there are still countless sentient beings who have never heard of the Dharma. All these illustrate that the Buddha is not almighty or omnipotent.

While he was living in this world, the Buddha also said that he could not deliver people who lacked karmic affinity with him, nor was he able to alter sentient beings' fixed karma. Therefore, when the Buddha's home country was invaded by King Virudhaka from a neighboring kingdom, and many of the Buddha's fellow tribespeople were slaughtered, the Buddha was not able to use his supranormal powers to prevent the catastrophe. What a buddha can do is to educate sentient beings about the Dharma and motivate them to cultivate good deeds, accumulate blessings, eradicate calamities, and avert misfortunes. So, the reality of the Buddha delivering sentient beings turns out to be one of sentient beings delivering themselves; otherwise it

would violate the law of nature as well as the order in accordance with karmic cause and effect.

As to the Buddha's omniscience, he knows the past, present, and future karmic and conditional relationships of all sentient beings in the ten dharma realms. Unlike sentient beings that can access limited time and space, the Buddha is cognizant of the totality from any point in time and space. Because any point in time and space to the Buddha is the total time and space to sentient beings; the Buddha does not belong to any certain time or space. Sentient beings are conscious of the past through their memories; those with supranormal powers are aware of past and future through resonances. The Buddha knows everything through direct realization of totality, although it is impossible to explain everything to sentient beings simultaneously. Space and time is perceived by the Buddha in its totality and wholeness, with no differentiation as to distance or size. Hence, the Buddha says that he is aware of all sentient beings' pasts and futures. However, he is not able to recount them all even if he were to do so through kalpas as innumerable as sands in the Ganges River. Therefore, except for a few instances, the sutras do not recount the past and future of sentient beings.

The Buddha did not speak much about the past or the future, for as long as one seizes the thought in the present moment, the entire temporal process from ordinary beings to buddhahood is already encompassed, together with the whole of the spatial dimension covering their activities. For the Buddha, the mind is the essence of the noumenon principle; and by realizing this noumenal essence and uncovering the wisdom of the mind, one can attain omniscience. But while a buddha's mind is omniscient, there is no need to speak of it being omnipotent; this is because buddhahood is inconceivable and indescribable – one cannot conceive it with thoughts nor interpret it through words.

Buddhahood and Retribution

QUESTION

Would one still receive karmic retribution even after attaining buddhahood?

ANSWER

Yes indeed, one may receive retribution even after attaining buddhahood. When we observe the sages and great people in this world, we see that even they would encounter many unfortunate events in their lives. For instance, after Jesus Christ was betrayed by his disciple Judas, he was arrested by the Romans and crucified. Confucius experienced starvation in the states of Chen and Cai. Wen Tianxiang was executed. Abraham Lincoln and Mahatma Gandhi were both assassinated, and Sun Yat-sen was kidnapped in London.

Similarly, before and after he attained buddhahood, Shakyamuni Buddha also endured many adversities, such as practicing asceticism for six years in the snowy mountains, and subduing demon forces under the Bodhi Tree. He also experienced returning from alms-rounds empty-handed, enduring back pains from cold and windy weather, being framed and wrongly accused by women, and suffering a foot injury due to the rock dropped by his disciple. He suffered on learning of his Shakya clan members being slaughtered, and suffered severe stomach pain due to eating poisonous mushrooms before entering nirvana. Needless to say, there are many examples of receiving retribution among Buddha's disciples even after they have attained arhatship. For

example, the revered Maudgalyayana who excelled at supranormal powers, and Bhikshuni Utpalavarna were both beaten to death.

Religions in the East and West hold their own respective theories and views on this subject. Sages and saints who endured adversities demonstrated that their great character and great achievements did not come easily. In Christianity, it is said that Jesus Christ suffered to atone the sins of human beings. In Buddhism the theory is different, and there are two perspectives: First, from the Dharma Body, the Buddha appeared as human in order to set an example for ordinary people, and to show that even ordinary people can also achieve buddhahood. In his manifestation as a human being, all miseries, happiness, misfortunes, and blessings that human beings endure will also occur to him. The Buddha himself is not troubled by all the miseries, happiness, misfortunes, and blessings. However, in order to lead sentient beings in the midst of these situations towards the path of practicing buddhadharma, he appeared expediently as an ordinary human being encountering the same sort of conditions.

Human beings who reside in this world must have a physical body and with it bodily needs and fears. If there are conflicts between one's needs and one's fears, trials and tribulations will result. Hence, Mencius says, "When heaven is about to bestow a great responsibility on a person, it first tests their mind and will, and toils their sinews and bones."

If a person can attain buddhahood without working hard and experiencing any trial and tribulation, there would be no need for practice and cultivation, and neither would it demonstrate the greatness of the sages. Therefore, after the Buddha attained buddhahood, although he had acquired the six supranormal powers and the three insights, he continued to travel in the human world as a mendicant begging for food. His needs for clothing, food, lodging, transportation, and all other aspects of life were the same as

the needs of ordinary people. When his disciples greeted him, they would ask “Is it difficult to deliver sentient beings?” and “How is your health?” They seldom saw him use supranormal powers to solve worldly problems, either for himself or for sentient beings; he would use only wisdom and methods common in this world to solve human problems.

The second explanation deals with bodhisattvas and arhats when they are in their final rebirth, after which they will not be subject to another cycle of birth and death in the three realms, or be afflicted by suffering. Therefore, they would need to completely redeem the effects of all their bad karmic causes, accumulated since time without beginning when they were still ordinary beings. During the Buddha’s time, there was a rule that required a follower to first repay all their debts, and fulfill all secular responsibilities and obligations before entering monastic life. A convict, a debtor, or a person without consent from parents and spouses, would not be allowed to become a monastic.

These days, we also ask anyone who wants to join our monastery to first completely resolve all issues in their secular affairs, be it monetary or personal. Only after the first step of taking care of their secular business are they allowed to join the monastery. Therefore, while still in their last life cycle and before attaining buddhahood, bodhisattvas would definitely be receiving karmic retribution from past karmic causes. When they attain buddhahood, although they are no longer afflicted by vexation or by either suffering or happiness, they still have the physical body and are still active in the human world, until they enter nirvana without remainder; they are still affected by the material world and that constitutes the final karmic retribution. However, a buddha who has attained liberation of the mind could still experience pain and other sensations in their body, just as ordinary people do; the difference is that a buddha would not be afflicted by feelings of sadness and happiness, anger and joy. Therefore, the effects of a buddha’s retribution differ from that

of ordinary people. Receiving retribution is to take responsibility of one's karma, and attaining liberation is to find freedom and ease from vexations.

For Mahayana arhats, bodhisattvas, and buddhas who return to this world to deliver sentient beings in fulfillment of their vows, they appear as transformation bodies, not because of karmic retribution. Ordinary beings may look at them as if they were enduring birth, death, waning, aging, and sickness; but they would not be afflicted by these phenomena.

Attaining Buddhahood and Delivering Sentient Beings

QUESTION

Should bodhisattvas vow to deliver sentient beings before they attain buddhahood?

ANSWER

According to the chapter titled “Karmic Retribution of Sentient Beings in Jambudvīpa” in the *Original Vows of Kshitigarbha (Earth Store) Bodhisattva Sutra*, countless of kalpas ago, Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva was the ruler in a small kingdom, and a friend of the neighboring king. In both kingdoms, people often committed evil acts and seldom did good deeds. To improve the situation, the two kings wanted to find ways to help people become more virtuous. The first king vowed to attain buddhahood quickly in order to liberate sentient beings from suffering. The second king vowed to deliver sentient beings from suffering, so that they may live in peace and attain enlightenment, even before attaining buddhahood himself. The king who vowed to attain buddhahood quickly eventually attained it and was known as Sarvajñasiddha Tathagata (“Thus Come One Who Has Attained Omniscience”) innumerable kalpas ago. The second king, who vowed to deliver sentient beings before attaining buddhahood, was Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva, who has yet to attain buddhahood.

Looking at these two cases people might ask, “Which should I aspire to first, attaining buddhahood or helping others to reach liberation?” The answer depends on one’s aspirations. When he was still a king, Sarvajnasiddha Buddha vowed to attain buddhahood quickly in order to deliver sentient beings; he did not say he wanted to attain buddhahood first, and then deliver sentient beings later. In other words, he vowed to attain buddhahood as a result of completing his bodhisattva path; after becoming buddha he would still deliver sentient beings. In fact, after attaining buddhahood he lived for sixty thousand kalpas, so the sentient beings delivered by him were countless.

The second king, Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva, vowed to deliver all sentient beings ahead of attaining buddhahood, and since his vow is perpetual, to this day Kshitigarbha is still a bodhisattva. Based on his own aspirations, Kshitigarbha did not want to follow the usual bodhisattva path of taking three *asamkheya kalpas* – so-called because they are incalculably long – plus one hundred kalpas to attain buddhahood. This does not mean that everyone needs to make the same vow as either Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva or Sarvajnasiddha Buddha.

Bodhisattvas experience rebirth due to the power of their vows, while ordinary sentient beings experience rebirth due to the power of their karma. Bodhisattvas take rebirth again and again in the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness for the purpose of delivering sentient beings, while ordinary sentient beings wander through the three realms to receive karmic retribution. Though in the three realms, bodhisattvas are free beings who have already achieved liberation, ordinary sentient beings are pitiful beings bound by karmic retribution to the cycles of birth and death. Since saintly bodhisattvas are free and at ease, to them there’s no difference between attaining buddhahood first or liberating sentient beings first. Therefore, Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva vowed not to become a buddha as long as hell is not empty.

Among all bodhisattvas, his compassionate vow stood above all others. Other bodhisattvas who have not made this vow follow the customary bodhisattva path of practicing for three great kalpas before becoming buddhas.

To follow the bodhisattva path is to vow to pursue buddhahood while also transforming sentient beings. The vow does not mean that one would attain buddhahood having to deliver sentient beings along the way. In the *Kshitigarbha Sutra*, Sarvajnasiddha Buddha vowed to reach buddhahood quickly, but that's not to say that he did not go through three great kalpas of practice and delivering sentient beings. However, compared with Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva, who is still going through numerous kalpas of time on the bodhisattva path, Sarvajnasiddha Buddha attained buddhahood more quickly. Accordingly, "I vow to attain buddhahood quickly in order to deliver sentient beings," and "I vow to deliver all sentient beings before attaining buddhahood," are just different compassionate vows of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Delivering Sentient Beings

QUESTION

Why should the Buddha deliver sentient beings?

ANSWER

In the *Diamond Sutra* the Buddha says to Subhuti: “Those to whom you refer are neither sentient beings nor non-sentient beings.” The sutra also says, “According to the Tathagata, sentient beings are not sentient beings; they are merely called sentient beings.” Also, “Truthfully, there are no sentient beings to be delivered by the Tathagata; if there were sentient beings to be delivered by him, he would be holding the notion of a self, others, sentient beings, and lifespan.” To deliver sentient beings is a vow made by future buddhas when they make the great resolution to attain buddhahood. It is a vow made before the attainment of buddhahood, and thus while one still holds the sense of self. Therefore, before bodhisattvas and ordinary people attain buddhahood, there are sentient beings to be delivered.

But after one attains buddhahood, there will no longer be sentient beings or buddhas; otherwise, there will still be a duality. If there is still the notion of those who deliver in relation to those who are delivered, it would not be complete. In that case, one is yet to realize the Dharma Body in its totality. This is because upon attaining the Dharma Body in its totality, there will be no more distinctions such as inside and outside, this and that. It is like

a drop of water that comes from the ocean and returns to the ocean. From the ocean's perspective, all water belongs to the entirety of water, and only when seeing it from each drop's perspective are there rivers, streams, rain, dew, snow, frost, ice, and fog.

Again the *Diamond Sutra* says, "Virtuous men and women who vow to attain the unsurpassed perfect wisdom of a buddha (Skt. *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*), should give rise to such a mind: 'I should deliver all sentient beings, and when all sentient beings are delivered, there is really no one sentient being that is delivered.'" Before attaining buddhahood, all aspiring bodhisattvas must deliver sentient beings; therefore, there are sentient beings to be delivered. So, from the standpoint of bodhisattvas, there are always sentient beings to be delivered. Even after reaching the first bodhisattva ground, knowing there are no sentient beings to deliver, they would still strive to deliver sentient beings. After reaching the eighth bodhisattva ground, it would be a natural process, and they no longer need to make a deliberate effort to deliver sentient beings.

Therefore, upon becoming a buddha one would no longer need to deliver sentient beings, because in fact there are no sentient beings to deliver. Rather, all sentient beings deliver themselves. They receive resonating response of buddhas and bodhisattvas in manifested forms depending on the level of their virtuous roots, merits and blessings, and karmic affinity. These manifestations are the buddhas and bodhisattvas in the minds of sentient beings, not the buddhas and bodhisattvas out there.

The virtuous roots of sentient beings are inherent but without cultivation and nurturing, they would not grow and manifest. The more one strives to learn Dharma, the more one can resonate with the responses of compassionate guidance from buddhas and bodhisattvas. One needs to first help oneself so that one can be helped by others; only then would they receive resonating manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Buddhism often uses the analogy of a bell – when a bell is struck lightly it chimes softly; when struck firmly it chimes loudly, but if not struck it won't chime by itself. Therefore, if sentient beings do not strive to grow their virtuous roots, even though the Buddha's Dharma Body is omnipresent, it would not be of help. To grow their virtuous roots, people should generate bodhi-mind; it means that when sentient beings resolve to strive for buddhahood, they would obtain the Buddha's guidance and resonating response; when they attain buddhahood, they would receive and resonate with sentient beings' request for guidance, rather than for the Buddha to seek resonance with sentient beings. On attaining buddhahood, all buddhas are omniscient. That is why they are said to be completely and perfectly knowing and enlightened, and to respond to requests without fail. When sentient beings ask for help, the Buddha will definitely respond.

The Buddha does not rely on knowledge to deliver sentient beings. The Buddha's omniscience does not mean that he needs to know everything known by all sentient beings, nor does he need to base his response on the logic and ideals in the experience of sentient beings. This is because the Buddha is the whole, while sentient beings are partial and individual. The Buddha can give sentient beings what they need, without having to learn what sentient beings know. Rather, he would give directly to sentient beings what they need. Therefore, sentient beings of different capacities benefit differently from the Dharma. The analytical and inductive methods used by ordinary human beings are based on individual and partial perspectives. The capacity of the Buddha's mind contains the whole; therefore, his completely and perfectly knowing cannot be explained or measured by the methods used by ordinary people.

The buddhas we see in this world, such as Shakyamuni Buddha, principally exist in his Transformation Body. They look like human beings when in the human realm, like heavenly beings when in heaven, and like hell denizens

when in hell. When among a particular type of sentient beings, buddhas are like that type of sentient being. As such a manifested buddha has a shape and form, and exists in space and time. Therefore, he would need to learn in order to attain all knowledge of human beings; he would then use that knowledge as tools to deliver all sentient beings, thus benefitting them. The Buddha can simultaneously appear as countless forms in countless places to enlighten countless sentient beings. Yet, the essence of his Dharma Body does not move.

Therefore, simply because the Transformation Body of a buddha arises and subsides, it does not mean that his Dharma Body would also arise and subside. It is also not correct to assume that the Dharma Body of a buddha has limitations just because his Transformation Body needs to acquire human knowledge. In fact, the Transformation Body of a buddha is also completely and perfectly knowing; this is because in its different forms the Transformation Body is never apart from the Dharma Body. However, it is not correct to say that the Dharma Body's complete and perfect knowing can be deduced from the knowledge and ability of the Transformation Body as perceived by ordinary sentient beings.

Cultivating Beneficial Karmic Affinity Extensively

QUESTION

What does it mean to cultivate beneficial karmic affinity extensively?

ANSWER

To cultivate good connections with people is called “forming *yuan*.” *Yuan* means “connections” or “relations.” When two or more people have relationships through previous interactions, they are said to have karmic affinity, or *yuan*. A relationship that benefits both parties is “beneficial karmic affinity,” while a relationship that does not involve personal desires is “pure karmic affinity.” When one cultivates many beneficial and pure relationships, it is called “cultivating beneficial karmic affinity extensively.” That’s why after taking refuge in the Three Jewels and practicing Buddhism, some people travel extensively and visit Buddhist monasteries to cultivate karmic affinity with whomever they meet. They tire themselves by constant socializing without any guiding principles to protect, teach, or promote the Dharma.

On the surface, these people seem to have established much karmic affinity; but they spend money and energy without cultivating their own practice, and without a stable place to practice. In reality, they fail to provide strong and effective help to others, themselves, or the monasteries they visit. Although they can be seen everywhere, they are not necessarily needed there. Although many people may be in contact with them, very few can really find effective

guidance from them. We can illustrate this way of cultivating karmic affinity with the following example: If we give a person a bowl of rice, it may just be enough to sustain him for a day, whereas a bushel of rice may sustain him for about half a year. If a bowl of rice was shared by 100 starving people, none of them would survive; whereas, if a bowl of rice was given to feed one person, at least it may sustain this person for another day. Therefore, if a bushel of rice was given to feed ten thousand starving people, one might establish extensive beneficial karmic affinity, yet no one could actually survive another day. Building extensive beneficial karmic affinity should be based on sound principles, and be within one's means. If one has the means to help the whole world without depleting one's resources, then they should do so equally, indiscriminately, and without restriction; they would be able to reach near and far, regardless of how small the help is. But if one has limited capacity and capability, then they should select and focus on those that urgently need guidance and support.

For example, priority should go to those we know and are close to, with whom we have deep relationships. This means immediate family members, relatives, teachers, and friends; otherwise, it would be impractical to extensively build karmic affinity without knowing one's capacity and limit. From the standpoint of the Three Jewels, cultivating beneficial karmic affinity extensively means to give without discrimination and equally. It is to use Dharma to teach and transform sentient beings without discrimination, and to respond to all their needs, regardless of their level of knowledge and intelligence, wealth, status, and power. Therefore, the Three Jewels accept any offerings without being selective. As long as people open their hearts to make offerings, regardless of quantity and type, anyone's gift would be accepted with compassion and delight.

It was like this during the time of Shakyamuni Buddha; everyday the monastic disciples begged for food from house to house. It didn't matter

how rich or poor the house they visited, or what type or quality of food they were given; they accepted whatever was given, until the bowl was full or there was enough. This is the way to form karmic affinity with a mind without discrimination. That's why it is said: "One bowl receiving food from thousands of families; extensively delivering people with karmic affinity." Therefore, almsgiving certainly is a way to cultivate beneficial karmic affinity, and the same is also true for receiving alms.

Since most people have limited financial and material resources, as well as limited physical and intellectual strengths and time, if they blindly try to build beneficial karmic affinity extensively without a guiding principle, the result would not only be ineffective, but may also afflict unwanted vexations. Some people would work hard to exhaustion, affecting their family's financial status and personal health; yet, what they get in return are anger, bitterness, and suspicions from others. These results could easily cost them confidence and aspiration.

In the *Sutra of the Buddha's Bequeathed Teachings*, the Buddha advised his disciples that when bhikshus beg for food in this world, they should be like bees collecting nectar from flowers without damaging the flowers' color and fragrance. Therefore, when lay people try to build karmic affinity without heeding their own limitations, though the Three Jewels have no intent to hurt them, these people could be harmed because of the Three Jewels. Instead of reaching high ground, they could fall deeper down. Wouldn't that be ignorant? So, when supporting the Three Jewels, one should do so with a core value, focus, and principle. Certainly we should provide aid to the poor and sick; yet, we should set priorities based on severity, urgency, distance, and relationship. It would be impractical to dwell on aiding and giving alms to everyone equally.

Actually, to give alms and support Dharma with principle and focus is also one of the ways to cultivate beneficial karmic affinity extensively. For

example, if you assist one person to achieve buddhahood, this buddha then would enlighten and deliver many sentient beings, and you would indirectly build beneficial karmic affinity with these sentient beings. Therefore, the *Sutra of Forty-Two Sections* states: “It’s better to feed one good person than feeding one hundred ordinary people; it’s better to feed one person who upholds the five precepts than feeding one thousand good people; it’s better to feed one first-stage arhat than feeding ten thousands upholders of the five precepts.” Of course, in this vein the merit would be greater if we gave alms to one who has attained great liberation, and who is beyond cultivation and attainment.

When it comes to making offerings, almsgiving, and supporting the Three Jewels, two points need to be stressed: First, you cultivate beneficial karmic affinity extensively when you support people and organizations that have great, positive influence on developing present-day and future Buddhism. Second, you cultivate beneficial karmic affinity extensively, when you support respected Buddhist practitioners and their activities, even if they are relatively unknown. As long as they have earned your trust and respect and you are willing to support them, it means they are already able to quietly transform others. Accordingly, we come to realize that supporting well-known Buddhist individuals and their efforts is not necessarily “icing the cake,” and supporting unknown Buddhist individuals and their efforts should not be construed as providing timely help to the needy. Most important is to have focus, and to know one’s own limitations.

Cultivating and Ending Karmic Affinity

QUESTION

In Chinese Buddhism there are the terms “cultivating beneficial karmic affinity” (*jie yuan*), and “ending karmic affinity” (*liao yuan*). What do these terms mean?

ANSWER

In Chinese Buddhism we only talk about cultivating beneficial karmic affinity (*jie yuan*) and about ending one’s unwholesome deeds (*liao ye*); however, ending karmic affinity (*liao yuan*) is not a correct Buddhist notion. Cultivating beneficial karmic affinity means enabling people who lack sufficient karmic affinity to accept or be led to accept, secular help and Dharma guidance. It’s a way to increase beneficial karmic affinity for everyone, to help each other to learn Buddhism, and be on the path of practice and buddhahood.

Therefore, we should do the utmost in using our knowledge, ability, and resources to extensively cultivate beneficial karmic affinity with all sentient beings we encounter. It is our obligation to do so. However, cultivating beneficial karmic affinity is an act of giving, not investing; one should not expect returns. Using our very ability to form beneficial karmic affinity extensively and influence others to also do so is considered almsgiving. At the very least, it benefits one’s own community and improves social harmony and happiness; on a larger scale, it could transform a country, or even the world, into a pure land on earth.

On the other hand, the notion of bringing karmic affinity to an end is ambiguous owing to folk religion's misunderstanding of karmic cause and effect. Basically it's correct to say that good deeds result in good retribution, while bad deeds result in bad retribution; and supposedly if you treat me well, I would also treat you well. But in folk belief, the view on amorous relationships between a man and a woman has somehow evolved into one of owing debts to each other. According to this belief, since they are in debt to each other, they are destined to become husband and wife again in future lives to repay their debts. This is an example of so-called bringing karmic affinity to an end.

In popular Chinese martial as well as spirit novels and legends, there are stories about husband and wife who continued their relationship for three, or even seven, lifetimes. Hence, for the three-lifetime couples, after being married in one life, only after two more lifetimes of marriage to each other, would they be able to separate. There are spiritual mediums of folk religions, wandering occultists, and irresponsible fortune tellers who instruct people that they must marry so-and-so to bring karmic affinity of marriage from past lives to an end, and if one refused, they may risk disrupting their family or even harming their own lives. Some spiritual imposters would make use of such beliefs to claim that there are one-time, several-days, or several-years karmic affinity to trick people into sexual relationships.

According to Buddhadharmā, since a relationship between a man and a woman is full of both gratitude and resentment, it would never end and can last countless lifetimes, not just limited to three or seven. As the *Brahma Net Sutra* states, "All men are my father; all women are my mother." Likewise, any person has been one's spouse in some previous lifetime; it is an endless relationship of gratitude and resentment. There are very few marriages in which there is only gratitude and no resentment, and even then they are of emotional and sentimental attachments in nature. As long as there are emotional attachments, the relationship is very difficult to sever

and would not last only three to seven lifetimes but countless lifetimes. The coming together of two persons as husband and wife only happens when causes and conditions are mature and karmic forces are compatible for both of them. To justify an unethical relationship between a man and a woman by saying that it is to bring karmic affinity to an end is unacceptable from the secular perspective, let alone that of Buddhadharma. It would harm more people and create more bad karma. Buddhadharma teaches that one should cultivate beneficial karmic affinity extensively and end unwholesome deeds. Hence, causes and conditions which are prone to produce bad karmic retribution should be vigilantly avoided. How then could people dare to perpetrate such mutually destructive acts to hurt themselves and others? Any kind of inappropriate relationship between a man and a woman will harm each other, third parties, and even many others. Therefore, the false belief in bringing karmic affinity to an end has brought much harm to countless people.

Instead of creating enmity, we should resolve it. Any inappropriate, unjustifiable, and unethical relationships between a man and a woman should be viewed as two foes coming together with their bad karmas manifesting. One should never believe in the theory of bringing karmic affinity to an end; rather, one should take the doctrine of ending unwholesome deeds to heart. If we are in debt to someone we should repay them; in adversity we should always have the courage to face and resolve problems. The more we pay back the less future burden we will carry. We should not think that all relationships between men and women create bad karma; in fact, proper marital relations are the foundation of morality in society. But if one alters good moral customs by advocating the belief of bringing karmic affinity to an end, it would be creating bad karma, resulting in the man and woman involved possibly not becoming husband and wife in a next life, but also receiving horrible retribution.

Monks and nuns may also be tempted, seduced or tested by the opposite sex. After all they too are ordinary people, not yet arhats who have left desire behind. That's why the Buddhist sutras say that sexual desire is the most fearsome thing. If we could trace back our own past causes and conditions, we would find that each of us have been spouse to countless sentient beings. If one believes in the theory of ending karmic affinity, one would have to get into marital relationship endlessly with many sentient beings, and there would be no opportunity for people to become monastics. Then, if monastics also believe in the theory of ending karmic affinity, there would not be any monastics anymore.

Monastics rely on faith and will power as the mainstay of their practice. If people become monastics willingly, they should view romantic relationships as negative causes and conditions and bad retribution, and not allow themselves to be entangled in it without end. Rather, they should use the sword of wisdom to cut off the affectionate attachment. This would be the true way to end karmic affinity!

Buddhism and Divine Way Teachings

QUESTION

Are the Chinese divine way teachings (*shendao shejiao*) a form of Buddhism?

ANSWER

No, they are not. Many people cannot distinguish the Buddha from deities, and assume that folk beliefs and Buddhism are similar. In addition, in some situations elements of folk beliefs have been mixed into Buddhism. This leads to some people mistakenly believing that Buddhism is a branch of divine way teachings.

There are two perspectives on what we call divine way teachings. The first is that according to the *Book of Changes* (Chn. *I Jing*), rulers follow natural principles to educate and guide people: “When we contemplate the divine ways of heaven, we see how the four seasons proceed without error. The sages, in accordance with this divine way, laid down their instructions, and all under heaven yield submission to them.” The “Great Declaration” (Chn. *Taishi*) chapter of *Book of Documents* (Chn. *Shangshu*) also states: “Heaven sees as my people see; heaven hears as my people hear.” And, rulers in the past were called Sons of Heaven, who ruled the country following divine orders. All of these imply using heavenly or divine ways to cultivate and guide people.

The second perspective is the use of ghosts and deities to rule and teach people. An example of this can be found in the *Book of the Later Han* (25–220): “Quickly build a temple to worship founding emperor Gaozu, pledging your

loyalty to him; this is the so-called ‘divine way teachings’ which resorts to the help of deities in this world.”

In the first perspective, the divine ways represent the operations of natural principles; in the second perspective, specific beliefs in ghosts and deities are used to give people revelation and guidance. The former is rather rational, while the latter is considered superstitious and is a kind of blind faith.

Religion in China has always developed out of a mixture of reason and superstition. As such, the Chinese never developed a religion similar to the monotheism of Christianity, nor did they develop a reason-based religion which was fully embraced by the people, unlike the imported Buddhism. Although Confucius did advocate “not speaking about occult forces and disturbing spirits,” the commoners, and even literati and many rulers in China, still accepted the beliefs in ghosts and deities to some extent. In this chapter, divine way teachings refer to folk beliefs centered on ghosts and deities appearing through spiritual mediums or on worship altars in the name of immortals and buddhas. The followers of these folk religions are not limited to only ordinary people.

The reason that this type of divine way teaching has been sometimes criticized as being an excessive form of worship is because it may confuse people’s minds and cause rampant harm. The phenomena seen by followers could have been actual appearances of ghosts and deities through a medium, or simply conjured up by a spiritual medium, shaman, or occultist. Even if there were ghosts and deities who really appeared, due to their various levels and type of merits and wisdom, they could be either virtuous or evil. As a result, people would receive different instructions from different spirits and at different times, even at the same altar and with the same spiritual medium.

Since they do not have uniform and firm fundamental principles, doctrines, or teachings, they cannot be used as the standard or basis for

knowledge, social norms, or morality. It would be even worse if the phenomena were manipulated by mediums and occultists. They could cause serious problems and reverse right and wrong although they could also be helpful and beneficial to society and people. The more believers they have, the stronger their “spirit force.” If used by someone with unscrupulous ambitions, the powers would become the seeds of chaos and disasters in the world; yet in a peaceful world, if used by some good rulers, such powers could be forces to benefit mankind.

Therefore, since ancient times the general view towards divine way teachings can be summed up with the expression, “Water can keep ships afloat, but it can also capsize them.” Since divine way teachings can help as well as harm people, wise and clear-minded people should see them with the attitude of “respecting ghosts and deities, but staying far away from them.” Ghosts and deities are like petty and untrustworthy people, one should not offend them or intimate with them. Ghosts and deities often are inconsistent, moody, wavering between good and evil.

Although some efficacious experience may have been witnessed by their believers, they are not absolutely reliable. It would be even more dangerous if these phenomena were being intentionally manipulated by a medium or occultist. The so called “devilish and disrupting cults” and “mass deception of devilish fallacies” throughout Chinese history have been the results of this type of manipulative divine way teachings.

The first generation of spiritual mediums and occultists are usually possessed by ghosts and deities in chance encounters; yet, their successors would need training. Often, children and youngsters were chosen and given special training. During the training process, they learn how to attract ghosts and deities to inhabit and possess their own bodies. After a long period of training and practice, this would become a natural habit and response. Then, it

would not be important at all whether the ghosts or deities actually arrive and possess the medium's body; what matters are the ritual, the atmosphere, and the psychological reactions.

Specific rituals and their atmosphere can create certain psychological reactions, making the medium responsive and receptive to the manipulator's cues, thinking that these are the wishes of deities. An adult medium could conjure up things on their own; yet a child medium would react based on normal training routines, or cues from the manipulator. Therefore, those phenomena could be due to the presence of ghosts and deities, by arrangement of the shamans and occultists, or psychological responses of a mentally ill person.

The occultist, shaman, or medium might have some education, or might even be illiterate. Yet, they share a common trait – the first generation tends to acquire their ability when they were suddenly possessed by spirits; rarely were they trained. While such phenomena are called “immortals and buddhas borrowing an aperture” (*xianfojieqiao*), they are actually due to some nameless ghosts or deities using the name of some locally popular spiritual being as tools to show off their power. They might well know of some past events and be able to predict some future happenings; they might be able to heal people, advise them to do good deeds and avoid misfortunes. That is why so many people would “rather believe in the shaman than the physician,” and “rather believe in deities than fellow human beings,” as the sayings go.

However those efficacious cases are often specious; their accuracy and rate of reliability is about seventy percent at best. But, it only needs a few testimonies of success through word of mouth to attract a crowd of followers with joss sticks and candles burning vigorously at the temple altar. The accuracy rate has a lot to do with the psychological makeup of the followers. When someone seeks help earnestly, they would likely, due to the ritual of inviting the spirits and its atmosphere, sense the presence of a “spirit force.”

The medium and occultist could also be guided by those nameless ghosts and deities and learn more about different topics, such as religion, ethics, moral standards, astrology, oracles, and medicine.

Therefore, they are able to compose poetic sayings, prescribe medicines, and talk about ethics and religious views which are a potpourri of different religions. These acts convince followers that major deities have descended to the altar. Actually, all ghosts and deities do have a certain degree of responsive spirit force and retributive supernatural power. Without prior learning, they can acquire other people's ideas, knowledge, skills, and learnings, and are able to use them right there and then. However, lacking ideals and aspirations, they merely display their conceit, esteem, and arrogance.

As described before, the later generation medium and occultist successors are usually selected and trained when young. They would tend to share more or less similar traits – neurotic, sensitive and fanciful. After studying and training in certain methods, and instructed with specific concepts and ideas – even without being spiritually possessed – they would be able to speak and write spontaneously with adroit phrases, prescribe medicine, tell fortunes and predict the future. Of course, they would have even lower accuracy and reliability.

Nevertheless, since their believers are so used to relying on these kinds of “revelations from descended deities,” it would be difficult for them to observe and investigate objectively. Similarly, adept mediums are often in a trance during rituals, and it is hard for them to distinguish between phenomena created by the power of ghosts and deities or by their own volition. Of course, if the matter touches on their own vested interests of fame, profit, and desire, they would know within that they are expressing their own views in the names of immortals and buddhas. Due to all these reasons, although divine way teachings do have their functions, they cannot be relied on.

Buddhism and Atheism

QUESTION

What does it mean when people say Buddhism is atheistic?

ANSWER

Atheism is a term widely used in discussions about religion. There are two types of atheism relevant to our discussion: one is materialistic atheism, the other is the atheistic view as understood in Buddhism. Materialistic atheism negates the independent existence of any spirituality, as well as the beliefs of the world of ghosts and deities. On the other hand, the atheistic view in Buddhism is that all phenomena are the result of causes and conditions coming together, and that all things in the universe are the consequences of the collective actions, or karma, of all sentient beings. Buddhism also acknowledges spirituality among sentient beings, as well as the existence of ghosts and deities. However, Buddhism is not monotheistic in that it does not believe in a single omnipotent and omnipresent God who created the universe, and who is the first, last and only God.

In religious studies, beliefs in god can be classified into that of one God only, in two or many gods, as well as pantheism, and atheism. Polytheism denotes folk religions which have no organization or system; it is a form of religion with primitive tribes and of regional characteristic. For instance, deities in Chinese folk traditions are divided into local and national types.

Local deities then are divided into ancestral and natural gods; their names and images change according to different time periods and localities. National gods include forefathers, heroes of a nation or patriarchs of an ethnic group, as well as gods of mountains, rivers, sun, and moon.

Religions that have two gods view good and evil as opposing forces. In the beginning, it may have been two rival tribes that viewed their own protective deity as benevolent, and the other tribe's deity as evil. After a period of integration of various cultures, the belief in two gods emerged. The benevolent deity became God while evil deity became the Devil. Zoroastrianism is a form of such dual theism. In Christianity it is believed that both God and the Devil exist eternally. Therefore, it may have contained some characteristics of dual theism, but has only taken on the form of monotheism.

In monotheism, all things are created, controlled, and destroyed by the supreme God. He has almighty power and authority to control all things. In Chinese this god is called the Creator (*zaowuzhe*); in Christianity He is called Jehovah. Christians also believe that there are angels and archangels, God's son Jesus and other celestial beings; yet they are created by the one and only God and belong to the retinue of the only God. They cannot be God's successors or become God's equals.

As for pantheism, it is the idealistic divinity that some philosophers believe in. It is the essence of the universe and the principle of nature, and it does not have personified characteristics; but it is the origin and final destination of all things. This divinity, however, does not have the volition to love people, while people have the responsibility and obligation to obey, respect and love the divinity.

As mentioned earlier, there are two forms of atheism. One is the godless, materialistic atheism which advocates that all phenomena in the universe are created by the interactions of matter. There is no independent existence of

spiritual elements outside of and beyond matter. Before birth a person has no past; after death there will be no future. Past and future only exist in the sense of hereditary continuation of the physical body. To individuals, death is like a lamp being extinguished. Although the spiritual power of their endeavors is recognized, in the sense that their efforts in scholarship, politics, and arts can influence future generations, those influences are ultimately materialistic rather than spiritual. For materialistic atheists, human may cherish the memory of ancient people, but the ancients do not know that we think of them because they no longer exist. Moreover, commemorating them is not to comfort their souls, but to emulate their virtues and to inspire ourselves and others.

The atheistic view of Buddhism is primarily based on the principles of phenomena arising out of causes and conditions, thus explaining the existence of sentient beings as the consequence of their karmic deeds. Buddhism believes that every sentient being creates individual deeds (karma), and then receives individual retributions for those deeds. Numerous sentient beings have created countless deeds in their past lives. Sentient beings with the same type of deeds will receive the same types of retribution and will be born in the same environment. The Buddha thus described a universe in which there are infinite worlds inhabited by countless sentient beings, who by their deeds harvest what they sow.

Our world is part of the solar system; it comes from the collective karma of humans and all other beings in our realm, not the creation of God as monotheists believe. In fact, the understanding of God and the demand for a God actually stem from the needs of human beings.

Although Buddhism does not believe in a sole omniscient god, it does not deny the existence of gods. From the Buddhist perspective, while an omniscient god is real for followers of monotheistic religions, that god may

well just be a powerful spirit, a major deity with great merit and virtue, or a deva from another world. There is more than one god and that could be why among the monotheistic religions, there is disagreement as to the image, understanding, and feelings of this one God, according to differences of people, location, and time. It can be argued that monotheistic belief actually is a higher form of polytheism.

The atheist view in Buddhism does not mean that it negates the beliefs and functions of polytheism, dual theism, or monotheism. Rather, in Buddhism gods and deities are just a type of sentient being. In fact, ghosts and deities are mentioned in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the *Kshitigarbha Sutra*, and even sutras from the Agama canon. Therefore, Buddhism is not atheistic in denying the existence of ghosts and deities. It is atheistic in denying the existence of a unique creator god who created and rules the universe.

God in Monotheism

QUESTION

Does the God of monotheism really exist?

ANSWER

To believers in monotheism, God exists. As far as religious experience is concerned, the founders really believed that they witnessed the real God, and such an experience made them unable to deny the existence of God. As a result they have developed a firm belief, and even fanatic faith to advocate that belief as their mission. That kind of God could be explained as the inner experience of the believer, not necessarily an objective existence, since for non-believers without the experience, God simply doesn't exist. However, non-believers, or people who have never witnessed God, are in no position to deny the existence of God. Similarly, those who have never gone to the moon do not have the right to claim that the samples collected from the moon are not real. Therefore, Christianity emphasizes "giving testament," which is to attest to one's religious experiences.

According to Buddhism the universe is the result of the collective karma of all sentient beings, rather than being created by one omnipotent and personified God. Therefore, Buddhism is thought to be atheistic. But atheism in the Buddhist sense does not deny the existence of God; it only does not acknowledge that there is a God who created the universe. Buddhism believes

that any god that exists is also an element of the universe, a sentient being – not the God who is the essence, beginning, and end of the universe as is believed in Christianity. Buddhism does not deny the existence of God, but believes that such a God would not be the sole cause of the universe.

If so, does it mean that God has lied to us, and that his believers have been fooled? No, God did not lie. Deities possess pride, so the higher a deity the more self-assured and prideful that deity is. In esoteric Buddhism this is called “deva-pride” or “buddha-pride.” Sentient beings with fragile minds need the protection and blessings of powerful deities to give them hope and comfort. And due to the needs of sentient beings, gods must also demonstrate strong and unlimited self-worth. Therefore, whether they are deities or humans, everyone has this instinct and these needs, and under these circumstances, the belief in a God who created the universe has become religious truth.

If that is the case, is the saying “God created the universe” just a claim from such a God? This is another topic, but this God may or may not know whether he created the universe. There is a story in a Buddhist sutra about the deva named Great Brahma (Skt. *Mahabrahma*), who admitted to Shakyamuni Buddha that he did not create the universe. However, he still believed that all sentient beings thought of him as the creator of the universe. Anyhow, in the scriptures of monotheistic religions, there is no statement to indicate that God never created the universe yet proclaimed that he did.

Take the example from the business world, where a sensible enterpriser humbly credits his company’s success to the collective work of all his employees, and the support of society. He does not claim the success as his own; rather he claims that he was only one of the parts that contributed the capital, expertise and time. Although he is responsible for the establishment, development, growth, and success of the company, he would still say that his success comes from the community and he should give back to the community.

This enterpriser is like the Great Brahma who had attained wisdom and dissolved his pride. No longer self-centered, he dedicated himself to benefit others. By contrast, many enterprisers continually remind others that they are the business founder, and they are the reason why their employees get fed and clothed, and the community benefits. They claim that their successes are due to their personal talent, their accumulation of capital, and developing a perfect management system. Enterprisers like this would be like the God in monotheism – he didn't really lie! Did God create the universe? Are believers being deceived? These are not the real issues. Those who did not create the universe yet are willing to bear all sentient beings' sufferings, and to provide adequate and timely aids, aren't they bodhisattvas? Even if believers were deceived, they did receive comfort and encouragement after all, and it would still be worthwhile. It would be like the story of Cao Cao (155–220) in the *Three Kingdoms Anthology*, who asked his soldiers to “quench their thirst by thinking of plums.” That's useful, isn't it?

The *Lotus Sutra* uses the analogy of the Illusory City to induce those who lack confidence and courage by preaching the ways of arhat and pratyekabuddha, so that they would strive for their own salvation before telling them to aspire to buddhahood. The path of individual liberation is like resting overnight at a hotel, before continuing the journey to buddhahood which is even further away. Therefore, one could say that the Buddha's teachings on individual liberation are also a kind of inducement, which is really a skillful means to practice towards buddhahood. Therefore, there is no need to deny the God of monotheism. In this case, whether one deceives or is deceived, it could be worthwhile as long as it is useful. It would be up to you whether you were willing to believe.

Esoteric Buddhism

QUESTION

What is esoteric Buddhism?

ANSWER

According to [the Chinese Buddhist canon] the esoteric Dharma was transmitted by Vairocana Buddha to Vajrasattva Bodhisattva, who then inhabited the palace of *vajra-dharmadhatu*, thus becoming the second patriarch of esoteric Buddhism. Some eight centuries after Shakyamuni Buddha entered nirvana, Nagarjuna Bodhisattva (Chn. *Longmeng* or *Longshu*) was born. Nagarjuna is said to have received the esoteric teachings directly from Vajrasattva Bodhisattva upon visiting an iron tower in Southern India, thus becoming the third patriarch of esoteric Buddhism. Nagarjuna then passed the teachings to Nagabodhi (Chn. *Longzhi*), who became the fourth patriarch. A few hundred years later, when he was said to be seven hundred years old, Nagabodhi transmitted the lineage to the fifth patriarch, Vajrabodhi (Chn. *Jingangzhi*). Vajrabodhi was the first of the three esoteric masters who traveled to China during the Kai Yuan period (713–741) of the Tang Dynasty.

It is clear from the narrative above that esoteric Buddhism was not transmitted by Shakyamuni Buddha; rather, it was preached by Vairocana Buddha in his form as the Dharma Body. But because the Dharma Body cannot actually speak the Dharma, the transmission is termed esoteric teaching, root

Dharma of the mind, or unsurpassed great Dharma. It is not possible for esoteric Buddhism to be received and transmitted by ordinary folks; therefore, one who receives and transmits the esoteric Dharma is called a *vajraguru* or a “great adept” (Skt. *mahasiddha*).

However, from the perspective of historical studies, the esoteric tradition has its origin in folk religious belief in India, before evolving into esoteric Buddhism during the later stage of Mahayana Buddhism in India. It was fundamentally based on the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism, while making use of the concepts and practice of Hinduism.

The esoteric practices [were known in China] to be of four types: miscellaneous esoteric practices (*zami*), phenomenal esoteric practices (*shimi*), yoga esoteric practices (*yuqie*), and *anuttarayoga* esoteric practices (*wushang yuqie*). Miscellaneous esoteric practices are similar to folk religions; phenomenal esoteric practices are more structured; yoga esoteric practices correspond to meditation and the cultivation of samadhi; part of *anuttarayoga* esoteric practices may have been developed out of an integration of Buddhism and sexual union tantra in Hinduism of the time. Sexual union tantra refers to practices involving union of a male and a female in sexual embrace, which would lead to the attainment and perfection of skillful means and wisdom. The female aspect represents wisdom, while the male aspect represents skillful means. The philosophy of these practices is similar to that in the sexual arts of Daoism (*fangzhongshu*); fundamentally, they are not Buddhist practices.

The fundamental tenet of Buddhism is the renunciation of desire; however, sexual union tantra in *anuttarayoga* advocates using sexual desires to attain liberation. Hence, later in Tibet, Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelug Sect, established reforms which prohibited and abolished sexual intercourse as a form of cultivation. Yet, other sects still continued the practice. In order to rationalize the practice, practitioners are required to cultivate energy (Chn. *qi*;

Skt. *prana*), channels (Chn. *mai*; Skt. *nadi*), and seminal points (Chn. *ming-dian*; Skt. *bindu*) before they can engage in the practice of sexual union tantra.

Esoteric Buddhism itself was shaped by the social and cultural elements in India at the time, and later by the environment in Tibet. We cannot say that tantric Buddhism in Tibet is not Buddhism, because except for sexual union tantra in *anuttarayoga*, its doctrinal teachings and methods of practices are rigorously organized, with a clear delineation of the stages of practice. Especially, their doctrinal teachings are rooted on the Madhyamika philosophy and supplemented by Yogacara. All this is unseen in Chinese Buddhism. Moreover, their monastic education and training is rigorously strict, as well as systematic and tiered. Therefore, it builds firm faith and consistent ways of practice. However, not all of those who are called “living buddhas” in Mongolia and Tibet are steeped in learning and attainment.

A guru in esoteric Buddhism is a lineage master in the transmission of Dharma. This transmission is presumably passed down directly from Vajrasattva Bodhisattva, or from the Buddha’s Dharma Body. A person cannot proclaim oneself as a guru. There must be a clear line of transmission from one guru to the next, with oral teaching given by the teacher to the disciple; one must also complete a certain set of tantric practices, and have a lineage guru who had previously received transmission recognize that one has achieved great attainment. Only then can one become a guru. It’s not as if people can just proclaim themselves to be a guru if they only became knowledgeable without guidance, having been possessed by ghosts or deities, or if they are able to exhibit some mystical ability by knowing some mantras.

Therein is the problem: the origin of esoteric Buddhism, [being based on transcendental transmission], makes it difficult to maintain the purity and clarity of Buddhism. At times it seems that anyone could declare oneself to be a guru by claiming to have received revelations from the buddhas or

bodhisattvas. Within Tibet, due to the rigorous system in place, it is difficult to make a false claim, making the system viable. But outside of Tibet, due to the limited reach of Tibetan Buddhist leaders and organizational strength, it has been difficult to fulfill the responsibility of identifying, authenticating, and supervising such claims. Hence, there have been many self-proclaimed gurus in areas where esoteric Buddhism is popular.

The earliest masters in the transmission of esoteric Buddhism were lay practitioners; for example, the founder of the Nyingma Sect, Guru Padma-sambhava, was said to have a female consort. Subsequently, lamas or gurus in the Nyingma tradition have been mostly lay people and this has been a unique characteristic in Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibetan Buddhism, followers take refuge in the four jewels: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and in addition the guru, who is considered to be the center of their faith. The guru himself is the principal deity and the Buddha. He represents the buddha's Reward Body. Only through him may one receive the Dharma. Though this concept of the guru has a clear theoretical foundation in esoteric Buddhism, and it is not recognized by non-esoteric Buddhist traditions, which would see the intermediary role of the guru as similar to that of God's angels [or intermediaries]. That would not be consistent with the Buddhadharmā, which advocates equality.

Gurus can also be female, as in the case in Tibet. But nowadays, some people say that if a male disciple wants to practice *anuttarayoga*, he should study with a female guru. This has led to cases in which self-proclaimed female gurus had sex with male disciples. As I mentioned before, the use of sex as part of cultivation is not Buddhadharmā; and it's not a pure practice. Within the wider society, this is also something that should be condemned. That's why since ancient times in China, only those with sufficient power and wealth were able to engage in Daoist sexual arts, with people employed

to guard the venue of practice. Ordinary Daoist priests would not have the resources to engage in this practice. For it to become widespread would not be a good thing for the society.

Practitioners of tantric sex and the like may not regard it as a kind of sexual behavior. Their goal is to achieve the unification of body and mind, the internal and the external, as well as to dissolve male and female boundaries, not for sexual pleasure and gratification. However, in China it has never been considered a legitimate, decent way of practice. Furthermore, the so-called unification is just a temporary state in which one briefly forgets the self-centeredness of the small self, not eradicating vexations. Of course, it is not the attainment of liberation let alone buddhahood.

Regarding the attainment of buddhahood with one's very body in the present lifetime (*jishenchengfo*), the Chinese Tiantai School propounds a doctrine of six types of buddhahood: buddhahood in principle, buddhahood in name, buddhahood in contemplation and practice, buddhahood in semblance, buddhahood in partial realization, and ultimate buddhahood. When we say that all sentient beings are buddhas, this refers to buddhahood in principle; after learning about the Dharma and knowing that one is fundamentally a buddha, this is buddhahood in name; when one starts to practice this is buddhahood in contemplation and practice. From this perspective, the claim of attaining buddhahood with one's very body in the present lifetime is not extraordinary. As to claiming having attained ultimate buddhahood, upon taking up esoteric practices and getting a bit of experience, it is not something that is approved even within the esoteric traditions. At most, that's only buddhahood in contemplation and practice." Not even Tsongkhapa or the Dalai Lama would claim to have attained ultimate buddhahood.

In esoteric Buddhism, energy, channels, and seminal points are extremely important. This is a common prerequisite of all yogic practices in the Indian

tradition. To cultivate samadhi, one needs to be healthy and strong. The use of meditation or contemplation technique to achieve unimpeded flow of energy through the channels is also common to both Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions. Similarities can be found between the so-called “seminal points” and the Daoist practices of “returning the essence to nourish the blood and the brain.” The point is to replenish one’s vigor, maintain a stable and relaxed spirit, sharpen one’s brain, and refresh one’s body and mind. Although Chan practitioners of orthodox Buddhism do not intentionally cultivate these techniques, they may experience similar outcomes due to their meditation practices.

Esoteric Buddhism emphasizes cultivating the body towards so-called “attainment of buddhahood with one’s very body in the present lifetime.” It is similar to the Daoist ideas of transforming into an immortal (*yuhuadengxian*) and ascending in broad daylight (*bairifeisheng*). Both practices aim at bodily transformation. However, according to the fundamental doctrine of Buddhism, the physical body is an illusion produced by the coming together of the five skandhas. Hence it is a phenomenon characterized by impermanence. Since the body is impermanent, it needs to be liberated. If we are attached to this impermanent body and consider it as the end point of our practice, then we will continue being trapped in the cycles of birth and death, and we will not transcend the three realms.

Therefore, from the Chan School’s perspective, people who practice physically based methods are like “ghosts guarding their own corpses.” Even if the legendary South Indian guru, Nagabodhi, did live to seven hundred, and the legendary Daoist Chen Tuan did live to eight hundred, they still could not escape death. Hence, while Buddhism does not deny the functions of energy, channels, and seminal points, it does not assert the need to cultivate them either.

As to Tibetan lamas as well as Theravada monastics accepting meat, or eating meat as a necessity, that is due to their social and natural environment. We do not have to be overly critical about that. Tibetan lamas certainly are aware that in accordance to the Buddha's teachings on compassion and kindness, one should not eat the flesh of fellow sentient beings. However, for some eating meat is a matter of survival and adapting to the environment. Yet, some specious justifications and excuses have been coined to defend it. For instance, some argue that eating the flesh of sentient beings would establish karmic affinity with those beings. Especially when eaten by realized practitioners, it is claimed that the animals might be transformed into bodies of buddhas and bodhisattvas. In other words, those animals' flesh would nourish the great adept's body and contribute to its transformation. It is also claimed that using the power of one's vows and reciting mantras over animals one eats would liberate them from suffering. In reality, not all practitioners have attained great realization; therefore, when practitioners collectively eat meat, their claim to deliver animals by eating them is very questionable indeed. Of course, from the perspective of esoteric Buddhism, greatly realized practitioners have already attained liberation; therefore, they presumably have no concerns about whether or not they eat meat.

As to the observation that meat eaters can also leave behind relics (Skt. *sharira*) after cremation, the phenomena of relics has nothing to do with eating meat or not, nor anything to do with liberation. Any practitioner who cultivates samadhi or focuses and stills his or her mind to attain bodily cultivation would leave behind relics after cremation. It is often said that only practitioners who are accomplished in the three learnings of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom would leave behind relics. In truth, these objects are crystallized and solidified bodily secretions from cremation. Although they have certain dimensions of sacredness and mystique, and many Buddhists

value them, they are not necessarily an important matter for Buddhists. Only liberation from the cycle of birth and death is the great matter. After all, relics manifest through the transformation of the physical body within the three realms, they are not beyond impermanence.

Therefore, after the Buddha was cremated, his disciple Venerable Mahakasyapa, convened 500 great arhats and gathered the non-material relics of the Buddha's Dharma Body, namely the sutras and the vinaya. They completely ignored the squabbles over the Buddha's relics by the lay followers. This shows that since the time of the Buddha, the appearance of relics from cremated bodies was valued by ordinary people but not by the sages.

Esoteric Buddhism and the Fate of Buddhism

QUESTION

Would Buddhism become extinct if esoteric Buddhism flourished?

ANSWER

It is true that Buddhism did disappear in India after esoteric Buddhism became popular. That's why esoteric Buddhism has been called late period Indian Mahayana Buddhism. However, we cannot claim that Buddhism would definitely cease to exist if esoteric Buddhism flourished. In fact, although esoteric Buddhism did flourish in Tibet, Buddhism has survived despite having periods of ups and downs.

Esoteric mantras originally were the main contents of the *Gandharva Veda*, one of the four Vedas, the sacred texts of Hindu Brahmanism. Later on, the integration of mantra practices with Shakti worship became the dominant form of cultivation in Hinduism. In addition, with the philosophy in the *Upanishads* as higher theological basis, the thoughts and analytical methods of Madhyamika Buddhism were assimilated and developed, leading to a new theoretical foundation of Hinduism. It can be said that by integrating the high grounds of Brahmanism and Buddhism, this movement culminated in a unified paradigm of religious philosophy in Hinduism. Theoretically, it adopted the highest principles in Buddhism and Brahmanism, and in application it employed mantras, meditation, as well as physical cultivation and exercises as methods of practice.

In contrast, the development of thought in Buddhism reached a saturation point after the appearance of the Madhyamika School. In terms of pragmatic application, it also reached a saturation point after the appearance of the Yogacara School's Consciousness Only doctrine. Buddhism then gradually shifted its emphasis to theories again, and neglected to provide a structured method to guide practice. In addition, due to shortage of talents and the decline of the monastic sangha, Buddhism could not compete on the same level with the strength of Hinduism. Therefore, people began to lean towards Hinduism and broke away from Buddhism. Especially after several big debates between Hinduism and Buddhism, hundreds and hundreds of Buddhist monastics converted to Hinduism.

In order to find ways to survive, some concerned Buddhists then drew on Hinduism's strengths and integrated them into Buddhism. This led to the unique characteristics of Madhyamika philosophy merging with yoga practices in the late period of Mahayana Buddhism in India, culminating in the completion of *anuttarayoga* esotericism, which used Hindu methods of practice and provided interpretations and guidance from the views of Buddhism. It had pragmatic effects and advantages. This is the prototype of Mahayana Buddhism which was introduced into Tibet from India.

Due to the similarities and blurring of boundaries between esoteric Buddhism and Hinduism, Buddhism's fate as a dispensable religion in India was sealed. Even today, Hindu believers claim that Buddhism has already been absorbed into Hinduism, and that Shakyamuni Buddha is the seventh incarnation of the god Brahma. It is also said that although Buddhism has disappeared in name in India, some of its contents still live within Hinduism, that it makes no difference whether it is called "Buddhism" or not. However, Hinduism is theistic and Buddhism atheistic. While the two have been mixed up, their fundamental tenets are nevertheless very different. Hence, we can truly say that genuine Buddhism had indeed perished in India.

The demise of Buddhism in India, however, was not completely caused by the flourishing of esoteric Buddhism; the invasion by Islam was also a major factor. In the second half of the 10th century, Muslims began entering India from the northwest, and wherever they went, they burned down Buddhist monasteries and purged and massacred Buddhists. Surviving monastics had no choice but to escape. From the 11th to the end of the 19th century, Muslims established kingdoms in India. Buddhists either converted to Islam or became Hindu. Hence, Buddhism disappeared completely.

However, although Buddhism did disappear in India during the era in which esoteric Buddhism flourished, the adoption of esoteric Buddhism would not necessarily lead to the disappearance of Buddhism. For example, esoteric Buddhism was brought into Tibet since the 8th century, and it continues to stand strong in Tibet today.

In China, the fate of esoteric Buddhism is different due to the Confucian and Daoist cultural backgrounds, as well as differences in social norms compared to that in Tibet. Esoteric Buddhism was introduced into China as early as the reign of Xuan Zhong (690–705) in the Tang Dynasty by the three great translators, Vajrabodhi, Subhakarasiṃha (Chn. *Shanwuwei*), and Amoghavajra (Chn. *Bukong*). Although they translated a great number of esoteric scriptures into Chinese, esoteric Buddhism was not embraced in a sustained manner in China. Instead, the teachings were transmitted to Japan, and continued to become a major Buddhist sect till present day as the Shin-gon Sect. Later, when the Mongols conquered China and established the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), esoteric Buddhism from Tibet was brought into China. But it was only practiced among Mongols and their related minority groups; it did not gain widespread acceptance by the majority Han ethnic group.

At the beginning of the 20th century, esoteric Buddhism did gain some attention in the early days of the Chinese Republic. But the quality of the people who transmitted the teachings was varied and inconsistent. There were

so many self-proclaimed gurus who tried to impress people with ghosts and deities-related tricks. As a result, esoteric Buddhism still failed to penetrate into the base of Chinese culture. At present, Tibetan Buddhism has become popular around the world and is also having quite an impact among Chinese communities. We should pay attention to what is good about it and steer away from its shortcomings.

If the dissemination of esoteric Buddhism is carried out on the basis of orthodox Tibetan monastic education, with Dharma teachers having to go through a rigorous and lengthy program of training, using texts such as Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* (Tibetan *Lamrim Chenmo*), *Great Exposition of the Stages of Tantra* (Tbt. *Ngakrim Chenmo*), and *The Golden Garland of Eloquence* (Tbt. *Legs bshad gser phreng*), it would not differ much from the dissemination of teachings of other non-esoteric traditions. There would not be any concern for the demise of Buddhism.

On the other hand, it will be a problem if the dissemination of esoteric Buddhism is carried out only with appeals such as the efficacy of mantras; rituals involving the use of bell, vajra dagger, horn, and drum; empowerments for the purpose of amassing wealth, dispelling ghosts, seeking longevity, and averting misfortunes and obstacles; claims of attaining buddhahood with one's very body in the present lifetime; sexual union practices; occult techniques and the like. If so, that will be the greatest misfortune for Buddhism, and if it is the above mentioned practices of esoteric Buddhism that flourish, there would be no reason for Buddhism not to perish.

Buddhism and the Apocalypse

QUESTION

How does Buddhism view the apocalypse?

ANSWER

The apocalypse is a well-known Christian idea. Yet, it is true that something similar to the apocalypse will eventually happen. In the Buddhist worldview, the world system goes through the cycle of creation and destruction in four stages: formation, abiding, decay, and nothingness. Nothingness is the state before the world came into existence; once coming into existence, it will evolve through the stages of formation, abiding, and decay; and from the stage of decay it ends as nothingness. In our world only during the stage of abiding is there active life. During the stage of formation there is the aggregation and solidification of some dilute material to gradually establish four major forms of phenomena: earth, water, fire, and wind. After that, life forms would gradually begin to appear.

The primitive life in this world came from transformed rebirths of life forms in other worlds in the universe, not originally created by any being or God. The stage of abiding is where active living takes place, and after the world gradually matures it begins to decline; eventually it decays to the extent that the world is no longer fit for living beings. Finally it reaches the state of total destruction, and the entire material world will collapse and return to the state of nothingness. Afterwards, a new world will form as the results

of the collective karmic forces of sentient beings with similar karmic types, from other worlds in every direction of the universe. Therefore, the cycles of world's creation and destruction correspond to the rise and fall of sentient beings' karmic forces.

Apocalypse in the Buddhist sense corresponds to the beginning of the stage of decay. Therefore, Buddhism does not deny there is apocalypse; however, it is a very different concept from that in Christianity in which apocalypse is believed to be God's will, to punish non-believers and to save believers. The day of apocalypse would be the day Jesus Christ returns to take his chosen ones to Heaven and send punish non-believers to Hell. In contrast, according to Buddhadharma, the arrival of the decay stage is a natural phenomenon caused by the collective karmic deeds of the sentient beings in this world. When this world is no longer habitable, sentient beings would be born in another world based on individual karmic force.

However, there is another term in Buddhism, called the Dharma Ending Age, or the Age of Final Dharma. Before that, there were the Age of Right Dharma and the Age of Semblance Dharma. In principle, the time when Shakyamuni Buddha lived in this world was the Age of Right Dharma; after his passing it is called the Age of Semblance Dharma, because there was only his image to represent him. After a while, it will enter the Age of Final Dharma during which the number of Buddhists would gradually decline; there would be even fewer true practitioners; those who realize the noble path through the practice of Buddhadharma would be non-existent. Eventually, Buddhadharma would be drowned out by deviant teachings and the pursuit of material desires. Even if there were still Buddhist sutras, few would believe, accept, and practice Buddhism. Therefore, as long as Buddhadharma still exists in the world, and sentient beings are willing to accept and believe in the Dharma, we should all strive to support and protect the Three Jewels and keep the wisdom life from withering away. That way, we can extend the

Buddhadharma indefinitely into the future, and bring vision and hope to all human beings. Hence, the concept of the Age of Final Dharma is not as frightening as the apocalypse in Christianity.

If your virtuous roots are deep and strong, or if you continue to develop blessings and wisdom, even during the Age of Final Dharma, and also when the world is entering the stage of decay, you need not despair. This world is only a tiny planet in a solar system in the vast universe. Your virtuous roots will lead you to be reborn into another world in the universe and continue practicing. Furthermore, if your vow is firm and your faith is strong, you may be reborn in the Pure Lands of other buddhas. Therefore, the decay and destruction of this world does not mean that it is the end of everything; this is certainly another very different point from the concept of apocalypse in Christianity. Moreover, although Buddhism speaks of the Age of Final Dharma, as long as we continue our diligent study and practice, it is possible to move from an environment corresponding to the Age of Final Dharma, to an environment corresponding to the Age of Semblance Dharma, and even one corresponding to the Age of Right Dharma.

The Meaning of Being Buddhist

QUESTION

What does it mean to be a Buddhist?

ANSWER

When filling out a form, Chinese people will often indicate “Buddhist” for their religion. In other words, except for those who have been baptized or initiated into Christianity, Islam, or other organized religions, and are therefore certain that they are not Buddhist, most Chinese have had some connection to Buddhism, whether as their own religious practice or through family or relatives. This means that as long as they do not repudiate or oppose Buddhism, they can be considered Buddhists. Among Chinese, the term “Buddhist” holds a wide range of meanings. This shows that the religious attitude among Chinese has always been open, accommodating, and diverse. For example, there is worship of natural deities such as water, fire, wind and rain; there is Confucian ancestral worship, worship of great sages, brave and loyal generals, martyrs and chaste women. Furthermore, there is worship of spirit objects such as certain rocks and trees; worship of legendary characters as well as immortals and deities in historical and mythological novels; worship of ghosts and spirits associated to various mysterious phenomena. All these beliefs somehow have co-existed and interfused with each other.

Although Confucius discouraged discussions of occult forces and disturbing spirits, the belief and worship of deities and spirit phenomena by the

common folk did not abate as it originated long before his time. Since there is a demand among the masses for such beliefs, they are still widely popular even though they are denounced by materialistic atheists and monotheists. However, such beliefs are not correct, or orthodox, Buddhism

When Buddhism was introduced into China during the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BCE–220 CE), polytheistic folk religions already existed. In fact, many natural deities are mentioned in the anthology of poems, *Songs of Chu*. Therefore, when Buddhism first entered China from India, to many Chinese it was simply adding a new deity to the existing pantheon. Owing to the translation and circulation of Buddhist sutras over a very long period of time, the Buddhist Tripitaka canon was gradually established. These efforts clearly demonstrate one of the differences between Buddhism and folk beliefs, but only those who have diligently studied and practiced Buddhadharma would appreciate and comprehend this.

Ordinary folks hold similar ideas and attitudes towards buddhas and bodhisattvas, as they do towards ancestral, tribal, and natural deities. Therefore, in popular legend and folk fiction, there are no differences between deities and buddhas. Instead of gaining knowledge about the Buddha and Guanyin Bodhisattva directly from Buddhist sutras, ordinary folks learn from novels such as *Investiture of the Gods* and *The Journey to the West*, as well as folk stories like *Guanyin Bodhisattva's Attaining Enlightenment*.

Although some heavenly and earthly deities' names do appear in some sutras, such as the *Avatamsaka Sutra* and the *Kshitigarbha Sutra*, China's folk polytheism did not come from Buddhism; rather, it came from rituals called "immortals and buddhas borrowing an aperture," in which mediums claimed to be possessed by deities, and also through more general paranormal experiences. The most popular practice is the so-called divine altar, where various types of mediums would channel certain deities' pronouncements in writing or speech. In the early days, most of these so-called deities were historical

characters in folk fiction or gods in popular myths, but after Buddhism spread in China, mediums began to use the names of buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats and Buddhist masters in their pronouncements both in writing and speech. Since deities, immortals, saints, sages, buddhas, and bodhisattvas from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism appeared often in the speeches or records of the mediums, Buddhism was viewed as another folk religion. Therefore, buddhas and bodhisattvas have long been intermingled with the worship in folk religions.

In folk beliefs the purpose of worshipping buddhas and bodhisattvas is no more than to seek blessings and longevity, fulfilling wishes, averting misfortunes and obstacles, curing illness, asking for wealth, and praying for a son, or a perfect marriage. We can say these are the basic motives for most religious beliefs. Worshipping buddhas and bodhisattvas as deities would also fulfill one's wish, because all kinds of virtuous deities also embrace the Three Jewels, and would protect the Three Jewels' believers. Prayers to buddhas and bodhisattvas will resonate with all the virtuous deities and receive sympathy and blessings from the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Since the worship of Guanyin Bodhisattva and Amitabha Buddha is widespread among Buddhists in China, they have become dear and well known to the general public; that's why there's the saying, "Every household prays to Amitabha Buddha, every family worships Guanyin." Since the general public prays to buddhas and bodhisattvas, we certainly cannot say that they are not believers in Buddhism.

However, true Buddhists take refuge in the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha – paying homage to and having faith in them instead of worshipping deities popular among the masses. Therefore, after the revered Shakyamuni attained buddhahood and started to teach the Dharma to lay householders, he bestowed upon them the Three Refuges: "I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dharma; I take refuge in the Sangha." That

is called taking refuge in the Three Jewels. The Buddha is the Great Awakened One; he is enlightened and capable of enlightening others; and he is with ultimate and perfect wisdom and merits. The Dharma is the teaching of Buddha on the practices towards attaining buddhahood, and why one should strive towards buddhahood. The Sangha are the monastics who emulate the Buddha and practice the Dharma, who assist the Buddha in disseminating the Dharma, and deliver sentient beings. Soon after attaining enlightenment, yet before having any monastic disciples, Shakyamuni Buddha bestowed the refuges upon two merchant lay disciples, Trapusa and Bhallika: “Take refuge in in the Buddha, take refuge in the Dharma, take refuge in the future Sangha (as there was not yet a monastic sangha).” Hence, only by taking refuge in all of the Three Jewels may one be a true Buddhist.

Just believing in the Buddha without embracing the Dharma and the Sangha would be blind worship, similar to folk belief in spirits and deities. Yet, to only study Dharma without embracing the Buddha and the Sangha would be like scholars who are diligent in academic pursuits, but without relevance to faith. To only embrace and rely on the Sangha would be like the popular rites of commending godparents or following ringleaders. Only by embracing all Three Jewels, can one then emulate the Buddha, practice the Dharma, and respect the Sangha.

The Sangha represents the upholding and preservation of Buddhadharma. Because monastics study and practice the Dharma, they are the embodiment of Buddhadharma. During the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, the Sangha had already preached to the masses on behalf of the Buddha. After he entered nirvana, it was even more necessary for the Sangha to continue passing on the Dharma. The Sangha is the community of monastics; everyone who leaves home and joins a monastic community is a member of the Sangha. On occasions where the Dharma is taught, monastics represent the Sangha and reach out separately to sentient beings with whom they have karmic affinity.

Therefore, the Buddha is the genesis of the Dharma, the Dharma is the basis of Buddhism, and the Sangha is the core of Buddhism; none of the three is dispensable. Buddhism is whole only with the presence of all Three Jewels.

There are buddhas in the past, present, and future in this as well as other worlds. Therefore, together they are called “all the buddhas in the ten directions and the three periods.” The basic Dharma consists of observing the five precepts of no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no intoxication. More extensively, there is the practice of the ten virtuous deeds of no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, no frivolous speech, no divisive speech, no malicious speech, no greed, no hatred, and no ignorance. These constitute the virtuous practices of ethics and morality for both humans on earth and devas in heavens. Going a step further, there are the supramundane virtuous practices that will liberate sentient beings from the cycles of birth and death. Beyond that are virtuous bodhisattva practices of engaging with and abiding in the world after attaining liberation.

Of the three levels of virtuous practices described above, the first – virtuous practices for both humans and devas – is common to all religions in this world. It corresponds to the common understanding that “all religions are here to guide people to do good deeds.” The second – supramundane virtuous practices – is the level of arhat or sages of individual liberation. It transcends the world of humans and devas, leads one beyond the cycles of birth and death in the three realms, and enters the state of liberation. The third – mundane-supramundane practices – is the level where one is not bound by birth and death and yet does not depart beyond birth and death. One could move freely amidst birth and death, and continue to extensively deliver sentient beings, while not having a notion of self, others, sentient beings, or lifespan. This is the level of the Mahayana bodhisattva.

Every buddha in the Buddha Jewel reveals all the Dharma of the Dharma Jewel; every member of the Sangha Jewel studies, practices and promotes

all of the Dharma Jewel. The Sangha Jewel consists of ordinary monks and nuns, saintly arhats of individual liberation, and all Mahayana bodhisattvas. If one takes refuge in the Three Jewels, they would receive guidance, help, protection, and blessing from all buddhas, sages, bodhisattvas, and eminent monastics of great realization. Regardless of identity or level of practice, anyone can gain insights and benefits from the Three Jewels according to the strength of their vows and the depth of their virtuous roots.

Whether people follow a benevolent folk religion or believe in one or many gods, if they observe the ethics and morality of the world, and meet the conditions for rebirth in the heavens, their practice commensurate with the first level of Buddhadharma – virtuous practices for both humans and devas. This amounts to teaching people to cultivate good moral character and to fulfill their responsibilities as human beings; based on the good deeds and merits they cultivate, they can be reborn in a human or heavenly realm when they pass away. Cultivating virtuous practices for humans and devas is definitely much better than committing bad deeds and receiving bad retribution of rebirth in one of the three lower planes of hell beings, hungry ghosts and animals.

Nevertheless, life in the human world is short, somewhat less than 100 years or so; life in heaven is longer but devas would also die when the time-span of their good retribution ends. In Buddhism, there are three heavenly realms of which the highest are the heavens of the formless realm, and below that are the heavens of the form realm. Both the form and formless realms are reached through the cultivation of samadhi. The lowest heavenly realm of desire is for people who have cultivated good deeds and merits.

There are six levels of heavens (Skt. *sugati*) in the desire realm (Skt. *kamaloka*): Heaven of the Four Deva Kings (Skt. *caturmaharajakayika*), Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods (Skt. *trayastrimsa*), Heaven of Yama (Skt. *yamadeva*), Heaven of Contentment (Skt. *tusita*), Heaven of the Enjoyment of Creation

(Skt. *nirmanarati*), and Heaven of Gods who Control the Emanation of Others (Skt. *paranirmitavasavartin*). The higher the heaven, the longer the lifespan of devas residing there. Among the heavens in the desire realm, the shortest lifespan is in the Heaven of the Four Heavenly Kings, which is 500 years, where one day equals fifty years in this world. With each higher heaven, the lifespan increases, the highest being in the Heaven of Gods who Control the Emanation of Others. Here, one's lifespan is 16,000 years, where one day equals 1,600 years in this world. However, when the beings there exhaust their heavenly blessings, they would die and return to the human world, or they may even fall into one of the three lower planes.

Enjoying the retribution of heavenly blessings is like an arrow shot into the sky – when the arrow's force is spent it will fall back to the ground. This is because one has not been liberated from the cycle of birth and death. Arhats, however, have transcended the cycles of birth and death in the three realms. Bodhisattvas, although liberated from this world, choose to return to deliver sentient beings. However, bodhisattvas entering the three realms differ from ordinary beings who wander through cycles of birth and death. As an analogy, ordinary beings are like prisoners who have been sentenced to life in prison; bodhisattvas are like officers and counselors who live in the jail to serve others, but are free to leave if they choose to.

Arhats are those who have transcended birth and death permanently. Bodhisattvas, although living amidst birth and death and among suffering sentient beings, are not bound by birth and death or burdened by vexations. Buddhas are bodhisattvas who have attained buddhahood, and it's also possible for arhats to become bodhisattvas. If ordinary folks emulate bodhisattvas and take the great vows of bodhisattvas, they would be considered practitioners of the bodhisattva path.

Folk religions are only able to get their believers to seek help from deities, but not able to get them to save themselves and others. Buddhism, however,

responds not only to every need of its believers; more importantly, it enables them to purify and strengthen themselves. They can also emulate bodhisattvas and buddhas in helping and saving people. They can even become bodhisattvas and buddhas themselves.

In China, Mahayana Buddhism has been the standard Buddhist practice, where people who study and practice Buddhism are called “disciples of the Three Jewels,” because they emulate the Buddha, practice the Dharma, and respect the Sangha. The Buddha is the one who has fully and thoroughly cultivated the bodhisattva way; bodhisattva practices are the standard for how Buddhadharma transforms the world; and the Sangha are the representatives who uphold and propagate the Dharma.

Folk religions certainly do have their functions and values; however, they lack reliable doctrines of teachings, restraints and regulations of practice community, and guidance of teachers. They can only rely on the maneuvering of various mediums. On the good side they may work alongside the good customs and traditions; on the bad side they may cause harm to good customs and traditions and corrupt people’s minds. On the contrary, Buddhism is different, as it has a very long history and clearly organized tenets, teachings, and rituals. It has Shakyamuni Buddha, born about 2,600 years ago in India, as its founder, and also unbroken transmissions through generations of sanghas and teachers. Shakyamuni Buddha as the Buddha Jewel is a historical figure with clear anthropological evidence; the Buddhist tenets and rituals are the Dharma Jewel; the monastic communities and teachers are the Sangha Jewel. Only by having faith and taking refuge in the Three Jewels, can one be called a disciple of genuine or orthodox Buddhism.

I would ask then: “Are you an orthodox Buddhist?” For further answers, please refer to my book, *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*.

Authenticating Buddhist Sutras

QUESTION

How do we know which Buddhist sutras are authentic?

ANSWER

There are two aspects to the authenticity of Buddhist sutras: the first deals with translated sutras of which the dates of origin and the names of the translators could not be ascertained historically; the second deals with specious sutras delivered by deities through mediums either in dreams or on worship altars. The first kind is considered formal sutras, not contradictory to Buddhadharma. The latter were considered specious sutras which were the production of folk religions.

Regarding the early history of Buddhism in India, there were opinions among some scholars that Mahayana Buddhism was not the direct teachings of the Buddha. This was mainly because the Mahayana sutras appeared and were circulated several hundred years after the passing of the Buddha. However, the basic principles of Mahayana Buddhism are very much in line with those of early Buddhism; it simply elevated and broadened the philosophical and intellectual dimensions of early Buddhism, giving it greater expansiveness, profundity, and magnificence, extending it beyond this human world to being limitless. While the early sutras directed their vision towards the mortal beings in this world, Mahayana sutras looked to the bodhisattvas.

Furthermore, Mahayana sutras do not deviate from the sutras of early Buddhism in expounding the principles of Dharma. First, based on the principle of causes and conditions, Mahayana sutras discuss emptiness and nonexistence, as well as an ultimate reality which is without form or characteristics. Second, based on the principle of cause and effect, they also discuss existence, true existence, and wondrous existence. Actually, these are the two sides of the same thing: fundamentally, existence and emptiness are not separate from each other; this is the meaning of causes and conditions and cause and effect at their highest level. Therefore, any Mahayana Dharma regardless of its origin, be it from the Buddha, the bodhisattvas, or other sentient beings, should not be accepted or rejected just on the basis of scriptural authenticity; it is acceptable if it is in accordance with the principles of Buddhist Dharma.

As for specious sutras, they are the products of folk religions, transmitted by ghosts and deities of pseudo-Buddhist cults; they appeared in the guise of buddhas or bodhisattvas, in a venue associated to themselves or to people who were engaging in practices, using colloquialisms familiar to the masses to produce volume after volume of short “sutras.” Some of them have titles like: *King Gao Guanyin Sutra* (Chn. *Gaowang Guanyin Jing*), *Blood Bath Sutra* (Chn. *Xuepen Jing*), *The Lunar Sutra* (Chn. *Taiyin Jing*), *Treatise on Invocation and Response of the Exalted One* (Chn. *Taishang Ganying Pian*). Some of these so-called “sutras” are kind of close to Buddhism; some are close to Daoism; some are fusion of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Those teachings could be useful if they were based on the moral standards of society to persuade people, infuse kindness, exhort filial piety, and teach gratitude and righteousness. So, even if not authentic Buddhist sutras, they nevertheless circulate widely among Buddhists. As such, they would not necessarily lead to negative consequences.

Furthermore, as related to this second category, there are books that claim to be Buddhist sutras and spoken by the Buddha. However, their contents violate both the principle of cause and effect and the doctrine of causes and conditions; when talking about “emptiness,” the principle of cause and effect is denied; when discussing “existence,” their attachment to this world becomes obvious. They mix up deities with buddhas and bodhisattvas, and give them equal status. They advocate theories such as the integration of the five major religions, the equality of the three religions in China, the identicalness of Buddhism and Daoism, and the connectedness of all paths. So, in truth, they are not Buddhism, not Daoism, not Confucianism, not Christianity, and not Islam. Although they use and interpret Buddhist sutras, they actually base their teaching on the so-called “true sutras” that were revealed by their own deities. Those books, falsely called sutras, are certainly not authentic Buddhist sutras.

There are also people who practice blindly by themselves and gain some mystical experience, either receiving revelations from demonic beings or being possessed by ghosts or deities. To establish a base for their own teaching in order to attract followers, they would also read and explain Buddhist sutras. However, they would use their own readings, or specious experience of samadhi, or signs from demonic beings, ghosts and deities, to arbitrarily interpret the passages and meanings in the sutras with their own language and symbolism. Although their writings and books are published in the name of Buddhist exegesis, their purpose is to deviate from the sutras and the Buddhist path, calumniate the right messages, and harm the root of wisdom. This is an example of what our ancestral masters said in the ancient days: “Deviating just one word from the sutra is like the devil speaking.”

Accordingly, to authenticate a Buddhist sutra, the best way is to look it up in the index of the canon. If a sutra is recorded in the index, even if it is

considered of doubtful authenticity, it is still worth believing and reading. If a sutra is not listed in the canonical index, then we should evaluate whether its contents violate the basic principles of Buddhadharma. In addition, it is safer to read Buddhist books written with the attitude advocated by Confucius, who said, “Be a transmitter and not a maker.” This is to say that the authors should try to explain the sutras based on its original meaning, cite the names of sutras when appropriate, and to describe what the ancient, most virtuous masters have said and done. It is best to not read specious books.

Buddhism and Folk Religion

QUESTION

How does Buddhism adapt to the spiritual needs of people who hold folk beliefs?

ANSWER

Folk beliefs are religious practices closely associated with the folk culture and customs of society; they are primitive religions developed among ethnic groups everywhere since human civilization began. Folk religions are means to alleviate vexation in people's minds and conflicts in the family and community, as well as easing the sufferings caused by nature. When people lack physical and intellectual abilities to solve problems in a timely manner, they seek help, guidance, relief, and blessings from deities; they will use whatever means available to communicate with ghosts and deities, such as casting lots, fortune-telling, causing spirits to appear, contacting the dead, receiving revelation on altars, sacrificing animals, or making vows.

From the monotheistic point of view, these kinds of activities are heretical superstitions and occult practices. Buddhism also does not advocate these practices. Folk religions in China mix up all kinds of beliefs and deities. Since the Song Dynasty, the trend has been to combine aspects of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism without differentiating among the various deities, immortals, buddhas, and bodhisattvas. Since the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

and the early Republic of China in the early 19th century, Christianity and Islam were added to the mix by some folk religions which claimed that all the five major religions are rooted in the same source. They use occultists, revelation altars, various spirit mediums, as well as operators and paraphernalia of divining lots to communicate with nameless ghosts or deities who proclaim themselves as well-known deities, immortals, saints, sages, bodhisattvas, or buddhas to help the worshippers resolve their uncertainties and satisfy their needs.

Gradually, in order to meet the spiritual needs of people who held folk beliefs, Buddhism also offered some expedient means to help people. The difference however, is that Buddhism provides rational guidance, teachings of cultivating good deeds and blessings, as well as practices such as chanting sutras and repentance, to help people achieve the goals of their prayers. In contrast, folk practitioners would flatter the deities and blindly depend on them to fulfill their wishes.

Monotheistic religions have similar goals and functions; however, their sole object is to worship the one God. People in folk religions also worship other religions' founders in the same way they worship deities. The problem is that while a major religion has a system of transmission including its own founder, history, tenets, philosophy, and community of teachers, folk religions worship a hodgepodge of multiple gods.

From an anthropological perspective, although folk religion is a form of religion associated with primitive cultures, it is able to meet the needs of the fragile bodies and minds of human beings. Even in the West, which has been under the influence of Christianity for more than 2,000 years, there are still traces of folk religion everywhere.

Hence, from the Buddhist standpoint, there should also be an appropriate degree of tolerance and acceptance towards folk religions. However,

in trying to meet the demand and needs of folk religions, if the threshold of what is Buddhism is lowered, or further if deities and ghosts are elevated and seen as expedient manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas, then Buddhism would perish and exist only in name. It would also be criticized and reproached by rational people. Therefore, a true Buddhist monastery should not install fortune telling lots, a revelation altar, or crescent-shaped divining “moon blocks” (*jiaobei*). Nor should it set up and worship statues or idols of local deities from folk beliefs. This is to avoid acquiring the character of a folk religion, and so that people do not misconstrue polytheistic beliefs as Buddhism, or that Buddhism is just another folk religion.

In that case, how does Buddhism respond to the religious needs of people who have a propensity for folk religions? This can be done by emphasizing the benefits of believing in buddhas and bodhisattvas, or disseminating the efficacy of popular mantras and sutras as follows. For example, we can expound that the efficacious responses of the bodhisattvas Guanyin and Kshitigarbha extend to all occasions at all times and places, no matter how small the issue. Guanyin Bodhisattva is known as the vastly responsive one, the savior from suffering and misfortunes, the most merciful and compassionate. Amitabha Buddha is referred to as the unsurpassed king of medicine, characterized by immeasurable longevity and infinite light. These buddhas and bodhisattvas respond to any plea, be it for longevity or wisdom. In addition, as one of the billions of manifestations of Vairocana Buddha, Shakyamuni is the founder of Buddhism in this Saha World (Skt. *sahaloka*) of enduring sufferings. He is the guiding teacher of humans and devas, the light in a long dark night, the merciful guide through the ocean of suffering. As all buddhas can receive any sentient being’s call for help at any time and from anywhere, they are able to help all sentient beings. All great bodhisattvas possess the six supernatural powers, and can respond to and resolve sentient beings’ reasonable prayers at any time and in any place.

Hence, one who prays to a specific buddha or bodhisattva, or chooses a specific practice, sutra, or mantra will easily attain the kinds of goals sought for in folk beliefs. Even more, by doing so, one can advance beyond the level of folk beliefs to the level where one can benefit oneself and others, as well as attain the freedom of liberation.

Among the many Buddhist traditions, the esoteric schools prescribe practices at various levels and for different goals. In the Tiantai and Huayan schools of China, various ritual procedures for cultivating realizations and for repentance and paying homage have been compiled; following these procedures to cultivate the Dharma gates mentioned in the sutras is very different from the practices of polytheistic worship in folk religions. However, it should be noted that in the early days of Buddhism, there was no such diverse choices of ritual procedures. The Buddha taught innumerable methods for practicing Dharma, and any one of them could encapsulate all Dharma methods if the practitioner focuses on it. For this reason, of the twenty-five Dharma methods of complete penetration introduced in the *Shurangama Sutra*, any one of them is equivalent to all the rest and encapsulates the functions of all. The *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra* further mentions the non-dual Dharma gate; this was to avoid Buddhism being easily confused with folk religions, or being polytheistic, or giving the wrong impression that deities are the same as buddhas.

At a deeper level, if Buddhists are eager to satisfy different desires, frequently changing their practice methods and focus of worship, they will lose sight of their central goals. For genuine Buddhists, having faith in the Three Jewels means learning Buddhism and cultivating Dharma; it means learning about the Buddha's compassion and wisdom, using Dharma as the correct guide, and focusing on one specific method to reach the firmly held goal of upholding the precepts, cultivating samadhi, and developing wisdom. As long as we do not deviate from the principles of the Three Jewels, and we

make a daily practice of reading Buddhist books, participating in Buddha activities, upholding precepts, giving alms, paying homage, reciting sutras, and repenting, even if we do not ask for any real practical benefits, they will naturally manifest in our daily life.

Shunning or Renouncing the World

QUESTION

What's the difference between one's shunning the world and renouncing it?

ANSWER

Usually beginners in Buddhism must have a sense of weariness and renunciation in order to appreciate the importance and need to practice Buddhadharma. They are weary of vexations and pains coming from contradictions and frictions within their own mind and body, as well from their relations with people and the environment. However, if they can transform their mind, they would no longer be weary of feelings associated with these phenomena, and when there's nothing to be weary about, they would have nothing to renounce. Therefore, having a sense of weariness and renunciation is their first step in studying and practicing Buddhism; it is to recognize suffering and wanting to renounce or transcend it.

Generally, people regard wearying of relationships and wanting to renounce them and the world means negating the value and meaning of human beings. Actually it is just the opposite, as one who is world-weary would want to elevate the meaning and value of being human. It is like a tradesman who leaves home to earn money to support his family; or a child who leaves home to pursue an education, gain the knowledge and skills to embark on a career, to have a family, and to benefit self and others. Therefore, the weariness

and renunciation associated with Buddhism is the first step onto the path of studying Buddhism, but it is not the ultimate goal.

Wanting to shun the world is different from renouncing it. A person who shuns the world does not want to fulfill their obligations and face the reality of life; they would prefer to run away from their debts, and be far away from their living environment. People like this are like escaped prisoners, as their minds are full of fear, uneasiness, and insecurity; they will always be burdened with the stress of having no place in this world. This is completely different from renouncing the world of vexations by studying and practicing the correct Buddhadharma. If one wearies of one's vexations and renounces them, one can then gradually depart from these vexations. The more one departs from vexations, the more one feels liberated and at ease; the more one is at ease, the more vexations will lighten. Eventually, one will attain complete liberation, and when one has attained liberation, there would not be any issue of weariness or renunciation.

One does not solve their problems by shunning them. Shunning indicates one is aware of their sufferings but is afraid to face them; instead, they choose to run away from them. On the other hand, having a sense of weariness and renunciation means that one knows about one's sufferings and seeks to alleviate them, thus practicing Buddhadharma to be free from them. Instead of shunning problems, one tries to work through them. Shunning problems not only ignores the law of cause and effect, it is also not condoned in Buddhadharma. To have a sense of weariness and renunciation does not necessarily imply leaving this world; rather, the important thing is for it to lead one to cultivate a thorough understanding of worldly phenomena through the guiding principles of Buddhadharma and its methods of practice.

Nagarjuna's *Root Verses on the Middle Way* (Skt. *Mulamadhyamakakarika*) says: "Whatever is produced by causes and conditions, I say they are empty." In the beginning, one has a sense of weariness and renunciation; in the end,

one realizes that all phenomena are empty and illusory. As such, one will no longer have vexations or attachments, and thus no longer needs to be weary of and to renounce anything. However, just having an intellectual understanding of this will not necessarily enable one to transcend suffering. Therefore, one may temporarily leave the secular environment and focus on practicing and observing the three learnings of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom. That way, it would be easier to reach the goal of transcending suffering.

Therefore, people with the most superior karmic capacity can attain sudden enlightenment once they come into contact with the Dharma; afterwards as a monastic or lay practitioner, they may continue to help others in this secular world. People of average karmic capacity would find it most effective to leave the secular world and be a monastic. However, being a monastic is a very challenging thing, not achievable except by the bravest. First of all, most people do not have a sense of weariness and renunciation; and second, while some people do have a sense of weariness and renunciation, they are not able to actually attain renunciation.

Practicing Alone or with a Group

QUESTION

What are the differences between practicing alone and practicing with a group?

ANSWER

It's commonly said: "One would rather sleep in a large monastery than practice in a small temple." It means that practicing by oneself is different from practicing with a group, but the difference between practicing under a good teacher and practicing with no teacher is even more profound. Practicing alone should be fine after one has understood the methods and reasons for practicing. It is also important that one knows how to solve any physical and psychological problems, as well as difficulties and issues arising during the practice; otherwise, instead of gaining benefits one might be harmed by it. Especially when cultivating meditation and samadhi alone, if one practices with zeal and diligence, one may experience various meditation related illnesses and demonic hindrances which are abnormal bodily and mental changes. Therefore, it is not appropriate for beginners to practice alone.

In group practice, even without guidance from good teachers, members in the group can support one another, and correct each other's mistakes. As long as their knowledge and understanding are correct, there would not be serious problems. Furthermore, solitary practice can be inconsistent; sometimes one can practice diligently with zeal, then suddenly become lax and

without self-discipline. This is because there is no one to restrain one's behavior, and there are no rules as when practicing with a group.

Overzealous and aggressive practice could exhaust one's body and mind, causing meditation related illnesses. Undisciplined and lax practice might lead people to abandon it and lose their aspiration for the path. After one has gone through several cycles of aggressive and lax practice, one might lose confidence in one's practice. If one practices with a group, due to the rules and regulations in the group living environment, as well as the checks and balances among the peers, one will be propelled to gradually make progress. That's why group practice is safer.

Moreover, an individual's strength of mind or willpower is very limited, and a beginner is not able to create an atmosphere of practice space by him or herself. Yet, when several people practice the same method as a group, having the same goal, with a common attitude and schedule, that creates an atmosphere of practice space. Even with just one person in the group who practices regularly and correctly, the whole group will be led onto the right path.

If most members in the group practice regularly and correctly, the strength of their combined efforts will resonate and affect everyone, enabling each member to receive the energy of the whole group. Should there be ten practitioners in the group, every person may receive the energy of ten; should there be one hundred, each person may receive the energy of one hundred. Therefore, Buddhism encourages the use of group practice as the common way for beginners to practice.

Even for long-time practitioners, periodical group practice will be beneficial. Therefore, when Shakyamuni Buddha was still living, more than a thousand of his disciples often followed him and lived and practiced together as a sangha, a monastic community. In the history of Chinese Buddhism, regardless of lineage, whenever a large number of great practitioners were

produced, it was brought about by group practice. In the Chan School, Fourth Patriarch Daoxin (580–651), Fifth Patriarch Hongren (601–674), Sixth Patriarch Huineng, great masters such as Mazu Daoyi (709–788), and Baizhang Huaihai (720–814), all were able to nurture a large number of great practitioners under them. They all formed large sanghas with 400, 500, or even up to 1,000 monastics.

Therefore, Chan monasteries were like an ocean or a forest. The ocean contains all kinds of life – serpents, dragons, fish, turtles, and so on, yet there are no rotten corpses in it. Regardless of the level and strength of their capacities, any practitioner who becomes corrupt or abnormal would be brought ashore by the waves, like a rotten corpse. As for the forest, the trees may vary in type and size, but they all grow upright; otherwise they would not receive rain, dew, or sunshine, and be eliminated naturally. Hence, diligent practice in solitude is not appropriate for beginners.

Conducting Solitary Retreat

QUESTION

Is it necessary for one to conduct solitary retreat in order to become a great practitioner?

ANSWER

The secluded solitary retreat, *biguan* or *yanguan* in Chinese, is a practice trend that did not exist in Indian Buddhism. Even in China, it was not until after the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) and into the Ming Dynasty were there records of this kind of practice. Therefore, we can say that it is not necessary for great practitioners to have conducted solitary retreat. On the other hand, people who have conducted solitary retreat are not necessary great practitioners. In China, the practice of conducting solitary retreat may have originated from Tibetan Buddhism where practitioners isolated themselves in caves for a long period of time to concentrate on their practice. When Tibetan Buddhism was brought into China with the Mongol Empire, the practice of solitary retreat gradually became popular.

In terms of methods, there are indeed prescribed practices to be carried out at fixed hours, in fixed months, and within a fixed duration, such as seven, twenty-one, forty-nine, ninety, and even a hundred days, to concentrate on a specific method and strive for realization within the allocated period. If it is necessary and conditions allowed, the term of practice can even be for one, three, six, nine years, or even decades.

But such practices are not necessarily done alone. For instance, during the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, his disciples participated in group retreats in the summer or in the rainy season. In Mainland China, Chan monasteries held large group retreats in the summer and winter. The methods of repentance and rituals compiled by the Tiantai School patriarchs are meant to be conducted by groups of six, seven, and more than ten people in a consecrated space. Although the summer or rain retreats during Shakyamuni Buddha's time might be conducted by individuals within a certain boundary, either under a tree, in a cave, inside a self-built hut, or in an empty hut of a lay person's home, they were not the same as the solitary retreats of today.

In ancient China, after an episode of enlightenment some practitioners were advised by learned masters to settle by the water, in the woods, in the mountains, or in a cave, to practice in solitude for several years, sustained by wild plants and water from the streams. The most famous of these places is Zhongnan Mountain where it is said, seventy-two thatch-roofed huts were originally used by solitary practitioners. Later some of them had gradually turned into monasteries. Yet, the custom of dwelling in huts continued. Living in a thatch-roofed hut, the dweller needs to be self-sufficient. They had to equip themselves with cookware, store seeds for vegetables and grains, enter into the mountains, gather thatching to build a shelter from wind and rain, and be away from people for a long period of time. However, this way of practice, although similar to the solitary retreat, is not really so.

In recent eras there have been two reasons for conducting solitary retreat: one is to shun mundane affairs in the secular world; the other is to engage in meditation practice diligently, or to delve deeply into the Buddhist canon. The first is more like retirement and self-refinement; the second is true practice. If it is just for self-refinement, as long as one has financial resources or external support, solitary retreat would be easy to accomplish. However, if one enters seclusion without knowing the methods of practice and ways to

delve deeply into the canon, even after three or five years in seclusion, they still would not make any progress. If one is on solitary retreat to practice meditation and study the canon, he or she should have a firm foundation on meditation practice, or already possess the knack of sutra study. Otherwise, one would not achieve much.

What we call “great practitioners” are those who devote themselves completely in the Dharma, and who have already opened their wisdom eye, yet they conduct themselves without pride. They would endure abuses to fulfill heavy responsibilities, work hard, endure hardship, bear what others cannot bear, and relinquish what others are not able to relinquish. Their hearts are as pure and clear as a mirror, yet they would not display it openly; their words and actions might appear to be slow and dull-witted, but they are full of compassion and wisdom. As soon as causes and conditions ripen, they will rise up to lead others, and people far and near will echo their efforts; they will deliver sentient beings extensively, teaching all sentient beings without discrimination and with no attachment.

Even if causes and conditions fail to ripen and they live their whole life without being recognized, the glory of their lives would never diminish. Great poet-practitioners [of the 9th century] such as Hanshan, Shide, and Fenggan became known only because of later efforts by busybodies who collected their poetic Buddhist hymns and made them popular; otherwise, we would have never known that these great practitioners existed at all. As Mencius said, “If poor, they attended to their own virtue in solitude; if advanced to dignity, they made the whole world virtuous as well.” This is similar to the mind and attitude of great Buddhist practitioners. Therefore, great practitioners may conduct solitary retreat, but it is not necessary that they go through the format and process of a solitary retreat. If causes and conditions allow and it is necessary, solitary retreat certainly is one of the best ways to detach from mundane affairs and outside intrusions to concentrate on practice.

Being Tested by Demons

QUESTION

Can sentient beings really be tested by demons?

ANSWER

The notion of being tested by the demons (*mokao*) did not come from Buddhism, but from Zhaijiao, a kind of Chinese folk religion. In Buddhism, there is the idea of being disturbed by demons (Skt. *mara*) of four types: vexation demon, five-skandhas demon, death demon, and deva demon. Aside from the deva demon, the others are phenomena created by imbalance and conflict between one's body and mind, and the outer environment.

Only great practitioners are subject to disturbances by deva demon. Other than deva demon, the other three types of demons originate within human beings. Even if disturbed by deva demon, as long as one's body and mind are normal and one is mentally stable, one would be able to overcome it. It is people who do not know how to practice or do not have right views that are prone to demonic disturbances. For people who have right views and practice diligently, demonic disturbances do not exist. These so-called demonic disturbances result from one's self-centered attachment of greed and anger; the lighter the attachment, the farther away one would be from the demons. On the other hand, no one can forever avoid facing the death

demon, but if practitioners can face death with an ordinary mind, then death would not be demonic.

The five-skandhas demon refers to the aggregates of form, sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness. Form, the first aggregate, refers to one's physical body and its environment. The other four aggregates are mental activities, as well as the mind-subject that transmigrates in the cycle of birth and death. As long as one has not transcended the three realms, one remains in the cycle of birth and death and under the control of the demon of five skandhas, which is not a personified ghost or deity but a karmic force. If one can transcend the three realms by eradicating greed, anger, and ignorance, one will then be free from the effects of the five-skandhas demon. It is hence apparent that this demon is not apart from one's own body and mind.

The vexation demon refers to the loss of balance and self-control over our mental activities. It is when one cannot control one's own mind which constantly changes according to the environment; it is when one worries about everything, has difficulty letting go, is unable to achieve goals or discard the unwanted, and so on. It is because one is haunted by self-centered attachment. If you can treat others with compassion, humility, and rational wisdom instead of emotions, the vexation demon would have no way to perplex you.

The deva demon is in the heavens, with similar powers as a monotheistic creator God. He has immensurable power, changing his appearance and form at will; he can appear ferocious but mostly presents an image of kindness and mercy. Yet, whether through threats or bribery his goal is to persuade you to deviate from the right path and to practice the deviant way. In Buddhism, deva demons appear when a practitioner generates great bodhi-mind and the aspiration to transcend the three realms. Whenever great bodhi-mind is generated, the demon's palace would be shaken, and the Demon King

Mara would start to worry because, whenever someone transcends the three realms, the number of potential demons and their descendants would decrease, and the influence of Buddhadharma would grow. Therefore, the Demon King would send his demonic offspring and generals and soldiers to disturb the practitioner.

If a great practitioner exists, the Demon King might personally attempt to keep that practitioner within his demonic power. For instance, before Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, he had to tame the demons. However, unless one is a great practitioner, one would not likely be disturbed by deva demons. Generally, ordinary lay folks are consumed by vexations and the five skandhas day and night, and are still in the cycle of birth and death. As such, how would they be worthy of being attacked by deva demons?

But nowadays tales of and beliefs in being tested by demons have become fairly popular in society. Particularly in the Zhaijiao sect, where if everything went well for a follower – successful career, nice family, good health – one could claim that their fortunes were granted by the Unborn Mother Goddess (*Wusheng Laomu*), and the Bright Illustrious Almighty (*Mingming Shangdi*), as a result of their belief in Zhaijiao. Hence, they should be wholeheartedly grateful and offer all their support.

On the other hand, if people encountered calamity, illness, accidents, or ghostly disturbances, they would assume that those misfortunes were demon tests, which exemplified the saying: “As virtue on the Way rises by one foot, the demonic rises by ten.” This is because followers of Zhaijiao believe they have entered the gate of Dao and become a member of the Dao family. As a result, they have literally booked a place in heaven and remove their name from hell, thus drawing jealousy and attacks from demons. Therefore, they would insist that one should not blame the Unborn Mother Goddess and

the Bright Illustrious Almighty; rather, one should appreciate and endure those misfortunes. Otherwise, if one failed to overcome the demon tests and lost faith, they would likely lose their place in heaven and have their names listed in hell again.

This kind of talk is truly foolishly superstitious. Think about it: if one had the power to register someone in heaven or remove someone's name from hell, why wouldn't he or she help people overcome demonic obstacles? Instead, they talk about demon tests, making people not dare to alter or improve their misfortunes by using their own human effort.

It is true that Buddhism accepts the idea of receiving lighter retribution for some severe sins, as well as receiving retribution earlier. That means when one does not practice, bad retribution would not necessarily appear; but as soon as one practices Buddhadharma diligently and aspires to renunciation and the bodhisattva path, he or she could attract certain demonic obstructions. These could be the doing of deva demons or debtors from previous lives, who worry that if you transcended the three realms, they would lose control over you and have no way to claim their debts. Therefore, they have come to collect the debts now. However, due to your practice and the power of virtuous merits from your aspirations, debts that were supposedly payable over many lifetimes have manifested as illnesses or misfortunes in this life. As a result, debts accrued over incalculable kalpas would be settled. This is based on the Buddhist principle of cause and effect, not irrational superstition. Regardless, Buddhism still advocates that when calamity or misfortunes occur, one should do one's best to improve the situation as a human being, rather than sitting helplessly and waiting for the worst, while enduring endless torture. Buddhism talks about cause and effect, but it also expounds causes and conditions – the causes from the past coming together with the present conditions, and hence, the results may change or be different.

Buddhism is not about predestination or fatalism; it is about making sincere effort. All misfortune and suffering come from one's past deeds and the lack of sincere effort in this life. Therefore, one should not complain about fate or blame others; instead, one should make an effort to use rational ways to improve one's condition. Hence, the idea of simply attributing illness and obstacles to being tested by demons cannot be substantiated or sanctioned in Buddhism.

Choosing an Illuminated Buddhist Teacher

QUESTION

How does one choose an illuminated Buddhist teacher?

ANSWER

The Confucian scholar Han Yu (768–824) once said: “Skills and trades are specialized fields.” Therefore, to enter a field of practice, one needs to find a good teacher who is an expert and excels in his or her own field. This principle applies to all pursuits, whether scholastic, arts, or crafts. It also applies to studying Buddhism. An illuminated teacher of Buddhism may not always be a student of another illuminated teacher, and an illuminated teacher may not produce a brilliant student. But by studying with an illuminated teacher at least one would not be misled onto a wrong path, or be taught the wrong principles. It would in fact be much safer than being in a “blind leading the blind” situation.

But who is an illuminated teacher of Buddhism? It is often hard for a beginner to know whether someone would be a good teacher, especially with regard to their depth of religious experience and meditative cultivation. Such a teacher does not have to be famous, but a teacher who has been widely recognized would be better and more reliable than a self-proclaimed one with no known reputation. When we are in no position to judge whether a teacher is good or not, it would be safer to follow a recognized teacher. It

would also be better if a relatively unknown teacher is recommended by a recognized teacher.

It would also be acceptable to have a trustworthy teacher to introduce you to another one. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the lay practitioner Sudhana visited fifty-three great spiritual mentors, each new one being introduced by the previous one. Thus, those fifty-three teachers formed a chain of relationships, and each was an illuminated teacher. Therefore, we know that Sudhana was not blindly seeking teachers, like a sick person frantically searching for a doctor.

Throughout history, there have been those who proclaimed themselves as great lineage masters. They would speak fallacies to puzzle and overwhelm people, reverse right and wrong, and mislead the public. They would freely recruit disciples and followers to exaggerate their strength. If one fails to recognize this kind of situation, it is easy to mistake a famous and deviant imposter as an illuminated teacher. The Confucian scholar Mencius said: “The big peril with people is that they all want to be other people’s teacher.” Because deviant teachers misguide people, they create turmoil, imbalance, confusion, and disorder in our society. Not only will one who learns their deviant ways, thoughts, and skills fail to broaden one’s horizons, one will end up harming one’s own body and mind, and cause tension and conflict in one’s family. It’s a pity that people cannot discern these imposters’ true characters, and their false and evil identities.

From the Buddhist standpoint the standards of good and evil, as well as honesty and deception, are based on the examination of a person’s self-centeredness. A person with strong tendencies of greed and anger would certainly not be a good teacher. Someone who appears to be kind, with pleasant countenance and high morale, but is arrogant, overbearing, and rude, is also definitely not a good teacher.

In Volume 9 of Master Nagarjuna's *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* (Skt. *Mahaprajnaparamita Shastra*; Chn. *Dazhidu Lun*), there are four critical points – the four principles of reliance (Chn. *siyifa*; Skt. *pratisarana*) that we may apply to our search for an illuminated teacher:

First: *Reliance on the Dharma or teaching rather than the person.* A good teacher is not self-centered, nor does he or she regard any particular individual as the authority; instead, a good teacher uses the common principles and criteria [of Buddhism] as the standard. This standard teaching is based on the principles of cause and effect, and causes and conditions. If a teacher violates these principles, he or she is not considered a good teacher. Because cause and effect makes us responsible for our own actions, causes and conditions teach us not to develop greed or anger towards any phenomenon. Otherwise, even if students see a teacher as a sage, if the teacher propagates the wrong teachings, he or she is no different from a deviant teacher.

Second: *Reliance on the meaning or spirit rather than the words.* True laws and principles can be applied everywhere in the world and at all times; they are not different because of the differences in race, regions, or cultural backgrounds. If a teacher claimed that religious taboos or mysterious language were part of the teachings, then what they teach would not be considered as the right laws. The right laws emphasize consistency and connectedness in term of reason and signification; they are not to be constrained by differences of words and languages. For instance, Arabic Muslims stress the importance of the Arabic language, while Judaism focuses on the Hebrew language; these are contrary to this principle. Buddhists study Sanskrit and Pali for the purpose of investigating the sutras for their original meanings, not because these languages are sacred or have any special spiritual power. In contrast, the importance of Sanskrit and the sound of the words in and of themselves are emphasized in Hinduism, making it different from Buddhism.

Third: *Reliance on wisdom rather than on discursive thinking.* Wisdom in Buddhism refers to the realization by sages of the great wisdom of no-self and unconditional great compassion. Therefore, as long as there is self-centeredness, whether for oneself or others, for all sentient beings, or for seeking unsurpassed buddhahood, and as long as there is a sense of self, whether it is the small-self, large-self, pure-self, or supreme self, it will be impossible to generate true wisdom; one's understanding will still belong to the scope of knowledge, intellect, and consciousness. Knowledge comes from the functions of differentiation, memory, and reasoning in the learning experience of the self. However, in [true] wisdom there are only objective phenomena without subjective referencing; only functioning without reference to any substance or essence. If a person [does not teach] in accordance to this principle, he or she is not a good teacher.

Fourth: *Reliance on the definitive meaning rather than the provisional meaning.* As far as definitive meaning is concerned, there is no Dharma to be taught, no Dharma to be attached to, no Dharma to be learned, no Dharma to be practiced, and no Dharma to be attained. Just as the teachings on no thought, no form, and no abiding in *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* indicate, there is no need of any reason and there is nothing extraordinary; just carry on with eating, dressing, living, benefiting self and others, diligently practicing without slacking.

According to these four principles, you should be able to distinguish without difficulty who is a good teacher and who is not. Then, as long as you follow these four principles to investigate and visit the teachers you wish to follow, nothing much can go wrong. With time, even if you can't find an illuminated teacher, you might become one yourself.

Going Deep on One Practice

QUESTION

Should one focus on one practice in order to go deeper?

ANSWER

The famous 20th-century Chinese thinker, Hu Shih (1891–1962), once said, “Scholastic pursuits should be like building a pyramid – broadly based and great in height.” To extensively study many fields of knowledge establishes the foundations of learning, but to specialize deeply in one particular field of study is a real scholastic achievement. If one studies extensively without achieving depth in any one field, what one learns is merely common knowledge, and one is, as the saying goes, “a jack of all trades, master of none.” If one cannot stand out from fellow practitioners and excel in any one field of pursuit, and there is no evidence of achievement or uniqueness in one’s work, one would be considered a generalist, not an expert.

Therefore, the Buddha stipulated that monastics should focus on studying the Tripitaka, which consists of the sutras, the Vinaya, and shastras. If one is especially talented and outstanding, they may spend about twenty-percent of their time browsing literature outside Buddhism. That’s because our time in this life is limited, we should know how to set our priorities by focusing on what is essential.

However, the Tripitaka is vast and deep, like the ocean. Even if one spent all one’s energy delving into it, one would not be able to fully learn

the profound teaching in one's lifetime. Therefore, since ancient times, people would use the following selective approach in the study of the Buddhist canon: at first, they would read introductory books, general commentaries, and general histories in order to gain an overview of the subject. From there according to aptitude and interests, they would focus on a specific sutra and a few other related sutras, a specific shastra and a few other related shastras, or a particular school of the Vinaya and related works on the Vinaya. By spending their whole life studying, practicing, researching, and disseminating their chosen subject, they would become a great living master in that subject. Successors could follow their footsteps to expand and further their work. This is how different lineages and schools of thought and practice were formed.

Currently, for Buddhist practitioners and followers in general, the most urgent thing in term of going deep on one practice does not concern sutras, the Vinaya, or shastras. Rather, it's about experiencing religious life, the methods of practice, and finding and following a good teacher. In the beginning, most people do not know which school of Buddhism or what method of practice is best suited for them. Therefore, one might be lost when faced with choices such as asceticism, joyful living, exoteric and esoteric Buddhism, ending up dabbling in all of them.

In exoteric Buddhism alone, even if there were just one or several eminent monastic masters or lay practitioners of great virtue in each of the Pure Land, Chan, Vinaya, Tiantai, Huayan, and Yogacara schools, someone who is anxious not to miss the boat, has the habit of running after the trendy, and is satisfied to just scratch the surface, would go for one school after another, changing teachers constantly.

What is worse, nowadays we keep seeing esoteric teachers with no formal lineage, as well as worshippers of ghosts and folk deities coming forth as teachers, proclaiming themselves to be gurus and living buddhas. They arm themselves with an assortment of specious theories, self-concocted

claims, and self-concocted practices to feast people's eyes and overwhelm their minds. People who do not have a good knowledge of fundamental Buddhism, but who need a method of practice and a drive to get benefits from practice, would inevitably search blindly, learning from whomever they find, going from one sect to another. This leads to psychological disorder, mental problems, and imbalance in life, causing them to be separated from the community, and to become a burden to the family and society. It is a very regrettable situation.

Therefore, we advocate that people go deep on one practice, not to change frequently, thinking that the other pasture is greener. If you are sure that you are studying the correct Buddhadharma and orthodox Buddhism, and that there have been no ill effects, then with a normal frame of mind and ceaseless diligent practice, you will see good effects, whether by reciting the Buddha's name, practicing Chan meditation, or chanting mantras.

One should not just want to satisfy their curiosity, or to seek sensual or mental stimulation. Instead, one should use ordinary mind to study and cultivate the normal Buddhadharma which is rational, humanistic, self-reliant, pure, simple and altruistic. You may at most need some assistance from the power of the Buddha to help you attain rebirth in the Pure Land at the time of dying. Otherwise, if you dream of becoming an esteemed high monastic or a virtuous lay practitioner on the one hand, and excel at ancient and modern, domestic and foreign literature, history, philosophy and religion on the other, you would be wasting your life. You won't benefit yourself or others, since you won't have time to cultivate sufficiently or use your talents to help others.

Focused and Mixed Ways of Practicing Buddhism

QUESTION

What is the difference between a Buddhist practice that is mixed and one that is focused?

ANSWER

Strictly speaking most Chinese Buddhists have a mixed practice; for instance to seek good health and longevity, and to eradicate disasters and misfortunes in their lives, Chinese people tend to recite the “Universal Gate” chapter from the *Lotus Sutra*, or the *Medicine Buddha (Bhaishajyaguru) Sutra*, or the *Great Compassion Dharani*. Or, they chant the name of Guanyin Pusa or Medicine Buddha. To seek future rebirth in the Western Pure Land, one would recite the *Amitabha Sutra* and chant the holy name of Amitabha Buddha. To alleviate sickness or bad karma, most would recite *Guanyin’s Efficacious Response Mantra*, or the *White Robed Great Being Mantra*, or carry out the Water Repentance Ritual or the Precious Repentance of Emperor Liang Ceremony. To help deceased relatives and friends transcend to a higher realm, people would recite the *Kshitigarbha Sutra* or the *Mantra for Rebirth in the Pure Land*, or perform the Flaming Mouth (*Yankou*) Ritual, or the Mengshan Ritual to feed hungry ghosts. These practices are exoteric, mixed with some esoteric style and flavor. They also attempt to adopt Western Pure Land as well as Eastern Pure Land practices. The same person, at different times for different purposes, might adopt different cultivation methods.

However, the best way to benefit from the practice of Buddhadharma is to focus on a specific practice, whether using exoteric or esoteric methods, reciting sutras or upholding mantras, meditating or performing rituals, or chanting the names of a buddha or bodhisattva. As long as you practice your chosen method persistently and constantly, you will receive responses and attain the goal of your practice.

In other words, reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha can lead you to the Western Pure Land, so does reciting the name of Guanyin Bodhisattva. Reciting the name of Guanyin Bodhisattva can help eradicate disasters and obstacles, just as reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha can. Meditation and contemplation can lead one to the state of samadhi and attain wisdom, and so will reciting the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Based on this principle, reciting the *Diamond Sutra* can also lead one to attain wisdom, eradicate calamities, be free of misfortunes, avoid obstacles, and attain rebirth to the Western Pure Land. This is true as well for other methods of practice.

The *Shurangama Sutra* records twenty-five different methods of complete penetration. Each method is taught by a Mahayana arhat or bodhisattva, who focused on that one method to attain realization; yet in the end, the realization of each method is the same as that of all the other methods. For example, Avalokiteshvara focused on the method of complete penetration through the faculty of hearing, and cultivated samadhi by contemplating sounds; he eventually penetrated the realizations of all the methods.

If practitioners completely devote themselves to the Pure Land practice by reciting the Buddha's name by upholding the chant of "Namo Amitabha," they would not only benefit in this life, but also be delivered by Amitabha Buddha at their life's end. In this way, all misfortunes would be avoided, all calamities diminished, and all obstacles removed. Those still in fundamental ignorance would gain wisdom, and afflicted ones would avoid demonic hindrances. If one practices Chan and persists in practicing methods such

as *huatou* or *gong'an*, or a currently available Chan method, they will receive benefits in the present as well as in the future; if one wishes to be reborn in the Pure Land they should also be able to do so.

Chanting is usually done in a group, or used as a means of balancing after a long period of sitting meditation. For individual practice or in a relatively long, fixed period of practice, there is no need to chant. For morning and evening services at home it is enough to recite, but one should focus on a specific sacred name, a specific sutra, pay homage to a specific sutra with prostration, or revere a specific buddha or bodhisattva with prostration. All of these methods are focused practices, and can help one reach their goals and fulfill their wishes. If each day at a fixed time one routinely holds a worship session with the same combination of sutras, mantras, chants, and holy names, this can also be called focused practice. Of course, compared with the aforementioned focused practices, this kind of practice has a mixed flavor to it.

Since ancient times, practitioners have focused on reciting the *Diamond Sutra* or the *Lotus Sutra* several thousand or even 10,000 times, prostrating, or chanting mantras several million times. For instance, Chan Master Yongming Yanshou (904–975) recited the sacred name of Amitabha Buddha every day without interruption, even while resting, sleeping, eating, or going to the toilet. This is what we called diligent, focused practice. It is not easy for ordinary people to reach this level of practice, because some may feel it is monotonous or even boring to read the same sutra over and over, or recite a mantra constantly, or just continually recite the revered name of a buddha. Therefore, it would be more suitable for them to recite a combination of sutras and mantras, holy names, or verses. However, never try to study exoteric Buddhism today and change to esoteric Buddhism tomorrow; or wish to be born in the Eastern Pure Land in morning, then in the Western Pure Land in the evening.

The Easy and the Difficult Path of Bodhisattva Practice

QUESTION

What are the so-called easy path and difficult path of cultivation for bodhisattva practice?

ANSWER

The easy path (*yixing dao*) and the difficult path (*nanxing dao*) are two ways of bodhisattva practice. The terms first appeared in Chapter Five, “On the Easy Path” of Nagarjuna’s *Exposition of Ten Stages of Bodhisattvahood* (Skt. *Dasabhumivibhāsa Śāstra*). The chapter introduces the two paths of bodhisattva practice. It is like traveling in this world: going on foot takes more effort and is more arduous, while going by boat is less physically demanding and thus easier. In general the easy path is to rely on faith as an expedient means until one attains the stage of non-regression, while the difficult path relies on one’s diligent effort to make progress.

The easy path described by Nagarjuna in his treatise consists of reciting the names of ten buddhas in the ten directions including Buddha Bhadrashri (Chn. *Shande Fo*); or those of 107 buddhas including Amitabha Buddha; or those of 143 bodhisattvas including Shumana Bodhisattva (Chn. *Shanyi Pusa*). By the time of Grandmaster Tanluan (476–542) of China, the practice focusing on just reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha was advocated, as in the first fascicle of the master’s *Commentary to the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure*

Land (Chn. *Wangsheng lun zhu*). This is called the easy path. It promotes the other-power of Amitabha Buddha's original vows. By relying on that power, one will be able to transcend to the Pure Land, and eventually attain the stage of non-regression with the empowerment of Amitabha Buddha.

In his *Anthology on Happy Contentment* (Chn. *Anleji*), Grandmaster Daochuo (562–645) referred to the difficult path as the way of the saints, and the easy path as the Pure Land way. Japanese Pure Land Master Honen Shonin (1133–1212) used the terms “self-power saintly way” and “other-power Pure Land” to differentiate the difficult path from the easy path.

It is evident that the easy path mentioned by Master Nagarjuna is to recite the names of various buddhas and bodhisattvas, and to seek rebirth in one of the Pure Lands in the ten directions. However, in China and Japan, Pure Land followers take the practice with Amitabha Buddha as the easy path, relying on the power of his vows to help them transcend specifically to Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. After one arrives in Amitabha Pure Land, all things seen and heard there are mediums and designs through which Amitabha Buddha teaches the Dharma. Therefore, whatever one sees and hears constantly reminds one to be mindful of the Buddha, mindful of the Dharma, and mindful of the Sangha. As a result, it becomes much easier for one to attain enlightenment and get to the stage of non-regression.

Nevertheless, it would take a very long time for one who transcends to the Pure Land by completely relying on the power of Amitabha Buddha's vow to reach the stage of non-regression. That is because in the Pure Land one can cultivate wisdom, but not blessings. Cultivating wisdom leads one away from vexation, but without cultivating blessings one cannot attain the merits of a bodhisattva. Therefore, though the Pure Land path is easier it is quite circuitous: one would need to wait till they have reached the stage of non-regression, and then return to the world to deliver sentient beings, to fully cultivate the blessings and virtues of a bodhisattva. Only when both

merits and wisdom are complete would they attain buddhahood. As a wondrous expedient means, the easy path is particularly conducive for sentient beings that lack self-confidence, who are weak and timid, and who have deep retribution karma, giving them hope for deliverance. It also encourages them to diligently study Dharma and recite the names of the buddhas.

As for the difficult path, it entails practicing for three *asamkheya kalpas*, as well as accomplishing the most challenging ways on the bodhisattva path, and withstanding the most unbearable obstacles to attaining buddhahood. But it is the common pathway in the practice of Buddhadharmā. All past, present, and future buddhas who have attained and will attain buddhahood, owe it to generating the unsurpassed and perfect great bodhi-mind on the causal ground. In other words, one who vows to become a buddha should first attain faith and confidence.

According to the *Jeweled Necklace Sutra* (Chn. *Yingluo Jing*), cultivating faith takes one, two, or three kalpas in order to gain faith and confidence without regression, and to progress to the first of the ten stages of abiding in bodhisattva wisdom (*chuzhuwei*). However, in Ashvaghosha's (100–160) *Treatise on Awakening to Faith in the Mahayana* (Chn. *Dasheng Qixin Lun*; Skt. *Mahayanasraddhotpada Shastra*), he says, "Cultivating faith and confidence takes ten thousand kalpas." Building up faith and confidence and being able to enter the first abiding stage of bodhisattva wisdom is the starting point of the first *asamkheya kalpa*. Then, arriving at the first *bhumi* stage of the bodhisattva path to buddhahood, one begins the second *asamkheya kalpa*. Completing the seventh *bhumi* stage is the starting point of the third *asamkheya kalpa*. When all ten *bhumis* are achieved, one has completed the three *asamkheya kalpas*, and becomes an absolute, universal, enlightened bodhisattva, and enters the final two stages before realizing full buddhahood.

Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteshvara (Chn. *Guanyin*), Mahasthamaprapta (Chn. *Shizhi*), Manjusri (Chn. *Wenshu*), Samantabhadra (Chn. *Puxian*), and

Kshitigarbha (Chn. *Dizhang*), all have 100 more kalpas to go before attaining buddhahood. This is the difficult path. During their time on the path, bodhisattvas sacrifice their lives and take on rebirths, make unlimited giving of alms, cultivate countless offerings, and study with uncountable buddhas. While being with sentient beings, they “never seek comfort and happiness for themselves, but vow to free sentient beings from suffering.” Day after day, gradually the self-centered attachment will gradually dissipate, and blessings and wisdom will grow. When one’s selfless great compassion reaches its fullness, it will be the realization of buddhahood.

Before completing the first *asamkheya kalpa*, one is still an ordinary being. According to the Tiantai School, before the attainment of faith and confidence, one is at the “external ordinary rank.” From the first of ten abiding stages of bodhisattva wisdom, till completing the ten stages of transference (*shihuixiang*), they are at the “internal ordinary rank.” At these ordinary ranks, bodhisattvas still have the sense of self and perceive that there are still sentient beings to be delivered, vexations to be eliminated, and buddhahood to be attained. Because of their unshakable faith and convictions in the Three Jewels, as well as the confidence on themselves, they bravely move forward and keep practicing in accordance to the teachings without looking back.

Before the first stage of abiding and during the ten stages of faith and confidence, there would be dangers of losing faith from four kinds of obstructions: demonic, karmic, afflictive, and retributive. There is still a danger that one may lose faith and that’s why these stages are called “with the possibility of regression.” One might experience fluctuations of progress and regression; sometimes one would have strong faith in Buddhadharma and continue to practice; at other times one would drift away from Buddhadharma. However, once bodhi-mind has been generated, one has already planted the cause of eventually becoming a buddha. Regardless of the strength of one’s causes, there is the chance of such causes emerging again and again from one’s eighth

consciousness; and that would keep one continuing to practice Buddhadharmā. Upon attaining non-regression in faith and confidence, there is no more uncertainty in the remaining time to be taken before one becomes a buddha. However, from the viewpoint of suffering, one can say that the torment gets stronger, and the journey becomes more challenging. This is the difficult path for bodhisattvas.

Did not the Chinese sages and heroes all hold the same view that “even in a cauldron of boiling oil, I would gladly endure hardship and suffering”? Bodhisattvas having to endure hardships and suffering is due to their vows, not to their karmic retributions. Therefore, to bodhisattvas this kind of difficult path is really a normal path of cultivation.

However, it should be recognized that the Pure Land method of Amitabha Buddha is not only for those with lesser faith and confidence. According to the *Contemplations on Amitabha Buddha Sutra* (Skt. *Amitayurdhyana Sutra*; Chn. *Guanwuliangshou Jing*), the conditions for being reborn among the nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land, especially that for the highest grade, include the bodhisattva path of generating the bodhi-mind and cultivating the three sources of blessings. Therefore, it is not completely dependent on Amitabha Buddha’s effort. Only at the lowest level of rebirth in the Pure Land does one rely completely on the other-power of Amitabha Buddha’s fundamental vow.

Practicing Forbearance, Enduring Humiliation

QUESTION

What is the right way to practice forbearance?

ANSWER

Forbearance (Chn. *renru*; Skt. *kshanti*) is the third of the Six Paramitas, which are practices that will upon perfection, deliver one across the ocean of vexations. To a certain extent, the Chinese “*renru*” implies putting up with insults and enduring humiliation. As said in the *Sutra of the Buddha’s Bequeathed Teachings*, “One who practices forbearance can be called a person of great strength. If one cannot enjoy the vicious insult as if drinking sweet nectar, they would not be considered a man of wisdom who has entered the path.” Volume 57 of the *Yogacara Bhumi Shastra* also states: “What is forbearance? It can be recognized from being in accord with the following three practices: not holding anger or hatred, not holding resentment and seeking revenge, not harbouring malice.” Also, Volume 6 of the *Mahaprajnaparamita Shastra* states: “Even when facing multiple vicious treatments from sentient beings, one would not have an angry mind or harbor hatred; and when receiving respect and offerings, one would not have a delightful mind either... This is practicing forbearance with sentient beings.” Volume 5 of the same shastra also states: “To forbear those respectful and supportive sentient beings, as well as with those angry, vexed, lustful, desirous people, is called forbearance with sentient beings. To forbear phenomena such as respect and support,

as well as phenomena such as anger, vexations, lust, and desires, is called forbearance of phenomena.”

Volume 7 of the *Sutra on Lay Buddhist Precepts* (Skt. *Upasaka Sila Sutra*; Chn. *Youpose Jiejing*) also speaks of two types of forbearance: the first is mundane forbearance, such as enduring hunger, thirst, cold, heat, hardship and joy. The second is supramundane forbearance, such as forbearance in faith, precepts, almsgiving, learning, cultivating wisdom, and having the right view without error; forbearance in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha; forbearance in verbal abuse, physical beating, evil words, evil affairs, greed, anger, and ignorance, etc. It is to bear the most unbearable, and give away the most cherished.

From the above scriptural excerpts, we can see that the idea of forbearance covers a wide range of meanings. In general, it implies that one should reject all pleasurable things and embrace all hardships. However, it is difficult for an ordinary person to endure unreasonable insults or for a man to reject seduction by a beautiful woman, just as it is difficult for an ordinary person to accept and have faith in the various teachings in Buddhadharma. Generally speaking, we can bear and tolerate most things, as long as they are not relevant to us; yet when issues are closely related to our personal fame, gains to our family, or love relationships, they would be difficult to tolerate.

Buddhadharma teaches us forbearance not only for ourselves, but also for sentient beings. When one can be fully without discord, one is unmoving in the face of the “eight winds”; that is to say, one is able to forbear each of the eight phenomena of gain and loss, honor and disgrace, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. Ultimately, liberated bodhisattvas are said to have attained the forbearance of the non-production of phenomena [or emptiness and non-self].

Liberated bodhisattvas are not attached to the inner emotions generated by the six sense organs of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind; and they are not affected by the six external effects of sight, sound, smell, taste,

touch, and thought. This is called “forbearance of phenomena.” They are not angered when being persecuted, and do not draw pleasure when others make offerings to them. That is to say, for them there is no self who receives, nor another self who give. This is to attain forbearance of sentient beings; it is the state of mind of a bodhisattva on the sagely level; it is also the goal of cultivating Buddhadharma. With forbearance, one gains peace for oneself, as well as instills peace in others, creating harmony and cooperation among people. Therefore, practicing forbearance is the best principle for building a harmonious and blissful world.

However, following this principle would seem to mean that forbearance is the same as simply putting up with insult and swallowing humiliation; it would seem that we should accept without resistance all false accusations, insults, slanders, and attacks. Of course, the reality is not so. We must know that forbearance not supported by wisdom may cause more harm. Therefore, acting with wisdom is very important. For instance, there’s no way to prevent and control natural disasters caused by wind, rain, flood or fire; yet if we take precautions and are prepared in advance, we can lessen the effects and reduce losses. We need to face retribution from our karmic deeds, but we can also make extra effort to alter the degree and manner of karmic retribution.

Therefore, we accept things that are mutually beneficial; we also consider accepting things that are beneficial to others but not to ourselves. If things are mutually damaging, then we should try to avoid or alter them. For instance, when we are dealing with animals and people who have lost control and are wantonly harming others, we should certainly try to do our best to deter them. Because they are already in an unfortunate situation, we should try to prevent them from creating even more harm. But we should not hold the attitude of “an eye for an eye”; instead, we should follow the principle of compassion and mercy – to be always introspective, self-reflective, and

repentant. With regard to unreasonable people, we should rely on education and restraints to return them to normal. This will be of great merit not only towards those people and the whole society, but to all sentient beings as well.

Seeking Enlightenment through Chan Practice

QUESTION

What shall one do if after lifelong Chan practice, one still has not attained enlightenment?

ANSWER

In Chan Buddhism, enlightenment means letting go of everything and having no attachments in the mind; that is to say, there is nothing to seek and nothing to give up. So if within a single thought we could let go of all our myriad engagements, in that moment we would be in enlightenment. As far as sudden realization or sudden enlightenment is concerned, there is no gradual progress or stages of attainment. So there is no need to worry about whether one has attained enlightenment before passing on.

In Chan practice one must guard against setting one's mind on seeking or anticipating enlightenment. Seeking enlightenment, one will not attain it; anticipating enlightenment, one is merely lost and confused. Seeking and anticipating are delusions, attachments, entanglements, and clinging. Therefore, while true Chan practitioners are aware of enlightenment, they do not covet it as the goal of practice. The thought of being enlightened is appropriate before one begins practicing, but during the course of practice, one must let go of this thought in order to practice well.

Therefore, practitioners of Chan emphasize the process rather than the goal. During the process, one follows the guidance of a good teacher, uses the

correct methods, and practices diligently to go forward with determination. As the saying goes, “one slap, one bloody palm; one step, one footprint.” One simply upholds the method in each and every thought, paying no concern to anything else. If one is clearly aware thought after thought without a break, holding closely to the method without gaps, meticulously without end, the practice naturally gathers strength. At this time one will know that none of these ideas – being enlightened or not, birth and death or nirvana – has anything to do with practice.

Beginning Buddhist practitioners generally know that the cycle of birth and death is an ocean of sufferings, and nirvana is the shore of liberation; but they do not really understand that there is no absolute boundary between birth and death, and nirvana. So beginners think that they should fear birth and death, and seek nirvana; they believe that before attaining enlightenment, they are shackled by vexations, troubled by birth and death, and tormented by myriad sufferings. And that once they attain enlightenment, they will be liberated from the cycle of birth and death, and become completely free. Little do they know that such a [dualistic view] is an expedient means for the confused, to lure them into practicing the Dharma; it is not for the enlightened. Once they step into the gate of the Dharma, gain faith and start to practice, they should be taught to not practice for any goals, that seeking enlightenment is also attachment. One has to be rid of all attachments in order to attain enlightenment, and not be afflicted by birth and death. Recognizing this, one will be able to let go of the desire to seek or anticipate enlightenment.

Spending one’s whole life practicing without gathering strength indicates that from beginning to end, one has not learned to renounce attachments or let them go. Nevertheless, if one always practices diligently, even though one is driven by the fear of birth and death and the yearning for enlightenment, at least one need not worry about falling into the three lower planes [of the

desire realm]. After all, focusing one's mind on leaning towards enlightenment is better than towards hell.

Buddhadharma emphasizes the power of our vows as well as the force of karma. If in our practice we are guided by our vows, even though obstacles from our past karma might prevent us from attaining liberation in this lifetime, we would at least not stray from the Three Jewels. If we cannot attain enlightenment in this life, we will still be able to continue diligently practicing the three learnings of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom in the next life, guided by the power of our vows. This is because the merits of upholding the precepts, together with the deeds of samadhi and wisdom, will lead us to be reborn in a heavenly place or in the Pure Land, or even attain enlightenment. At the very least, we would be reborn into the human world to continue studying and practicing the Dharma.

Therefore, Chan practitioners should not be concerned about the direction they may go after death. However, there are practitioners who perceive that the strength of their practice is weak, who lack confidence and doubt the strength of their vow and the depth of their cultivation. They may fear that because their vow and their strength in the practice of precepts, samadhi, and wisdom are not strong enough, at the time of death they would be affected by the manifestation of bad karma or led astray by demonic foes. This would separate them from the Three Jewels, causing them to fall into the three lower planes, trapped in the cycle of birth and death with no chance to return. For these practitioners, it's better to rely on Amitabha Buddha's vow and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. In the meantime, they can use the merits accrued from all aspects of their practices including Chan meditation, to increase the provision for rebirth in the Pure Land; this would be the most reliable way.

Therefore, since the Song Dynasty there has been much interaction between the schools of Chan and Pure Land, and the dual practice of Chan

and Pure Land has been promoted. This entails an equal emphasis on the methods of Chan and the power of the vow to seek rebirth in the Pure Land. If one can gather strength through Chan practice, there will be no need to worry about whether one will attain enlightenment. As in the case of a true Chan practitioner mentioned earlier, if one's practice cannot gather strength, one would still have the wondrous Pure Land as one's temporary home to continue one's practice.

*When One Cannot
Accomplish the Path in this Lifetime*

QUESTION

Is it true that if a monastic cannot accomplish the path in this life, he or she would have to pay back by being reborn with “fur and horns,” meaning as a beast?

ANSWER

This is a specious question. What exactly is the path that needs to be accomplished? Why should one be reborn as a beast with fur and horns? As far as “paths” are concerned, in the higher planes of existence there are the human path, the heavenly path, the shravaka path [of the arhat], as well as the bodhisattva path and the buddha path. In the lower planes of existence there is the path of hell, the path of hungry ghosts, and the path of animals. There being these higher and lower paths, one cannot just broadly speak of “accomplishing the path.” Of course, accomplishing the path usually means departing from birth and death, and transcending the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness. These paths of liberation can be divided into the easy path and the difficult path.

Practicing the easy path, anyone can transcend the three realms directly by vowing to be reborn into Amitabha Buddha’s Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Practicing the difficult path takes three *asamkheya kalpas*, each

being incalculably long. This is the path of bodhisattva on which one must take on the difficult, let go of the cherished, and bear the unbearable. Only then can one attain buddhahood. On this path, only upon completing the first *asamkheya kalpa* would one be able to transcend the three realms. That is the usual path for bodhisattvas to become buddhas. Despite the path being difficult, we have not seen any record in the scripture of bodhisattvas who have just generated bodhi-mind by doubting the practice on the path. As long as we have strong faith and the right vows, and we hold to our ultimate goal, there is no need to worry about failing, let alone to worry about birth and death, or being reborn as a beast of fur and horns.

During their cultivation, buddhas and bodhisattvas can manifest in various identities and forms to accommodate the needs of sentient beings. For example, in the *Stories of the Buddha's Previous Lives* (Skt. *Jataka*), the future Buddha sometimes took the form of animals to help sentient beings in the animal realm. It is also recorded that Chan Master Puyuan (748–835) of Nanquan told his followers that he would be reborn as a water buffalo in a hillside village. Therefore, a true practitioner should just focus on practicing diligently at the present moment. As to whether one would transcend the three realms, it would be best to have the attitude of “just till the land; don’t worry about the harvest.”

Someone who fears being reborn with “fur and horns” would also fear committing to practicing the path. People who promote the notion of monastics being reborn as an animal if they do not accomplish the path are not true Buddhists with the right beliefs, let alone understanding the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism. This notion of the consequences of not accomplishing the path deters many from practicing Buddhism as a monastic; it also brings despondency and disappointment to many monastic practitioners. Furthermore, it even causes some monastics to selfishly and urgently seek their own

liberation; as such they are unable to generate vows to benefit sentient beings and purify society. Hence, this notion often leads many people to consider Buddhism as passive, pessimistic, and escapist.

This saying that one who cannot accomplish the path in this life will be reborn with fur and horns did not originate with Buddhism. Rather, it was a scheme to do harm to the Three Jewels. Even when the Buddha was alive, there was no requirement that all monastics must attain enlightenment in one lifetime. The normal and usual practice of Buddhism is to neither attach to birth and death nor be afraid of life and death.

Those wishing to harm Buddhism with this notion include followers of Zhaijiao (see Chapter 53). Not having a monastic tradition, Zhaijiao falsely claims that in this era, the path of Dao has “descended” into secular society (using the *Lotus Sutra* metaphor of a house on fire) and is no longer monastic. As a result, they claim that even though monastics practice to attain enlightenment, they will never attain it; further, that since monastics accept alms without attaining enlightenment, they will naturally be reborn as cattle and horses to repay their debts.

The truth is that monastics lead a simple and frugal way of life; they take care of lay followers, provide services to temples and monasteries; in return, they receive minimal support for their living. Why should they be condemned to repay their debts by being reborn as cattle and horses? There is no other ground to explain this kind of claim except as antagonism against monastics. This is just as vicious as the saying, “There are plenty of Buddhist monastics and Daoist priests at the door of hell.” The fact is that during the Buddha’s time, monastics practiced alms-seeking as a way to create affinity with lay followers. They interacted with the laity by going on alms-rounds and giving their blessings to lay followers. This was a way to teach the Dharma on behalf of the Buddha, and a way to repay the almsgiving of the believers.

The image of monastic life alone is enough to awaken in people a sense of renouncing desire and departing from suffering. When further enhanced by teaching and guiding people in Buddhadharma, the merit of being a monastic is far beyond that of exchanging one's labor to provide for one's daily living. From the standpoint of religion, even if bhikshus and bhikshunis seclude in monasteries away from the secular world, they still may not attain enlightenment in this life. But, as long as they diligently conduct their daily liturgical practices, thus giving blessings to society, the nation, humankind, and all sentient beings, their merit is already immeasurable.

Therefore, the *Sutra on the Merits of Leaving Home to Be a Mendicant* (Chn. *Chujiagongde Jing*) says that even one day of being a monastic achieves immense merits, let alone taking a lifetime vow. Pursuing buddhahood as a monastic is a deed requiring multiple lifetimes and multiple kalpas; it is not a hurried endeavor to achieve spontaneous, expeditious results. Hence, there is no need to urgently attain one's own liberation in one lifetime.

If one cannot transcend the cycle of birth and death in this lifetime, one has two options: one is to rely on the power of Amitabha Buddha's vow and be reborn in the Western Pure Land; the other is to use the power of one's own vow to continue practicing through many kalpas. As long as one's faith and confidence are firm, and one does not regress in their vows, there is no doubt that the practice will continue moving forward. As newly aspired practitioners, our confidence may be inadequate, our vows lack strength, and we haven't got the knack of practicing; but as long as our vow to persist in practice and yearn for renunciation, the life of a monastic life is less distracting and less hindering than that of a householder. Even if being a monastic does not guarantee that we will never fall into the three lower planes, it will not be more likely to happen than if we were a householder.

The Concept of Hell in Buddhism

QUESTION

What is the meaning of the saying, “There are plenty of Buddhist monastics and Daoist priests at the gates of hell”?

ANSWER

The concept of hell existed in India even before the birth of Shakyamuni Buddha. Even before Buddhism was introduced into China, there was already the belief that after death, people would descend to the “yellow spring,” meaning the netherworld. Christianity teaches that those who do not believe in Christ, and especially those not loved by Christ, will fall into Hell on Judgment Day. Hence, it is apparent that the notion of hell is commonly shared by all major religions. However, the attitudes towards hell and their descriptions vary due to regional, historical, and cultural differences. Since different ethnic groups and religions differ in their beliefs, their images of hell also differ. For example, a person who will ascend to heaven according to one religion may be destined for hell according to another.

According to the Buddhist sutras, there are eight cold hells and eight hot hells, each of which has sixteen subsidiary hells. The eight cold and eight hot hells are the primary hells, while the sixteen subsidiary hells are called the peripheral hells. In addition, there are also isolated hells existing in mountains, under trees, and in the air. There is also a classification that names eighteen hells.

The Buddhist description of hell can be seen in the *Samyuktagama Sutras* (Chn. *Za Ahan Jing*), Vol. 48, according to which there exists a hell where bloody-red fire burns. Detailed descriptions of hell appear in Volume 19 of the *Dirghagama Sutras* (Chn. *Chang Ahan Jing*) as well as in other scriptures: the *Lokasthiti-Abhidharma Shastra*, the *Samyuktabhidharmahrdaya Shastra*, the *Abhidharma-Mahavibhava Shastra*, the *Abidharmakosha Shastra*, the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, the *Yogacarabhumi Shastra*, and the *Mahaprajnaparamita Shastra*, and so on.

It is a common Chinese folk belief that a deceased person would go through interrogation and judgment by the Yama kings (Chn. *yanwang*) of the ten courts of hells; each court of hell is set up differently with different types of punishments. However, this belief cannot be found in the Buddhist sutras from India; rather, it actually originated from the “*Sutra*” of *Ten Kings*, a book of Chinese folk beliefs which was believed to have originated from the Zangchuan collection of the Dashengci Monastery in Chengdu, Sichuan. The notion of ten courts of hells, consisting of 138 individual hells, also exists in Daoism.

Without exception, these beliefs mostly originated from practices such as dream visions, spirit writing, mediums, and belief in resurrection of the dead that spread through times and places. The idea of Yama king came from the *Rig Veda* of ancient India, according to which he resides in one of the heavens and is in charge of the dead. In Chinese folk beliefs, the idea of Yama kings gradually evolved and they came to be positioned in hells.

As for the notion of the ten courts of hell which developed later in China, it was similar to the imperial executive and judiciary systems, in that it involved a hierarchy of governing officials who served at the same time as judges at various levels of jurisdiction. Interrogation by the kings in ten courts of hells were similar to the interrogations in the secular world by a county magistrate, provincial governor, central government minister, and even by

the emperor himself. The depictions of scenes in hells were based on what people have generally seen and are familiar with in the secular world. Thus, in the hells depicted by Chinese there are no Africans or Caucasians.

Due to the differences in time, location, customs, and beliefs, the hells perceived by people differed. The Buddha says: "All phenomena are just consciousness; the three realms are just the mind." In other words, the fact is that hell is imbedded in the minds of sentient beings, yet it is not the same for everyone. So on the one hand we should not deny the existence of hell; on the other we should not rigidly adhere to the absoluteness of the myths of hell.

There are many descriptions in Buddhist sutras about descending into hell. In the early days, [the teaching was that] falling into hell involved committing any of the five heinous crimes: patricide, matricide, killing an arhat, disrupting the harmony of the sangha, and shedding the blood of a buddha. For instance, the Buddha's cousin Devadatta and his followers fell into hell because of their attempt to disrupt the harmony of the sangha. However, later on the teachings gradually evolved into the case that all wrongdoings whether minor or major, would result in falling into hell.

According to extant collections of the Vinaya for bhikshus and bhikshunis, regarding the violation and breaking of the monastic precepts, only a few very severe wrongdoings are considered not redeemable. A non-redeemable offense involves a wrongdoing so severe that the concerned monastic loses the essence of the precepts altogether and is thus expelled from the sangha, and [depending on the violation] faces execution under secular laws. A redeemable offense involves repenting to a few or to all sentient beings, or to just a specific person, as well as to one's own conscience.

Throughout the Vinaya it says, "The one who violates the precepts shall repent; repentance leads to peace and happiness." It also says, "One who has precepts to break is a bodhisattva; one who has no precepts to break is

an outer-path follower.” The Vinaya does not promulgate the concept that anyone who breaks the precepts would fall into hell.

Sinful acts are of two kinds: natural sins and precept sins. Natural sins refer to wrongdoings that are sinful in nature, regardless of whether a person has taken the oath of upholding the precepts or not. Every wrongdoing of this type will incur natural retribution. Precept sins have to do with the fact that after taking the precepts, there are merits to be gained by the upholding of the precepts. In the same vein, if one violated a precept, one would have sinned against the precept in addition to incurring the corresponding natural sin. Therefore, as far as precept sins are concerned, upholding the precepts leads to merits while violating the precepts leads to negative retributions. However, the act of upholding the precepts is beneficial to all sentient beings; therefore, the merit is immeasurable. On the other hand, violating the precepts affects only a few sentient beings. Therefore, in general, the merit gained by upholding the precepts is greater than the retribution from violating the precepts.

To receive the precepts is to vow to restrain one’s actions, while repentance has the effect of cleansing one’s mind. Sins have different degrees of severity: someone who committed very severe natural sins and precept sins would fall into hell; others with less severe sins would accordingly have opportunities to receive retribution, such as being reborn among human beings, ghosts, or other types of creatures. Therefore, it is not necessary that everyone who commits evil acts or violates precepts would descend to the hells. Even though the latter day publication “*Sutra*” on the *Questions of Maudgalyayana* emphasizes that it is possible that every single wrongdoing may lead one to fall into hell, such a claim is not seen in the earlier sutras such as the Agama sutras or the Vinaya. Such a claim could easily be misconstrued by people that it’s risky to practice Buddhism since one who does not practice Buddhism

would be less likely to descend to hell than one who does. If that were the case, then who would dare practice Buddhism?

The saying, “There are plenty of Buddhist monastics and Daoist priests at the gates of hell,” did not come from Buddhism or Daoism. Rather, it came from the mediums in Zhaijiao (see Chapter 53) after the Ming Dynasty. Followers of Zhaijiao were all lay people. They plagiarized terms and concepts from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism and formed a specious new folk religion, organized as a secret association. Because it was a lay organization, in order to dispel other religions and compete for followers, they were antagonistic toward Buddhist monastics and Daoist priests. So, they created the saying, “the path of Dao has descended into secular society.” They also advocated that it is easier to achieve Dao and be reborn in heaven when one practices as a lay person. They also exaggerated and made up stories about the hardship of monastic life, as well as its alleged dark side and corruption; they even claimed that Buddhist monastics and Daoists would all end up descending to hell.

Through the grapevine and word of mouth, the saying “there are plenty of Buddhist monastics and Daoist priests at the gates of hell” became common; it not only vilified the image of monastics, but also deterred talented lay people from becoming monastics. Since the saying did not originate from Buddhist sutras, we do not need to be bothered by it. However, we must point out that this saying was made up by Zhaijiao followers to humiliate Buddhism and Daoism. For example, the book *Treasury of Insights into the Mystical* (Chn. *Dongming Baoji*), published in 1920 by several Zhaijiao divining altar organizations in Eryuan County, west of Kunming, Yunnan, accuses monastics of not upholding the rules of pure conduct, and fabricated stories about monks descending to and being punished in hell.

This was recounted in *An Exploration of the Divine Way* (Chn. *Tiandao Gouchen*) – a book written in support of Yiguan Dao, a Zhaijiao sect, by a

researcher at the Academia Sinica. Though the said researcher did not admit being a Yiguan Dao member, every citation of Buddhist monks in his book was with an attacking, abusive, acerbic, and unkind attitude. He negates the moral values of monastic practice, while constantly emphasizing the fraternal benefits and pleasure of being lay Zhaijiao disciples among sects such as Xiantian, Longhua, and Yiguan Dao. Although he cited a lot of sources, his work exhibited an emotional complexity but lacked rational deliberations. From his book, one may sense the fanatic arrogance of an evangelist, but it's hard to imagine him as a scholar in the Academia Sinica.

It's worth noting, that as long as people deal with each other, there will be malpractice and abuse. Therefore, there is no guarantee that monastics will never violate or break the precepts. It was exactly for this reason that the Buddha established the precepts: to prevent and censure abuse and manage these issues.

Confucianism says, "Since human beings are not saints or sages; who would be without fault?" Before reaching the stage of saints or sages, ordinary people who will themselves to become monastics and endeavor to practice Buddhism, must use the precepts as a starting point to purify themselves through practice. After each stumble, they must pick themselves up again and again; after every offense of the moral laws or the precepts, they repent again and again. This is the normal process of practice. Zhaijiao followers, however, are not willing to be restrained by the precepts of the monastics; instead, they criticize and slander monastics for not strictly upholding the precepts; furthermore, they overstate the wrongdoings of monastics. Their malicious intent is very obvious.

Practicing Towards Buddhahood

QUESTION

What is the meaning of the saying, “The longer you practice Buddhism, the farther away you get from buddhahood”?

ANSWER

We often hear the saying, “Being a Buddhist for three days and the Buddha seems right before your eyes; being a Buddhist for three years and the Buddha seems far away in the West.” This appears to be a definitive saying that the longer one practices Buddhism, the farther away one is from the Buddha. However, that is actually a misinterpretation of Buddhism related to another common saying, “The moment the butcher puts down his cleaver, he’s a buddha.” Seemingly, with a single act a person can complete their journey to buddhahood. This leads people to believe that as soon as a wrongdoer gives up evil, they would achieve salvation and become a buddha. In truth, when we begin practicing Buddhism, we soon realize that becoming a buddha is not such an easy thing.

The path to buddhahood can be cultivated in two ways: one is the so-called difficult path which begins with taking a vow of bodhisattva, and cultivating the bodhisattva path of bearing the unbearable, and benefiting oneself as well as others. This process can take as long as three *asamkheya kalpas* before one completes the path to buddhahood. The other way is the easy path, in which one practices the method of reciting the sacred name of

Amitabha Buddha. Relying on the power of Amitabha Buddha's vow, one first seeks to be reborn in the Western Pure Land; after a long cultivation to achieve the state of a saintly bodhisattva in the Pure Land, one uses the strength of one's own vow to return to living in the secular world; there one strives to enlighten sentient beings extensively while accumulating wisdom, blessings and virtues. All merits need to be completed to their fullness for one to attain buddhahood. Therefore, the longer we study Buddhism and the deeper we understand Buddhadharma, the more we begin to realize that for an ordinary person, the journey to reach buddhahood is quite long.

As such, the saying that a butcher will become a buddha the moment he puts down his cleaver, simply means that as soon as we start the process of cultivating the merit of buddhahood, we have completed the first step to ultimately attaining buddhahood. Moreover, to recognize that sentient beings and buddhas are one – neither separate nor different – and that we are sentient beings when perplexed and buddhas when enlightened, does not mean that we have already attained buddhahood. To recognize that it is possible for us to become a buddha does not mean that we have already attained the wisdom and merits of a buddha.

There is another situation in which a practitioner practices very diligently upon coming to Buddhism, and expects that he or she can count the days towards attaining buddhahood. Indeed, they are able to have one breakthrough after another in their practice; it seems that their vexations have dissipated quickly, and their wisdom has grown rapidly. However, after a while, not only do they still feel troubled by vexations, they also feel burdened by all sorts of obstacles – karmic obstacles, demonic obstacles, and sickness. It seems that these obstacles just appear endlessly one after another. Consequently, there can be two kinds of results: one is realizing that becoming a buddha cannot be achieved overnight, or even in a single lifetime; that it would require continuous cultivation through multiple lifetimes and kalpas. Such a

practitioner would settle down and not be in any hurry to attain buddhahood; instead, they would take a down-to-earth and gradual approach, and practice diligently, like just tilling the soil without worrying about what the harvest is going to be.

On the other hand, one could lose faith in Buddhadharma and think that becoming enlightened and attaining buddhahood is only a concept or an ideal. And one would think that it is impossible to be free from vexations, or to become a sage. So they would either give up the practice or switch to another religion, in hopes of finding another form of spiritual shelter. Taking all this into consideration, we may conclude that the situation described by the saying, “The longer you practice Buddhism, the farther away you get from buddhahood,” arises from the idea of “eradicate vexations and realize bodhi.”

If we can truly perceive that only with a practice of no-seeking and nothing to gain will we be able to attain unsurpassed buddhahood, then by applying Buddhadharma to daily life, we will be able to untangle many complex issues and conflicting emotions. If we are not in any hurry to eliminate vexations and to attain enlightenment, vexations will automatically decrease. As a result, we would not feel that the longer we practice Buddhism, the farther away we get from buddhahood. We will also suddenly discover that Buddha is right in front of us.

So long as our mind resonates with the Buddha’s compassion and wisdom, then our own mind will totally embody the great functioning of a buddha. Therefore, Chan Master Yongming Yanshou, the author of *Records of the Source Mirror* (Chn. *Zongjing Lu*), said, “With one thought in resonance, that one thought is Buddha; with thought after thought in resonance, thought after thought is Buddha.” If we apply Buddha’s compassion and wisdom to our everyday life and are not in a hurry to pursue liberation from birth and death and attain nirvana, we can avoid the misconception that the longer we practice Buddhism, the further away we get from buddhahood.

The Meaning of the Buddhist Swastika Symbol

QUESTION

What is the meaning of the Buddhist swastika symbol?

ANSWER

In the sutras, the “marks” of the Buddha are described in one enumeration as the Thirty-two Major Marks of the Great Being, and in another enumeration as the Eighty Secondary Marks of the Buddha. According to the *Dirghagama Sutras* (Chn. *Chang Ahan Jing*), among the Thirty-two Major Marks, the 16th is a swastika (卐) often depicted on the Buddha’s chest. However, Volume 6 of the *Mahasatya Nirgrantha Putra Nirdesa Sutra* says that the swastika is the 80th among the Buddha’s Eighty Auspicious Secondary marks. Volume 12 of the *Commentary on the Ten Stages Sutra* (Skt. *Dasabhumikasutra Shastra*), states that before reaching buddhahood, Shakyamuni already had the adamantine swastika on his chest, symbolizing the adornment of merits and virtues. However, in Volume 3 of the *Lalitavistara Sutra*, the Buddha was described as having five swastikas in his hair. Volume 29 of the *Miscellaneous Records of Vinaya of the Mulasarvastivada School* mentions that there is a swastika on the Buddha’s abdomen. The swastika is a symbol, not a part of a written language; it symbolizes incomparable auspiciousness, and is sometimes called “propitious ocean of clouds,” or “circle of auspicious bliss.” Therefore, Volume 381 of the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* states that there are “propitious ocean

of clouds” on Buddha’s hands, soles, and chest, symbolizing the Buddha’s merits and virtues.

The swastika is often depicted in one of two versions: one version shows it rotating towards the viewer’s left (卍) (left-rotating) and the other towards viewer’s right (卐) (right-rotating). According to various sources such as Volume 21 of *Huilin’s Dictionary of Sounds and Meanings* (Chn. *Huilinyinyi*), *Huiyuan’s Dictionary of Sounds and Meanings* (Chn. *Huiyuanyinyi*), and the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, there are seventeen cases where the symbol is described as rotating right. However, in Volume 10 of the *Sutra of Dharani Collections* (Chn. *Tuoluoniji Jing*), the symbol shown on the fan held by Marici Deva, rotates left. Furthermore, in the Temple of the Medicine Buddha in Nara, Japan, the swastikas on the Medicine Buddha’s soles also rotate to the left. However, most Buddhist records show the symbol rotating to the right.

The earliest primary gods in Hinduism, such as Vishnu and Krishna, all have the swastika on their chests. The legends in ancient India indicate that all wheel-turning kings (Skt. *cakravartin*) who rule the world, would have the thirty-two marks of the great being. Since the Buddha is the sagacious king of all Dharmas, he certainly has the thirty-two great marks, as discussed in the *Diamond Sutra*.

In modern times, there are debates over the direction in which the swastika should rotate. Most Buddhists assert that the swastika rotating to the right is correct, while rotating to the left is a mistake. Especially in the 1940s, Hitler in Europe used the swastika to represent his Nazi party. Afterwards, there were more disputes, as some argued that the one Hitler used rotates to the right, while the sign in Buddhism rotates to the left.

In fact, during her reign Empress Wu (624–705) of the Tang Dynasty, created a version of the swastika which rotates to the left. It is pronounced *ri*, symbolizing the sun. The symbol Hitler used, is placed on a slant (卐), while the Buddhist sign is positioned upright. In Hinduism, however, the

right-rotating swastika symbolizes male deity, while the left-rotating one symbolizes the female deity. In Tibetan Buddhism, the right-rotating swastika is used, while the left-rotating swastika is used in Bonpa, the Tibetan folk religion.

According to research by Dr. Tadasu Mitsushima of the Kokushikan University in Japan, the swastika is not part of any written language. The sign first appeared in Brahman records around the 8th century BCE; it appeared as the principal deity Vishnu's chest hair and was called *srivatsa*, as a symbol rather than a written word. It was not until the 3rd century BCE that the symbol was used in Buddhist sutras. By the first century, the symbol was called in Sanskrit, *svastika*. Originally, it manifested in the form of a whorl of hair on calf's head; later, it evolved and became the form of Vishnu's chest hair. Subsequently, it transformed into one of the 16 marks of great beings, and then one of the 32 marks of great beings.

Whichever way it rotates, the swastika symbolizes Buddha's immeasurable wisdom and compassion. The spiraling form symbolizes the unlimited activities of Buddha's power; the four legs bending at 90 degrees show his power extending and expanding in all directions, without limits or boundaries, endlessly offering salvation to all sentient beings. Therefore, there is no need to obsess or debate whether the swastika should rotate right or left, clockwise or counter-clockwise.

The Meaning of the Lotus Flower in Buddhism

QUESTION

What does lotus flower symbolize in Buddhism?

ANSWER

According to the Buddhist sutras, in the secular world a lotus flower contains no more than several dozen petals, in the heavens no more than several hundred; but in the Pure Land it has a thousand or more petals. In Buddhism, the lotus flower symbolizes progressing from the state of vexations to that of purity and serenity; this is because while the roots of the lotus grow in mud, its blossoms rise above the water, signifying not being contaminated by the mud of the environment.

Besides its petals, the lotus also has broad leaves and seeds; the petals and leaves are pleasant to look at, while the seeds are edible. Seeds can also be planted to grow new lotuses. The flower itself blossoms above water in the heat of summer. Symbolically, the heat can be likened to vexation, while the water signifies clarity and coolness; in the human world of vexations, the virtue of the lotus brings an air of refreshing coolness. Therefore, the lotus blossom has been used as a metaphor for liberation from vexations, and sentient beings attaining rebirth in the pure lands of the buddhas are born or emerge from lotus blossoms.

All sentient beings in the three realms are born through acts of sexual desire. However, sentient beings reborn as sages in the pure lands manifest through lotus flowers. The lotus flower represents pure merits as well as clear and refreshing wisdom; as such they are formless to sages, yet they appear before secular beings in images which are familiar to them. Therefore, the statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas as well as descriptions of buddhas and bodhisattvas in the sutras all come with lotus as the platforms on which they stand or sit; as such, they represent the pure Dharma Body and the solemn Reward Body of buddhas and sages.

Bodily Sacrifices by Buddhist Monastics

QUESTION

Is it necessary for monastics to perform bodily sacrifices such as burning their scalp, arms, or fingers?

ANSWER

According to the early sutras and the Vinaya, any act by monastics that harms or abuses their body is forbidden by the Buddha. Nevertheless, some Indian non-Buddhist ascetics used fire, water, knives, and other abusive ways to inflict harm and suffering on their own body, to seek redemption or a deity's forgiveness. This practice might have originated with the custom of sacrificing live animals or even human beings to deities, in the belief that the deities preferred flesh and blood, and that such offerings demonstrate pious devotion. Yet, even if extreme asceticism might help to attain certain goals, it is not the Buddhist way of cultivation. In fact, monastic rules prohibit anyone with missing limbs or any of the five facial organs to receive full ordination.

Nevertheless, there are records in the Mahayana scriptures about the need for monastics to burn their scalp, arms or fingers. For instance, the 16th of the forty-eight minor precepts in the *Brahma Net Sutra* states that "... those not burning their body, arms, or fingers as offerings to the buddhas cannot be regarded as monastic bodhisattvas." In the *Lotus Sutra*, the chapter "Previous Lives of the Medicine King Bodhisattva" says: "If one takes the vow to

attain enlightenment and can burn the scalp, a finger, or even a toe as a way to make offerings at a buddha's stupa, that would be superior to one who offers their country, city, wife, children, vast land, mountains, forest, rivers, lakes, or precious treasures.”

In Mahayana Buddhism, asceticism had its origin in Shakyamuni Buddha's practice on the causal ground [before he became a buddha]. When he was cultivating the bodhisattva path, he often sacrificed his body as an offering or to save others. For instance, when he sought a certain verse from a *rakshasa*, a flesh eating demigod, he did not hesitate to offer his own body to it. Furthermore, when he encountered a hungry tiger and her cubs in a snowy field, seeing that the cubs were starving to death, he offered himself as food to the tigers. These actions were in line with asceticism, following the bodhisattva's principle of “doing the most difficult and bearing the most unbearable.”

Asceticism in Buddhism differs from ascetic practices in theism; it also differs from customs of human and animal sacrifices to deities. In the chapters “Forgetting One's Body” and “Abandoning One's Body” in the *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, there are many accounts of esteemed monks who sacrificed their bodies to advance their cultivation.

Death is the most difficult thing for human beings to face; there is no one who does not value his or her own life or body. It would take utmost determination and perseverance in suffering for one to sacrifice or burn their body for a cause. However, the normal practice is to use proper human conduct in society as the standard, as well as ethical principles in the secular world as the foundation. Any action which violates common sense and conventional reasoning should not and cannot, be adopted by ordinary people; otherwise, it will cause more problems and vexations for ourselves, and draw criticism from others.

Practice should be based on the early Buddhist spirit of cultivating with the ordinary human body, and Buddhadharma should be a way of cultivation that can be accepted by ordinary people. If we only emphasize the special practice of the bodhisattva path but ignore the mundane aspects of Buddhadharma, the common nature of human beings and commonality in society, it would be difficult to promote its educational and transformative benefits worldwide. At most it would be viewed as eccentric and aberrant. Even if it could earn the respect of some, Buddhadharma would not be able to gain universal acceptance.

In modern times there are some notable cases of monks burning fingers and bodies. For instance, there is the “Eight-Fingered Ascetic,” Chan Master Jingan (1852–1912), who burned off two fingers. During the war in Vietnam, the monk Venerable Thich Quang Duc (1897–1963) immolated himself; in Taiwan a Dharma master burned off one finger. In each case their goal was to fulfill a specific vow. Although their intentions and courage are praiseworthy, we should not emulate them; otherwise we deviate from the normal path of Buddhadharma.

Although there are scriptural grounds for burning the scalp, there is no scriptural source instructing monastics to receive burn marks in order to be ordained. In addition, this kind of practice is relatively recent. Whether in the Mahayana or Theravada traditions, this custom is only practiced by Chinese Buddhists. Before the late imperial Ming and early Qing dynasties (16th–17th centuries), there were no such practices. After the Cultural Revolution in Mainland China (1966–1976), although monastic ordination ceremonies were revived, the practice of burning incense marks was abolished; it is only in Taiwan that newly ordained monastics are still having such marks burnt on their scalps. But I do not think this custom will continue for long, so we do not need to talk further about it.

Whether twelve, nine, six, three, or only one mark is burned, it does not really carry much significance. One can only assume that more marks may show greater sincerity in one's vows; however, if the number of burn marks is a strict requirement from the precept masters, it would have nothing to do with the aspirant's own determination or vow. Therefore, I do not agree with precept masters making the burning of incense marks mandatory for ordination.

*Differences between Practicing
as a Lay Person and as a Monastic*

QUESTION

What are the differences between practicing as a lay person and as a monastic?

ANSWER

There are six commonly asked questions about the role of lay practitioners. Can a lay Buddhist 1) conduct ceremonies for taking refuge in the Three Jewels, 2) expound sutras, 3) seek alms, 4) become the abbot of a monastery, 5) provide services such as sutra recitation, repentance practices, and deliverance of the deceased, and 6) intervene in monastic affairs?

In principle, these six activities are the duties of monastics, not to be carried out by lay practitioners. If lay people somehow conduct them, they would breach their status as lay practitioners. In that case, they should become monastics since one should not cling to secular life while imitating the monastics and enjoying monastic privileges. That would be contrary to the original intent of practicing as a lay person. The laity practices to benefit from Buddhadharma and uphold the Three Jewels, but they are not the core of the Three Jewels; their role is to be exterior protectors or guardians of the Three Jewels.

Nevertheless, today there are fewer monastics, yet there are increasing numbers of people who need Buddhadharma and Buddha activities (See

Chapter 12). Where there are no monastics or only a few, it has been permissible for a lay practitioner, for example, to transmit refuge in the Three Jewels. It must be recognized, however, that the meaning of taking refuge is to respectfully offer one's life to following the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Originally, the intent was for the sangha to conduct refuge taking, not a lay teacher. Moreover, taking refuge in the sangha does not mean taking refuge in a lay teacher. (On this matter, I have written a short essay titled, "The Sangha is not necessarily the Sangha Jewel." The article can be found in the book *Buddhism of Tomorrow*.)

In short, although lay practitioners should not appropriate the monastic role and proclaim themselves as a refuge master, when there is no one else to do so, a lay practitioner may, on behalf of a virtuous Dharma master in the sangha, transmit refuge in the Three Jewels. Moreover, any Buddhist may bestow refuge in the Three Jewels to non-human sentient beings any time, including animals alive or dead, to help them sow seeds of good roots as causes for future transcendence.

As for expounding the sutras and interpreting Dharma, during the Buddha's time, there were examples of lay Buddhists explaining Buddhadharma on behalf of the Buddha, and even that of lay elders lecturing on the meaning of Dharma to monastics on behalf of the Buddha. In the Mahayana sutras there are records of sermons given by eminent lay practitioners such as Vimalakirti, [whose teachings on liberation are the subject of the *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra*] and Queen Srimala, [whose teachings on buddha-nature are the subject of the *Srimaladevi-simhanada Sutra*]. Therefore, there's no problem with lay people giving lectures or sermons to others.

Since ancient times the custom has been that lay Buddhists should not make a living giving sermons. They have other means of making a living, and should not rely on giving sermons for livelihood. However, today, society

values professionalism, so the teaching of Buddhadharma has also become a profession. Therefore, for lay Buddhists whose profession is disseminating the Dharma, it is appropriate to receive reasonable fees for livelihood and to cover their expenses. However, using the Dharma as a means for financial gain and receiving payments without constraints would not be the right attitude and conduct for a Buddhist. Other than that, lay Buddhists who provide professional services in education, culture, and administration in Buddhist organizations should accept reasonable compensation.

Regarding the question on alms seeking, the original intent of the custom of giving alms to monastics was to provide people with opportunities to encounter Buddhadharma. When bhikshus went door to door begging for alms, their goal was not really for the food; it was to sow the seeds for people to become acquainted with the Buddhadharma. Nowadays, when giving alms, or making offerings, is mentioned, people right away associate it with asking for monetary donation. That is not the original intention of Buddhadharma. Of course, seeking alms will give the laity an opportunity to make offerings, thereby benefitting both parties. However, we should not promote the Dharma with the ulterior motive of seeking monetary gains.

Today, soliciting donations is mainly to raise funds to build monasteries; it is very rarely for the livelihood of monastics. Some monasteries, organizations, and individuals also raise funds for educational, cultural, and charitable purposes, such as printing sutras, building schools, hospitals, orphanages, and nursing homes. These kinds of purposes should be supported by both monastics and lay people.

In the relatively recent past, there was a so-called “beggar educator” Mr. Wu Xun who begged for alms to build schools; this is admirable and should be encouraged. It’s not a matter of whether a lay Buddhist should or should not ask for donations; rather, it’s about the purpose of the request.

If it aims to support the Three Jewels or social welfare, that would certainly be fine, but if it means using the names of monastery or private temples for personal gain or attain personal enjoyments, it would bring about negative karmic consequences.

In the *Lotus Sutra* monasteries are called “stupa temples”; they were originally used to safeguard the Buddha’s relics, but later evolved to house sutras. In places where the Buddha and the Dharma are worshipped, there must be monastics to take care of them, so there are monastic quarters near a stupa. With the Sangha Jewel now in residence, the image of the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is complete. Lay practitioners who want to pay homage to the Three Jewels can live in a monastery, a custom called “close living.” This gives lay practitioners a chance to learn about the lifestyle of practice and from the conduct of monastics. While living there, they will also offer their services to the sangha and the laypeople. This is called cultivating the field of blessings.

There’s no record in the scriptures of lay Buddhists serving as abbots of monasteries. However, in modern times, Japanese Buddhism has centered on the laity, having non-celibate Buddhist priests and their families living in the monastery, passing down their duties generation after generation. They are families of professional Buddhist priests and different from ordinary lay Buddhists. Additionally, in late 19th and early 20th century China, people like Yang Renshan, Ouyang Jingwu and Han Qingjing were all lay Buddhists, and managed Buddhist educational and cultural organizations. They had their own practice and learning centers, which were not called monasteries; instead, they had names such as Jetavana Vihara (Chn. *Qiyuan Jingshe*), Jinling Sutra Publishing House (Chn. *Jinling Kejing Chu*), Chinese Institute of Inner Study (Chn. *Zhina Neixue Yuan*) and Society of The Third Period of Buddha’s Teachings (Chn. *Sanshi Xuehui*), and so on.

Therefore, in recent times, there have been many famous lay Buddhists who established an array of Buddhist studies and practicing organizations with names like “vihara,” “society,” “institute,” “lotus society,” “laity association or society,” but none were called “temple” or “monastery.”

It’s possible for certain non-celibate lamas of Tibetan Buddhism, or acolytes of Japanese Shinto, to manage temples, but they are not abbots of monasteries. In a Buddhist monastery, the abbot represents the abiding and upholding of the Three Jewels, and since lay practitioners are not part of the Sangha Jewel, how can they be abbots? Since their lay status is not consistent with the real meaning of the Jewel Sangha, if they acted as abbots, that would be contrary to Buddhist ethics.

[Regarding the question of laypeople providing sangha services] all Buddhists should recite sutras and perform repentance practices. Since Buddhism encourages practitioners to organize and practice in groups, when a practitioner dies, fellow practitioners should of course also conduct assisting recitation sessions of Amitabha Buddha’s name to help deliver the deceased. Therefore, lay Buddhists can certainly assist in recitation sessions and help deliver others. The problem is that some people have become professionally engaged in sutra recitation, repentance services, and deliverance services. This has happened in folk religious groups such as Xiantian, Longhua, and Yiguan Dao.

These people do not usually respect monastics, but they show up at funerals, going from one to another, conducting deliverance rituals normally conducted by Buddhist monastics. Since they have become professional sutra reciting groups and repentance ritual teams, they would inevitably request compensation based on their services. This is not permissible according to Buddhadharma.

May lay Buddhists play Dharma instruments to accompany chanting and recitation at Buddhist services? Yes, there is no problem as long as they use

the instruments for the purpose of engaging in sutra recitation, repentance practice, or liturgical practices, and not for profit making. The issue is, after being trained to use Dharma instruments in chanting and recitation, this person may be invited to perform in all kinds of situations. They may be overwhelmed by this, and be led to give up their normal job and make this as a new profession. This must be avoided. There are many ways for lay practitioners to make a living. Providing Buddhist services may not lead to poverty, but neither would it lead to great wealth. So, why should a lay Buddhist with the right beliefs hop on the bandwagon of performing deliverance services for the dead to make a living?

As to laypeople being involved in monastic affairs, all sangha affairs should be attended to by monastics and the laity should not intervene or interfere. Doing so would be like a non-member intervening in an organization's internal affairs; it is inappropriate to participate, let alone interfering. By monastic affairs, we refer to their daily living, bearing and etiquette, their observance of precepts and rules, as well as conflicts among monastics. If lay practitioners intervened in these monastic matters, it would be like a civilian intervening in disciplinary issues in the military.

Insofar as monastics are also human, they are like ordinary people; therefore, there can also be tensions and conflicts. However, monastics do not carry resentments or grudges overnight, let alone holding unrelenting animosity towards others. Small frictions are simply put aside, as monks and nuns often settle such trivial matters nonchalantly by leaving it unsettled.

If lay practitioners wade into monastic affairs, they may expand and exacerbate the situation and create gossip. Therefore, when lay practitioners go to monasteries, they need only to enthusiastically support the sangha with devotion without taking sides, talking about right or wrong, gossiping and creating discord. There is a saying, "If one doesn't want to spare the monastics, at least spare the Buddha." Lay practitioners go to monasteries for the

purpose of cultivating their faith in the Buddha, studying and practicing the Dharma, and supporting the Three Jewels; therefore, they should refrain from criticizing or slandering monastics because what they don't like what they see. This would be inviting vexations upon themselves.

*Buddhism and the Monastic Sangha***QUESTION**

Can the tradition of monastic-centered Buddhism continue to exist as in the past?

ANSWER

This is certainly a very pertinent issue. Over the past 2,500 to 2,600 years, Buddhism has spread from India throughout Asia, including China, then into Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and so on. For a long time, it never had to face this question about the sustainability of a monastic-centered Buddhism. Yet, due to changes during the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912) under Emperor Meiji, and Japan’s desire to increase population to engage in outward expansion, Buddhist monastics in Japan were pressured to raise families and eat meat. Since then, Buddhism in Japan gradually transformed into a tradition in which lay practitioners serve as abbots in temples. Since they operate temples [formerly called “monasteries”] as their profession, [in Japan] these lay practitioners are still considered ordained members of the sangha.

After World War II, lay Buddhist orders also began to appear in Korea. Today there are two co-existing but irreconcilable Buddhist factions in Korea: one monastic-centered, and the other laity-centered. In China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia and North America, independent lay Buddhist organizations have also gradually appeared. Although they are not against monasticism, as lay organizations they may not function as external guardians,

or protectors of the monastic sangha. According to the traditional concept of the sangha, the laity certainly cannot represent the Sangha Jewel; therefore, lay Buddhists leaders have not openly accepted disciples taking refuge through them. How long into the future will this trend stay unchanged? It will depend on the quality and quantity of talents in the monastic sangha, and the strength of that sangha in upholding and promoting the Dharma. If there are no talented monastics who are capable of leading followers, it would not be long before Chinese Buddhism would change to a laity-centered practice.

During the time of Shakyamuni Buddha and several centuries after his enlightenment, many outstanding, great monastics appeared; therefore, it became standard for lay people to follow monastics to learn and cultivate Buddhism. When Mahayana Buddhism started to become prominent, the idea of laity-centered practice also began to appear. Vimalakirti, whose teachings are contained in the *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra*, is the best example.

After the Ming Dynasty in China, the influence of lay Buddhists began gradually to rise. In the early 20th century, there were many gifted lay practitioners. Even Grandmaster Yin Guang (1861–1940) mostly focused on guiding the laity. We can only guess that his intention was to use his renowned status as a great master to focus on the lay people so that they would be inspired to become disciples of the Three Jewels instead of staying away from the monastic sangha altogether. Whether the monastic sangha can maintain its traditional status depends on the presence of talented monks and nuns who are capable of inspiring lay people to become disciples of the Three Jewels.

As far as I know, today there are many meritorious lay practitioners who do not seek to take refuge in the Three Jewels from the sangha. This may have to do with the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, which says, “If you practice Buddhism, you may practice as a householder, not necessarily as a monastic. A householder who practices well is like a kind-hearted person of the East; a monastic who does not practice is like an evil-minded person of

the West [meaning “India”]. Just keep a pure mind and that is the self-nature of the West.” Sayings like this may cause some lay people with high self-regard to be unwilling to pay homage and prostrate to monastics, and carry themselves as disciples of monastics.

Also, according to Pure Land scriptures, it is not necessary to take refuge in the Three Jewels to be reborn in the Western Pure Land. However, the *Contemplations on Amitabha Buddha Sutra* says that taking refuge in the Three Jewels and upholding the various precepts are necessary conditions to attain above the middle-grade middle-level [among the nine grades of rebirth in the Western Pure Land]. To attain rebirth at the middle-grade lower-level and below, there is no need to take refuge in the Three Jewels; it is sufficient just to recite Amitabha Buddha’s name sincerely before death.

It should also be noted that Confucianism has been orthodox Chinese thought for several millennia without fading away. As a result, whether people come to respect Confucianism because of their Buddhist faith, or come to believe in Buddhism as a result of practicing Confucianism, their attitudes towards Buddhist monastics have mostly been one of keeping other-worldly friendship, [not one of devotion as disciples]. While there were examples of dignitaries such as emperors, empresses, prime ministers, and high officials who carried themselves as disciples towards eminent Buddhist monastics, including Emperor Wu of Liang (464–549), Empress Wu Zetian of Tang (624–705), Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (810–859), and Prime Minister Zhang Shangying (1043–1121) of the Song Dynasty, they were the minority. [This is due to the dominance of Confucianism in Chinese culture.] Therefore, although there have been many Buddhist followers in Chinese history, not many actually took refuge in the Three Jewels and called themselves disciples of the Three Jewels.

Buddhism emphasizes that one should rely on the Dharma or teaching rather than on the person; therefore, the sangha should center on the Three

Jewels, rather than on specific individuals. However, the Chinese hold the view that “It is people who propagate the Way (Dao), rather than the Way propagating people,” thus valuing [prominent] individuals over the Dharma. As a result, a situation where the sangha continues to be the center of practicing and promoting Buddhism would naturally form only if there were eminent monastics who excel in scholarship as well as practice, and who embody wisdom and compassion.

Maintaining a monastic-centered Buddhism may be even more challenging in the future. In the face of scientific and technological advance, democratic movements, and people’s strong passion for freedom, if monastics want to attract wide support, and be embraced as the center of refuge, they must be equal to the task, and pay the price to earn that respect. In fact, whether we can keep monastics as the center of Buddhism should not be a problem. If we pay attention to programs for developing ample monastic talents, and appropriately use their talents in the right places, since monastics are not burdened by family or secular affairs, compared to lay people, on average they should excel in practice, scholarship, wisdom, and compassion. Therefore, there is no need to worry or debate over who would be at the center of Buddhism in the future; it will all depend on the vision of monastics on the future of society, how they respond to that, and whether they can continue to accord with causes and conditions without changing their principles.

Monastics in the Future of Buddhism

QUESTION

Will there still be monastic practitioners in future Buddhism?

ANSWER

In the previous discussion on the subject of “Buddhism and the Monastic Sangha,” we mentioned passages in Sixth Patriarch Huineng’s *Platform Sutra*, as well as the *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra* to show that lay people can indeed cultivate Buddhism, and one need not become a monastic to practice Buddhism. Moreover, owing to changes in society as well as in lifestyles, fewer and fewer people have the desire or are able to become monastics.

Today, there are large factories and businesses with tens of thousands of workers, yet it is rare to see a Buddhist monastery with hundreds or thousands of monastics. Factory or corporate workers have their own families, and therefore their working and personal environments are separate. After a long day of intense, strained or drab work, they still have time to relax and enjoy their family life and some entertainment. Monastics are quite different in that they live a shared life from dawn to dusk, day after day, and year after year; their living is monotonous, disciplined, simple and plain; diligent, and regulated without indulgence. Hence, it would be very difficult for people to adapt to monastic life, unless they possess depth of character, good nature, perseverance, determination, and the strength of great vows.

In the past, monastics lived in monasteries located in deep mountain woods or on the shores of great rivers; they were not distracted by the temptations of the material world. Yet today, many monasteries open their doors to tourists, and monastics must interact with lay followers and tourists. Furthermore, in order to manage monasteries and promote Buddhism, it is necessary for monastics to engage more deeply with society. Both these conditions impact the simple, pure, peaceful and quiet way of monastic life. Hence, besides keeping a monastic bearing and following rules, such as vegetarian diet, celibacy, and no personal possessions, today monastics are in some ways similar to lay people.

Therefore, unless they are encouraged and mentored by virtuous masters, most lay people of ordinary capacity lack the motivation to voluntarily become monastics, and even if they do become monastics it would be challenging for them to keep their monastic vows throughout their lives.

Certainly, buddhas of the past, present, and future attain buddhahood as monastics. Historically, arhats, whether male or female, were also monastics. Moreover, the absolute majority of the patriarchs of the various lineages in the ancient times also appeared in the world as monastics. That is because the monastic lifestyle, in which one abides by the precepts and the Vinaya, allows people to live a life free of worry, disturbance, and entanglement.

To individuals, the monastic lifestyle allows them to devote their life to studying and practicing Buddhadharma, and to the growth of their blessings and wisdom. To society as a whole, this means that monastics can offer their whole body and mind to concentrate on promoting and teaching Buddhadharma without distraction, and to make their utmost effort to uplift sentient beings. Although they ceaselessly work for their own and others' salvation, they are still able to savor the joy of being free of attachments and being at peace and at ease. They do not need to worry about tomorrow, or to search for livelihood; their daily living embodies their vision and mission of life.

Therefore, as long as orthodox and authentic Buddhism exists, the door of monasticism will be always open. There will always be people who follow the monastic path. Even though there might no longer be a long-term living arrangement where hundreds or thousands of monastics can cultivate the Dharma under one roof, the footprints of monastics will never disappear. While we do need wisdom to think and plan with deliberation to establish an environment for monastics far into the future, as long as there are people who aspire to be monastics with the great vow of compassion, regardless of any difficulties and obstacles, they will overcome all challenges, and pave a promising path forward.

The Place of Women in Buddhism

QUESTION

What is the view of women's place in Buddhism?

ANSWER

The most often discussed issue regarding women's place in Buddhism is the eight deferential rules (Chn. *jingfa*; Skt. *gurudharma*). According to the eight deferential rules, nuns cannot be independent, and must rely on the assistance of monks. Nuns cannot reside in the same place as monks, nor can they reside too far from them. Twice a month, nuns must invite elder monks to deliver sermons, to be cautioned and admonished. They are not allowed to be ordained directly by other nuns, and must obtain monks' approval and certification. By tradition even a nun who has been ordained a 100 years, should still respect and bow to a newly ordained monk.

Therefore, today nuns still lack equal status with monks, especially in places where Theravada Buddhism is predominant like Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand. Women are not even allowed to take the full ordination as nuns in these regions and can only practice as *anagarika* [a lay person who lives a monastic life]. However, since more Western women have been joining the Buddhist sangha, they have been outspoken about gender equality. They feel that nuns do not have status while in the East, and when they return to the West, their life as a Buddhist nun is even more difficult. This is a very peculiar situation. After all, male teachers are still the main force in introducing

Buddhism to the West. Although monks do not necessarily discriminate against nuns, the tradition in Buddhism has posed an obstacle. The key is how to overcome this obstacle.

Since 1979, [Deborah Hopkinson and Susan Murcott] in the United States have been publishing a quarterly journal [of the Diamond Sangha], *Kahawai: Journal of Women and Zen*. In Sri Lanka, some women Buddhists have also published a monthly newsletter, *Parappaduwa: Nuns' Island*. The goal of these publications is to improve women's status in Buddhism and to attain gender equality. In February, 1987, a historical world bhikshuni conference was held in Bodh Gaya, India.

In March, 1987, Dr. Ku Cheng-mej, in the essay titled "Buddhism and Discrimination against Women," in Issue 11 of *Contemporary Monthly (Dangdai zazhi)*, wrote that gender discrimination originated from the Mahisasaka, an offshoot of the Sarvastivada School. Teachings such as the Eight Deferential Rules and Women's Five Obstacles were both emphasized by the Mahisasaka. The so-called Five Obstacles are that a woman cannot become a buddha, the Lord Mara, a deva king, a Brahma king, or a wheel-turning king. However, in the later stages of the Mahasanghika School, the Sarvastivada School, as well as the Sunyavadin (Emptiness Sect) of the early Mahayana Buddhism held different views on this.

In the *Sutra on the Girl Nagadatta* (Skt. *Nagadatta-darika Sutra*; Chn. *Foshuo Longshinw Jing*) of the Sarvastivada School, there are statements which essentially question the claims of the five obstacles regarding women. Volume 22 and Volume 50 of the *Ekottaragama Sutras*, also mentioned exemplary women such as the Buddha's stepmother and aunt Mahaprajapati, as well as Sumati, both of whom were competent, confident, and proud to be women.

The *Sutra on the Prajna Path* (Skt. *Astahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra*; Chn. *Daohang Bore Jing*), associated with the Mahayana Shunyata (Emptiness) schools, touches on the issue of how a woman can become a buddha.

Later, many sutras such as *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra* (Chn. *Weimojie Jing*), *Sutra on Following Provisional Expedients* (Skt. *Strivivartavyakarana Sutra*; Chn. *Shunquanfangbian Jing*), *Buddhasangiti Sutra* (Chn. *Zhufoyaoji Jing*), *Bodhisattva Asokadatta Sutra* (Skt. *Asokadattavyakarana Sutra*; Chn. *Asheshi-wangnv Ashudapusa Jing*), *Sutra on the Dharma Gate of Great Purity* (Skt. *Manjusri-vikridita Sutra*; Chn. *Dajingfamen Jing*), *Sutra Requested by Putri Ratna* (Skt. *Mahayanopadesa Sutra*; Chn. *Baonusuowen Jing*), *Buddha's Sermon on Sumati Bodhisattva Sutra* (Skt. *Sumatidarikapariprccha Sutra*; Chn. *Foshuoxumotipusa Jing*), and *Perfect Virtue Girl Sutra* (Skt. *Strivivartavyakarana Sutra*; Chn. *Foshuowugouxiannv Jing*), all advocated the view that there is no difference between men and women [regarding their potential to attain buddhahood].

When examining gender issues during the Buddha's time, we should look at the fundamental aspect of equality in Buddhism. For instance, there was no gender distinction in the status of arhats. In so far as the practice of Buddhadharma is concerned, there was gender equality among Buddhist practitioners. Furthermore, Buddha proclaimed that all sentient beings have the potential to attain buddhahood.

The term "buddha" refers to the totally liberated one, the one with complete wisdom who is the ultimate savior. If men can attain it, so can women. However, from the points of view of physiology and psychology, women were traditionally thought to be more frail, soft, and dependent than men. Hence, to protect the safety of women who live a life of practice and encourage them to become leading practitioners in Buddhism, men should put more effort into helping women. This should not be viewed as domination or discrimination. For instance, regarding the first great Buddhist bhikshuni, the Buddha's aunt Mahaprajapati, no bhikshu would disrespect her.

It is stated in the Vinaya that the presence of women could generate sensual desires among monks. Therefore, to prevent temptation, the idea

of women's bodies being unclean was taught to monks, and women's bodies were used as the meditation objects of practicing contemplation on the impure (Chn. *bujingguan*; Skt. *asubhabhavana*). This is a precautionary and preventive method used during cultivation, not meant to discriminate against women.

Throughout history there have been women leaders and heroines, but unfortunately their numbers have not been as many as men. In modern times, there are movements promoting gender equality to safeguard women's rights; yet, the results have not always been significant. In the world today, among the great number of nations, there have been only few women leaders in the last several decades; such as Prime Minister Golda Meir of Israel, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom, President Corazon Aquino of the Philippines, and President Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka. As of globally renowned religious leaders, there was Mother Theresa, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

In the world of business according to the May, 1987 issue of *Forbes Magazine*, there were only three female CEOs among more than 800 companies listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Yet we all know that the population ratio of men and women is almost the same. This brings up the question of why there are much fewer well-known women leaders than there are men. Traditionally, the woman's role has been that of caretaker for the family, thus performing this heroic role out of the public eye. It is also true that in general, men are more dominant than women.

We do not need to emphasize either absolute equality or inequality between the two genders; it is more important to follow the Buddha's teaching that "all phenomena abide in their respective places," meaning that each person has his or her place and standpoint, and roles and responsibilities, and we should develop mutual respect and assistance. For example, in a meeting where the four Buddhist assemblies of monks, nuns, male and female lay

followers gather, they should be seated depending on the nature and purpose of the meeting. Women who are representatives and hold significant positions should be seated equally as the male counterparts. In ordinary gatherings or a ceremonial ritual, female and male attendees should sit in separate sections.

I have published several articles dealing with gender issues. Interested readers may refer to the following articles for further reading: “Bhikshunis and the Eight Deferential Rules,” “Regarding How to Address Bhikshunis,” and “A Buddhist View on Men and Women,” collected in my book *Living in Accordance to the Vinaya*, as well as an article “On Women Practitioners in Future Buddhism,” in my book *Knowing the Path of Learning Buddhism*.

Buddhism and Mystical Phenomena

QUESTION

What is the Buddhist view of mystical phenomena?

ANSWER

Mystical phenomena happen not only to religious devotees; they happen to non-believers as well, though those without religious belief tend to treat these phenomena as hallucinations. Most people are puzzled by the phenomena of ghosts and deities, who are unfathomable and ungraspable beings. Therefore, some people think that they are not real, but yet they do seem to exist; others think that they are real, but their existence is difficult to verify.

Regardless of their level of practice, as long as religious devotees believe sincerely and practice correctly, many would more or less experience some degree of resonance or [paranormal] sensations in connection with spirits. While Buddhism does not deny the existence of such phenomena, it does not place any importance in them. Having come across a little mystical experience, some people assume that they have gained some kind of supranormal power, or witnessed the appearance of a buddha or bodhisattva. That would not be correct. This is because buddhas and bodhisattvas respond without taking on any particular form. Although formless there is power. It is a resonating function of responding to circumstances in meeting the needs of sentient beings. They do not follow a specific pattern, nor designate

a particular person to represent them. Since their responses are formless, and their responses take effect directly, what need is there for buddhas and bodhisattvas to designate a representative?

Although the power of buddhas and bodhisattvas may manifest through people and objects, those people or objects should not see themselves as buddhas or bodhisattvas. Whether monastic or lay, Buddhist or not, anyone who claims to be the manifestation of a buddha or bodhisattva is either seeking benefit, status, or fame, with a great lie, or is possessed by ghosts, deities or demons who want to confuse people. Even if some of their conjuring may be efficacious, they have no power to truly affect the fortune or misfortune of their believers. Therefore, Buddhists with correct beliefs should not emulate these people, nor should they trust in or rely on them.

According to recorded Buddhist history, only the Most Venerable Shakyamuni became a buddha. So far, there has not been anyone who proclaimed himself or herself as a second buddha. If someone claims to be a buddha, in any form whatsoever, it would be either a big lie, or they are possessed by ghosts or deities. On the surface, such people seem to be following the Dharma and saving people, but in reality they create chaos and confusion in people's mind. They encourage people to seek fortune and blessings without putting in good efforts.

It is the same regarding bodhisattvas manifesting in this world. Shakyamuni Buddha prophesied that Maitreya will be the only great bodhisattva from our current epoch who will manifest in this world as the next buddha in around 5.67 billion years. Other bodhisattvas, such as Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Samantabhadra, and Kshitigarbha are not historical figures [existing in a certain era]. However, they were acknowledged by the Buddha and thus became well-known. Indian Mahayana masters such as Ashvaghosha, Nagarjuna, Asanga, and Vasubandhu were revered by later followers based on their Mahayana deeds and writings, and were referred to as "bodhisattvas."

There were others in China, such as Tiantai master Zhiyi (539–598), who was called “Little Buddha of the East,” but he still considered himself an ordinary practitioner at the stage of faith. Chan Master Yongming Yenshou was considered by others a manifestation of Amitabha Buddha, but that was not his own claim. Dizang (Kim Gyo-gak, 705–803) of Mt Jiuhua was a prince from Silla of ancient Korea who became a monastic, and his Dharma name was Dizang (Skt. *Ksitigarbha*), so many people later assumed he was the manifestation of Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva. In the same spirit, all orthodox disciples of the Three Jewels should view all sentient beings as future buddhas or bodhisattvas and as manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas, although they are nevertheless still ordinary beings.

Even if a self-proclaimed buddha or bodhisattva can tell you about your past and predict your future, even if they know your life history and that of your relatives, you should still not be misled by them. Ghosts and deities have this kind of power as well. If you exert diligent effort and cultivate samadhi, you could also attain this kind of ability as well. However, it would not really be supranormal power; it comes mostly from the power of mantras, responses from ghosts and deities, or effects of being able to dispatch ghosts or deities. At best these are the effects of the power of samadhi.

Hence, when these people try to predict your future, their predictions may not be that good; when they talk about your past, they would not know it as well as you. As to what they would know about your past lives, the chance of getting it right is even more remote. Not even they would not know how accurate their words are themselves. This is because the law of causes and consequences cannot be violated. When causes and conditions are such that something is going to happen, that cannot be altered by ghosts or deities. Even having foreknowledge would not positively impact the outcome. The only things that can condition the outcome are doing good deeds versus doing bad deeds, and being diligent versus being lazy. Only acts of great

merit, or of serious misconduct, can change our fixed karma or retribution from past deeds. As long as we wholeheartedly vow to do good deeds and eliminate evil ones, to follow the Buddha's actions, speak the Buddha's words, and learn what bodhisattvas learn, our own destiny will be in our own hands.

Probably only a handful out a thousand people may have some power of foreseeing the future or knowing the past at birth, either from their practice in past lives or because they were in the realm of deities in the previous lifetime. This ability is more pronounced during childhood, but with adulthood the ability may gradually subside due to negligence or a busy life. If there had been careful cultivation or if they simply let the ability evolve naturally, they may very likely become a medium who can connect with ghosts and deities. These people are so-called spiritual mediums or shamans.

Today, people in general are more educated and knowledgeable; therefore, those with mystical abilities are able to use logic and pseudo-science in attempts to explain the principles of their ability. Some would also use Buddhist knowledge and Dharma terminology to speak about the essence of their own mystical power, and claiming the so-called methods of cultivation revealed by ghosts and deities as "esoteric practices," "great practices," or "unsurpassed practices." They use these methods to teach others, and to be sure, some mystical effects are produced, so sometimes these methods do seem to work.

However, there is a common repercussion to all this; as the saying goes, "It's easy to invite ghosts, but hard to get rid of them." After channeling ghosts and deities, one could be forcefully manipulated by them, and possibly lose one's free will. In less serious cases, one would still look like an ordinary person, but in serious cases, one could become mentally unstable, even abnormal, and one's speech, demeanor, and expression would be quite different from ordinary.

To break from the control of these beings, one often finds oneself losing control of one's own mind and body. Realizing they are on the wrong path and wanting to break away, a person with strong will would have to endure a long period of mental and physical struggle, and often it would take a year or more before returning to normal.

Therefore, to help one who is deeply into mystical phenomena is to return to genuine Buddhism is very challenging though not impossible. This is very unfortunate.

Not all people with mystical experience would claim to be a manifestation of a buddha or bodhisattva, but some would claim to be a teacher confirmed directly by a certain buddha or bodhisattva. There are three possibilities here: First, they may have experienced mystical phenomena while in samadhi (meditative concentration); second, they experience mystical phenomena through dreams; and third, they see or hear a deity while awake. If it occurs in samadhi, it is certainly not a deep samadhi; in deep samadhi, it is not no-mind, yet there doesn't seem to be mind; there is no realm, yet it is not without a realm; therefore, there would be no appearance of buddhas or bodhisattvas. This kind of shallow meditative state is similar to dreaming.

People dream when in deep sleep just before waking up, as well as before falling into sleep. These dream states are quite different: the first is relatively lucid, while the second is more chaotic. Similarly, the visions they see in samadhi occur when there is still some scattered thoughts, and they have not yet attained unified mind. However, they have already lost their sense of the present state; the visions are reflections of the illusions in their minds. Therefore, the images of buddhas and bodhisattvas one sees in samadhi often come from within their own mind.

Another mystical phenomenon, similar to that of mediums inviting ghosts or deities, is an illusion manifested by ghosts or deities in the guise of

a buddha or a bodhisattva in the form of sound, light and shadows. People without right knowledge and right views on Buddhism can be easily fooled and used as tools by ghosts or deities to express their spirit force. Although the Buddhist sutras mention that Dharma can also be delivered by ghosts, deities, or celestial beings, if what they teach does not correspond with the Three Dharma Seals of impermanence, no-self and cessation in nirvana, it is not Buddhadharma, only pseudo-Buddhism.

Ordinary spirits and deities will usurp the name of buddhas or bodhisattvas, and while they adopt many Buddhist terms, their speech is confined to the level of ghosts and deities in the desire realm. Therefore, we should verify what they say against the Three Dharma Seals. This is the way to eradicate vexations and eliminate attachment.

In the *Shurangama Sutra* and the Tiantai School's *Great Calming and Contemplation* (Chn. *Mohe zhiguan*), there are detailed explanations of what are actually demonic states, not the true, correct state. That is why Chan Buddhism emphasizes the importance of lineage. Starting with First Patriarch Bodhidharma, generation after generation of lineage masters transmitted the teachings from mind to mind; it is for the same reason that in Buddhist precepts and Vinaya, there is an emphasis of transmission from one teacher to the next in term of maintaining the essence of precepts.

Although some practitioners in later generations did reach enlightenment without a teacher, their practice still should at least be consistent with the teachings in the sutras, without violating orthodox Buddhadharma. It would be good to have a teacher who can verify our attainment, but if not we should seek verification from the sutras. Otherwise, even if we claim to be disciples of the Buddha, and consider ourselves within a branch of Buddhism, in essence we are still pseudo-Buddhist.

If the so-called ghosts and deities advocate correct Buddhadharma, they would be Dharma-protecting deities who can be considered manifestations

of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Therefore, in judging whether their teachings are orthodox Buddhadharma, it is not important whether they preach in their own name, or that of buddhas or bodhisattvas. The key is whether their knowledge and views are correct and accurate. That is to say, we should not ignore the message just because it is spoken by someone we dislike; nor should we embrace something simply because it is advocated by someone famous.

Buddhism, Mysticism, and Science

QUESTION

Can we explain mystical experiences as some sort of physical phenomena?

ANSWER

Physical phenomena refer to the matters and forces studied in physics, such as magnetic fields and forces, electromagnetic waves, electromagnetic induction, optics, velocity of light, thermal energy, gaseous energy, gasification, and so on. Mystical experiences generally refer to people's receptions and sensations of spiritual forces. The correct way to generate mystical experiences is to attain extraordinary functions of the mind, body and sense organs through methods of cultivation. Mystical experiences may also be taken as the function of resonant responses between practitioners and the buddhas, bodhisattvas, various divine beings as well as ghost and deities.

In a general way these extraordinary functions and supernatural forces can be illuminated by analogy with concepts in physics. Therefore, as I have said before, in principle even materialistic atheists may be able to cultivate supranormal powers, as long as they practice the right methods correctly. If one concentrates their mind to a certain level it is possible to change the state of physical phenomena through the manipulation of energy fields.

The whole universe can be thought of as a giant energy field; therefore, no single object in part or by itself, can exist apart from the total system. Within this huge environment, an object's field orientation will not change

unless subjected to additional factors, which can then produce small changes. Continuous and consistent changes although minor and partial, will eventually change the field orientation of the whole object.

As a result of cultivation, a medium's mind power may affect the energy field within their range of influence, consequently changing existing patterns, which may lead to producing phenomena as directed by the mind. The stronger one's mind power, the wider its range of influence and the longer the power is maintained, the greater its ability to effect changes. This is the supranormal power of unimpeded bodily actions (*shenzutong*). However, nobody can use mind power to alter human destiny or the natural laws of the universe.

As for seeing into the future and seeing miniscule things and things at a great distance in the present (the divine eye), as well as seeing into the past existences of sentient beings, they are related to optics and *qi*. Seeing into the past existences is to know the past. In a sense, the farther one is located from the earth, the further back in time one would see the happenings on earth. For instance, if you are 3,000 light-years away from the earth, you would see the earth as it was 3,000 years ago. Of course, a person with past vision does not need to see with their naked eyes; rather, they use the power of the mind or the power of resonating responses; their acute sensibility is also far beyond ordinary people's logical reasoning. Therefore, they do not need to retreat to a place far from the earth to examine the conditions of its historical past.

Because of the intricate complexity of light and images which change constantly, people with weak supernormal ability would not be able to see into the distant past. Even when seeing more recent events, they would not be able to see clearly but only the general situation with blurred details. Only buddhas and bodhisattvas with their limitless supernormal power are able to see long into the past with total clarity.

As to *qi*, it is a kind of moving force of physical phenomena. Colorless and odorless, *qi* contains substantial energy. Any phenomenon that has come into being would leave certain imprints that can be traced backwards. Therefore people with the power of past vision do not need to be light-years from Earth to see past events. The speed of light and the concept of light-years are merely analogies to help explain the principle of the flow of time.

The divine eye, which is the ability to know the future, is due to the karmic power of peoples' various accumulated deeds which can be understood as patterns of seeds. The stronger the causal seeds of one's deeds, the larger the probability of the effects, and the more acutely the future can be known. It is like seeing a grown tree within a seed, or seeing nuclear energy within an atom.

However, Buddhadharma does not stray from the principle of causes and conditions; the effects of causes and conditions are determined by every single element in the entire environment, and every change of any single element may affect the future development of the whole. Therefore, although the Buddha saw that every sentient being is capable of achieving buddhahood, he could not give a prophecy (Chn. *shouji*; Skt. *vyakarana*) as to when every sentient being would achieve it. If one has not yet seen the nature [of emptiness] of all dharmas, or at least not yet attained the consummation of faith, the Buddha would not be able to foretell when one would attain buddhahood. Here, "foretelling" means predicting how long it would take, how many buddhas one needs to make offerings to and study with, before one would definitely attain buddhahood. In the case of Shakyamuni Buddha, before he saw Dipankara Buddha, he did not receive any prophecy from any buddha. Only after kalpas of cultivation was Shakyamuni's attaining buddhahood prophesized by Dipankara Buddha.

Ordinary people are adrift in the bitter ocean of birth and death, struggling to keep their heads above water. It is like a long dark night with no end in sight. Even though the Buddha has the divine eye, he cannot predict when all sentient beings will achieve buddhahood. If a person has not yet attained the stage of forbearance or one may still retrogress, even the Buddha cannot foresee that individual's karmic future. Therefore, though we may use physics to explain some mystical effects, we should not blindly believe that science is able to solve everything. The scope of scientific knowledge is limited and will forever be limited; yet the cultivation of Buddhadharma and its functions are without limits.

The Buddha's virtues and wisdom are boundless. Trying to use physical phenomena based on mankind's limited scientific knowledge to explain, speculate, or infer the Buddha's wisdom and supranormal powers is like measuring the ocean with a seashell, or observing the sky through a small tube. Yet, there is no harm in using science as an expedient tool to help us explain the mystical phenomena of great practitioners. However, the purpose should be to educate those who themselves lack experience of inner realization and mystical experience. We should not imagine that science can truly explain everything. To do so is putting the cart before the horse.

Having had a taste of mystical experience, some people try to use scientific terms and cutting-edge scientific theories and discoveries to explain ideas in the Buddhist sutras, and to investigate the Buddha's insights and realization. As a tentative expediency it is acceptable but one should definitely not claim that these are the actual conditions in the realms of the buddhas or bodhisattvas. The best, most accurate and safest way to explain Buddhism is through comparative exegesis of the sutras – to use the Dharma to explain the Dharma. Otherwise, it will inevitably be far-fetched or falsely constructed. Some people will rely on their own "sixth sense" and appropriate scientific

terminology to explain mystical phenomena in Buddhism; that is certainly not correct.

It is said: “The buddha realms are known only among buddhas.” The world of the buddhas and the great bodhisattvas cannot be grasped by ordinary beings. How then can a small measure of mystical experience and limited knowledge of phenomena explain the lofty and wonderful realm of supranormal powers of the buddhas and bodhisattvas?

Buddhadharma and Science

QUESTION

Can Buddhadharma be explained from a scientific perspective?

ANSWER

The task of science is essentially to observe and explain natural phenomena using the methods of deduction and induction. In terms of theory, science emerges out of logical thinking; in terms of practicality, science is the systematic organization of facts. The rationale of theoretical science is to provide convincing explanations, while empirical science leads to practical applications. Theoretical science does not necessarily evolve into practical science, although it is the foundation for practical science. When a scientific theory is proven to be practical and feasible through experiments, only then does it become useful to human beings.

Science itself evolves constantly and rapidly; new ideas and theories replace old ones, and new experiments refute old results. Hence, science itself is not the final, ultimate truth. Furthermore, science is limited in its capacity to explain things already known, as well as things not yet known. It is said that some of the most accomplished physicists took an unknowable God to be the highest principle of science. This is exactly what some scholars conclude: philosophy is the root of science; religion is the root of philosophy; therefore, we place religion as the root of our explanations of the universe and life.

Using philosophy to explain religion is already insufficient, let alone using science to reveal religion's profound mystery. Just as the famous Chinese scholar Liang Qichao (1873–1929) said, Buddhism is not of religion, philosophy or science. Actually, it can be said that Buddhism encompasses religion, philosophy, and science but it is not just religion, philosophy, or science. Buddhism is not against religion, philosophy, or science but it is not possible for religion, philosophy, or science to fully explain what Buddhism really is.

Some people advocate that in an era where science is the hallmark of our time, Buddhism can be introduced from the perspective of modern science. Using science to explain Buddhadharma is certainly a positive approach; it would help people who already believe in science to accept Buddhadharma. There is no need for criticism here.

However, while science belongs to the realm of natural knowledge; it can only explain a very small fraction of natural phenomena. Not only do we know very little about the universe outside the solar system, we also have very limited knowledge of the planets within our own solar system. Additionally, in trying to understand the human body and mind from the perspective of medical science, traditional Chinese medicine views Western medicine as mainly studying the body's organs, while traditional Chinese medicine explores no more than the vital energy of qi and their meridians. Both approaches are merely studying the phenomena of the living body.

Psychiatric medicine shows little progress: besides using mood-altering and tranquilizing drugs – as well as confinement and restraint with psychotic patients – there are few effective methods of treatment. Meanwhile a psychotherapist can use analysis of the patient's experience, and inferring from that ways to alleviate their condition; however, they do not go deeper into the spiritual aspect, which entails intangible but powerful factors beyond the material and the physical. As for occult healing based on spirits and deities

using talismans and spells, such treatments for mental ailments may have useful effects, but are beyond the scope of science and considered superstitious.

Since its beginning, Buddhadharmā's means for helping people and transforming the world has mainly focused on the mind. Here, "mind" is the spirit, the mental state, which can be described with vexations and wisdom. When vexations or afflictions increase, the mind is confused; when the wisdom increases, the spirit is clear and bright. When one's mind is confused, no method in religion, philosophy, or science can truly and permanently resolve the problem; but when wisdom arises, it can easily resolve any problem, whether physical or mental.

Therefore, during his life Shakyamuni Buddha did not provide many answers about natural phenomena, such as whether the world was infinite or if the universe had a beginning. In the Buddha's view these questions have nothing to do with liberation from vexation; more important was to use methods of cultivation to eliminate vexation and generate wisdom. What we mean by wisdom is not the cognitive mind of discrimination; rather, it is a mind which is at ease because it is free of attachments. When the mind is free and at ease, how can there be any material or mental constraints?

In the Buddhism of ancient India the spiritual mind encompasses the materialistic natural phenomena; therefore, when they spoke of "mind," natural phenomena are also included. It is said: "All dharmas are nothing but consciousness; the three realms are but the mind." The vexed mind is consciousness; the clear and peaceful mind is wisdom. As long as there is attachment to phenomena, one is in the realm of vexation. Buddhadharmā does not place importance on investigating phenomena; rather, it emphasizes the transformation of consciousness into wisdom. Otherwise, it will be too easy to confuse the trifle with the essential, mistakenly believing the constantly changing and illusory phenomena as the real essence.

The mind does not have form or shape, yet it is not separate from form or shape. Science only investigates phenomena, yet phenomena change often and constantly. Therefore, science cannot explain [the ultimate unchanging reality]. At best, it strives to make progress – when the head aches, science treats the head, and when the foot hurts science treats the foot.

As Zhuangzi (370–287 BCE) said: “There is a limit to our life, but to knowledge there is no limit; using what is limited to pursue the unlimited is perilous.” The Daoists were naturalists who truly understood the nature of the physical world. Buddhadharma, however, thinks that even understanding nature is superfluous, for if one attains illuminated mind, one would find that nature is within that mind. To understand and unite with nature is not the same as being liberated from self-centered attachment. Science can only investigate and analyze the physical world; it cannot explain or articulate the ultimate truth of Buddhadharma. Of course, for the sake of expediency in educating sentient beings, the scientific frame of mind is needed. That’s why we have said from the outset that Buddhadharma encompasses science, but is not limited by science.

*Buddhism and Science
on Rebirth and Conception*

QUESTION

Can the Buddhist view on birth and conception be explained by science?

ANSWER

Generally speaking, Buddhism believes what the *Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* (Chn. *Da fangguang yuanjue xiuduoluo liaoyi Jing*; Skt. *Mahavaipulya purnabuddha-sutra prasannartha Sutra*) says – that rebirth and conception occur because “sentient beings are created from desire and lust.” This means that a sentient being’s cyclical existence is generated by the desire and lustful actions of men and women, and therefore, it is impossible to depart from the cycle of life and death without first uprooting desire and lust. [The conventional narrative is that] when deceased beings seek rebirth, most are driven by lust at the sight of their future parents’ sexual act and [stronger attraction to one of the parents]: if one is more drawn to the father, one would be conceived as female; if one is more drawn to the mother, one would be conceived as male. Therefore, a daughter tends to be more reliant on the father, while a son is closer to the mother. This is a very common psychological phenomenon.

However, nowadays with artificial insemination and in-vitro fertilization, there is no need for sexual intercourse between the parents. With in-vitro

fertilization, the female eggs (ova) and male sperm are harvested from the parents to create a fertilized egg in the laboratory. The fertilized egg is then implanted in the mother's womb to become an embryo. This procedure is inconsistent with what Buddhism says. How to explain the difference?

Actually, from the Buddhist view there are two explanations regarding rebirth and conception. First, when seeking rebirth, one is conceived when one's future parents engage in sexual intercourse. In this case, one either has a vision of sexual act, a vision of palace, or a vision of bright light, whereupon one is abruptly conceived. Another explanation is that being conceived is a means of repaying one's karmic debt to one's parents, whether out of gratitude or for past ill will; it is created naturally out of the force of past karmic deeds. Therefore, we cannot attribute conception to being solely created with witnessing the parents in a sexual act.

Yet, according to the principle of "attraction between opposite sexes," the union of sperm and ova can be taken to mean that they are inherently of different sexes. Therefore, under the right causes and conditions, it's possible for a deceased being seeking rebirth to be conceived [when a sperm enters an ova] in any circumstance, as long as one is yet to depart from the drive of sexual desire. Consequently, Buddhism can easily explain conception through the modern "test tube baby" practice.

*Early Buddhist View
on the Existence of Our World*

QUESTION

Is the early Buddhist view on the existence of our world consistent with modern science?

ANSWER

Among the earliest of the Buddhist sutras, the *Dirghagama Sutras* (Chn. *Chang Ahan Jing*), there are references to a Mt. Sumeru being at the center of the world. For example, the opening chapter of *Sutra on Creation and Destruction* (Chn. *Daloutan Jing*), *Sutra on the Beginning of the World* (Chn. *Qishi Jing*), as well as *Sutra on the Cause of the World's Beginning* (Chn. *Qishiyinben Jing*) all refer to it. In the four directions surrounding Mt. Sumeru, there are four continents. In the south it is Jambudvīpa, which comprises the continent we humans reside in. Mt. Sumeru is said to be 84,000 *yojanas* in height [about 750,000 miles]. Halfway up, on the sides of Mt. Sumeru are four palatial abodes called the Heaven of the Four Heavenly Kings. At the summit is the Trayastrimsa Heaven, with thirty-three palatial abodes.

However, according to modern geographical and astronomical knowledge, we cannot really locate Mt. Sumeru as described in the sutras, and certainly we do not know where the other three continents are. If we consider this a myth, then it may be appropriate to say that Mt. Sumeru might have been referring to the Himalaya Mountains in northern India. This myth

seemed to have existed in India even before the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. The Buddhist sutras simply repeated the old legends. We need not be overly concerned with it.

Furthermore, the aim of the Buddhism is to offer solutions to the real problems facing humanity, not to offer a scientific worldview. If one absolutely wants to investigate the shape and condition of the universe according to the Buddhist worldview, they may want to refer to the essay on “What is a Billion-World Universe?” in my book *Orthodox Chinese Buddhism*.

Scriptural Authority in Buddhism

QUESTION

Is the early Buddhist view on the existence of our world consistent with modern science?

ANSWER

In Buddhist epistemology, there are three criteria or forms of valid knowledge which also serve as skillful means of persuasion regarding the principles of Buddhadharma: 1) direct perception as factual evidence, 2) inference as logical deduction, and 3) the Buddha's authoritative words or scriptural authority as the Buddha's teachings recorded in the sutras. The first two criteria are usually not much of a problem; however, the third criterion has become the focus of much dispute today.

Modern scholars use the methods of historical studies, archaeology, linguistics, and evolution to study the Buddhist sutras. They have learned that Shakyamuni Buddha did not actually leave behind any written scriptures; indeed, the earliest sutras were not propagated in written form, but orally transmitted from one generation to the next. As Buddhadharma spread and as time went by the sutra canon flourished, indicating the various viewpoints on the Buddha's teachings. This is how the different schools of early Buddhism were formed. In the midst of this, the Mahayana sutras gradually came to existence.

Whether any one sutra belongs to the early Nikaya sutras or the later Mahayana sutras, all were transmitted by great Buddhist practitioners. However, since each school or sect firmly believed that its own teachings were the true representation of Buddha's Dharma, various sectarian tenets or views became established. This is known as "sectarian attachment." From their own respective perspective, each sect saw its own tenets and views as based on Buddha's authoritative words which should not be challenged. However, modern scholars are able to compare and analyze all the sacred sutras from the perspective of the various schools and sects. They are thus able to point out contradictions and differences among the sutras, as well as additions and omissions in different sutras at different times. However, to consider all the sutras as being the exact words of the Buddha without any contradiction is not likely and not possible.

On the other hand, if one denies the validity of all the sutras or adopts a skeptical stance towards them, then the Buddhadharmā would not be able to provide its endless benefits to people, nor can it effectively transform the world. Therefore, coming to terms with all these and making informed choices has become the work we must do. Actually, these kinds of questions did not just begin today; in ancient India, the system to classify the diverse teachings of the Buddha already existed, together with various schemes or methods of classifying the Buddha's teachings. For instance, the *Lotus Sutra* and other sutras categorized scriptures in terms of whether they were "Hinayana" or "Mahayana." The *Lankavatara Sutra* classifies the teachings into the gradual path and the sudden path. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* likens the Buddha's teachings to three phases of the sun's daily movement: sunrise, zenith (midday), and sunset. The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* likens the stages of the Buddha's teachings to the five flavors of milk, cream, curdled milk, butter, and ghee.

In China, the eminent Indian monk Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva (344–413) advocated the “one-sound teaching” system to subsume all the Buddha’s teachings. However, his disciple Daosheng (355–434), classified [the Buddha’s teachings] into the four Dharma wheels: virtues and purity, expedient means, ultimate reality, and nirvana without residue. Later on, to resolve the same questions concerning doctrine, schools such as the Tiantai, Huayan, and Weishi (Consciousness Only) developed their own systems of classification and exegesis based on the sutras.

The Buddha taught according to the different levels of understanding of sentient beings; and since sentient beings embody different capacities, their receptivity towards different levels of the Dharma and methods of practice also varies. However, the era of our ancient forefathers is over, and their ways of classifying and explaining scriptures and tenets have gradually become less effective in meeting the needs and viewpoints of modern people.

In terms of viewpoints more readily acceptable by modern people, the criteria of the Buddha’s authoritative teaching should be about the central meanings of Buddhadharma, on the basis of the Three Dharma Seals, and the Four Reliances. The Three Dharma Seals are: all compounded things are characterized by impermanence, all phenomena are characterized by no-self, and nirvana is characterized by uncompounded quiescence. In terms of causes and conditions, all phenomena are empty and without self; in terms of causes and effects, all are impermanent and of the nature of suffering. In other words, impermanence and suffering characterize that which is mundane, while no-self and quiescence characterize that which is liberating and supramundane.

The Four of Reliances are: 1) reliance on the Dharma or teaching rather than the person; 2) reliance on the meaning or spirit rather than the words; 3) reliance on wisdom rather than discursive thinking; and 4) reliance on the definitive meaning rather than the provisional meaning. Using the principles

of the Three Dharma Seals we can filter and discern the pure Buddhadharma; applying the Four Reliances in studying all sutras, we can easily see the true Dharma and the Buddhadharma on which we can rely and trust. Based on these criteria we will be able to clearly identify the fundamental teachings of the Buddha from expedient teachings intended to meet the needs of people in the ordinary world.

Sheng Yen Education Foundation

SHENG YEN EDUCATION FOUNDATION promotes educational initiatives that help people to know, stabilize, and purify their minds so that they can improve society. The foundation's mission is based on Master Sheng Yen's vision of "uplifting the character of humanity and building a pure land on earth." The foundation pursues the following objectives:

1. To assemble, organize, research, categorize, classify, translate, compile, print, produce, and publish Master Sheng Yen's works, including books, publications, and audio-visual information, as well as to promote, propagate, and provide free copies of such works to people throughout the world in order to improve and enrich the individual and society, and to bring about a pure land on earth.
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*If someone believes in and practices Buddhism,
should they also take refuge in the Three Jewels?
Is special knowledge and advanced learning required to practice Buddhism?
Are there any taboos concerning practicing Buddhism at home?*

In *Common Questions in the Practice of Buddhism*, Chan Master Sheng Yen addresses these and many other spiritual and worldly problems in a simple question-and-answer format. He clarifies common areas of confusion about Buddhist beliefs and practices and gives practical advice on leading a life that is “full of wisdom, kindness, radiance, comfort, freshness, and coolness” in the contemporary world.

Master Sheng Yen

1930–2009

Master Sheng Yen was born in 1930 and became a monk in 1943. He conducted a six-year solitary retreat, after which he went to Japan for further study and obtained a doctorate in Buddhist literature at Rishso University. In 1975, he began sharing the Dharma in the US, and in 1989, founded the Dharma Drum Mountain organization. In 2005, he established the Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan Buddhism, as an effort to reinvent Chinese Buddhism.

He authored more than 100 publications in Chinese, English, and Japanese, and received the Sun Yat-sen Art and Literary Award, the Sun Yat-sen Academic Award, and the Presidential Cultural Award, among other honorary awards.

He proposed the vision of “uplifting the character of humanity and building a pure land on earth,” founded the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts, and Dharma Drum Sangha University. Experienced in Chan using correct approaches, he guided practice in both the West and East. Popularizing the Dharma in modern language, the Master initiated movements including Protecting the Spiritual Environment, Four Kinds of Environmentalism, the Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance Campaign, and the Six Ethics of the Mind. He shared the Dharma globally with a broadminded perspective, winning him worldwide recognition.



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