

# The Ultimate Meaning of Learning the Buddha-dharma

Author: Venerable Yinshun

Source text: 《福慧隨身書》 No.013 《學佛之根本意趣》

Translated by Yinshun Cultural & Educational Foundation Translation Team

## Contents

<b>WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF LIFE? .....</b>	<b>1</b>
THE VAST UNKNOWN PROCESS OF LIFE AND DEATH .....	2
WHAT DO WE GET FROM A LIFE OF TOIL? .....	2
WHAT IS THE BENEFIT OF ASSIDUOUSLY DOING GOOD?.....	3
THIS MIND THAT PURSUES CAN HARDLY BE PACIFIED .....	4
<b>MY ROLE IN THIS UNIVERSE .....</b>	<b>4</b>
AM I CREATED BY GOD?.....	4
AM I BORN OF HEAVEN AND EARTH?.....	5
DO WE CREATE OUR ENVIRONMENT?.....	6
<b>LEARNING AND PRACTICING THE BUDDHA-DHARMA IS A MATTER OF ACHIEVING LOFTY IDEALS .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>THE CORE OF LEARNING THE BUDDHA-DHARMA: UNDERSTANDING AND PRACTICING.....</b>	<b>11</b>
PURIFYING THE MIND AS THE QUINTESSENTIAL TASK .....	12
BENEFITING OTHERS AS THE MOST NOBLE DEED .....	12

## What is the Purpose of Life?

People may talk about learning the Buddha-dharma but they may not really understand the purpose of learning the Buddha-dharma and its ultimate meaning. This is something we need to clarify because learning the Buddha-dharma is not a meaningless nor aimless undertaking. Rather, the purpose of learning the Buddha-dharma is to attain an outcome that is noble and ideal. Those who learn the Buddha-dharma must seek a thorough understanding of the ultimate meaning of learning it, and then must feel it is essential to life. Only with such a strong conviction will Buddhists be able to truly progress on the path of learning the Buddha-dharma, rather than hovering around the edges or [worse] falling into deviant ways.

What exactly is the purpose of human existence in this world? What is the meaning [of human existence]? The way to find out the answer is through a path of reflection upon ourselves. This is also the only way to understand the true meaning of learning the Buddha-dharma, because the Buddha-dharma essentially aims to resolve the question of the purpose of human existence. It can be said that this question is common to all the religions and, indeed, it is the impetus for the arising of these religions. Nevertheless, only Buddhism can provide the perfect answer to the question of the purpose of human existence and its meaning.

## **The Vast Unknown Process of Life and Death**

From the time of birth through to old age, and then finally to death [we experience the] flurry of several decades, and each day we blindly go about our lives. Where exactly did we come from and where do we go after death? There is no one who can answer this question. Therefore, we can only say that we come [to this world] and depart [this world] in ignorance. In other words, human beings live their lives with minds that are unclear. For some, even their marriage is unplanned and comes about randomly. Likewise, the things we do in life are carried out in much the same way. That is to say, we may never have a clear plan, and very few achievements are attained according to what has been planned.

There is a certain western philosopher who uses a very interesting simile to describe this unclear process of life and death. The simile goes like this. In a certain place there are two very high mountains, and between them is a ravine; at the bottom of the ravine is a deep, long stream. Connecting the two mountains is a very narrow and long suspension bridge. Human life is like a person crossing this bridge. Looking towards the mountain ahead, what lies in front is fog and clouds, and everything seems blurry. Gazing at the mountain behind, there is smoke and mist. Looking down into the ravine, it is so deep that the bottom is not visible. Some people take a few steps and then they fall into the ravine. Other people make it halfway but, unfortunately, they fall into the ravine too. Even those who come close to the other end of the bridge cannot avoid the possibility of falling into the ravine. No one knows where exactly those who have fallen into the ravine have gone. This is a great depiction of the unclear process of life and death.

A thorough understanding of this human existence, which we know nothing about, is essential to learning the Buddha-dharma. [For some people] it may not be essential to investigate this matter of human existence, just like the situation in which a ship sets out from one port and crosses the vast ocean towards its destination, it can proceed forward in ignorance. However, blindly going about things in this way is very dangerous. The Buddha-dharma addresses the question of where our life comes from and where we go after death. Moreover, it also teaches us what to do now so that we can safely reach the luminous shore [that is, nirvana].

## **What Do We Get from a Life of Toil?**

Over the decades of our busy lives, from our youth until old age, what exactly do we accomplish? This is a very meaningful question that we should reflect upon carefully. Interestingly, things do not seem right if we are not engaged in any activities. Accordingly, many people are busy with the matters of their lives, even though they have no need to be so. When you ask them why they are busy, they have no idea about the answer. All they know is that they have to keep being busy. Many young adults are unlikely to reflect on their lives in this way because they believe that their future is filled with opportunities [and therefore it is good for them to be engaged in whatever they are interested in]. But once people pass their middle age, they begin to reflect more on the nature of this busy life. I am not telling you all to do nothing; rather, I want to investigate what we could achieve after we put a lot of effort into what we have done. There is a saying: “This human life is like a bee which is always busy collecting pollen to make honey. But when old age arrives, they gain nothing from their toilsome life.” [For some people], a life of hard work has led them to positions of power, wealth, and status. Nevertheless, one day these people will still lose all of what they have gained, as though such gains were a transient happiness and nothing was truly attained. Regarding this

point, older people may specifically have more and deeper connections with such sentiments. Just as when children are young, they always want to be by their parents' side. But once they grow up, each child wants to leave the nest and carve out an independent life for themselves. Such matters [of nothing being gained permanently] can arouse a mindset of sadness, dejection, and pessimism. This is not the case in Buddha's teachings.

## **What Is the Benefit of Assiduously Doing Good?**

It is not only Buddhism, but also Confucianism, Christianity, Islam, and other religions that teach people to practice wholesome deeds and cease all evils. There is such a saying, "when doing good, [one] only fears they do not do enough." What exactly is the benefit of doing good? [In other words,] what exactly is the value of morality? It is commonly said, "Good begets good and evil begets evil." This is the infallible law of cause and effect. For the Chinese people, the ideology of doing good is largely founded on the family unit. For example, if parents are virtuous and create merits, then their children and future generations will be prosperous. This is like the Chinese saying, "Good fortune will definitely occur in a family that accumulates merits." But in reality, this is not always so. There are parents who are very kind and virtuous but their children are evil, while there are parents who are really bad and yet their children and grandchildren are loyal and filial. For example, Emperor Yao<sup>1</sup> was a benevolent person and yet his son, Danzhu, was very arrogant. Another example is Gou Sou,<sup>2</sup> who was cruel while his son, Emperor Shun, was extremely filial. If we only look at some individual cases, it seems that bad people always get the upper hand while good people are oppressed and exploited. Here are some examples of good people who were oppressed and exploited. Confucius was well known for his morality and knowledge. And yet, several times while he travelled around various countries, he almost starved to death. Moreover, he was unable to implement his ideologies politically. In contrast, Dao Zhi<sup>3</sup> was unexpectedly able to get away with whatever he pleased. Seeing such examples, [one] may question the infallible law of good and evil begetting their respective outcomes and then doubt: why should we carry out wholesome deeds? These questions can only be addressed through the Buddha's teaching, which establishes the law of cause and effect over the three life cycles.

Therefore, although we could say that all religions have similar preliminary teachings, which is to encourage people to do good, the reasons they do so are very different from what is taught by the Buddha. Those who practice the Buddha-dharma just need to focus on tirelessly undertaking wholesome deeds. One's current situation may be unfortunate and may bring difficulty and confusion; however, when one's past wholesome karma ripens, naturally one will enjoy the wonderful fruits of one's good karma. When one is able to have such outlooks of life, and practice accordingly, then one is aligned with the spirit of the Buddha-dharma.

---

<sup>1</sup> Emperor Yao is a Chinese legendary figure who is considered one of the great rulers in history due to his wisdom and great virtue. He, along with Emperor Shun, is often regarded as the role model for any ruler due to their wisdom, benevolence, and diligence.

<sup>2</sup> Gou Sou is a Chinese legendary figure. He is supposed to be the father of Emperor Shun (see note 1) and considered to be one of the greatest emperors in Chinese history.

<sup>3</sup> Dao Zhi is a figure who lived in the Spring–Autumn Period in Chinese history (770–476 BCE) and was an infamous thief.

## **This Mind That Pursues Can Hardly Be Pacified**

This [mind that always pursues things] is truly a [type of] suffering without end. The minds of humans are constantly directed outwards in longing for things; each day our minds seek to chase after entertainment, lust, wealth, personal gain, fame, and power. Why must our minds be like that? The answer is to fulfil our desires. However, when people are living in poverty, they must gain money in order to address the hardships of their life. But once they attain enough food and clothing, they are still not content, and they begin to pursue a higher quality of life, such as longing to have brand new cars and living in luxurious homes. [In short,] even when all these possessions are attained, their minds are still not content. Human minds are always as such; that is, always pursuing things and never content. This is just like a galloping horse: all four legs never touch the ground at the same time: as the hind legs touch the ground the front legs are already in the air. Our minds are never content, and we always think that others are better off. But this is not true. Similarly, for the sake of gaining more knowledge, a knowledge-seeker [whom we think are better than us] is never satisfied. Those who rule their countries have the same problem, too. Although they have great authority and power, these rulers are still not content and continue to have hidden suffering. As long as humans are discontent, their minds are never able to be at peace. It is commonly said that to attain peace one must be content. However, the fact is that humans have never been content. How then can we attain peace?

Religions, in general, offer people security and contentment. This can also be regarded as a common factor across all religions. For example, the western religions teach people that if they believe [in God] they will be saved. This saviour will naturally lead them to contentment, and so people's minds can become calm. [Actually,] this is just like comforting a crying child by giving them a toy, as the underlying problem has not been resolved. This is because the dissatisfaction of humans' minds cannot be fully addressed through an external object. Only what the Buddha taught enables us to truly attain peace and happiness. The Buddha-dharma teaches people to understand what exactly this cycle of life and death is about. It also teaches people [to reflect upon] what is to be gained from a life of toil, and what are the [true] benefits of doing good deeds. Further, the Buddha-dharma teaches people how they can find the way to contentment and peace. Only by investigating these issues will we be able to grasp the core of the Buddha-dharma, and this is also the essence that enables us to truly attain peace and happiness.

## **My Role in This Universe**

### **Am I created by God?**

In this vast unknown life, there is another question we need to consider. That is, what exactly is our position or role as we live our life in this boundless universe? This universe is so vast, and all kinds of things or events are able to manifest in it. Examples of things include the heavens above and the earth below, all manners of forms, and compounded objects; while examples of events include the situations into which people are born and then die over their lifetime, and they undertake both wholesome and unwholesome deeds. [In short,] all this occurs within this universe. But as we go about our lives in this universe, what exactly is our position or role? Accordingly, what type of attitude should we hold?

For example, if someone is a patriarch or matriarch of the family, then that person assumes the responsibility of a patriarch or matriarch. Or as an apprentice, one should have the attitude of an apprentice. The views [regarding this matter] in western religions are that humans exist in this universe due to being created. Moreover, everything in this universe, such as the flora, fauna, forests, and so on are all created by God and everything is under His control. [Under this ideology], humans actually belong to God, and are essentially his slaves. Therefore, they refer to God as their lord and refer to themselves as servants. This is why I conclude that the view of human existence in the western religions is based on a master–servant cultural system. Humans are God’s servants, and we must obey [His commands], or else we have committed a sin. For example, if a master tells the servant to first sweep the floor and then cook dinner, even though both tasks are done very well, though in opposite order, what the servant has done is still considered wrong. The reason is that the servant has not conformed exactly to the master’s orders. [According to the theistic view], in this universe there are only two roles: that of the creator, God, and the created, such as humans and all other things. [In this setup] although humans are servants, they are servants with a higher status. [This is because] after God created the universe, and all things and creatures within it, He assigned humans to take control and manage the things and creatures in this universe. Therefore, the role of human beings is [two-fold]: on the one hand, human beings are in a position of great pity as God’s servants, and on the other hand, being able to control and manage this world, human beings are in a position of great power, which enables them to be proud. In the cultures influenced by western religions, everything loses its meaning if God is not included. This type of view may have been logical before the advancements in civilisation. However, in this present age it should be reassessed.

### **Am I born of Heaven and Earth?**

The Chinese cultural view regarding humans and their role in the universe is much more sophisticated than that of western religions. The view is that humans are born of Heaven and Earth. It is also explained as being born from the union of the yin and yang. Here, Heaven represents the metaphysical or consciousness, while Earth represents the physical; that is, matter. [It is said that] Heaven and Earth give rise to all phenomena, and it is human beings alone who have attained the true energy of righteousness of Heaven and Earth. Thus, humans are more intelligent than all other creatures. In addition, the greatness of humans can even go as far as to place them on a par with Heaven and Earth [and collectively humans, Heaven and Earth are] called the three pillars. Therefore, the position of humans within the universe is regarded as supreme, which is different to the system of master–servant in the west.

Is everyone able to stand on a par with Heaven and Earth? Only the sages are able to “assist Heaven and Earth to nurture [all things].” It is also said that, “Although Heaven and Earth unintentionally create everything, sages hold sympathy toward all creatures.” These descriptions clearly reveal just how great a sage is. In terms of having no intention when Heaven and Earth create things, this refers to a natural phenomenon. This is unlike the case in which God creates the universe with intention; that is, by His will. [If all things are God’s creations,] then yes, when we look at the good side, the flowers are beautiful, the birds sing, and each blade of grass or tree is wonderful. However, if we look at the bad side, we see that larger insects eat smaller insects, larger fish eat smaller fish. In addition, beings also mutually harm or kill each other. If we take the line that God created everything, then the source of this environment of mutual killing can be traced back to God. In that case, God is rather cruel. Thus, this theory that everything is created by God does not make sense.

Confucianism says that there is no intention behind Heaven, Earth and all beings in this universe, and all beings in the universe are mutually destructive and mutually supportive. Facing this situation, sages, however, cannot be indifferent [to mutual destruction], and so they do have sympathy toward the creatures in this world. Heaven and Earth belong to nature while sages [represent] human virtues. When sages see the conflicts between people, they promote benevolence, love, and peace. When sages see people lacking in knowledge, they guide people with education. When sages see that morality among people is declining, they stress morality. In short, when facing all the unfortunate circumstances in this world, sages will try to find ways to improve the situation until wholesomeness is attained. In this way, sages assist Heaven and Earth to nurture all beings.

This type of outlook is much more logical than the theories of western religions. Due to the Chinese view that Heaven and Earth, or yin and yang, give rise to all things, the Chinese cultural system is a parent–child relationship. This is applied to a family in which there is a head of a family who is in charge; in the governing system there is a ruler who regards the people as children, and the people refer to the local minister as a parent.<sup>4</sup> Under a parent–child system, emotions or sentiments prevail over reason. In contrast, a master–servant system that focuses more on [obeying] rules can be harsh, with little sympathy.

## **Do We Create Our Environment?**

The Buddha-dharma teaches that this universe and everything in it are created by each sentient being. It is said in Buddhism that living beings reap what they sow, both individually and collectively. This teaching shows the law of karma, which is exactly the opposite to theistic religions. Therefore, those who are learning the Buddha-dharma should clearly understand the following two right views.

First, this world is filled with chaos and suffering, and this is because of the past unwholesome karmas that all people have created. Hence, for this world to become pure and beautiful all people are required to undertake wholesome deeds. Only in this way can people have hope [to better this world]. Individually, some people may be uneducated, or may experience family hardships, or may even be afflicted with illnesses. All of these are the results of the karmic forces from past or present deeds that the person has undertaken. That is to say, if people want peace to prevail in this world, or individuals want to attain security and happiness, then each person must do their best to undertake wholesome deeds and head in that direction. If it were the case that humans were created by a god (that is, passively controlled by a god), then humans have no power [over their future] and everything is at the discretion of that god. Buddha-dharma teaches that [what we experience] arises from the karmic forces we created. This is why we have the ability to improve ourselves as well as this world.

Two, upon having confidence in this Buddhist principle of causes and conditions, no matter how pure or impure this world is, all is due to past karmic deeds. Individuals' successes or failures also follow this principle. With such a right view, one no longer blames others [for their predicament]. The results of past karmic forces can change situations for the better. To achieve this, we must begin now by doing more wholesome deeds. Then our future will

---

<sup>4</sup> Note here that the Chinese especially uses the term “parent officer 父母官 (*fù mǔ guān*),” which literally translates as “father mother officer”. This is a general and honorary term to address anyone holding a ministerial position.

naturally be full of boundless opportunities. As humans, this is the basic attitude that Buddha-dharma teaches.

The purpose for which everyone undertakes wholesome deeds is to bring peace and happiness to every individual, and to help the world move closer to a state of peace. The task of assisting Heaven and Earth to nurture all things is something that we all can do. That is why Buddha-dharma promotes the view of equality, which is connected to the principle that all beings can attain Buddhahood. Once we understand that [everyone contributes to the formation of this world], then we can realize just how important our role in this universe really is. The Buddha-dharma's teaching on human existence is that we create this world; that is to say, everyone [collectively] creates this world, which shows the quality of personal freedom and independence. In other words, between human beings, there is no master-servant relationship, nor is it a parent-child relationship. According to the Buddha-dharma, those who progress further or attain awakening earlier are the teachers, while those who are slower to awaken are the students. Those who awaken first should do their best to guide those who are yet to awaken. This is a responsibility and not a privilege. In contrast, those who awaken later [than their teachers], or are unawakened, have the responsibility to be respectful to the teachers and to listen to their guidance. This relationship between teacher and student equally incorporates reason and sentiments.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, when dealing with common matters or working together, there is absolute equal standing between teachers and students.<sup>6</sup> A social system established according to the Buddha-dharma include a culture of teacher-student relationship that aligns with the spirit of freedom and democracy. The Buddhist view that we are able to create this world is different from [the view that] a god creates this world. [The latter view] claims that when the creator God wants people to exist, then there are people; when He wants other creations to exist, then these just come to be. This is to create things out of nothing, which contradicts the law of cause and effect. According to the Buddha-dharma, the creation of the world is based on the karmic forces stemming from individuals' thoughts and actions. Therefore, if we are able to accumulate virtues and merits and further purify our minds to undertake wholesome deeds, then we can create a pure and ideal world.

Recently, some people have said that buddhas can also create worlds, such as Amitābha Buddha, who created the Western Pureland. If someone wants to use the Western Pureland's creation as a parallel to the Judeo-Christian God's creation of the world from nothing, then this is absolutely ridiculous! Or, if someone wants to reveal buddhas' powers by using such an example, then this shows that these people lack a proper understanding of the Buddha-dharma. Such kinds of creation in which the world arises through the law of cause and effect are not strange at all. This means that ordinary beings are able to create the world [they live in], but what they create are the realms of the hells, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, and heavens. Because humans still have defilements and create unwholesome karma, the world they create is impure. Buddhas possess countless pure virtues, and their wisdom and merits are perfect. Therefore, the worlds they create are beautiful and pure buddha lands. Both of these [creation of worlds] are based on the principle of cause and effect taught by the Buddha. When people who are learning and practicing Buddha-dharma understand this principle, their daily thoughts

---

<sup>5</sup> Reason, here, refers to the respect for each person's respective position, such as that a student should follow the teacher's instructions. "Sentiments" refers to the need to show care and consideration for each person's needs, such as the teacher being aware of their student's condition, and catering to that need.

<sup>6</sup> This is highlighting that, under common situations, such as communal living, both teacher and student have equal rights, and the teacher should not misuse their higher position to gain more or to do less. Similarly, when working together on projects etc., teachers and students have equal positions, and each person's role in the project should be respected.

and actions should endeavor to be wholesome. Not only should they behave in this way, but they should also encourage others to behave in the same way. Only then is there hope for the purification of our world. In fact, many other worlds in the ten directions have already achieved this.

## **Learning and Practicing the Buddha-dharma Is a Matter of Achieving Lofty Ideals**

If we want to understand the underlying goal of learning the Buddha-dharma, we must first know the value of being a human; that is to say, when we realize the independent and proactive role of being a human, then we can determine the correct direction in which we should be heading. This is because the peace or chaos in the world, and the joys or suffering people experience are all caused by our own doing. In other words, there is no external power that controls us. Humans have the power of independence and proactivity and, therefore, it is possible for us to become better. To become better is to put in effort to move toward that which is wholesome; that is, we should move forward one step at a time until we reach the peak of wholesomeness. This is exactly the goal of learning Buddha-dharma.

Generally, everyone likes to improve and be wholesome, for this is human nature. The only exception is those who have suffered great failure. This is because the collapse of their career and so on makes them depressed and dejected. Accordingly, they intentionally continue to be a burden on society.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, such kinds of people are still in the minority, and they always have the opportunity to change for the better. Often, the concept of what is a good life refers to having a happy family, having many children, being in good health, and possessing wealth and power. Of course, these can be considered good situations in life. However, according to the Buddha-dharma, these are the fruits of wholesomeness and not the causes. If we want to attain good outcomes, we cannot be so easily content with having these good situations at present because they will come to pass eventually. We must continue to accumulate the causes for good outcomes [that is, undertake wholesome deeds], then we are assured to maintain our current good situations and can even gain better outcomes in future. This is like the case in which one sees a beautiful flower and wants to cut it and take it away for oneself alone. In other words, they do not think of ways, or put in effort, to grow flowers or other beautiful plants. Although someone can enjoy the present cut flower, it is still unwholesome, and they will lose that cut flower quickly. Another negative thing is that some people use lawful ways to attain money and power, but they then use their money and power inappropriately to bring themselves more benefits, and at others' cost. These negative examples are all due to the error of lacking the human spirit to improve oneself. More precisely, they are due to not wanting a definite and lofty goal. Some people say that they do not want to learn the Buddha-dharma or attain Buddhahood. All they want is to be a good person. This way of thinking is not so correct. There is an ancient saying that, "When one aims high, the outcome is mediocre; when one aims for mediocre, the outcome is inferior." Upon learning the Buddha-dharma, the intention that one first aims to be a good person is correct. However, if one only aims to be a good person and has no further intention to be better, the outcome gained is usually inferior.

---

<sup>7</sup> Note that the meaning of "burden on society" is not just of one who refuses to work and lives off welfare support. It also includes someone who uses unwholesome ways to make a living, thereby harming himself and others.



Therefore, learning the Buddha-dharma involves not only to be a good person, but also to achieve a lofty goal. Even though we cannot attain it in this very life, we should be determined to fulfil that goal in the future. This is indeed the right path. Every civilized and lofty culture in the world has its own ideal goal for which people are encouraged to strive. For example, Christianity admonishes followers to be considerate of God's wills and to follow in Jesus's footsteps. Although Christians believe that they cannot be as powerful as God or Jesus, they still have to learn from Jesus's great love and His spirit of sacrificing Himself for others. Christians believe that the human body was made of earth, while the soul was given by God. People become corrupt when they commit sins, and this makes the pure and holy soul impure. Therefore, Christianity teaches people first to cleanse their hearts. When their hearts become cleansed then they can proceed toward their brilliant goal — Heaven.

Another example is in Chinese Confucianism, which says that, "Scholars aim to become nobles, nobles aim to become sages, sages aim to become as perfect as Heaven." Scholars are those who are well educated, and yet they still "long to become noble ones when seeing them." When nobles see sages they also further aim to imitate the sages. But, even "sages have things that they do not know," and therefore sages long to become as perfect as Heaven. Hence, the orthodox spirit of Confucianism is that Confucians persistently push themselves toward the great path of the nobles and sages. Taoism also has its ideal goal, which is that, "Heaven follows the way of the Tao, the Tao follows the way of nature." The meaning of "the Tao follows the way of nature" is that one follows the natural laws of this universe without any artificial impositions. That is, one just lets oneself and things perform naturally. This is their goal for improving themselves as a human. In other words, everything in this world, the way we live and deal with things, should develop in accordance with the natural laws. Otherwise, there will be chaos, which is just like one trying to unravel silk threads, which then become further entangled. Accordingly, pain and suffering will follow [when people contradict the natural laws]. To sum up, the aim of Confucians is to imitate the lofty character of the nobles and sages, and then to further attain the same qualities as Heaven. Taoists revere the natural laws of the universe. In summary, both aim to guide people to seek a higher and ideal status.

Most people think that there is no need to aim for a goal to improve themselves for the better; that just being a good person is satisfactory. This mentality is to just meet basic standards without higher goals, which is unable to strengthen someone's resolve to put in effort and improve themselves. If [the people of] a country or a tribe generally hold this mentality, then there is the danger of degenerating. Religions that are more evolved all have a distant goal that is filled with hope and promise. When such a goal is placed before them, it can inspire people to admire and yearn for it. Until they attain this ideal outcome, they will continue to work hard and improve themselves. This [continual striving for improvement] is how people can attain true benefits from having faith in a religion.

When learning Buddhism, how does one improve? To answer this question, we must first understand the meaning [and hierarchy] of the five vehicles, which consist of human, heavenly, *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha*, and buddha (or bodhisattva) vehicles. The human and heaven vehicles are the foundational practices in the Buddha-dharma, yet they are not the main focus of Buddhism. This is because being a good person is our fundamental responsibility, and even if it brings about rebirth in the Heavens, there is nothing that special about this result. Although the Heavens have much more bliss than the human world has, it is still within the three realms, and once the karmic force of the heavenly life is exhausted, one still has to regress down [to the human or lower realms]. That is to say, heavenly beings still have the suffering of cyclic existence before them. The true purpose of the Buddha-dharma is to teach people to seek

liberation, which is the goal that *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* practitioners seek. In addition, people are also taught to be bodhisattvas and buddhas whose practices focus on benefiting oneself and others. That is, one is not conflicted between remaining in or going beyond the three realms. The teaching that encourages people to only learn and cultivate the *śrāvaka* or *pratyekabuddha* practices is just a skilful means [that caters to certain spiritual foundations]. The ultimate and perfect goal is Buddhahood, which is realized through the cultivation of the bodhisattva practices.

The bodhisattva practices that lead to Buddhahood must be based on the virtuous practices accumulated from the human, heavenly and *śrāvaka* [practices]; that is, we gradually progress higher. Although the bodhisattva path requires us to traverse very long periods of time and undertake heroic and countless virtuous deeds, this lofty goal [of Buddhahood] can spur on diligence to improve ourselves for the better and, at the very least, it can develop our determination to not become dispirited and degenerate. Learning and practicing the Buddha-dharma must begin with taking refuge in the Triple Gem: buddha, Dharma and *saṃgha*. The Triple Gem is the most ideal refuge for Buddhists, and we should rely on the Triple Gem to practice.<sup>8</sup> The Triple Gem's Dharma refers to the absolute truth underlying this human existence and universe. The buddha is an awakened one who has attained complete and perfect realization of the truth. *Samgha* [ideally] refers to the community, which is made up of the noble sages of the three vehicles. Although these sages have not attained complete and perfect awakening to this truth, they have already entered the ocean of Dharma, and have varying degrees of experience in this truth. Therefore, the buddha and *saṃgha* are both ideal role models for people learning and practicing the Buddha-dharma. The Buddha-dharma is unlike Christianity or Confucianism, which only worships a human-like God, or sages, respectively. Nor is it like Taoism, which only seeks the eternal laws of nature as its ideal. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem harmonizes both human and truth aspects, and therefore a faith [and goal] that is most ideal can be established.

Why do we need to respect, prostrate, praise, and make offerings to the Triple Gem? These practices are not merely a show of our earnest faith, and not just common practices that are for the sake of seeking merits. Instead, these practices are undertaken in search of the virtuous qualities and perfect wisdom of the buddhas and sages, as well as the ultimate refuge; that is, Dharma. In this way, we aspire to attain the same complete awakening to the truth. I often indicate the fact that the ways of Confucius and Mencius do have a good advantage in terms of how each person deals with situations, and undertakes virtuous deeds. But their ways lack a wonderful and sublime distant goal and, as such, is unable to encourage ordinary people to long for a brighter future and move in that direction. Indeed, religions in general have a power to entice people and cause them to exert effort to improve themselves, no matter how ignorant or old they are.

In conclusion, those who are able to read the *sūtras*, investigate the Dharma, prostrate to the buddhas, or recollect the buddhas, may not necessarily be regarded as genuine Buddhists who have confidence in the Buddha, or are earnestly learning and practicing the Buddha-dharma. The correct way to learn and practice the Buddha-dharma is essentially to hold the Triple Gem as the ultimate goal. With the compassionate blessings [and guidance] of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as continuously cultivating the Buddha's teachings, our wisdom will

---

<sup>8</sup> Here, the Triple Gem as the ideal goal refers to being the ideal object in which we take refuge, and also the final perfect goal we can attain when relying on the Triple Gem.

develop and grow, and we will move closer to the [ultimate] goal, day by day. In this way, we will cause ourselves to always be connected with the Triple Gem.

## **The Core of Learning the Buddha-dharma: Understanding and Practicing**

Within the Buddha-dharma, from the first step of faith and confidence until the goal of awakening, there is the learning process concerning understanding and practice. Understanding means to comprehend, and practice is to actually apply what is learned. There are countless aspects regarding the understanding and practice of the Buddha-dharma, and here I will only point out two crucial aspects and explain them in detail.

Let us first look at the matter of understanding, which has two key elements: the continuation of arising and ceasing, and mutual advancement. The first is “continuation of arising and ceasing.” This teaching explains how our life is impermanent, and how we continually experience birth and death, with no end. This is the meaning of the statement that, “All conditioned phenomena are impermanent.” In this life, from early childhood through to old age, there is never a moment in which we are not changing. Even though we are constantly changing, and what existed prior is different from what exists after, we still manifest some individual continuity, which persists constantly. Extending this principle further, when one’s life comes to an end, another new life will begin. In other words, it is not the case that after death there is nothing. This is just like the following situation. A person who goes to sleep tonight will awaken in the morning when the night is over. Only when we understand this principle [regarding this cycle of birth and death] will we be able to affirm the principle that cause and effect never end. Take for instance that in this lifetime the success or failure of a person’s career may depend on whether they have been given an ideal education and nurturing in the home and at school. Another example is of a person in their youth who is too lazy to learn a skill and is not diligent when working. When that person becomes old, maintaining their livelihood may be problematic. We can extend this simple logic to the broader picture, to show the relationship between this and future lives. That is, in this life, if someone does not want to be a good person and does not go about accumulating virtues, then in their future lives the fruits that person will reap will be unthinkable bad. In other words, if we want our future lives to be better than this current life, such as to be more intelligent and prosperous, then in this life we must try to be a very good person. This is the meaning of the continuation of arising and ceasing, which shows that things have the status of continuity but are impermanent; that is, arising and ceasing. [Such a right view] can spur us on to diligently work to attain the goal of morally improving ourselves for the better. The second key element is mutual advancement. “Advancement” in this context has the sense of having strength and being relied upon. Human beings’ existence in this society cannot be sustained purely by living alone. There must be mutual reliance on each other, one way or another. For example, when children are small, they rely on the nurturing and education provided by their parents; when the parents are old, they rely on their children for care. Extending this logic further, everything in society, from farmers, workers, and merchants to governments, all must be mutually relying on each other to progress and advance, and there is no exception. From the Buddhist perspective, the scope of this matter is even broader. Every living being in this universe would have had a very close relationship with us in the past. It may be that in a previous life they were our parents or siblings but due to the effects of karmic causes and effects we have now all changed to beyond recognition, and so are unable to mutually know each other again. When we are equipped with this

understanding of mutual advancement, we will be able to nurture the virtue of mutual assistance and care for people, and even attain a mutual existence that is harmonious and happy. Otherwise, bad situations such as mutual harm, deception, or destruction would occur, and the personal prosperity and world peace that we seek will forever be impossible. Therefore, this world is driven by us. If we want to turn this defiled world into a pureland, it all depends on whether we can start to create mutual harmony and joy.

Now, to the second aspect of practice. Though there are many ways of practice, the main approaches are no other than “purifying the mind as the quintessential task,” and “benefiting others as the most noble deed.”

## **Purifying the Mind as the Quintessential Task**

When learning and practicing the Buddha-dharma, the ideal goal is to attain the levels of the buddhas and [great] bodhisattvas. The main practice to attain this goal is to develop our virtues and wisdom, and we have to achieve this through practices that accord with the Buddha’s teachings. The main element of practice is to purify our minds. This is because, since time without beginning, our minds have been afflicted by many unwholesome elements such as greed, hatred, wrong views, arrogance, and doubts [on truth]. With the obstructions of these unwholesome elements, everything we do is unable to accord with the Buddha’s teaching and bring mutual benefits. Therefore, the first thing when practicing is to purify the mind. To purify the mind does not mean to break free from all external matters unrelated to us, and then do nothing and think nothing. We should still do what we must do and think about what we must consider. But the main point is that, in the process, we should give rise to wholesomeness in the mind so that what we have done is more lawful, and what we consider better accords with the truth, which accordingly can benefit ourselves and others. This is like removing the weeds in a field. In this case, we not only have to remove the roots of weeds so that they will not regrow, but we also have to further cultivate useful plants so that the general public can enjoy them. The Buddha-dharma says that only cultivating concentration will not resolve the problem of cyclical birth and death. We must cultivate wisdom and concentration together so that we can eradicate defiled afflictions and then achieve the goal of the path. The Buddha-dharma says, “When minds are purified, sentient beings become pure,” and “When minds are purified, this world becomes pure.” These sayings indicate that practitioners have to begin with purifying themselves, and then extend that purification toward the world and all other sentient beings. Regardless of whether the teachings belong to the Mahāyāna or Śrāvakayāna, this aspect of purifying the mind is the main subject when learning and practicing the Buddha-dharma.

## **Benefiting Others as the Most Noble Deed**

The other key element mentioned is “benefiting others as the most noble deed.” In accordance with the principle of mutual advancement, an individual cannot survive if they completely distance themselves from everyone else. If someone wants to attain peace and happiness for themselves, then it is a must that everyone else attains peace and happiness first. Take a family or a society as an example. Each person is a member of a family or society. If the family is happy, then it is possible that each member has happiness. Similarly, in a society in which all people are harmonious, it is possible that any single one member has attained true peace. This is like observing hygiene. If people only pay attention to the cleanliness inside their own home, and neglect the hygiene of their surrounding environment, then the way in which they observe their hygiene is not thorough. Likewise, Śrāvakayāna practitioners’ emphasis on self-benefit,

purifying their own mind, and attaining self-liberation is not perfect. This is a provisional path according to Mahāyāna teachings. Bodhisattvas emphasize the benefit of others. Whenever, wherever, whatever they do in terms of any matter or speech, all is for the sake of benefiting others. [In conclusion,] the element of purifying the mind as the quintessential task is a practice that is common to the two-vehicle path, while [the element of] benefiting others as the most noble deed is unique to the Mahāyāna, and more aptly aligns with the Buddha's true spirit. (Transcribed by the Venerable Yin Hai)