



# LIFE'S SUFFERING AND ITS LIBERATION

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**I**n our lives, the most important thing is life itself, and our greatest desire is happiness. How can we achieve happiness in life?

Throughout the ages, humanity has worked tirelessly to explore happiness. Regrettably, most people lack a correct understanding of this pursuit, blindly chasing wealth, status, fame, and love, believing that having these will lead to happiness. However, in today's materially advanced civilization, despite enjoying abundant material wealth, people are still plagued by worries and suffer immensely. What is the reason? Today, I wish to discuss from a Buddhist perspective: the suffering of life and its liberation.

# I

## THE CAUSES OF SUFFERING IN LIFE

What causes the suffering of life? This is a topic of great concern to many. If we were to investigate this issue, the answers would vary from person to person: some suffer from physical illness, bedridden for years; others suffer from lack of food and clothing, tirelessly working day in and day out; some suffer from loneliness as they age alone; others suffer from heartbreak, unable to alleviate their solitude; some are pained by their unfulfilled ambition to advance in their careers; while others suffer from slow business, unable to achieve wealth. Suffering manifests in myriad forms due to the differences in each person's circumstances, pursuits, and perceptions of pain.

However, all the above difficulties are just manifestations rather than the root cause of suffering. If a person suffers from a lack of food and clothing, will they find permanent happiness once well-fed and dressed? If a person is suffering from poor health, can they gain real happiness once they recover? If a person is suffering from being single, can they achieve perfect happiness once they get married and start a family? If a person suffers from low status, can they achieve long-lasting happiness once they flourish in a government position?

If our suffering could be eliminated through resolving these practical issues, then not so many people would be mired in misery. For anyone, as long as they have afflictions in life, they will suffer one way or another, regardless of material conditions, social status, or life experiences.

To live happily, we must find the root cause of suffering and eradicate it fundamentally. It is pretty similar to a doctor treating an illness. First, he must identify its root cause. Otherwise, the treatment will only be comforting

rather than a cure. The so-called remedy will only address symptoms rather than treat the illness itself. It only offers temporary relief, and the illness will invariably recur someday unless the root cause is removed.

So, what are the root causes of suffering in life? The Dharma teaches us the following aspects.

### **1. Ignorance**

For most people, ignorance is generally understood as a lack of knowledge. In the current information era, knowledge seems particularly important. As is often said, *knowledge is power, and knowledge is wealth.*

Everyone here is an intellectual, and you are likely familiar with worldly knowledge. If you study history, you possess historical knowledge; if you study Chinese, you have literary knowledge; if you study philosophy, you have philosophical knowledge; if you study biology, you have biological knowledge. Having this knowledge can equip

you with survival skills and relevant competencies, but it offers little practical help in understanding your true self. In other words, having knowledge does not equate to having happiness or being free from suffering.

So, what is the ignorance that brings suffering to life?

From the viewpoint of the Dharma, ignorance is a lack of wisdom to see the truth about the universe and life. Regarding life itself, which is ever so close to us, we know almost nothing. We do not know where we came from before birth and where we will go after death. We are unaware of the causes and effects of life. Similarly, we are unfamiliar with our inner world: we lack the ability to control our thoughts. We become overwhelmed by our various moods, such as affliction, joy, pain, and ecstasy now and then. Facing our emotional turmoil, we, as victims, often feel at a loss. Meanwhile, we still lack the understanding of the world we live in. How exactly was the universe formed? When will the Earth be destroyed? Among all the things we know, what is illusion, and what

is reality? From the individual life to the universe upon which life depends, what we know is extremely limited. What we see and understand in the universe is merely a drop in the ocean.

Wrong views also arise from ignorance. Lacking wisdom, we cannot form the right views about the world and our lives, confusing right and wrong and producing many wrong views. As views guide our behaviors, our different views will shape different lives we lead.

For atheists who do not believe in the Law of Cause and Effect, they often take risks with illegal behaviors, hoping to escape the effect. However, once their karmic retribution comes to maturity, suffering is inevitable. As for hedonists, who believe in living for pleasure, they indulge in an extravagant or even wasteful lifestyle. They don't understand that their blessings are limited, just like a bank account that diminishes with each withdrawal. Similarly, the blessings we enjoy in this life come from the accumulation of past lives; enjoying a bit means losing a bit. If

one only squanders these blessings, once the blessings are depleted, they will be stricken by poverty in the future. Therefore, the ancient masters instructed us that blessings should not be enjoyed to the fullest. If blessings are used up, the source of happiness and joy will dry up.

Superstitions are caused by ignorance as well. In the face of the immense universe and complex nature, humanity appears insignificant and incapable. As Albert Einstein said, “The greatest secret lies in the existence of the universe and its comprehension.” In early human activities, people did not understand the universe or life, so animism prevailed almost worldwide: mountains had their deities, trees had their deities, thunder had its deity, wind had its deity, rain had its deity, Wenchang (deity of literature and education) governed learning, Shennong (king of farmers) presided over agriculture, and Yama (king of death) ruled the underworld. Everything in the world was under the control of deities, and even the fortunes and misfortunes of our lives were somehow predestined.

Although modern science has to some extent explained these phenomena, keeping humans away from simple speculation and conjecture about the world, the influence of animism remains undiminished to this day. Today, many people still depend on the prayers and worship of deities to secure their happiness.

The fascination with fate has kept the ancient practice of fortune-telling very much alive to this day. So, does fate really exist? From the perspective of causality, fate indeed exists. However, the accuracy of fortune-telling and physiognomy is highly questionable, as it depends on the mental cultivation of the practitioner and the reliability of the texts they rely on. Often, these predictions about one's fate are nothing more than games that bewitch the mind. Over-reliance on them is clearly unwise. Some people also have a deep belief in Feng Shui, consulting experts for advice on purchasing land or building houses. Indeed, while environmental influences exist, it is one's own actions that have a direct impact on life. In fact, our fate is determined by the wholesome and unwholesome karma

we create, changing with our thoughts and deeds.

By contrast, some people would claim they are not believers or fans of anything mentioned above. However, after careful observation, we can often find that everyone has something they particularly care about and focus on, causing their thoughts to involuntarily turn towards it. It is exactly what captivates our minds: those greedy for wealth are obsessed with money, those greedy for lust are obsessed with desire, those greedy for power are obsessed with authority, and others are fans of football, singers, or movies.

In general, unawakened people will inevitably be fond of particular objects or crave external things. Because of this delusion, there comes attachment, and their attachment becomes one of the roots of their suffering. When our mind is immersed in something, we are manipulated by its various changes, unable to remain detached. Those obsessed with wealth rack their brains for more money; those obsessed with power spare no effort for higher

status; music fans often yearn day and night for their idols; and over the years, the repeated defeats of the Chinese football team have brought much disappointment and frustration to its many fans!

Our bad habits also stem from ignorance. Habits are an essential factor that influences our mindset and life quality. We can even say that they affect our way of living, direct our lives, and seal our fate.

In our lives, cultivating good habits is crucial. However, because of ignorance, all beings will often be unknowingly contaminated by bad habits. Some people enjoy extravagance, spending lavishly to show off their wealth. This only diminishes their blessings and even attracts greedy eyes. Some like to showcase themselves and brag about their abilities, only leading to the opposite effect and provoking others' aversion. Some like to act peremptorily, using forceful means to eliminate dissent and suppress others, ending up making many enemies. Some like to fish for fame through various improper means, only to be

despised by others. Others like gambling and consider it a highly profitable business until they get deeply entrapped in it, to the point of losing their family fortune.

Bad habits also form the emergence of social issues and crimes. As you know, conflicts usually stem from self-centeredness; theft often begins with seeking small profit; corruption arises with abuse of power for personal gain; violence often starts with bullying the weak; fraud is from idleness and laziness. When bad habits are in their nascent stage, they seldom capture our attention. However, if they are allowed to develop, without being noticed in time, they can bring about dreadful consequences. For instance, although the dangers of drugs and their prohibition are known to all, drug abuse remains hard to tackle. The reason is that, from the beginning, many drug addicts do not realize that their behaviors have violated the law. They are merely indulged in bad habits. Some try to challenge the law out of curiosity; some want to seek thrills when feeling empty and bored; and some attempt to escape from reality when frustrated with their lives.

Unfortunately, they do not realize that such temporary satisfaction will bring endless trouble, ruining their body and mind.

Additionally, not allowing our mind a moment of relaxation is also a bad habit. We are so used to being busy that our minds cannot rest peacefully for a while. After finishing our work and household chores, we usually fill our little spare time with various entertainment. Although TV programs have greatly broadened our horizons, expanded our knowledge, and enriched our cultural lives to a large extent, it has also become so indispensable that we spend much time watching them. It is the same with the global prevalence of the internet. Under the enticing guise of modern technology, they constantly incite us to seek external things, making us feel fulfilled only with external stimuli. The moment we have some spare time, we feel empty and bored. But this kind of “fulfillment” is temporary and illusory.

What is truly fulfilling comes from within. When we look

within and find that inherently pure source which encompasses all dharmas, we can achieve self-sufficiency and find balance in any situation without having to depend on external circumstances.

## 2. Attachment

Because of ignorance, we further develop attachment.

The attachments of sentient beings are pervasive everywhere and at all times. In Buddhist sutras and treatises, this is referred to as “attachment arising out of pervasive discrimination.” “Pervasive” means universal, and “discrimination” refers to differentiating among all things. Such discrimination is incorrect because it originates from our ignorance of the world and our wrong views. Here, “attachment” refers to our clinging, which arises from our illusory discrimination. Buddhism categorizes attachment into two types.

## 1) Attachment to Dharmas

The attachment to dharmas means clinging to the dharmas. When we talk about “dharmas,” we usually understand it as laws or rules, while in Buddhism, “dharmas” has a broader meaning, for it includes everything in the world: whether spiritual or material, conditioned or unconditioned, virtuous or vile; pure or defiled. They all belong to the category of “dharmas.”

In Buddhism, “dharmas” is defined as “everything has its standards or rules, so it can be understood; everything has its properties, so it differs from others.” Let’s put it this way: “Everything has its standards or rules,” so people can understand what it is; “everything has its properties” means the dharmas possess their distinct features. For example, water has the property of wetness, for wetness is its feature; fire has the property of heat, for heat is its feature. In short, everything can be analyzed from the perspective of the dharmas.

Having understood the “dharmas,” let’s talk about

“attachment to the dharmas.” It is very common for sentient beings to attach to the dharmas, such as the attachment to names, words, and concepts. In reality, words are nothing more than symbols agreed upon by successive generations. They are not the facts themselves, akin to how uttering “fire” does not scorch the mouth. However, sentient beings in their ignorance always regard names, words and concepts as actual entities, with their attachment to names being particularly strong.

In addition to our attachment to names and words, we have also become obsessed with our bodies. As the saying goes, good health is the beginning of everything. However, in our whole life, rather than saying we use our bodies to serve our study and work, it is more accurate to say that we have often become the most faithful servants to our bodies: busy with its eating, its clothing, its living, its pleasures, and its various other desires. Even after being busy for decades, we still feel the need to do more, hoping to remain busy forever. From the refinement of magical pills in ancient times to the preservation of sick bodies in

our modern era, humanity has been occupied with various unimaginable ways to live up to the illusion of immortality. But such efforts, as they have turned out, have certainly been fruitless because everything in the world is impermanent. Even the Earth has its day of destruction; how can our frail bodies expect to endure? The sutras tell us: “Where there is birth, there is no escape from death.” If we cling to our physical body as an eternal and unchanging entity, we will find it hard to face its aging and the inevitable arrival of death.

Likewise, we are deeply attached to our physical appearances. This is especially true for girls, who value their looks greatly. They spend a lot of time and effort decorating their bodies, applying makeup, changing hairstyles, leaving their bodies in a state of unrest. But the fact is that the body is not as clean as we often expect. Not to mention bodies as decaying corpses. Even young girls in the prime of their youth, what do they contain inside their bodies? Beneath the skin and flesh is nothing more than a skeletal frame, and within the frame are nothing but internal

organs that honestly can't be beautified. As for the contents of the organs, they are even filthier. Every day, we walk around carrying these things within us. We don't feel disgusted but instead cherish them in every possible way and always try to dress up nicely for them. Though this body is *impure with its nine orifices constantly discharging impurities*, we, sentient beings, do not recognize this fact. Conversely, we cling to the body as pure and permanent, breeding many unnecessary afflictions. Therefore, the Buddha repeatedly admonished us to contemplate the body as impure and impermanent.

Beyond the body, we are also attached to wealth as a substantial and permanent entity. As the process of commercialization in society progresses, the mantra of money being omnipotent has reached an unbridled extent, as if having money means having everything, thus everything we do revolves around money. Of course, appropriate material wealth is required to satisfy our survival needs. However, today, although we have basically solved the problem of food and clothing, our attachment to wealth

has not diminished but instead strengthened. Money is worshiped as a deity, and earning money is considered the sole goal of life. For many people, possessing wealth is no longer about ensuring a livelihood but a means to satisfy their greed. But have we considered that accumulated wealth will eventually dissipate? Thieves will devise myriad ways to take it, descendants will squander it without guilt, and even if it's securely locked in a safe, inflation can turn it into beautiful but useless paper overnight, not to mention destruction by natural or human-made disasters. Therefore, if we regard wealth as eternal, we are undoubtedly planting another seed of suffering in our lives.

The attachment to affection is one of the causes of suffering. If we are eager for a harmonious and loving relationship, we may, one way or the other, be disappointed once reality sets in. Some may toss and turn for unrequited love, unable to get what they desire; some may be saddened by a separation from their beloved, or by living far away from each other; some may agonize over being with someone they dislike due to frequent conflicts. If two persons

become mutually enamored, they may expect their love to last forever. But this world is impermanent, and so is the mind. No matter what they have pledged to each other, it will hardly withstand the test of impermanence. We always view marriage and family as important to a happy life, yet we don't know that they are a source of troubles and concerns.

In addition to all the attachments above, we usually cling to many other things, such as status, career, reputation, and loved ones. Still, we hardly realize that everything in the world is impermanent and illusory. If we are obsessed with illusions, insisting they are real and permanent, we will fall into the pit we dig for ourselves. Only when we fully recognize the false appearance that originates dependently and understand its empty nature, can we root out our attachments.

## 2) Attachment to the Self

In Buddhism, self refers to something that is dominating,

eternal, and unchanging.

Sentient beings always feel that in their lives, there is a constant, unchanging self that dominates. As a result, they always think of themselves, place the self at the core of everything, and their every word and every action reflect a strong sense of ego: “I” like, “I” dislike, “I” love, “I” hate. If we were to count, how many times do we unknowingly say “I” in a single day?

Because there is an “I,” attachment to the self thus arises.

Usually, we tend to be attached to our name, thinking of it as “I.” Every time our name is mentioned, it will attract our attention. We feel our name is “I,” and believe that praising our name equals praising “I” or defaming our name equals defaming “I.” In reality, our name is no more than a mark given by our parents, which cannot represent the true self. Otherwise, if we changed our name, we would become someone else. Besides, those with nicknames, pen names, and other names alike can hardly

distinguish which names can represent themselves. From that perspective, it makes no sense to take our name as “I” and feel worried or delighted about it.

Also, we always take our body as “I.” In fact, according to Buddhism, a body is just a provisional aggregate of the four primary elements, namely, earth, water, fire, and wind, and none of them bears the mark of “I.” For this reason, the ancient Chan masters raised the question: “What was your original face before your birth?” As for our bodies, which part of it can really stand as “I”? With today’s advanced medical technology, many parts of our body can even be transplanted or recreated. If there had been an organ called “I,” the concept of self would have been challenged earlier by modern medicine: Who am “I” after cosmetic surgery? Who am “I” after a heart transplant? However, due to ignorance, we falsely cling to this illusory physical body as “I” and worry over its beauty or ugliness, its stature being tall or short, and its health or weakness, thus endlessly seeking trouble. Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism in ancient China, once said, “The

reason I have great trouble is that I have a body. When I no longer have a body, what trouble do I have?” This echoes with the Buddhist principle that “the body is the root of suffering.”

We also take our clothing as “I,” paying particular attention to our appearance and thinking that wearing famous brands makes us superior. We also take our profession as “I,” convinced that our occupation is not only a means of making a living but also a symbol of our status in society. We also take our status as “I,” feeling incredibly proud and arrogant once we hold important positions. But what do our clothing, profession and status have to do with the true “I”? Once all these changes, will “I” also feel high or low accordingly?

We have a diverse range of attachments, all-pervasive and lasting, which can essentially be summarized as two kinds of attachments – the attachment to the dharmas and the attachment to the self. Where there is no self at all, we still cling to the self; where there is no permanence, we

still cling to permanence; we cling to the impure as the pure; we also cling to suffering as pleasure. These attachments bring us perpetual concerns and endless troubles and make us suffer when things don't go according to our wishes. Only by using wisdom can we eliminate ignorance and attachment, enjoy the freedom of letting go, and liberate ourselves from bondage.

### 3. Afflictions

Ignorance and attachment are the roots of life's suffering because they give rise to afflictions. Afflictions are not only the cause of suffering; they are suffering itself. Our inner peace will vanish once we are infected with the viruses called afflictions. Lurking in our lives, they dwell in our minds. Wherever we go, we bring our afflictions with us, just like a shadow following its form.

So, what exactly are the afflictions we have? The Buddhist sutras mention that there are 84,000 afflictions. In the Desire Realm, the Form Realm, and the Formless

Realm, sentient beings of different levels are fraught with different afflictions. Among these, there are six primary afflictions, which serve as the soil from which all other afflictions arise; there are also twenty secondary afflictions, which arise in response to the influence of the six primary afflictions. Let us first get to know the primary afflictions.

The first primary affliction is greed. It is one of humanity's most common mental activities. Greed refers to a defiled attachment to take possession of the object of our liking.

When the raging flames of greed engulf our minds, we might lose control of our behavior and do everything we can to satisfy our greed. Because of greed, we may use all means possible to acquire wealth, conspire for personal status, undeservedly glorify ourselves and defame others for the sake of reputation, or not hesitate to trample on our dignity through distorted and flattering means, to achieve ulterior motives.

There is a wide range of greed. The *Discourse on the Theory*

*of Consciousness-Only* teaches that the nature of greed is a defiled attachment to the Three Realms and the causes of all their phenomena. The Three Realms include the Desire Realm, the Form Realm, and the Formless Realm. Sentient beings are attached to every phenomenon in the Three Realms and their causes. Specifically, we are greedy for our body, wealth, career, reputation, delicious food, gorgeous colors, musical sounds, pretty compliments, comfortable houses, cozy environments. In short, we crave everything.

Our minds cannot stop being obsessed with greed, causing various obstacles. When our greed is not satisfied, our mind is occupied and tormented by strong desires, even leading to morbid desires, making us disregard moral norms and legal constraints, and act recklessly under the drive of greed. Even when greed is temporarily satisfied, our minds still cannot find peace, falling into fear of losing everything, trapped in anxiety over gain and loss. What's worse, those desires that are fully stirred up continue to destroy our reason and make us sink deeper and deeper

into the trap of greed.

From an individual perspective, greed is the root of afflictions in one's life, while for humankind, greed is the source of all human-made disasters. What influence does greed have over the world?

As desires escalate, humanity is consuming our planet's limited natural resources in an unprecedented way: massive forests are being cut down, minerals are blindly exploited, the air is polluted, and water sources are deteriorating. The vicious cycle formed by the rapid depletion of resources and the constant growth of greed is spreading across the world. Consequently, within just a few generations, we have caused more destruction to nature than all of the past several thousand years combined. Today, we are almost choking nature in our demand for more. If we can't overcome our greed and keep our possessive desires within reasonable limits, and instead continue to develop and indulge them, we'll leave future generations with nothing but a scarred Earth, a home unsuitable for

human habitation.

Contrary to the possessiveness characterized by greed, hatred means we harbor annoyance and rejection against the things we dislike.

Hatred reveals itself in many ways. In daily life, quarrels and fights triggered by hatred can be witnessed everywhere. Some become angered by disagreements with each other; some confront each other furiously over conflicts of interest. When others bring trouble or harm to us, we may develop hatred towards them. To top it off, we sometimes take our anger out on others by blaming our faults on them.

Hatred can lead to the loss of inner peace. However, after analysis, we will find that hatred is essentially the manifestation of ignorance. When we lose our temper, we are virtually “punishing ourselves for others’ faults,” making us the primary victim. Even worse, hatred can turn minor conflicts into bigger ones. When hatred is put into action,

reason disappears, morality disappears, and even the law disappears. As it is said in the Buddhist sutra, “When a single thought of hatred arises, a million obstacles unfold.”

Jealousy also comes from hatred. While we are capable of having minds as vast as the sky, there are times when we become so narrow-minded that we fail to consider anyone but ourselves. When envy clouds our minds, we might find it hard to tolerate the glory, success, or happiness of others. Jealousy is a terrible state of mind. Out of jealousy, we slander others, interfere with their lives, and create obstacles for them at every turn. Under extreme jealousy, we may even take delight in wishing death upon them, thus embarking on the path of crime.

To overcome jealousy, the Buddhist sutras encourage us to rejoice over others’ merits. When other people are performing charitable services, diligently practicing the Buddha Dharma, or making progress on the path, we may obtain the same merits as they do, as long as we rejoice sincerely and praise them genuinely. So rejoicing over others’

merits is an extraordinary practice that helps us overcome jealousy effectively and offers us a shortcut to obtain both mundane and supramundane merits.

Pride, commonly referred to as arrogance, is also a critical component of primary afflictions. Pride leads us to overestimate ourselves and look down on others, unwilling to be humble before the talented and virtuous. Moreover, pride can lead us to stubbornly insist on doing as we please, resulting in a variety of negative actions. There are several different manifestations of pride.

Pride: When others have lesser abilities and knowledge or are equal to oneself, those burdened with pride often become arrogant and look down on others.

Excessive Pride: When others match or surpass one's abilities in every aspect, excessive pride can lead to complacency and a failure to acknowledge others' strengths.

Superiority Pride: When others surpass oneself significantly

in every aspect, such pride leads one to distort the truth, still believing oneself to be superior and unable to tolerate the achievements and admiration others rightfully deserve.

**Self-Pride:** The life form, composed of the Five Aggregates, is inherently without a self. Yet, due to delusion, we always believe there exists an “I” within it. Furthermore, we exaggerate and elevate the self, centering everything around ourselves, feeling that everyone should respect us, follow our commands and assignments, act according to our will, and even wishing that the entire world revolves around us and our needs.

**Overestimation Pride:** Some people become smug and conceited after noticing a minor benefit or response in their spiritual practice, mistakenly thinking they’ve achieved a significant spiritual milestone. Those who become deluded due to misguided practices generally fall into this category.

**Inferiority Pride:** Some individuals are predisposed to self-degradation and willingly embrace moral downfall, yet they simultaneously disregard others' strengths. Despite opportunities to learn from others, they choose not to, aiming to conceal their ignorance. This results in a complete absence of humility, a lack of respect for others, and a failure to understand that true growth stems from modesty.

**Misguided Pride:** Certain individuals, devoid of authentic knowledge and virtue, seek worldly recognition and pursue hidden agendas. They resort to deceptive methods to promote themselves, angling for fame and an unearned reputation.

There is a saying that goes, “Humility brings benefits, while arrogance invites failure.” An excessively proud person is unlikely to advance in learning or moral development. Their inability to recognize their own flaws or acknowledge others' strengths leads them to look down on others. Moreover, they disregard advice and resist learning

from others with an open mind, undeniably impeding their own growth.

As the saying goes, “literati often belittle each other,” a phenomenon driven by pride. Often, those skilled in a particular area become excessively proud, feeling entitled due to their abilities. Furthermore, the constant praise and deference they receive only fuel their arrogance, leading them to believe they are superior and have an advantage over others.

Pride also makes it difficult for people to get along harmoniously. Generally, those burdened with pride have an exceptionally strong sense of self-esteem, always desiring respect from others and intolerant of any disdain. Due to an excessive focus on oneself, they often fail to treat others with equality and do not show the due respect to others, even going as far as to hurt others as they please. However, relationships among people are reciprocal. If we wish to be respected by others, we must first respect them and treat them with a friendly attitude. If we fail to

do this, always belittling others, whether intentionally or unintentionally, they will naturally respond to us in the same manner. Moreover, people with too strong a sense of self-esteem often have fragile emotions. In their eyes, they hold a supreme position, only accustomed to obedience and compliments. Once faced with setbacks, their spirit can easily collapse.

#### **4. Creating Karma**

Afflictions are not only the cause that disturbs our inner peace, but they also confuse us and make us create negative karma.

Buddhism classifies human actions into three types: wholesome actions, unwholesome actions, and neutral actions. Among these, only wholesome and unwholesome actions can generate karma, which in turn leads to future happiness or suffering. So, what are the criteria for distinguishing between wholesome and unwholesome actions? The explanation given in the *Discourse on the*

*Theory of Consciousness-Only* is that actions beneficial to oneself and others in this and future lives are considered wholesome, while those harmful to oneself and others in this and future lives are considered unwholesome. Therefore, the determination of wholesome and unwholesome actions is not based on immediate benefits but is defined by the results they bring about, spanning both the present and future lives.

An action is truly wholesome only when it yields benefits both now and in the future. Take, for example, the act of giving, which Buddhism promotes as a wholesome deed. It is beneficial not only to oneself and others in this life but also in future lives. First, giving helps one overcome selfishness and greed, fostering a generous and compassionate mindset that enhances current joy. Furthermore, it sets the stage for amassing immeasurable wealth in the future, thus ensuring happiness in subsequent lives. Lastly, the act of giving accumulates the merits necessary for attaining Buddhahood, and it brings about a unique joy stemming from the Dharma.

In contrast, actions harmful to both the present and the future are viewed as unwholesome deeds. Behaviors such as killing, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, and lying not only harm others and breach laws but also pave a path to inevitable suffering. Individuals committing these acts will confront their conscience's censure, risk retaliation, and face legal repercussions in this life. Furthermore, they are destined to endure the agonies of the Three Wretched Realms (the realms of hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals) in future lives. When retribution arrives, ready or not, they will have no option but to endure the consequences of the actions they themselves have set into motion.

Beyond wholesome and unwholesome actions, there are also neutral actions. “Neutral” here means that these actions cannot be classified distinctly as either wholesome or unwholesome. Examples include drinking water when thirsty, eating some bread when hungry, taking a break when tired, and engaging in legitimate, moderate entertainment. Additionally, karmic consequences are

deemed as neutral. For instance, the joys experienced in Human and Heavenly Realms, though enjoyable in this life, do not bring benefits for the future and thus cannot be categorized as wholesome. Similarly, suffering karmic consequences in the Wretched Realms, while detrimental in this life, do not affect the future and hence cannot be considered unwholesome.

The *Sutra on the Ten Wholesome Actions* also discusses the criteria for distinguishing between wholesome and unwholesome. The sutra states: “What is called a wholesome Dharma refers to the actions that serve as the foundation for achieving the fruits of the Human and Heavenly Realms, the path of the Sravakas, the path of the Pratyek-abuddhas, and the unsurpassed Bodhi. All these are accomplished based on the ten wholesome actions, which is called wholesome Dharma.” This means that actions are deemed wholesome or unwholesome based on their outcomes. Actions that lead to the attainment of worldly and supermundane fruits across the Five Vehicles are considered wholesome dharma. For instance, the practice of

the Five Precepts and Ten Good Deeds in the Human and Heavenly Vehicle, the Thirty-Seven Factors of Enlightenment in the Sravaka vehicle, and the Six Perfections and Four Means of Conversion in the Bodhisattva vehicle are all regarded as wholesome actions. Conversely, actions that lead to the suffering of the Wretched Realms are considered unwholesome.

Wholesome and unwholesome actions take on many forms, but the fundamental ones are the ten wholesome and the ten unwholesome actions. Let us examine the ten unwholesome actions first.

The first, killing, which means to intentionally end the life of a sentient being with malice. If all the following five conditions are met, the karma of killing is formed: 1. The intention to kill; 2. The act targets another sentient being; 3. Confirming the target of the act is a sentient being; 4. Carried out the actions to kill, with all preparations made; 5. Killed the specific intended being without error.

The second, taking what is not given, or stealing, includes actions such as deceitful acquisition, theft, robbery, usurpation, and embezzlement. If all the following five conditions are met, the karma of stealing is formed: 1. Intentionally having the mind to steal; 2. Targeting others' property; 3. Knowing this property belongs to others; 4. Making preparations for stealing; 5. Stealing the targeted property not by mistake.

The third, sexual misconduct. If all the following four conditions are met, the karma of sexual misconduct is formed: 1. Improper partners, engaging in sexual relations with someone else's wife, one's own parents or siblings; 2. Improper means, engaging in non-vaginal sexual relations; 3. Improper times, engaging in sexual relations with one's own spouse at inappropriate times, such as during pregnancy, nursing, or religious fasting, is also considered sexual misconduct; 4. Improper places, engaging in sexual relations in temples or near Buddhist pagodas.

The fourth, deceitful speech, or false speech, includes

lying, instructing others to tell lies, sending others to tell lies, making up lies in the written language, or deceiving others by giving tacit approval, giving a hint, nodding the head, making a gesture, and so on. The following four conditions constitute the act of false speech: 1. Deceiving others with statements that contradict facts, such as claiming to have seen what has not been seen, or not seen what has been seen; 2. The other party understands your meaning; 3. Having a deceitful mind; 4. The other party accepts your statement as true.

The fifth, divisive speech that serves to alienate one person from another. The act of divisive speech is established through four conditions: 1. Distorting the facts with the intention of sowing seeds of discord among other people; 2. Deliberately using language intended to trigger a conflict or provoke disputes; 3. The other party understands what you've said; 4. The other party accepts it as true.

The sixth, harsh speech, or verbal abuse, includes various sarcastic and insulting language such as slander, attacks,

sarcasm, and ridicule. The act of harsh speech is established through four conditions: 1. Intending to harm others; 2. Using unkind words, such as various forms of uncivil language; 3. The other party understands what you've said; 4. The other party accepts it as true.

The seventh, frivolous speech, idle gossip, or words of gossip. This is established through two conditions: 1. With a defiled mind, flattering and pandering to others for personal purposes; 2. The language spoken involves inciting lust or theft, such as love songs with explicit lyrics, idle gossip about anything and everything, and incorrect or heretical views.

The eighth, greed, which means coveting others' wealth, status, family, and so on, with the desire to possess them as one's own.

The ninth, hatred, an intention to harm other sentient beings out of annoyance.

The tenth, erroneous views. This includes denying the Law of Cause and Effect, disbelieving in the existence of past and future lives. Nihilistic perspectives, such as those of materialists, and eternalistic views, often embraced by adherents of various religions, are considered examples of deluded erroneous views.

The opposite of the ten unwholesome actions are the ten wholesome actions: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no false speech, no frivolous speech, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no greed, no hatred, and no erroneous views.

The ten wholesome actions and ten unwholesome actions are all created through the three actions of body, speech, and mind. Killing, stealing and sexual misconduct, along with the abstinence from killing, stealing or sexual misconduct, belong to the action of the body; false speech, frivolous speech, divisive speech and harsh speech, along with the abstinence from false speech, frivolous speech, divisive speech and harsh speech, belong to

the action of speech; greed, hatred, and erroneous views, along with the abstinence from greed, hatred, or erroneous views, belong to the action of the mind.

Fundamentally, both bodily and verbal actions originate from the mind's actions. It's the afflictions within the mind that prompt unwholesome bodily and verbal actions. A mind clouded by greed may resort to killing, driven by various motives. Some individuals might be lured by the taste of succulent meat or the prospect of profit from trading in butchered animals. Others may seek the thrill of trapping and hunting, while some, coveting another's wealth, do not shy away from the sin of devising schemes to acquire wealth, even at the expense of taking lives.

Greed is also the catalyst for wars between nations and conflicts between regions. For millennia, the world has witnessed a relentless cycle of conflicts, both major and minor, fueled by the desire to seize territories and pillage resources to fulfill insatiable ambitions. This dynamic has

now reached a critical point, with nations threatening each other with nuclear arms, posing a significant, latent threat to global peace.

Greed is the root of theft. Criminals, who cast aside the law to seize others' property, are propelled by greed. Similarly, greed leads to sexual misconduct, with desires causing individuals to abandon reason and engage in inappropriate relationships. Furthermore, greed incites false speech. The saying "there's no business without deceit" prompts the question of whether merchants are inherently dishonest. Fundamentally, it is greed that drives them to seek excessive profits, sacrificing truth and misleading others in the process. Although greed originates in the mind, once it manifests, it significantly influences both bodily actions and speech.

Similarly, hatred can give rise to a range of unwholesome actions. It can incite violence, disrupting peaceful coexistence and sparking conflicts. It is hard for an angry person to remain rational. As hatred deepens, conflicts can

intensify, leading from verbal altercations to physical violence, with minor skirmishes causing injuries and serious confrontations sometimes resulting in death.

Hatred can also lead to theft, as envy towards others' wealth may compel one to engage in robbery or thievery to unlawfully claim what is not theirs. Moreover, hatred can result in sexual misconduct. In today's society full of violence, crimes driven by hatred leave many innocent individuals, especially women, to suffer. Additionally, hatred fosters false speech. Against those we dislike or with whom we have had conflicts, we may hide the truth and intentionally deceive. This extends to the business realm, where competitors might not deal with each other honestly, or may even resort to scams to inflict financial losses on one another.

Karmic retribution is unfailing. Any karma we create, no matter its size or severity, will eventually bring about its consequences. However, the process from cause to effect also depends on supporting conditions, that is, the

influence of external circumstances. Only when both causes and conditions are present can the karmic results ripen. Therefore, karma is divided into four types.

The first is the karma of the present retribution, which can bring karmic consequences to this life.

The second is the karma of the retribution in the next rebirth, which can bring karmic consequences to the next life.

The third is the karma of the subsequent retribution, which can inflict karmic consequences in future lives.

The fourth is the karma of uncertain retribution, which means the karma that still has the potential for change, so the timing and severity of the consequences are not fully fixed.

Many people are unaware of the principle of cause and effect that spans across three lifetimes: past, present, and

future. As a result, they frequently lament about seeming injustices dealt by higher powers. However, the maturation of karmic consequences can be likened to the growth of a seed, which requires nourishment from soil, sunlight, rain, and dew, in addition to a specific process and timeframe.

## 5. Suffering Results

Our current existence and circumstances are shaped by the karma accumulated in our past. It is crucial to note that the karma we have created, whether wholesome or unwholesome, is inherently tainted and with outflow. As a result, the consequences that manifest from karma are laden with flaws and suffering.

Buddhist scriptures enumerate eight types of suffering that sentient beings endure: birth, aging, illness, death, separation from loved ones, unfulfilled desires, encounters with those one resents, and the distress caused by the overwhelming presence of the Five Aggregates. These

sufferings may originate from mental afflictions, particularly those caused by the intense imbalance of the Five Aggregates. Additionally, suffering can arise from physical experiences, including the processes of birth, aging, illness, and death. Interpersonal relationships contribute to suffering through the pain of separation and the frustration of unmet desires. Moreover, suffering can be triggered by external factors, such as natural disasters resulting from the imbalance of earth, water, fire, and wind.

The Buddha encourages us to understand suffering not to passively accept it, but to deeply comprehend its causes and effects. This understanding allows us to leave suffering behind and attain happiness.

Some individuals have short lifespans or face frequent illnesses. This is due to their past actions that caused harm or death to animals, or subjected them to severe mistreatment. These actions lead to a level of suffering for the perpetrator in their current life that mirrors their past deeds. Likewise, there are those who struggle with poverty and

continuous failure, finding obstacles in every endeavor, including business, where success remains elusive. This pattern can often be traced back to previous greed and stinginess. A person's wealth and status are reflections of their past generosity, just as the saying goes, "You reap what you sow." Hence, if we failed to cultivate blessings in our past lives, blaming others or fate is misguided.

Moreover, excessive anger can manifest as unattractiveness and widespread dislike in the present. Anger distorts one's features, making an angry face the most unappealing. Those who frequently indulge in anger may, therefore, find themselves dealing with the repercussion of perceived ugliness. Similarly, poor interpersonal relationships can stem from past actions, particularly from sowing discord and ruining friendships through divisive speech. This leads to an inability to live in harmony or be treated sincerely by others in the current life.

Relationship issues, such as having a disloyal spouse or facing a broken marriage, are the result of sexual misconduct

in past lives. Lastly, individuals who are looked down upon or hold a lower status are experiencing the consequences of excessive pride in their previous existence.

Many other examples could be mentioned. In essence, every phenomenon in the world operates according to its causes and effects, adhering to specific patterns of development. By understanding the principle of causality, we ought to adopt it as a guide for our lives and a benchmark for our actions. We should neither disregard doing good deeds because they seem minor, nor engage in wrongdoings because they appear inconsequential. This approach reflects a responsible attitude towards oneself and one's future lives.

# II

## THE WAY TO HAPPINESS

What is happiness? How does one attain it? The answers to these questions differ for each individual. Some find happiness in vast wealth, while others in a wealth of knowledge. Some are fulfilled by significant social standing, others by mutual love. For some, career success is the key to happiness, and for others, it's found in health and longevity.

However, is this what happiness is all about?

If that were the case, then individuals with immense fortunes should be happy. However, despite their substantial

wealth and grand ventures, many are unable to evade suffering and live in a state of constant frustration. Similarly, distinguished politicians should find happiness, but entangled in the complexities of power, they fluctuate between feelings of invincibility and being under siege, seldom finding genuine contentment. Likewise, couples in perfect harmony should experience happiness, yet no joy lasts forever. With the inevitable arrival of impermanence, loved ones will pass away, leading each to part ways.

In Buddhist teachings, the forms of happiness pursued by the worldly are considered “contaminated.” This term signifies that worldly happiness inherently includes elements of affliction. For instance, a professional dedicated to their career may find themselves completely absorbed, laboring without respite. Similarly, those in positions of power often find themselves constrained, lacking freedom in their actions and speech, perpetually concerned about potential schemes from others, the loss of their status, or even the necessity to act against their conscience. This raises the question: Do positions of authority and career

pursuits genuinely lead to happiness?

So, how can we attain true happiness? Buddhism teaches us that it involves the following aspects.

## **1. Establishing Right Views**

Ignorance is the root cause of the cycle of rebirth for all sentient beings. Therefore, adopting right views forms the foundation for our liberation from suffering. To leave suffering behind and achieve happiness, we must first establish a correct understanding of the world and life.

Then, what are the right views?

### **1) Believing in the Law of Cause and Effect**

Everyone is familiar with the term “Cause and Effect,” but it’s difficult to truly understand and firmly believe in it. Usually, we interpret it with the saying, “You reap what you sow.” However, the Dharma says, “Sentient beings’

karma is inconceivable, and the retribution is also inconceivable.” As the fundamental law governing the existence of all things, the Law of Cause and Effect is far from being as mechanical and simplistic as we might think.

To understand the Law of Cause and Effect, we should, first and foremost, be convinced that there are wholesome and unwholesome actions and be clear about what they are. Secondly, we should believe that there are different karmic consequences. Wholesome actions can lead to good karma, and unwholesome actions can lead to negative karma. Whether karmic consequences come sooner or later, we will eventually reap the good or negative karma we have created. Thirdly, we should believe in past and future lives, and life is a continuous process with a beginningless past and an infinite future, in which this present life is merely a chapter, and the Law of Cause and Effect is the link that runs through all episodes. Finally, we should believe that there are saints and ordinary people. That is, there are high and low levels of life. Life is malleable; it can be uplifted through moral purification or degraded

by the deepening of afflictions. This potential for change renders our efforts meaningful. After all, if our lives were unchangeable or concluded entirely at death, what significance would there be in our actions, whether good or bad, in this world?

The Law of Cause and Effect reveals the underlying rules governing life. However, those who don't believe in this law prioritize immediate interests over anything else rather than considering future consequences. Only by correctly understanding cause and effect can we have a long-term vision and change our fate through continuous efforts.

If we hope to possess wealth in future lives, we should practice generosity as much as possible. Indulgence is a consumption of blessings and giving is the cultivation of our field of merit. Just as sowing seeds is essential for harvesting, generosity is crucial for attaining wealth and prosperity. Thus, giving holds greater blessing than receiving.

If we hope for longevity, we should cherish the lives of

all sentient beings, be compassionate without taking life, and actively engage in protecting all beings from harm and setting captured animals free. If we hope to be noble and dignified in appearance, we should cultivate a mind of tolerance, greeting everyone with kindness, regardless of enemies or loved ones. If we hope for a harmonious relationship, we should free ourselves of jealousy, interact with others in a friendly manner, offer to help them out of difficulties, and rejoice over their glory. If we hope to be of noble birth, we should be respectful to our parents, teachers, and virtuous people. At the same time, we should never look down upon those of low status, but treat them equally without discrimination.

## 2) Believing in Impermanence

It is the attachment to permanence that inflicts great suffering in our lives. Therefore, in order to be relieved from afflictions and suffering, we must gain insight into the essence of impermanence. Buddhist sutras tell us, “All compounded things are impermanent and subject to birth

and decay.” In other words, all conditioned things cannot escape the law of birth and death.

Our thoughts are impermanent. Our current states of happiness, anger, sorrow, and joy, including any mindset, are influenced not only by internal causes but also by external conditions. This is particularly true for ordinary people, whose minds often change with their circumstances. When external situations shift, so does the mindset. It’s like the ocean, sometimes calm and tranquil, other times stormy and turbulent; or like the sky, sometimes clear and cloudless, and at other times overcast with clouds.

Our body is also impermanent. From the time we had this physical body, we constantly underwent the test of impermanence. Because of impermanence, the little genetic material inherited from our parents grew into our large present body; because of impermanence, vigorous young people are gradually aging day by day; because of impermanence, our strong body is threatened by illness, always at risk of disease and even death. That’s why the Buddha

admonishes his disciples, as is recorded in the *Sutra in Forty-Two Sections*, that “Human life hangs by a breath.”

Our country and society are also impermanent. The opening chapter of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* says, “The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide. Thus, it has ever been.” This reveals the truth that impermanence also rules countries and societies. Browsing through any books on China’s ancient history, you will find that Chinese history has evolved by the Law of Impermanence. At the end of the Zhou Dynasty, seven states began to contend with each other for hegemony. The state of Qin eventually swallowed them up. After the collapse of the Qin Dynasty, a civil war broke out between two armies called Chu and Han, leading to the Han seizing power over the country. At the end of the Han Dynasty, the Three Kingdoms emerged, followed by unification under the Jin Dynasty; after the fall of the Jin Dynasty, the Southern and Northern Dynasties were divided until reunification under the Sui and Tang dynasties. Inevitably, all dynasties, spanning several decades or centuries,

had to go through the same periods of birth, growth, and demise. Impermanence ensures that no dynasty can exist forever. Impermanence leads societies from prosperity to decline, completing the cycle of flourishing and waning. The first emperor Qin Shi Huang unified China, but his dream of a lasting legacy barely extended beyond two generations. But from another perspective, impermanence also promotes the progress and development of society. It is precisely because of impermanence that humanity has been able to evolve from primitive society to slave-owning society, feudal society, capitalist society, and socialist society.

The wealth we diligently seek is also impermanent. Many strive to accumulate riches by any means necessary, even resorting to dishonest methods. They wish to enjoy this wealth themselves and pass it on to their descendants, hoping it will last for generations. Yet, they overlook that wealth is also subject to the Law of Impermanence. According to Buddhist teachings, wealth is subject to five major vulnerabilities: it can be taken by floods, destroyed

by fire, stolen by thieves, and confiscated by authorities. Finally, if these do not deplete it, then often, a wealthy family will have unworthy descendants who squander the hard-earned fortune, quickly dissipating their ancestors' efforts. As the saying goes, "Wealth does not last more than three generations." History shows that it is indeed rare for a family to maintain its wealth forever.

The world we live in is also impermanent. For thousands of years, humankind has been striving to develop science and technology to build the world, evolving from ignorance and backwardness to today's high level of civilization. Impermanence drives progress and development in the world but also leads civilization towards destruction. This is because the Earth, upon which we depend for survival, undergoes the processes of formation, existence, destruction, and emptiness. When it trends towards destruction, can human civilization still exist? As a Chinese saying goes: "If the skin does not exist, how can the hair cling to it?"

### 3) Believing in the Dependently Originated and Empty Nature

Dependent Origination, a central tenet that permeates Buddhist teachings, stands at the heart of the Buddha Dharma. Unlike the deterministic causality posited by fatalists, the Buddhist perspective on causation is grounded in the Law of Dependent Origination. According to this principle, every outcome is the product of a web of causes and conditions interacting with one another. This principle also applies to the nature of impermanence: since every phenomenon arises from a temporary convergence of causes and conditions, its existence is inherently transient and uncertain. Dependent Origination also dictates the development of all phenomena in the universe. As stated in the *Treatise on the Middle Way*, a foundational text of the Three-Treatise School, “There are no things that do not arise from interdependence.” Thus, nothing in the universe comes into being through divine creation or sheer coincidence; every existence is predicated upon specific causes and conditions.

The concept of Dependent Origination mainly involves four types of conditions: the causal condition, the predominant condition, the object condition, and the immediate antecedent condition. Thus, “all dharma arises from four conditions.”

The causal condition is the first and most direct factor in a phenomenon. For instance, if we sow a seed in the ground, the seed is the proximate causal condition of the plant’s growth.

The second is the predominant condition, or external factor which promotes the development of an object. For example, the growth of a seed requires conditions such as soil, water, labor and sunlight.

The third factor is the object condition. This refers to the external object that our consciousness acts upon or the necessary condition for a consciousness to function. For example, the function of eye consciousness requires a visible object, and that of ear consciousness requires an

audible object. The visible and the audible objects are the object condition. The object condition is an important factor for consciousness to arise.

The fourth one is the immediate condition. Thoughts flow like water, one thought following another in succession. In mental activity, two different thoughts can't occur simultaneously; a subsequent thought can only arise after the previous one has ceased. Thus, the previous thought is the immediate condition for the arising of the following thought.

Nothing in the universe will come into being without causes and conditions. For example, a table is made of nails, wood, paint, and a carpenter's work. Our body is also a combination of the Five Aggregates. Form, the first aggregate, refers to matter, that is, human organs of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The other four aggregates, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, are various mental activities with consciousness being the central part of mental activity. Every occurrence

of mental activity requires a combination of numerous causes and conditions. For instance, eye consciousness occurs under nine conditions: light, space, objects, observation, the seed, the sense organ, consciousness, the Manas consciousness, and the Alaya consciousness. Only when complete with the nine conditions can eye consciousness arise.

It can be seen from above that everything, from consciousness to the universe, comes from the unification of numerous causes and conditions. When the Buddha told us to observe the world according to the Law of Dependent Origination, he wanted us to penetrate through the surface of all phenomena and reach its empty nature. Here is a Gatha from the *Treatise on the Middle Way*:

Phenomena arise from causes and conditions,  
I say they are “emptiness.”  
They are also conventionally named,  
And this represents the Middle Way.

Why are all phenomena arising from causes and conditions empty? Because they have no self-nature. Self-nature refers to an entity that is not dependent on causes and conditions, unchanging and fixed. Let's go back to the example mentioned previously. The table depends on conditions like carpentry, wood, and nails, without which there is no table. Likewise, the wood of the table is made up of elements like earth, water, fire, and wind, without which there is no wood. Human bodies are the provisional coalescence of the Five Aggregates, without these aggregates, what then are humans?

Thus, it shows that all things originating from causes and conditions do not have a fixed and unchanging essence. In fact, the immediate present moment of dependent arising is inherently empty. But we should also understand that emptiness does not negate phenomena. We must be aware of the empty nature of all phenomena as well as the false appearance of all phenomena. This is the correct understanding in accordance with the Middle Way.

In Prajna sutras, we are consistently asked to observe everything in accordance with the Middle Way. The *Heart Sutra* tells us, “When Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva was practicing the profound Prajna Paramita, he illuminated the Five Skandhas and saw that they are all empty, and he crossed beyond all suffering and difficulty. Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form. The form itself is emptiness; emptiness itself is form.”

The Sutra mainly tells us that the Dependent Origination and the emptiness of self-nature are non-dual. This is the Buddhas and bodhisattvas' deep insight into the essence of the world and life based on wisdom. “Form itself is emptiness, and emptiness itself is form” means that the phenomena of the Dependent Origination and the emptiness of self-nature are one. Many people do not have an adequate understanding of what “emptiness” really means in Buddha Dharma. Some think that emptiness exists outside of form, or that form must be annihilated for emptiness to be present, leading to various misunderstandings

about emptiness. However, the emptiness in the Dharma is actually based on the dependently originated existence. One cannot seek emptiness apart from Dependent Origination. “He crossed beyond all suffering and difficulty” signifies that only by recognizing the Law of Dependent Origination can we truly eliminate all afflictions.

## **2. Not Dwelling in Forms**

Sentient beings give rise to afflictions because they dwell in false appearance, and thereby generate karma, leading to various forms of suffering. To achieve liberation from this, we must give up all attachments to false appearances. How can we achieve this?

First, we must see through everything with wisdom, accept the Law of Cause and Effect and the Law of Impermanence, and realize that emptiness is unattainable. Only by penetrating the truth of all things can we avoid being confused by their false appearances. Only in the same way can we avoid greed, hatred, and ignorance, and the

suffering that attachments bring.

In the *Diamond Sutra*, as we all know, Subhuti asked the Buddha, “If a good man, or good woman, resolves their mind on Anuttarasamyaksambodhi (supreme enlightenment), how should they dwell, and how should they subdue their minds?” The whole sutra focuses on the answers to the two questions: “How should they dwell?” refers to how practitioners’ minds should remain; “How should they subdue their minds?” pertains to what methods should be used to subdue our minds.

The reply from the Buddha is, “Cultivate a mind that clings to nothing.” “Clinging to nothing” means not abiding in any forms.

When practicing giving, a bodhisattva should not attach to any forms. Just as the *Diamond Sutra* says, “One should practice giving without abiding in anything, that is, giving without attachment to form, sound, taste, touch, or phenomena.” Otherwise, what happens? “If a

bodhisattva's mind abides in phenomena while giving, it's like a person walking in darkness, seeing nothing. If a bodhisattva's mind does not abide in phenomena while giving, it's a person with eyes, in bright daylight, seeing various colors." Giving without attachment to any forms means observing the emptiness of the giver, receiver, and gift. That is, a bodhisattva should not be attached to the self who is giving, the one who is receiving, and the things given. If one attaches to any form when giving, the giving is limited, and so is the merit; if he does not dwell in forms when giving, the giving is unlimited, and the merit is as immeasurable as the void.

A bodhisattva must also not attach to appearances when liberating sentient beings. "Of all the classes of sentient beings, whether born from an egg, from a womb, from moisture, or from metamorphosis; whether with form or without form; whether with consciousness or without consciousness, or neither possess nor lack consciousness, I lead them all into nirvana without remainder, liberating them. After liberating immeasurable, innumerable, and

infinite sentient beings, a bodhisattva sees that in reality, no sentient beings are liberated. Why is this so? If a bodhisattva holds to the forms of self, others, sentient beings, and everything, then they are not a bodhisattva.” Bodhisattvas liberate all sentient beings but must not abide in the forms of liberating beings, a self who liberates, or the sentient beings being liberated. If a bodhisattva holds to the forms of self or sentient beings while liberating others, they are not qualified as a bodhisattva.

While practicing the Dharma, one must also not attach to any forms. “Why is that? Because if sentient beings cling to forms, they are attached to the notion of self, others, sentient beings, and longevity; if they cling to the forms of Dharma, they are attached to the notion of self, others, sentient beings, and longevity; if they cling to the forms of non-Dharma, they are attached to the notion of self, others, sentient beings, and longevity. Therefore, one should not cling to Dharma, nor should one cling to non-Dharma. For this reason, Tathagata always says: ‘All you Bhikkhus should know that the Dharma

which I speak is like a raft. Even the Dharma should be relinquished, to say nothing of non-Dharma.’” Usually, people are attached to worldly things before learning the Dharma, but become attached to the Dharma after learning it. In reality, any attachment will become an obstacle to practice, just as gold and sand grains will do the same harm to the eyes. Therefore, when cultivating the Dharma, we should not cling to either worldly forms or the teachings themselves.

Similarly, while practicing and realizing the Dharma, one must also not attach to any forms. A Srotaapanna (stream-enterer) does not cling to the form of having attained the fruit of Srotaapanna; a Sakrdagamin (once-returner) does not cling to the form of having attained the fruit of Sakrdagamin; an Anagamin (non-returner) does not cling to the form of having attained the fruit of Anagamin; and an arhat does not cling to the form of having attained the fruit of arhat. If an arhat thinks “I have attained the fruit of arhat,” they are clinging to the forms of the self, others, sentient beings and everything.

The *Diamond Sutra* once again tells us, “Subhuti! As to Anuttarasamyaksambodhi, there is not even the slightest Dharma that I could attain.” The four stages of sainthood (stream-enterer, once-returner, non-returner, and arhat) are the goals of cultivation for sravakas (voice-hearers), while Anuttarasamyaksambodhi is supreme Buddhahood. Practitioners of the three vehicles, in their process of cultivation and realization, use the wisdom of prajna to realize the true nature of all dharmas, where subject and object are both extinguished, with neither wisdom nor attainment to be found. If one clings to forms and discriminates falsely, they are already far from the truth.

In every way, the *Diamond Sutra* reminds us not to attach to any forms. “All forms are delusional.” “Detaching from all forms is what makes a Buddha.” “True nature of forms is no form.” “For all dharmas, one should not attach to their forms. One should thus know, thus view, thus believe and understand the Dharma.” “If one sees me in form, if one seeks me in sound, this person practices a wrongful path and cannot see the Tathagata.” To

realize the true nature, one must observe everything with prajna wisdom: “The body or appearance of the Tathagata is, in fact, not a body or appearance,” “Adorning the Buddha-land is not adorning, hence it is called adorning,” “The Tathagata speaks of the thirty-two marks as no marks; they are called the thirty-two marks,” “What is called ‘sentient beings’ is not sentient beings; they are called sentient beings.” By observing so, one can give rise to a mind that does not abide in anything.

When Chan Buddhism was transmitted to the Fifth Patriarch, the *Diamond Sutra* began to be used as a guide for cultivation and realization. Afterwards, the Sixth Patriarch had a great enlightenment upon hearing the phrase, “Give rise to a mind that does not abide in anything.” His verse of enlightenment, “Originally, Bodhi has no tree, the bright mirror has no stand. Originally there is not a single thing. Where can dust alight?” perfectly reflects the principle of the formlessness of prajna. The *Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch also teaches the practice of non-abidance to disciples of later generations. Regarding

the distinction between afflictions and Bodhi, the Patriarch said, “Past thoughts attached to states of being are afflictions, and future thoughts separate from states of being are Bodhi.” The difference between afflictions and Bodhi lies merely in the thought of attachment or detachment. Abiding in forms is affliction, while not abiding in forms is Bodhi.

As for seeing the Buddha-nature and realizing Buddhahood, the Sixth Patriarch said, “Worldly people have 84,000 kinds of afflictions. If there are no afflictions, wisdom is always present, not departing from one’s true nature. Those who understand this Dharma are in a state of no-thought, no-remembrance, non-attachment, and non-production of falsehood. Use your true-suchness nature, observe with wisdom, neither grasping nor rejecting all dharmas, this is to see one’s nature and realize the Buddhahood.” It is also said, “If one is enlightened to the Sudden Teaching, not clinging to external practices, but constantly giving rise to the right views within one’s mind, afflictions and troubles can never stain, this is seeing your

nature.” Everyone inherently possesses Buddha-nature, but it cannot reveal itself because of our inner afflictions and troubles. If we become not attached to forms, Buddha-nature can manifest itself.

Regarding the practice and realization of the Dharma, the Sixth Patriarch also summarized the three main principles of Chan Buddhism with the concept of cultivating a mind that abides in nothing: “From the beginning, this Dharma gate of mine has been based on no-thought as its essence, no-form as its nature, and non-abiding as its foundation.” No-thought means the mind is not tainted by any phenomena, and that is no-thought; no-form means the true nature has no form, and practitioners must detach from all forms, not grasping any forms, to realize the pure Dharma nature; non-abiding means not dwelling on past thoughts in moment-to-moment awareness, not abiding in any dharmas, the mind does not abide in any phenomena, and that is non-abiding.

Regarding actual practices, Chan Buddhism differs from

other schools in its methods. When practicing sitting meditation, practitioners have traditionally emphasized the sitting posture. However, the Sixth Patriarch rebuked them for doing so. The *Platform Sutra* says, “The Way should flow freely; why should it be obstructed? If the mind does not abide in dharmas, the Way flows freely; if the mind abides in dharmas, it is called self-binding. If someone claims that constant sitting without moving is the Way, they are just like Shariputra, who was rebuked by Vimalakirti while sitting tranquilly in the forest. Good Knowing Advisers, some teach sitting meditation, observing the mind and contemplating stillness, unmoving and unarising, claiming this as the practice. The deluded do not understand, and take this as the ultimate, such people are many. Such teachings are greatly mistaken.” The Way is realized by cultivating a mind that does not abide anywhere; clinging to the form of sitting will surely not lead to the realization of the Great Way. It is said, “Born sitting without lying, dying lying without sitting, just a set of stinking bones, what use is it to establish merits?”

Master Huairang, a disciple of the Sixth Patriarch in Nanyue, did not favor the idea of simply sitting for meditation, either. When Mazu Daoyi was sitting in meditation in Nanyue, Master Huairang, believing he was a vessel of the Dharma, approached him to inquire:

“What do you seek by sitting in meditation, master?”

“To become a Buddha,” replied Daoyi.

Then, Master Huairang picked up a brick and began grinding it on a stone.

Daoyi was confused, “What are you doing?”

“I am grinding the brick to make a mirror.” replied Huairang.

Daoyi became puzzled, “How can you make a mirror by grinding a brick?”

Huairang said, “If a mirror cannot be made by grinding a brick, how can one become a Buddha by sitting in meditation?”

Daoyi felt even more puzzled, asking, “What should I do then?”

Huairang explained, “It is like a bull pulling a cart. If the cart does not move, should you whip the cart or the bull? Similarly, you hope to become a Buddha by sitting in meditation, but Chan is not confined to sitting or lying down, and Buddha has no fixed forms. In the principle of non-abidance, one should not cling nor reject. If you cling to the form of sitting, not only will you not understand Chan, but you will also never achieve Buddhahood.”

When practicing Chan meditation, one must not let the mind abide in anything. Before the rise of Chan Buddhism, the prevalent Theravada meditation practices involved fixing the mind on objects. However, Chan Buddhism emphasizes that in sitting meditation, the mind

should not abide in anything. The *Platform Sutra* states, “In our practice of sitting meditation, we fundamentally do not cling to the mind, nor do we cling to purity, nor is it about being motionless.” If you cling to the mind, but the mind itself is illusory; knowing the illusory nature of the mind, what is there to cling to? If you cling to purity, the Buddha-nature itself is inherently pure, only appearing impure due to delusional thoughts obscuring the true nature. Clinging to the form of purity is in itself a delusion.

When the Sixth Patriarch decided to guide Huairang, Huairang bowed to pay homage. Then the Patriarch asked, “Where do you come from?”

He replied, “From Mount Song.”

The Patriarch asked, “What thing is it, and how does it come?”

He replied, “To say that it is like a thing is to miss the point.”

The Patriarch said, “Then, can it still be cultivated and realized?”

He replied, “The practice is to attain emptiness. But it is unattainable when tainted.”

The Patriarch said, “It is precisely this untainted thing that is guarded by all Buddhas. You are like this, and I am like this, too.”

The koan shows that, when cultivating the Way, one should maintain an untainted mind, not abiding in any forms.

Chan masters also examine whether each other is attached to forms. One day, when Zhaozhou was traveling in Tiantai, he came across Hanshan. Seeing a cow's hoof prints, Hanshan said, “Did you see the cow?”

Zhaozhou replied, “No, I didn't.”

Pointing at the hoof prints, Hanshan said, “These are the footprints left by five hundred arhats wandering the mountain.”

Zhaozhou asked, “If they are arhats, why would they leave cow hoof prints?”

Hanshan said, “Vast sky, vast sky.”

Zhaozhou burst into laughter.

Hanshan asked, “What are you laughing at?”

Zhaozhou replied, “Vast sky, vast sky.”

In the eyes of ordinary people, the dialogue seems irrational, but it reveals the difference between Chan masters and ordinary people. Ordinary people are attached to forms, thus insisting that a cow’s hoof prints is just a cow’s hoof prints, and an arhat’s footprints is an arhat’s footprints, while Chan masters see everything as it truly

is in its own nature. In their Dharma-nature, the cow's hoof prints are the arhat's footprints, and the arhat's footprints are the cow's hoof prints.

In life, Chan practitioners also neither cling to nor reject anything, not abiding in forms. Chan master Huixiu wore the same pair of shoes for thirty years; Chan master Fachang in Damei did not eat vegetables cultivated from plowing; Chan master Xuanlang in Zuoxi always lived an ascetic life, sheltering himself under rocks and cladding in the same robe for over forty years; Chan master Tong-hui entered Mount Taibai without carrying provisions, lived under a tree, ate wild fruits when hungry, drank from springs when thirsty, and never changed his patched robe for life; Chan master Zhize, with an unrestrained personality, had nothing in his house except a bedsheets, a bowl, and a wooden spoon, and never closed his door.

Chan practitioners embody their practice in a simple life, finding enlightenment in everyday tasks such as eating, dressing, tea picking, and wood chopping. They minimize

material desires yet find infinite joy in their spiritual practice. When you ask Chan masters how to practice the Way, they will tell you: “Eat, sleep, and drink tea.” But the way Chan practitioners eat and dress is different from us. Ordinary people don’t fully engage in eating, being picky and distracted; they don’t sleep well, toss and turn when sleeping, filled with endless thoughts and restlessness. In contrast, Chan practitioners are not attached to the forms of eating or dressing, adapt effortlessly to circumstances, and live in ease and comfort.

Not abiding in forms is the key to liberating oneself from the sufferings of life. The *Heart Sutra* teaches us to use the wisdom of prajna to observe everything, realizing that all phenomena are unattainable. This leads to a mind free from attachments; without attachments, there is no fear. Thus, one can move away from deluded dreams and ultimately reach nirvana. Nirvana is the complete cessation of afflictions. Only by realizing nirvana can one truly liberate oneself from the cycle of life and death.

### 3. Extinguishing Delusions

Many people attribute their suffering to external conditions such as poor health, poverty, or social injustice. However, these are merely external causes of suffering; its true root lies within the mind. Our inner world is filled with various delusions, including the aforementioned wrong views, superstitions, attachments, greed, hatred, and erroneous views. It is these delusions that deprive us of inner peace, trapping us in an endless cycle of pursuit, seeking various stimulations, and sometimes even engaging in irrational actions. To be free from suffering, one must extinguish these delusions.

How can we extinguish delusions? Many beginners in meditation often say that they have too many wandering thoughts during meditation and cannot calm down, asking if there is any way to overcome this. Of course, there is a way, but first, we must examine why these delusions arise. Thoughts are continuous; if we wish to meditate with undivided attention, we must always be mindful in

our daily lives. The most frequent and intense delusions that arise during meditation are undoubtedly those to which we are most attached in our daily lives. To strengthen our meditation practice, we must live without clinging to anything, letting all experiences pass through like wild geese flying across the sky or wind blowing through bamboo leaves, leaving no trace. When the mind is purified, naturally, there will be no chain of wandering thoughts during meditation.

Chanting the Buddha's name can also extinguish delusions. People often mistakenly think that chanting the Buddha's name is a practice only for the elderly or that it is a way of praying for Buddha's blessings. Here's a story about a grandmother who chants the Buddha's name all day, and her grandson, annoyed by the constant chanting, starts calling out "Grandma, Grandma" incessantly. Irritated, the grandmother asks why he keeps calling her, and the grandson replies, "You get annoyed when I call you a few times, but you chant the Buddha's name non-stop, doesn't that annoy the Buddha?" This story

reflects the common misunderstanding about chanting the Buddha's name. In fact, chanting the Buddha's name aims to regulate one's mind and extinguish delusions, as it is said, "When clear water droplets are dropped into murky water, the murky water must turn clear; when the Buddha's name enters the mind of delusion, the deluded mind must turn towards Buddha-nature." As stated in the *Maha-Stamaprapta Bodhisattva's Preachment on Being Mindful of the Buddha*, "Gathering all six senses, with successive pure mindfulness, attains samadhi. This is foremost." Thus, chanting the Buddha's name is indeed an effective remedy to combat delusions.

Cessation and contemplation can extinguish delusions. Cessation, from the Sanskrit "Samatha," means calming the scattered mind and concentrating it on one point; Contemplation, from the Sanskrit "Vipassana," involves observation of external phenomena. There are distinctions between Theravada and Mahayana Samatha-Vipassana. Theravada practice involves focusing on a single sense, such as mindfulness of breathing, so one

can focus on the breath and perceive its coming and going, length, temperature, and depth. By concentrating the mind on the breath, one can realize that the mind and breath are interconnected with each other. So, the breath moves from coarse to subtle, and finally to the absence of breath, thereby extinguishing delusions. Mahayana Samatha-Vipassana, on the other hand, is based on generating the bodhicitta (the mind of enlightenment) and accomplishes the meditation on emptiness from the Mahayana viewpoint.

Observing the mind can extinguish delusions. The mind flows continuously like water, and ordinary people, lacking observation, always run around following their thoughts. Observing the mind is to realize the illusory nature of thoughts. What is the mind, after all? It is nothing more than a series of experiences and concepts. Thus, the *Diamond Sutra* tells us: “The past mind is unattainable, the present mind is unattainable, and the future mind is unattainable.” This perspective reveals the nature of the mind through the perspective of time. The unattainable

past mind signifies that the past has already passed and there is no need to dwell in reminiscence; the unattainable future mind signifies that the future has not yet arrived and there is no need to chase after it. In the moment between the passing of the previous thought and the arising of the next thought, maintain this clear and bright state of mind, as stated: “When the arising and ceasing cease, tranquility is revealed.” The *Shurangama Sutra* says, “When the restless mind ceases, enlightenment ensues.” Master Linji stated: “How to cease the stream of thoughts constantly running without ceasing? Only the true mind, as boundless as the void, can cut off the stream. Detached from forms and names, the true mind remains unrecognized by the unenlightened. For the enlightened, the wholesome thoughts must be constantly cultivated, just like ‘a precious sword requires sharpening after each use.’” All of these are to teach us to recognize our true mind through observing the mind.

Investigating a topic can also extinguish delusions. This is one of the important cultivation methods in Chan

Buddhism. Common topics involve the following questions: Who is chanting the Buddha's name? What was my original face before birth? In the state of no dreams and no thoughts, who is the master? What is it before no thought arises? When investigating a topic, we cannot annotate or deduce it; we cannot wait for enlightenment; we cannot abandon it to seek peace; we cannot reason with ourselves; instead, we should get to the bottom of it, leaving aside what is happening outside. Chan master Huanglong offered a metaphor to explain the investigation, "Like a nimble cat catching a mouse, its eyes unblinking, all senses directed forward, from head to tail in perfect alignment."

The investigation highlights "doubts." As the ancient masters put it, "Great doubt leads to great enlightenment; little doubt to little enlightenment; no doubt, no enlightenment." One must become fully immersed in the investigation of these questions, like a "living dead person." Without reaching this state, one is not yet on the path. When one delves deeply into the topic of inquiry, concentrating on a single thought with undivided attention,

delusions naturally cease to arise.

Delusions are the root of suffering. To fundamentally eliminate suffering, we must start by extinguishing delusions. When delusions are effectively controlled, we will not be swayed by them, thus maintaining a peaceful mind. When we are not distracted by delusions, we can enhance concentration and efficiency in learning and work. When we are not disturbed by delusions, we can focus our mind in one place and improve our ability of concentration; and our Buddha-nature will not be obscured by delusions, allowing our true nature to emerge and wisdom to develop. Therefore, the importance of extinguishing delusions cannot be overlooked.

#### **4. Knowing Oneself**

At a macroscopic level, technological advances enable humans to know about other planets and even travel through space. At a microscopic level, we can directly explore the structure of matter and uncover the secrets of

genetics. Unfortunately, none of those achievements can help humans to understand ourselves further.

If we cannot have a clear understanding of ourselves, we cannot control our thoughts, nor can we observe and eliminate afflictions at the moment they arise. If we want to free ourselves from suffering, we should first know ourselves. How can we know ourselves? The ancient masters told us that realizing our Buddha-nature is knowing ourselves. In our lives, bodies are not truly ours, but merely a temporary combination of the four elements; our thoughts are not truly ours, but just a continuation of concepts. Beyond these physical and mental aspects, what is the “self”?

When the Buddha attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree, he exclaimed in wonder: “How marvelous! All sentient beings have the wisdom and virtues of the Tathagata but cannot attain them because of their attachments and delusions.” Aside from delusions and attachments, our minds also have the pure wisdom and virtues of the

Tathagata. So, to take direct responsibility for ourselves means recognizing our inherent Buddha-nature.

When Chan master Huihai of Dazhu visited Mazu Daoyi, Daoyi asked, “Why are you coming here?”

Huihai replied, “To seek the Dharma.”

Daoyi said, “What Dharma? I have nothing here. Why abandon your own treasure and seek elsewhere?”

Huihai was puzzled, “What is my treasure?”

Daoyi replied, “The one who is asking me is your treasure. It is endued with everything, rather than devoid of anything. It can be used freely as you want. Why do you seek it elsewhere?”

Illuminated by Daoyi, Huihai realized his true self at that very moment.

Later, someone asked Huihai, “What is a Buddha?”

He replied, “If you’re not a Buddha, then who is?”

Here is another example. One day, Chan Master Lingxun called on Chan Master Guizong. He asked, “What is a Buddha?”

Guizong said, “I’m afraid you won’t believe it if I tell you about it.”

Lingxun asked, “How dare I doubt a great master’s teaching?”

Guizong said, “You are a Buddha.”

What is a Buddha? It is the true essence of our self, our Buddha-nature.

Although our Buddha-nature is not the deluded consciousness that can see, hear, feel, and know, they are not

separate from seeing, hearing, feeling and knowing. Chan Master Yunmen said, “The consciousness of seeing and hearing are not their true nature. The true nature cannot be presented to you through any sound or any form. If you understand the true nature of emptiness, why make a difference between nature and consciousness?” In order to know ourselves, we should directly take the responsibility of the consciousness that can see and hear, but not abide in the form of seeing and hearing.

Not falling into conceptual thinking is to understand oneself. Generally, thinking is a continuation of names and concepts, a re-presentation of past impressions. Once we fall into discriminative thought, entangled in concepts of right and wrong, gain and loss, we will lose our true nature. Here is an anecdote to illustrate it.

Chan master Linji, elucidated the teachings in the Dharma hall, “In your fleshly mass resides a true person of no position, constantly coming in and out through the gates of

your face. Those who have not yet become enlightened, see it.”

A monk asked, “What is the true person of no position?”

The Master grabbed him and said, “Speak, speak!”

After the monk pondered for a moment, the Master let him go and remarked, “What kind of dry shit-stick is the true person of no position?”

Similarly, there is the case of Huiming’s encounter with the Sixth Patriarch.

After receiving the robe and bowl from the Fifth Patriarch, the Sixth Patriarch fled southward, with Huiming in pursuit. The Sixth Patriarch placed the robe and bowl on a rock, which Huiming couldn’t lift, prompting him to declare, “I came for the Dharma, not the robe.”

The Sixth Patriarch responded, “If you’ve come for

the Dharma, let go of everything and don't let a single thought arise."

He further asked, "Without thinking of good or evil, at this very moment, what is your original face?"

Huiming then recognized his true self.

The two cases teach us that only by stepping away from our usual patterns of discriminative thought can we truly come to know ourselves.

To understand oneself, one must see the true nature of the mind itself. The mind refers to the present thoughts, which are illusory, constantly arising and ceasing. However, beyond this form of arising and ceasing lies the true nature of the mind, neither arising nor ceasing. To see the true nature of the mind, we must realize the illusory nature of thoughts without being deceived by their changes, so we can see our pure mind and true existence.

When the Sixth Patriarch attained enlightenment under the Fifth Patriarch, he declared, “All dharmas do not depart from the self-nature. No matter when, the self-nature is originally pure. No matter when, the self-nature is originally unborn and undying. No matter when, the self-nature is originally complete. No matter when, the self-nature is originally immovable. No matter when, the self-nature can give rise to all dharmas.” The Fifth Patriarch, recognizing that the Sixth Patriarch had realized his true nature, further explained to him, “Without recognizing one’s own mind, studying the Buddha’s teachings is of no benefit. If one realizes the original mind, one will become a great being, a teacher of humans and heavenly beings, a Buddha.”

Since the beginningless time, sentient beings, due to not knowing themselves, have been mistaking the thieves for their children, and sinking into the six realms because of delusions. If we recognize our self-nature, we can extinguish delusions and afflictions, and will not be swayed by the external changing conditions. Thus, we can unlock

our inherent wisdom, fundamentally control our destiny, perfect our character, and achieve great freedom.