



# Buddhism for Beginners:

## Questions and Answers

Compiled by Householder Fo'en  
English translation by Householders Foqing and Folu  
Edited by Householder Jingtu







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**Live an Awakened Life,  
Be Kind to Yourself**

**Attain Full Enlightenment,  
Benefit All Living Beings**



# Preface

Religion emerged when human civilization evolved to a certain stage. Some higher religions even represented an apex of mankind's understanding of truth and the world. They are still of significance today.

Most people worldwide embrace theistic religions, believing that all things were created by a deity. Two-and-a-half millennia ago, however, Prince Gautama Siddhartha was born in ancient India. He renounced his household life for monastic cultivation and became a Buddha -- one who attained full enlightenment regarding the truths of life and the universe. He overtly denied creationism, indicating that it is a superstitious belief resulting from human ignorance and confusion.

According to the Buddha, all phenomena have neither self nor possessions of self. There are no achievements or achievers. All things are subject to dependent origination and are of empty nature. They have always been in a state of tranquil extinction. These notions are undoubtedly beyond our experience and habitual thinking.

The Law of Dependent Origination and Empty Nature constitutes Buddhism's fundamental perception of the world's phenomena. Things arise co-dependently from various karmic causes. They originate with the convergence of conditions, relationships and elemental factors. Because of such dependent

origination, the essence of all dharma is of non-independent nature. There exists no unique, permanent subject. Everything is without an ego.

As conditions change, all phenomena continuously change as well. But no matter how things transform, their essence is always empty. And by virtue of emptiness, there are endless changes. “Dependent origination” means that something exists, while “empty nature” indicates that its essence is impermanent. Dependent origination manifests empty nature and coexists with it -- and vice versa. The two are simultaneous. They are reflected in all phenomena, showing that the world is an absolute and harmonious realm of oneness.

With an understanding of dependent origination and empty nature, we humans can surely break away from the myth of creators. According to Buddhism, a creator-lord is merely a result of the pursuit by limited humans of something unlimited. In the process they imagine and assume things that are beyond their reach, hypothesizing that the unlimited, infinite existence is god. The Buddha, however, personally realized and verified the subtlety and profundity of the truth. He experienced the existence of infinity, so he needn't make any assumptions. Only he can abolish the existence of hypothetical gods.

Modern science and technology have developed greatly since the founding of the major religions. Many explanations of phenomena based on religions and mythologies have been demystified by science. People still need spiritual beliefs, but religions' spheres of influence are steadily diminishing. Impending challenges from scientific developments have compelled religions to retreat step by step. Fewer and fewer people believe in creationism. Some creeds are even redefining god.

However, no matter how what advances science and technology make, the

truth of Dependent Origination and Empty Nature is incontestable. Buddhism's main purpose is to resolve ultimately the afflictions and suffering in our lives and to attain the perfect happiness that resides in the truth: nirvana. Yet by reason of the Buddha's unhindered wisdom, his descriptions of the realm of insentient beings – the material world – have repeatedly been verified as byproducts of mankind's scientific discoveries. Certainly, the discoveries and inventions of science are far less profound, extensive and resplendent than what is depicted in Buddhist scriptures. These two perspectives also differ in terms of researchers' areas of focus and norms of linguistic expression. So we cannot simplistically equate them. But we may still compare them and obtain interesting findings.

Science has found that there are countless galaxies in the macro-cosmos. According to Buddhist sutras, a single Buddha's realm contains three thousand chiliocosms -- and there are immeasurable Buddha realms. Science is still exploring and speculating on the issue of life beyond the Earth. For his part, the Buddha has stated explicitly that there are innumerable worlds, each of which contains a variety of life forms.

Within the micro-cosmos, science has discovered molecules, atoms, electrons, protons, neutrons, quarks .... The Buddha speaks of endless subdivision to "next to nothing," culminating in emptiness.

Science claims that everything exists in the form of energy. The Buddha affirms that "all phenomena are consciousness-only."

The Buddha told us that time is an illusion of the human mind -- as are space, distance, movement, interaction, life and death. So he says: "There is neither arising nor ceasing, no coming or going." He also says, a bowl of water contains eighty thousand microbes, and a human body is the household of eighty

thousand microbes. Modern microscopes show the same clearly.

The Buddha teaches us, “All things arise from Dharma realm” – a single leaf or water droplet contains all the information of the entire universe. Every thought embraces an infinity that runs from the past through the present to the future. Each dust-mote embodies unlimited sublime realms. The three time frames can be compressed into a single thought, while a thought can be expanded into past, present and future. The ten directions can be contracted into a single hair, and the latter can be enlarged into the former. Such freedom to switch between long and short durations, and between broad and narrow spaces, is far beyond human imagination.

This volume, *Buddhism for Beginners: Questions and Answers*, unfolds the building blocks of Buddhist knowledge. It cannot possibly answer and satisfy all the questions and curiosity of its readers. Yet it will fulfill its purpose if it arouses readers’ interest in Buddhism and prompts them to pursue further its truths.

May readers all achieve Buddhahood, attain perfect wisdom and compassion, and obtain the body of truth to deliver all sentient beings. Namo Amitabha Buddha.

***Shi Jingzong***

*15<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month,*

*2561 Buddhist Era (September 5, 2017)*

Chapter

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**1**

# Understanding Buddhism



# 1. Buddhism and the Buddha

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**Q 1: Buddhism is known as one of the three major religions in the world, together with Christianity and Islam. Is that correct?**

▶▶**A:** Generally speaking, yes. Specifically, **Buddhism** is the teachings given by Shakyamuni Buddha, based on his realistic understanding of life and the universe. The sutras were spoken by the Buddha himself, which differ from scriptures of other religions recorded by disciples according to instructions from God or other deities.

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**Q 2: Is the Buddha a deity?**

▶▶**A:** The Buddha is not a deity. The Buddha is the Awakened One, who has attained full enlightenment regarding the truth about life and the universe.

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**Q 3: Who is greater, Buddha or God?**

▶▶**A:** According to the Dharma (teachings of Buddhism), all living beings have Buddha-nature equal to that of the Buddha. God is one of those living beings. So the question of who is greater does not exist.

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**Q 4: Are Shakyamuni Buddha and Tathagata Buddha (Rulaifo) in the classic Chinese novel, *Journey to the West*, the same person?**

▶▶A: “Tathagata” and “Buddha” have the same meaning. For example, Shakyamuni Buddha can be called Shakyamuni Tathagata, and Amitabha Buddha can be called Amitabha Tathagata. “Tathagata Buddha,” however, is not correct. There is no such Buddha called “Rulai.”

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**Q 5: I see. I thought Rulaifo, Shakyamuni Buddha and Amitabha Buddha were the same.**

▶▶A: Shakyamuni Buddha is the founder of Buddhism in our world. Amitabha Buddha presides over the Western Land of Bliss. In numerous sutras, Shakyamuni Buddha urges us to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha.

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**Q 6: Was Shakyamuni Buddha a real person in history?**

▶▶A: Yes. He is mentioned in history textbooks. “Shakya” means “competence and benevolence,” and “muni” means “serenity.” “Shakyamuni” refers to a sage of the Sakya clan. Shakyamuni Buddha lived around the 6th century B.C.E., concurrent with the Spring and Autumn period in China, and was a contemporary of Confucius. He was crown prince of the Kapilavastu kingdom in ancient India. His name was Gautama Siddhartha. His father was called Suddhodana; his mother, Maya. Queen Maya gave birth to Prince Siddhartha while taking a rest under a tree in Lumbini Grove. She died soon after giving birth. Prince Siddhartha was raised by his aunt Princess Prajapati.

**Q 7: Did he succeed to the throne?**

▶▶A: No, he didn't. Since Prince Siddhartha was extremely wise and handsome, King Suddhodana expected him to be a *chakravartin*, or ideal universal ruler, who would subdue all nations. But Prince Siddhartha was strongly touched by the phenomena he observed: birth, aging, sickness and death, as well as the law of the jungle prevalent among living creatures. He meditated frequently and thought about taking monastic vows. Having discovered his son's intention, King Suddhodana tried his best to stop him. He arranged for his son to marry Princess Yasodhara from a neighboring state. Yasodhara bore him a son named Rahula. But all this was in vain. Finally Siddhartha slipped out of the royal palace in the still of the night and became a wandering mendicant seeking the truth.

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**Q 8: So we have to be a monk to study Buddhism?**

▶▶A: Not necessarily. Shakyamuni Buddha later taught people a way to achieve full liberation without renunciation. It is to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, gain rebirth in the Pure Land and attain Buddhahood there.

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**Q 9: How did Prince Siddhartha become a Buddha?**

▶▶A: After leaving home, he visited three renowned scholars of the day and learned from them. Very soon, he mastered all their methods. But none of them was the real path of liberation. He then decided to seek freedom from samsara by himself. To convince the ascetics (who practiced

austerities popular at the time), Siddhartha underwent severe austerities for six years in a forest on the banks of the Neranjara River, living on a grain of rice a day. After realizing the futility of austerities in his search for enlightenment, Siddhartha stopped them and took a bath in the Neranjara River, cleaning off the accumulated dirt of six years. He accepted milk gruel offered by a shepherd girl and recovered his strength. Then he went to a pippala tree, sat down on a seat made from auspicious grass and faced East. He vowed, “I will not rise from this seat until I have attained supreme enlightenment!” Finally, one night, after defeating moral afflictions and Mara’s temptations, he achieved complete enlightenment and became a Buddha.

The place where Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood is in the southern suburbs of Bodh Gaya in India’s Bihar State. Nearby are numerous other sites associated with the Buddha.

**Q 10: Becoming a Buddha and an immortal are not the same, right?**

▶▶A: Of course not. Some people can’t distinguish among Buddhas, deities and immortals. Probably they were influenced by old ethics books with contrived terms such as “divine Buddha” or “immortal Buddha.” Immortals are a type of ordinary being within the Six Realms of Rebirth. They may enjoy the five desires and possess certain supernatural powers in meditation, but they haven’t attained complete emancipation.

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**Q 11: Why is the Buddha called *Fo* in Chinese? What’s the meaning of the term?**

▶▶A: *Fo* is an abbreviation of *Fotuo*, the transliteration of “Buddha.” Buddha means an “enlightened person,” with three implications: 1) self-enlightenment; 2) enlightening others -- not only awakening oneself but also helping others become enlightened; 3) perfect enlightenment and practice -- one’s wisdom and meritorious achievement have reached the highest and most perfect level in enlightening both self and others.

---

**Q 12: After becoming a Buddha and attaining the highest levels of merit, what else did he do?**

▶▶A: To deliver sentient beings from the suffering of samsara, Shakyamuni Buddha traveled widely; many who heeded his teachings gained liberation. First, he went to Sarnath in Benares (Varanasi) and found the five followers who practiced austerities with him. He taught them the Dharma. The five converted to his teachings and formed the very first Buddhist Sangha. In Buddhism, the Buddha’s first discourse is called “the initial turning of the Dharma wheel.”

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**Q 13: Why is it called the “turning the Dharma wheel”?**

▶▶A: One of the seven treasures of the *chakravartin* is the *chakra*, or wheel. It can break mountain rock and cannot be impeded. Buddhism uses the *chakra* of the *chakravartin* as a metaphor to indicate that the Dharma can cut through the hardened negative karma and afflictions of sentient beings. Moreover, the Buddha did not stop with a single person or place

while giving his teachings. He was on the move, instructing many -- like a turning wheel. So Buddhism calls the Buddha's discourses on the Dharma the "turning of the Dharma wheel."

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**Q 14: Why is the "initial turning of the Dharma wheel " considered so important?**

▶▶A: The Buddha's initial turning of the Dharma wheel at Sarnath was a major event in Buddhism. From that moment, Buddhism was established and the **Three Gems** were complete.

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**Q 15: What are the Three Gems?**

▶▶A: They refer to the Gem of the Buddha, the Awakened One; the Gem of the Dharma, the teachings given by the Buddha; and the Gem of the Sangha, the order of the Buddha's monastic disciples. The three are called gems because they can lead people to cease evil and accomplish good, to free themselves from suffering and obtain happiness. They are rare and precious.

When the Buddha first turned the Dharma wheel, his five followers took refuge in him and formed a Sangha. From that moment, the Three Gems were all in place.

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**Q 16: What is to "take refuge"?**

▶▶A: **Taking refuge** means to turn towards and rely on completely, spirit and body. Those who have taken refuge in the Three Gems are Buddhists.

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**Q 17: Did many take refuge in the Three Gems during the Buddha's lifetime?**

▶▶A: Yes. After the Buddha's initial turning of the Dharma wheel, many people took refuge as he gave his teachings from Sarnath to Magadha State. Among them there were three brothers with the family name of Kasyapa who used to be Zoroastrians. But they abandoned their original faith and led more than a thousand of their followers to take refuge in Buddhism. After the Buddha arrived in Rajgir, the capital of Magadha, many more took refuge, including renowned disciples such as Sariputra, Moggallana and Kasyapa. Afterwards, when the Buddha returned to his home town, his younger half-brother Nanda, his cousins Ananda and Devadatta, and his son Rahula all followed him and became monastic disciples. The Buddha's aunt Prajapati also took refuge to become the first female monastic disciple. Even more people took refuge in the Three Gems without renouncing lay life.

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**Q 18: Whether male or female, one can choose to learn the Dharma with or without taking monastic vows?**

▶▶A: Yes. Buddhism's male monastics are called *bhikkus*, and female monastics are called *bhikkunis*. Male and female lay followers are called *upasaka* and *upasika* respectively. Together they are known as the **four groups of disciples**.

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**Q 19: Where did Shakyamuni Buddha travel and teach during his lifetime?**

▶▶A: Mainly in central India. The places the Buddha resided for most of his

lifetime were Rajgir and Sravasti, in the states of Magadha and Kosala respectively. Outside Rajgir was a bamboo forest, donated to the Buddha and his disciples by King Bimbisara. It was later known as Bamboo Grove Monastery. In Sravasti, Prince Jeta of Kosala and a rich merchant, Sudatta, together gave the Buddha a garden, subsequently named Jeta Grove Monastery. Gijjhakuta Hill (Vulture Peak), south of Rajgir, was another place where the Buddha gave many discourses. Shakyamuni Buddha taught the Dharma for 49 years, until he passed into nirvana at the age of 80.

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**Q 20: What is “nirvana”?**

►►A: Nirvana is a state that is very hard to describe with words. It carries the meanings of extinction, cessation, non-birth, inaction, peace and joy, liberation and death. It also connotes elimination of the karma of birth and death, transcendence of the rebirth cycle, perfection of wisdom and virtue, and achievement of an eternal, quiescent, steady and joyous state of liberation. Such a state can “only be known by sacred beings.” It cannot be measured with concepts such as “present,” “absent,” “coming” and “going.” It is an unfathomable state of liberation.

To describe it thus with words is already very inaccurate. The state of liberation is an actual experience obtained through spiritual practice in accordance with the Dharma. It cannot be deduced by the logic of worldly thinking.

## 2. The Spread of Buddhism

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**Q 21: Please describe briefly the history of the development of Buddhism in India.**

▶▶A: The Buddha taught the Dharma differently to sentient beings, according to their disparate natures and inclinations. Their capabilities, preferences and practice methods were also different. And their understandings of the same teaching varied as well. Therefore, during the long process of Buddhism's dissemination, various groups that propagated the Dharma evolved their own lineages.

About a hundred years after the Buddha's nirvana, the Buddhist community became divided into two major sects: Theravada and Mahasamghika. The Theravada focused on the practice of meditation, with comprehensive and stringent disciplines. The Mahasamghika stressed extensive learning and hearing the Dharma. It sought to convert more sentient beings with simpler and more accommodating disciplines.

In the next 300 years, Buddhism spread ever more widely. In order to integrate with local conditions and customs, the Theravada and Mahasamghika progressively divided into about 20 subgroups.

In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E., Ashoka, the third king of Magadha's Maurya Dynasty (322-185 B.C.E.), became the first monarch to unify India. Witnessing the devastation caused by his war to conquer the southern kingdom of Kalinga, Ashoka felt deep remorse. He held a number of long conversations with an eminent Buddhist monk. Afterwards, he decided to convert to Buddhism. He sent missionaries, including his son and daughter, to propagate Buddhism in various places. Due to Ashoka's efforts, Buddhism spread from the Ganges River region not only all over India, but also to many foreign countries. At that time, Buddhism reached as far as Myanmar to the east, Sri Lanka to the south, and Syria, Egypt and Greece to the west.

It is said that during the time of the First Emperor of Qin, 18 monks from India, headed by Shilifang, visited China to propagate Buddhism. There is no record of this in official history, but First Emperor and Ashoka were contemporaries. It is possible that Ashoka sent missionaries to China.

In the 300 years after Ashoka's dedicated dissemination, Buddhism spread widely in Central Asia and to China in the east. The areas it covered continued to expand. But in India itself, Buddhism met with great misfortune. Less than 50 years after Ashoka passed away, his Peacock Dynasty was replaced by the Shunga Dynasty (187-78 B.C.E.). King Pusyamitra, who usurped the throne with the help of a Brahmin state preceptor, embraced Brahmanism and rigorously suppressed Buddhism. He destroyed stupas and viharas, slaughtered Buddhist monks and plunged Indian Buddhism into a dark age. Fortunately, the jurisdiction of the Shunga Dynasty was restricted to central India.

In 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E., Buddhism was thriving again, thanks to the

efforts of King Kaniska in northern India. Represented by Asvaghosa, Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) groups began to form in various locations.

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**Q 22: Were all the previous schools Theravadan (Smaller Vehicle)?**

▶▶A: Yes. The purpose of a “vehicle” is to carry [people or goods]. Generally speaking, the Greater Vehicle stresses benefiting all beings and attaining liberation together with them. The **Smaller Vehicle** emphasizes salvation for oneself.

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**Q 23: What happened afterwards?**

▶▶A: In the 3rd century C.E., **Nagarjuna**, a Brahmanic scholar in southern India, converted to Buddhism and became a monk. He learned the Mahayana sutras from an old bhikku in the Himalaya mountains and acquired great wisdom. He wrote many theoretical treatises to explicate the Mahayana scriptures. His Madhyamaka (“Middle Way”) thought spread throughout India. Mahayana Buddhism started to flourish. With his voluminous writings, Nagarjuna was known as the “common patriarch of the Eight Schools” of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism.

In the 4th-5th centuries C.E., the Gupta Dynasty (320-550) reunified India. Two brothers, **Asanga** and **Vasubandhu**, founded a new Mahayana school — Yogacara. Vasubandhu was known as “treatise master of a thousand volumes” because of his prodigious output.

In the 6th century, the Gupta Dynasty was overthrown by foreign races and Buddhism suffered severely. Later King Siladitya of the Vardhana Dynasty (606-647) unified central India and Buddhism enjoyed a slight

revival. Nalanda Monastery, whose construction began during the Gupta period, continued to expand and attained an impressive scale during the Vardhana Dynasty. Mahayana scholars assembled there for lectures and studies, and it was considered India's leading educational institution of the time. The period between the mid-6th and mid-7th centuries marked the golden age of Nalanda. When Master Xuanzang of China went there to study, its instructors included treatise Masters Silabhadra of the Yogacara school and Jnanaprabha of the Madhyamaka school.

After the death of King Siladitya, central India again fell into disarray. Most of the kingdoms in India followed Brahmanism, and Buddhism gradually declined. However, the Pala Dynasty in eastern India, which lasted from the mid-7th century till the end of the 11th century, adhered to Buddhism. It ruled over the territory east of Magadha, which included Nalanda's location. It built an even larger temple, Vikramasila, near Nalanda.

Late in the 7th century, Brahmanism absorbed some Buddhist teachings, greatly expanding its own doctrines. It flourished with a new posture. Thenceforth, Western scholars would refer to Brahmanism as Hinduism. Buddhism faced a shortage of talent. Its response to such karmic conditions saw the rise of esoteric Buddhism. It expediently adopted many Brahmanic rituals and applied various interpretations to them. Nevertheless, its doctrines continued to be based upon the concepts of emptiness and non-self. After the 9th century, esoteric Buddhism became more popular.

In the 11th century, extensive Turkic invasions ravaged all of India's domestic religions. The Buddhist masters dispersed and fled; many went

to Tibet, by way of Nepal. Influential educational institutions such as Vikramasila Monastery were ruined, with few monks remaining. By the 12th century, Buddhism had vanished from India.

Today's Indian Buddhism was reintroduced through Sri Lanka late in the 19th century. In recent decades, Buddhists from China, Japan and Myanmar have built monasteries in various sacred Buddhist sites in India.

In October 1956, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, leader of India's dalits ("untouchables"), announced his conversion to Buddhism and stated Buddhist teachings such as "human beings are not created by God" and "all sentient beings are equal." Half a million dalits taking part in the assembly heeded his message. They gave up their Hindu faith and converted to Buddhism. The movement unleashed powerful waves nationwide, with tens of millions becoming Buddhists.

#### **Q 24: When was Buddhism officially introduced into China?**

►►A: According to historical records, in 64 C.E. Emperor Ming of the (Eastern) Han Dynasty (25-220) sent twelve emissaries to the Western Regions in search of Buddhist teachings. Three years later they returned to Luoyang with two Indian monks, Kasyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna. They brought with them Buddhist scriptures and images. The monks translated the *Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters* (an abridged version of the Agama scriptures). At the same time, the first Buddhist monastery, White Horse Temple, was built. It was named after the horse carrying the scriptures and images to China.

The introduction of Buddhism to China didn't actually begin with Emperor Ming of the Han (non-governmental efforts could be traced back to the First Emperor of Qin, in the 3th century B.C.E.). However, it was during Emperor Ming's time that Buddhism was introduced as a religion with official support, the basis for its subsequent growth.

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**Q 25: Were the Buddhist sutras written by Shakyamuni Buddha himself?**

▶▶A: No, they were not. They were recited and recorded by his disciples after the Buddha entered nirvana. The year he did so, his 500 disciples, headed by Ven. Kasyapa, assembled at Saptaparna Cave near Rajgir to compile and edit the Buddha's teachings for posterity. At the assembly Ven. Ananda recited the Sutras spoken by the Buddha, Ven. Upali recited the Vinaya (monastic regulations) established by the Buddha, and Ven. Kasyapa recited the Abhidharma, or commentaries on the Buddha's teachings. The Sutras, Vinaya and Abhidharma comprise the **Tripitaka**.

*“Pitaka”* originally meant a bamboo basket for holding things. The compilation of the Sutras, Vinaya and Abhidharma into the Tripitaka is comparable to the designation of treasured Chinese texts into *jing* (classics), *shi* (histories), *zi* (philosophical thought) and *ji* (collections) — the “Four Depositories.”

During early times, the Buddhist scriptures were passed on by oral recital. Later, several Tripitaka assemblies were held to forestall heterodoxy and erroneous views infiltrating the Dharma, as well as to preserve the teachings and texts.

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**Q 26: Why do Buddhist sutras start with “Thus I have heard”?**

▶▶A: When the Buddha’s disciples held assemblies to compile and edit the Tripitaka, the sutras were recited by Ananda. So they all begin with “Thus I have heard.” It means: “The following true teachings were proclaimed by the Buddha as I, Ananda, heard them. They are authentic and trustworthy.”

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**Q 27: Which language was used to record the early Buddhist sutras?**

▶▶A: The dissemination of Buddhism can be divided into the Southern and the Northern transmissions. The southern canon was recorded in Pali (a popular dialect used in Magadha at the time of the Buddha; “pali” means “texts”) and comprises the scriptures of the Smaller Vehicle. Those of the Northern tradition were in Sanskrit, mostly being Mahayana texts, with a few Theravada ones. Pali was a vernacular tongue of ancient India, while Sanskrit was a refined literary language. The Buddhism that was introduced into China was the Northern tradition. Therefore most of the scriptures in Chinese were translated from Sanskrit, though with a few were rendered from Pali.

Most of the Mahayana scriptures of the Northern transmission are preserved in the Chinese and Tibetan Tripitakas. Today Buddhism can be categorized under three major language systems: Southern Buddhism — practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, India, Pakistan and Thailand as well as among ethnic minorities of China’s Yunnan Province such as Dai, De’ang and Bulang, which falls under the Pali system; the Buddhism of the Hans in China, as well as of Korea, Japan and Vietnam

belongs to the Chinese system; the Buddhism of Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Tujia, Qiang and Yugu and other nationalities of China, as well as that of Mongolia, Siberia and northern India, is within the Tibetan system.

**Q 28: Please give a brief introduction to the history of Buddhism in China.**

▶▶A: The propagation of Buddhism in China was closely associated with the translation of Buddhist scriptures. The Han Dynasty saw the earliest stages of translation. The texts rendered can be divided into two main categories. The first was Theravada scriptures, represented by translator An Shigao of Parthia; they focused primarily on the Agama and Dhyana (meditative) teachings. The other was Mahayana texts, represented by Lokasema of Kusana. Their main emphasis was the *Prajna-paramita* sutras and Pure Land faith.

**Q 29: At that time, did any Chinese monks travel westward in search of the Dharma ?**

▶▶A: Yes. The earliest ones were Dharmaraksa and Zhu Shixing. They also translated quite a few scriptures.

**Q 30: Were there other Chinese monks who made contributions to Buddhism?**

▶▶A: By the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420), Buddhism was widespread in China. The most outstanding figure was Master **Dao'an**. China's earliest enthusiastic propagator of Buddhism, he sent his followers to various parts of the country to teach the Dharma. He also founded the first monastic sangha in China. He diligently sought precepts to supplement

deficiencies in Vinaya, and set rules and rites for monks and nuns to follow on a nationwide basis.

Upon taking monastic vows, Chinese monks and nuns style themselves “Shi” (Shakya) in place of their former surnames. This practice was first advocated by Master Dao’an. He collected and collated Buddhist texts already translated, and compiled the first bibliography of Chinese Buddhism — *Jinglu* (Bibliography of the Sutras). Master Dao’an was the first person to summarize his experience translating Buddhist scriptures. He classified all sutras into three parts -- introduction, main body and circulation section. This method remains in use today. Under his supervision, many important scriptures were translated and numerous scholars and translators gathered together. Such efforts provided favorable conditions for the later large-scale translation work of Kumarajiva.

Another outstanding figure of the time was Master **Faxian**. In 399, aged 65, he set out from Chang’an to seek the Vinaya. Crossing deserts and mountains, he walked thousands of miles. He traveled all over northern India, visited numerous holy sites, learned Sanskrit and transcribed scriptures. He went as far as Sri Lanka and returned to China through Indonesia. The trip took Faxian 15 years and he visited 30 countries. He was 80 when he reentered China, but still translated scriptures. Besides precious sutras, Master Faxian brought back the complete Mahasamghika Vinaya and Mahisasaka Vinaya, fulfilling his own aspirations. In addition, his travelogue *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* contained much valuable historical material on the regions west of China. It has been translated into many languages.

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**Q 31: You just mentioned the large-scale translation work of Kumarajiva. Please elaborate.**

▶▶A: The large-scale, systematic translation of the Buddhist scriptures began with **Kumarajiva** in the early 5th century. His translation work enjoyed unprecedentedly favorable conditions, being supported by the Yao Qin kingdom and assisted by a large group of learned volunteer monks influenced by Master Dao'an. The 300-odd fascicles of canonical works translated by Kumarajiva are not only a Buddhist treasure but an important literary legacy. They had a tremendous impact on the philosophical thought and literature of China. In Buddhist thought, Kumarajiva's most important contribution was to introduce the works of the Madhyamaka school founded by Nagarjuna. The brilliant translator and Dharma teacher was born in Kucha, Xinjiang. Kumarajiva and the later Xuanzang were known as the two great masters of translation of Buddhist scriptures.

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**Q 32: Was Master Xuanzang the same as the “Tang monk” or “Tripitaka” who went to the “Western Heaven” in search of Buddhist scriptures (in the classic novel *Journey to the West*)?**

▶▶A: Yes. But the terms “Tang monk” and “Tripitaka” originally referred to Chinese monastics and Tripitaka masters of the Tang Dynasty, rather than Master Xuanzang alone.

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**Q 33: Please say something about the life and work of Master Xuanzang.**

►►A: Master **Xuanzang** took monastic vows as a teenager. He traveled widely in pursuit of learning and called on eminent monks. After carefully studying the doctrines of Chinese Buddhist schools, he found that they conflicted with one another and there were inaccuracies and contradictions in the translations of Buddhist scriptures. He made up his mind to go to India to seek the Dharma. A series of natural disasters occurred in the year 629. Government authorities lifted their ban on citizens leaving China, allowing them to seek livelihoods in other countries. Master Xuanzang was able to travel westward. He journeyed alone for more than 15,000 miles and visited over 130 nations in the western regions and India, overcoming countless dangers and difficulties.

Xuanzang spent five years studying at Nalanda Monastery -- India's highest seat of learning at the time. After four years' criss-crossing the kingdoms of southern India, he returned to Nalanda and became a presiding lecturer there. He wrote the *Treatise on the Harmony of the Principles* with 3,000 odes, which covered the theories of the Madhyamaka and Yogacara schools. He also composed the *Treatise to Restrict Malicious Views* with 1,600 odes, refuting anti-Mahayana heterodoxy. With that, his mission was complete.

On Xuanzang's return journey to China, King Siladitya (Harsa) convened an assembly in honor of the Chinese monk. Xuanzang's two treatises were set as benchmarks. No one could challenge him successfully as he proclaimed his tenets and presented his views. Participants at the 18-day conclave included 18 monarchs, more than 3,000 Mahayana and Theravada monks from various kingdoms, 1,000 monks from Nalanda

and over 2,000 male and female representatives of Brahmanism and other creeds. From then on, Master Xuanzang became well-known all over India. He was honored as *Mahayanadeva* (a deity of Mahayana) by Mahayana scholars, and *Moksadeva* (a divinity of liberation) by Theravada counterparts. He was recognized as *Tripitakacarya* (Tripitaka Dharma master) by Buddhists of the Great and Smaller Vehicles alike.

In 645, he went back to China. With the support of Emperor Taizong, he set up a large translation bureau at Hongfu Monastery in Chang'an. Xuanzang devoted himself to the translation of Buddhist texts for 19 years. He comprehensively and systematically rendered not only the sutras and treatises of the Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism, but also the encyclopedic collection of the emptiness sect, the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* (Large Perfection of Wisdom Sutra), with its 200,000 odes into Chinese. In addition, he translated almost all the important treatises of the Theravada Sarvastivada school. In all, 75 sutras and treatises were translated -- some 1,335 fascicles or 500,000 odes. Nearly all the finest works available during Nalanda's peak period spread to China through translations that passed through the hands of Master Xuanzang. He is respected worldwide for his courage and dedication to the propagation of Buddhism. And his *Journey to the Western Regions of the Great Tang Dynasty* is considered an essential work in the study of Indian history.

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**Q 34: When was the heyday of Buddhism in China?**

▶▶A: The golden age of Buddhism in China occurred during the Sui and Tang dynasties. The various schools emerged one after another, like the spectacle of a hundred flowers blossoming.

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**Q 35: A brief introduction, please.**

►►A: Many sects sprang up at the time, with **eight major Mahayana schools** being particularly influential: the Sanlun (Madhyamaka, or Middle Way), Yogacara, Tiantai, Huayan (Avatamsaka), Ch’an (Zen), Pure Land, Vinaya (monastic discipline), and Esoteric schools.

The **Sanlun school** was founded chiefly on the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way), the *Sata Sastra* (Treatise in One Hundred Verses) and the *Dvadasamukha Sastra* (Treatise on Twelve Topics), translated by Kumarajiva. Its central doctrine is the integration of absolute and relative truth and its ultimate aim was to perceive the reality of the Middle Way. This school was in fact directly descended from the Madhyamaka thought of Nagarjuna. It was founded during the Sui Dynasty by Master Jizang at Jiaxiang Monastery in Shaoxing. It was also called the Jiaxiang school.

The **Yogacara school** was based on the *Samdhinirmocana Sutra* (Sutra of the Explanation of the Profound Secrets), the *Yogacaryabhumi Sastra* (Treatise on the Stages of Yogic Practice) and the *Vijnapitmatratasiddhi Sastra* (Treatise on the Establishment of the Doctrine of Mere Consciousness). It followed the Yogacara doctrine established by Asanga and Vasubandhu -- thus its name. Its chief tenet is that “all phenomena are consciousness-only” and “the Three Realms exist only in the mind.” Its purpose is to convert consciousness into wisdom. Tripitaka Master Xuanzang, abbot of Ci’en Monastery in Chang’an, was the first to translate the Yogacara works and propagate its doctrines. He founded the school, and compiled the thought of ten masters into the *Vijnapitmatratasiddhi Sastra*. Yogacara is also known as the Ci’en or

Faxiang school.

The **Tiantai school** was founded on such texts as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra* (Treatise on The Great Perfection of Wisdom). Its doctrines were formed by assimilating the ideas of various Indian schools and systematically reorganizing them. Its main creed is the theory of the Five Periods and Eight Teachings, and its central ideas are Three-fold Contemplation With One Mind and the Perfect Harmony of the Three Truths. The school was named after Mt. Tiantai in Jiangsu, where its founder Master Zhizhe lived. And because its principal scripture was the *Lotus Sutra*, it was also known as the Lotus Sutra school.

The **Huayan school** took the *Avatamsaka Sutra* as its foundation and made comprehensive studies and penetrating explications of the text. Its thought was developed from the theories of earlier thinkers and schools, such as the Sanlun, Tiantai and Yogacara. This school classifies the entire Dharma into the Five Teachings, core tenets of which are the Six Features, Ten Metaphysical Entrances (doors) and Three Contemplations. Its founder was the preceptor of state, Xianshou (Master Fazang), who inherited the thought of Dushun and Zhiyan. This was also called the Xianshou school. And because it developed the principle of the “Dependent Origination of the Dharma Realm,” another name was the Dharma Realm (Fajie) school.

The **Ch’an school** advocates *ch’anding* (*samadhi* practice), meaning meditation or tranquil contemplation. The aim is to focus on a single point and contemplate, so as to become aware of the true nature of one’s own mind. It was also known as the “Buddha-Mind school.” Its

founder was Bodhidharma from India. The subsequent transmission was to Second Patriarch Huike, Third Patriarch Sengcan, Forth Patriarch Daoxin and Fifth Patriarch Hongren. The school then divided into two sub-sects, the Northern and the Southern. The Northern branch was headed by Shenxiu, who propounded gradual cultivation. It flourished for a time, but declined before long. The Southern sect was led by Huineng, who advocated sudden enlightenment. His lineage thrived and he was venerated as the Sixth Patriarch by later generations.

The Ch'an lineage was transmitted on a one-to-one, mind-to-mind basis. Though it emphasized non-reliance on language and "special transmission without using the scriptures," it had its own canon. Master Bodhidharma bequeathed the four-fascicle *Lankavatara Sutra* to Second Patriarch Huike. Moreover, Hongren and Huineng taught their followers to recite and practice the *Diamond Sutra*. Later appeared the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* and many other recorded quotations.

The **Pure Land school** was established on the basis of the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra*, the *Amitabha Sutra* and the *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*. It was founded in the Tang Dynasty by Master Shandao, who inherited and synthesized the Pure Land thought of Masters Tanluan and Daochuo. The school classifies the Buddha's teachings into the Difficult Path and the Easy Path, self-power and other-power practice, and the schools of the Sacred Path and the Pure Land school.

Those schools that cultivate the precepts, meditative concentration and wisdom through self-power methods, taking three great *asamkhyeya-kalpas* in this world to accomplish Buddhahood, follow the difficult

Sacred Path. By contrast, the easy Pure Land path focuses on Amitabha-invocation, with adherents exclusively reciting “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*.” They depend on the (other-) power of Amitabha’s vows to be reborn in the Pure Land and gain Buddhahood there. The aim of this school is therefore rebirth in the Land of Bliss through recitation of Amitabha’s name. For practitioners, it is not necessary to master the Buddhist scriptures, meditate or undertake special self-cultivation. They can recite “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*” while walking, standing, sitting or lying down. So long as they have sufficient faith in Amitabha’s deliverance, aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land and recite single-mindedly, they will be guided to the Pure Land by Amitabha Buddha when their lives end.

Because of its simplicity, and convenience and ease of practice, the school has drawn the greatest number of adherents since the Tang Dynasty. Even many followers of other schools practice its methods, making Pure Land the most popular path in China.

The **Vinaya school** is known for its focus on the study and practice of precepts. Its *de facto* founder was Master Daoxuan of the Tang Dynasty. Because it was established according to the *Vinaya in Four Divisions* (Dharmaguptaka) of the Vinaya Pitaka, it was also known as the Four-Division Vinaya school. And as Master Daoxuan lived in the Zhongnanshan (mountains), it was alternatively called the Nanshan Vinaya school or the Nanshan school. Its popularity meant that learners of the Mahayana’s three disciplines of precepts, meditation and wisdom also attached importance to the Vinaya Pitaka of the Theravada tradition.

Key to the study of Vinaya rules is to distinguish among the concepts of

flexibility, protection, abidance and violation as they apply to monastic discipline. Flexibility means that certain Vinaya precepts normally regarded as inviolable, may be breached under certain circumstances. Protection refers to certain precepts without inherently sinful nature, but which may be inducement to the violation of Vinaya rules -- such as drinking alcohol. In certain circumstances, it isn't easy to judge whether there has been an infraction. Study of the Vinaya texts is necessary, so that the demarcations among flexibility, protection, abidance and violation can be determined.

The **Esoteric school** was introduced into China from India by Subhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra, among others. Based on the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* and the *Vajrasikḥara Sūtra*, this school established the Three Secret Yoga, performing meditative contemplation and specific actions to achieve integration with a sacred being or master (guru-yoga). To preserve its esoteric nature, the school does not permit those who have not undergone *abhiṣeka* (empowerment by pouring water on the head) from freely displaying and passing down its traditions. Hence the name Esoteric school.

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**Q 36: Why are there so many schools? Won't it be simpler if they all unified?**

▶▶A: Since the aptitude of sentient beings varies greatly, Shakyamuni Buddha gave his teachings in accordance with their karmic inclinations and capabilities -- the 84,000 Dharma paths. The schools' patriarchs or lineage masters, taking into account their times and karmic conditions, delineated paths to liberation suitable for large numbers of practitioners. Thus were the schools formed. It's like going on a long journey. Because of their different circumstances, people choose to travel on land, over

water or in the air. If there were but a single mode of transportation, many would find it difficult to make the trip. Although the methods are different, the aim is the same -- to achieve Buddhahood.

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**Q 37: Since the aim is the same, why there are disagreements among different sects?**

▶▶A: Because each school views things from different perspectives, their conclusions vary accordingly. Various sutras and treatises may seem contradictory, as there seem to be numerous answers to a particular question. This is because the Buddha gave his teachings to different audiences. Consider the question of giving directions to head downtown. To people in the east side of the city, you would tell them to go westward. But to residents of the west side, you would say: Go east.

In a story in *The Analects*, Zi Lu asks Confucius: “Is it right to do things by following a principle you just heard?” Confucius says: “You have a father and elder brothers. How could you act without first consulting them?” When another disciple Ran You asked the same question, Confucius replied: “Act once you have heard it.” Confucius gave completely different answers because Zi Lu tended to recklessness, while Ran You was overly cautious.

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**Q 38: It seems Buddhism emphasizes teaching students according to their characteristics as well?**

▶▶A: That’s right. But the Buddhist expression is “compliance with both principle and circumstances.” The teaching must fit both the requirements of the truth and the aptitudes of its audiences.

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**Q 39: We hear little about some sects. Is that because they didn't accord with most people's aptitudes?**

▶▶A: You could say that. The doctrines of some schools are too abstruse to be understood by ordinary people. There were some historical factors as well. Gradually, certain schools fared less well than they did during the Sui and Tang dynasties.

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**Q 40: What happened to Buddhism after the Tang Dynasty?**

▶▶A: The historical event with the greatest impact on Buddhism was the “**Huichang Dharma-Persecution**,” which occurred under Emperor Wuzong of the Tang. Before that, Buddhism had enjoyed its heyday. The economic expansion of monasteries seriously dented government revenues. Moreover, Emperor Wuzong personally preferred Daoism. Induced by prime minister Li Deyu and Daoist priest Zhao Guizhen, he ordered the eradication of Buddhism and promotion of Daoism. Buddhist scriptures and images were torched, temples were destroyed and their property confiscated, and monks and nuns were forced to resume secular life. In 845 Emperor Wuzong died after consuming Daoist elixirs. Xuanzong ascended the throne and tried to revive Buddhism, but it had been eviscerated. Following the fall of the Tang Dynasty, China entered into the period of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, a time of war and turmoil. Many commentaries and texts of the various schools were lost for good.

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**Q 41: Did all eight Mahayana schools decline?**

▶▶A: No. The Ch’an and Pure Land schools survived and continued to flourish. Most Ch’an practitioners lived in mountains and woodlands, growing their own food. They didn’t rely much on either society at large or the Buddhist texts. The Huichang Persecution and chaos of the Five Dynasties had a limited impact on the Ch’an and its transmission continued. (Many Ch’an temples have been preserved all over China.) As for the Pure Land school, though the writings of Master Shandao were lost, his thought and advocacy of rebirth in the Pure Land through Amitabha-recitation survived, because of their simplicity and ease of practice. However, the school’s teachings later merged with those of other paths. The convergence made them different from the original thought of Master Shandao.

Fortunately, many of the scriptures lost in China had been passed to Korea and Japan, and were preserved there. During the Five Dynasties, the works of Tiantai school were transmitted back from Korea, as were some of the Huayan school. The two lineages revived. Towards the end of the Qing Dynasty, many texts of the Sanlun, Yogacara, Esoteric and Vinaya schools, together with the works of Master Shandao, returned to China from Japan.

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**Q 42: What about Tibetan Buddhism?**

▶▶A: Tibetan Buddhism dates back to the mid-7th century, the Tubo Dynasty. Tibet’s ruler at the time, Songtsen Gampo, converted to Buddhism under the influence of his two wives, Princess Wencheng of Tang

China and Princess Bhrikuti of Nepal. He sent ministers to India to learn Sanskrit and Buddhist scriptures. On their return they created the Tibetan writing system and began to translate Buddhist texts. In the mid-8th century, Tibetan King Trisong Detsen invited the renowned Indian Buddhist scholars Santiraksita and Kamalasila, as well as Tantric master Padmasambhava, to build temples and ordain monks in Tibet, and undertake systematic translation of scriptures. Buddhism spread throughout Tibet. In the 8th century, Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra established the earliest Tibetan lineage -- the **Nyingmapa**, or Red Hat Sect.

However, in the mid-9th century, Buddhism in Tibet suffered a setback with the Glandar-ma Persecution. It languished for more than a hundred years. But Buddhism revived in the 10th century, with its reintroduction from the Xikang (Sikang) region. The time before the Glandar-ma Persecution is known as the Early Propagation Period, and that after is called the Later Propagation Period.

In 11th century, the Bengali Dharma Master Atisa arrived in Tibet, which led to the founding of the Kadam school. It was inherited by Master Tsongkhapa, who established the **Gelugpa**, or Yellow Hat Sect. It spread throughout Tibet, regions of China, and Mongolia. Adherents later developed the well-known reincarnation system of two living Buddhas, the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. Tibet's Marpa also visited India three times to study the Dharma; he founded the **Kagyupa**, or White Hat Sect. Its second patriarch was the world-renowned Tibetan sage Milarepa. The **Sakyapa**, or Multi-Colored Sect, was set up by Khon Kontchok Gyalpo. Its fifth patriarch Baspa was given the title of "Royal Preceptor Karmapa" by Kublai Khan, the first emperor of China's Yuan

Dynasty. Baspa's successors inherited the title.

In year 1203, a Turkic military invasion of India destroyed Nalanda and Vikramasila monasteries, and Buddhist scholars went to Tibet in large numbers. As a result, a very rich collection of later works of Indian Buddhism are preserved in the Tibetan Tripitaka.

There are now four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism: the Nyingmapa (Red Hat Sect), Sakyapa, Kagyupa (White Hat Sect) and Gelugpa (Yellow Hat Sect).

#### **Q 43: What are the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama?**

►►A: The Dalai Lama, leader of Gelug sect, lived in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital. The *New Record of Tibet* says: The Dalai Lama was the ranking disciple of Tsongkhapa and Panchen Erdeni was his second one. Tsongkhapa was born in 1359 and attained enlightenment at Galdan Temple in Tibet. He passed away in 1419, in his will urging his two leading disciples to reincarnate life after life to propagate the Mahayana teachings without losing their true nature of mind.

The Panchen Lama, also called Panchen Erdeni, is a leader of the Yellow Hat Sect, his position second only to the Dalai Lama. The Panchen Lama lived in Tashi Lhunpo Monastery in Xigaze, Tibet.

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**Q 44: Buddhism has had a presence in China for well over a millennium. How has it influenced Chinese culture?**

▶▶A: Though it was a foreign religion, Buddhism blended very well with the traditional culture of China. The translation of Buddhism scriptures abetted the evolution of Chinese poetic language and style. For example, the poetry of Bai Juyi in the Tang Dynasty and Su Dongpo in the Song were inspired by Ch’an Buddhism’s odes and new poetry. The translation and propagation of Buddhist texts also enriched the Chinese vocabulary, many terms and expressions of which are still commonly used today.

A Confucian school of idealist philosophy in the Song and Ming dynasties was deeply influenced by the Huayan and Ch’an traditions of Buddhism. In the late Qing Dynasty, studying Buddhism was common among Chinese scholars. Some pioneers of democratic thought in China, such as Tan Sitong, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao and Zhang Taiyan, advocated Buddhist principles. These included compassion, equality, impermanence and selflessness, which resonated broadly among the intelligentsia of the time.

In addition, the magnificent temples, exquisite pagodas and beautiful Buddha statues are a key part of China’s art treasures. Also, many traditions and customs originated from Buddhism. For instance, the Chungyuan Festival (honoring the spirits of the deceased) and the Laba rice porridge festival derived directly from Buddhist commemorations.

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**Q 45: Buddhism advocates benefiting all sentient beings. What kinds of socially beneficial activities are Buddhists engaged in?**

▶▶A: Buddhists are engaged in a wide range of work relating to social welfare. Some monks practice and distribute medicine, while others build bridges and roads, dig wells, establish free schools and plant trees. The planting of trees, especially, has been a remarkable success. Just look at places throughout China where there are Buddhist pagodas and temples, presenting a tranquil environment and attractive scenery.

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**Q 46: Many non-Asians have become Buddhists ...**

▶▶A: That's right. The teachings of the Buddha are full of wisdom, something increasingly recognized by people of discernment. The diverse ways of information dissemination also accelerate the propagation of Buddhism. Besides oral and scriptural transmission, people can get to know Buddhism through audio-visual products, TV, radio and the internet. Buddhism has been not only accepted by the general public, but also noted by thinkers, philosophers and scientists.

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**Q 47: It seems that worries about Buddhism being unable to adapt to the scientific age are misplaced.**

▶▶A: Yes. If you understand Buddhism, you will find that the more advanced science becomes, the easier it will be for Buddhism to be accepted. In his book *The Avatamsaka Sutra and Nuclear Physics*, Japanese scientist Shinichi Matsushita concludes that Buddhist views of the universe as well as the creation and destruction of matter and those of modern nuclear physics can be juxtaposed and used to corroborate each other. He believes they are startlingly similar. Einstein reportedly said: "If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism."

## 3. The Buddha's Followers

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**Q 48: Was the institution of monasticism initiated by Shakyamuni Buddha?**

▶▶A: No. By the time of the Buddha, renunciation of household life for religious self-cultivation was already commonplace within academic and philosophical circles in India. But because of the Buddha's status as a prince, his renunciation gave a boost to the practice. Buddhists who have left home life are generally called monks or nuns.

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**Q 49: Are such monastics the equivalent of the clergy of other religions?**

▶▶A: Buddhist monks and nuns are merely those who renounce the household to practice for the sake of liberation (from samsara). They are not intermediaries between deities and human beings.

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**Q 50: What kind of life should a Buddhist monastic lead?**

▶▶A: A monastic should lead a pure and frugal life. He or she should strictly uphold the precepts of abstaining from killing, stealing, sex, lying, hurtful speech, frivolous talk, alcohol, untimely eating and the use of perfumes and adornments. Other observances include refraining from singing and dancing or watching others sing and dance; sitting on high

chairs and sleeping on luxurious beds; accepting precious things like gold, silver, elephants and horses.

Monastics should not have private possessions except robes, an alms bowl, razor, water-filter, needle and thread and other such necessities. Nor should they do business, engage in fortune-telling or spuriously display magical wonders. During the six periods of the day (morning, noon, dusk, nightfall, midnight and dawn), they should devote themselves to diligent study and practice of the Dharma, after allowing time for sleeping, alms rounds, food and drink, and labor.

**Q 51: Why do they need to renounce lay life?**

►►A: The monastic sangha represents the presence of the Three Gems (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha) in the world. It gives sentient beings confidence that they can achieve emancipation. Lay life entails many obligations and attachments. Only by renouncing it can sangha members devote themselves fully to Buddhist activities, raising high the banner of the Dharma and vigorously disseminating the essence of Buddhism.

In addition, Theravada lay practitioners can at most attain the third *phala* (fruition) of self-cultivation -- eliminating wrong views of the sensuous world. A monastic life is free and detached. Monks and nuns can more easily focus on the achievement of no-ego and no-desire. That's why renunciation of the householder life is essential to reach the fourth and highest stage of cultivation.

**Q 52: Is it the Buddhist ideal for everyone to become monastics?**

►►A: **Renunciation** should be for only a minority of Buddhists. There are many preconditions. Candidates must have their parents' consent, and their motives must be pure and genuine, not avoiding debts or legal liabilities. After renunciation, they are required to meet monastic standards in both Dharma knowledge and personal conduct. If they break the four fundamental rules against murder, theft, sexual intercourse and lying, they will be expelled from the sangha. Ordination must be recommended, certified and approved by ten or more monastics, each of whom must have taken vows at least a decade earlier.

The Buddhist community comprises four groups: monks and nuns responsible for maintaining the Dharma, and male and female laity charged with supporting the Dharma. Therefore Buddhism does not require everybody to renounce lay life. Many Buddhist scriptures eulogize those who practice at home.

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**Q 53: In some countries, everyone is apparently obligated to experience monastic life at least once. Is this true?**

►►A: Yes, it is a custom in Thailand, Myanmar and some other countries. So it was formerly in the Dai-inhabited region of China. But this is not a regulation laid down by Buddhism. In these places, children seven or eight years of age are usually sent by their parents to temples where they can learn not only to read and write as well as the Buddhist scriptures, but also lead a monastic lifestyle. Their stay varies from a few days to a few months, or even several years. One who has not undergone monasticism during childhood is required to do so at least once during

adult life. Unlike those who voluntarily renounce lay life to become monastics, these temporary practitioners do not receive ordination as *samaneras* (novice monks).

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**Q 54: Why are the Buddhist monks called “*heshang*” in China? What does the term mean?**

▶▶A: “*Heshang*” was derived from Sanskrit, meaning teacher or mentor. Originally it was an honorific reserved for monastics who had attained certain qualifications. It was applicable not only to monks, but also to qualified nuns. Later, the term came to be used to address any male who is leading a monastic life.

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**Q 55: What is the meaning of lama?**

▶▶A: **Lama** is a Tibetan word with the same meaning as “*heshang*.” It too has been misused, since it was not originally applicable to all monastics. The proper term for males who have received the Ten Precepts is *samanera*, while that for those given full ordination is *bhikku*. For nuns, the equivalent terms are *samaneri* and *bhikkuni*.

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**Q 56: In the Han-Chinese regions, monks are usually called “*seng*” and nuns “*ni*.” Are these names correct?**

▶▶A: “*Seng*” is an abbreviated form of *sangha*, meaning “community.” A *sangha* is a congregation of Buddhist monastics, with at least four members. So an individual cannot be called *sangha*, only a *sangha* member. Both monks and nuns are included in the *sangha*, so they are *sangha* members. As for the term “*ni*”(nun), it is derived from the

final syllable of samaneri or bhikkuni. It is an abbreviated reference to Buddhist nuns by Chinese people.

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**Q 57: Who can be called a *fashi* (*Dhammacariya*), or Dharma master?**

▶▶A: “*Dhammacariya*,” or *fashi*, was originally the title of an academic degree. It was conferred on those with a comprehensive knowledge of the Dharma and capable of teaching it. Today people customarily call all monastics *Dhammacariya*, which is acceptable. There are other degrees for Buddhists: *Suttacariya* (sutra master) for those versed in the Sutta Pitaka, *Vinayacariya* (vinaya master) for masters of the Vinaya Pitaka, and *Abhidhammacariya* (treatise master) for those with thorough knowledge of the Abhidhamma Pitaka. Even higher is the *Tipitakacariya* -- master of all three pitakas. Both Xuanzang and Yijing of the Tang Dynasty had this designation.

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**Q 58: What is a Tibetan Living Buddha?**

▶▶A: Those who achieve exceptional cultivation and can reincarnate according to their own will are called “*hpbrulsku*” in Tibetan or “*Hobilghan*” in Mongolian, meaning “one who reincarnates” or “incarnation.” It’s the Han Chinese who call them “Living Buddhas.” Actually, there is no such term in Tibetan or Mongolian Buddhism.

The Buddhist bhikkus of Dai nationality are called “*Foye*” (Lord Buddha) by Han people. This is a misnomer and is not used by the Dai themselves.

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**Q 59: It is true that monks and nuns are not required to engage in production?**

▶▶A: In the time of the Buddha it was true. But like worldly educators, monastics were responsible for preaching, teaching and dispelling doubts. They practice diligently, propagate Buddhist teachings for the benefit of all beings and quietly make contributions to society. They are worthy of being called true “engineers of the human soul.”

Monks in Han-inhabited regions have a custom of farming. After the Dharma was introduced into China, the tradition evolved from Buddhism's adaptation to prevailing conditions.

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**Q 60: What are “monastic regulations” (*conglin qinggui*)?**

▶▶A: The original meaning of “*conglin*” is grove or forest. A congregation of monastics in a temple is like many trees forming a forest, so it is called *conglin*, meaning large monastery. “*Qinggui*” means pure rules or regulations observed daily by monastics in monasteries. These were laid down according to the Vinaya enacted by the Buddha and adapted to prevailing conditions. The earliest monastic rules in China were initiated by Master Dao'an of the Eastern Jin Dynasty in the 4th century. In the Tang Dynasty, Master Baizhang created a set of codes for monks of the Ch'an school. It was later lost. Current monastery rules were originally enforced by imperial edict during the Hongwu (1368-98) and Yongle (1402-24) eras of the Ming Dynasty.

**Q 61: Nowadays monks and nuns use mobile phone and computers. Does that break monastic rules?**

▶▶A: Products of modern technology, including mobile phones and computers, are very convenient and effective tools for propagating Buddhism. But they should be used cautiously, lest they distract from cultivation or create afflictions.

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**Q 62: Can the rules ever be relaxed?**

▶▶A: There are no waivers for the four fundamental prohibitions against killing, theft, sex and lying about spiritual attainment. While all the other monastic precepts should be upheld in general, they can be relaxed under certain circumstances. All such cases should be governed by the precept of “benefiting sentient beings.” “Uphold” and “waive” are terms used in Vinaya texts. There are strict rules with respect to the conditions under which precepts can be relaxed.

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**Q 63: There are different colors for monastic robes. Do they represent different levels of attainment?**

▶▶A: No. According to the Buddhist system, monks should have robes of three different sizes: large, medium and small. The small one, made from five strips of cloth, is known as a **five-strip robe** in China. It is worn when doing manual work, such as cleaning. The medium robe, stitched from seven pieces of cloth, is known as a **seven-strip robe**. It is the regular form of dress. The large one, made from nine to 25 strips, is commonly called **ancestral robe** in China. It is the ceremonial attire when traveling

or visiting elders. **The three robes** are collectively called *jiasha (kasaya)*.

Because the robes are stitched together from multiple rectangular pieces of cloth and resemble paddy fields, they are also known as “quilted,” “farm-land” or “merit-field” garments. Sometimes, they are called “discolored clothes,” because the Buddha’s followers originally made their attire from abandoned materials collected from the cemetery or the dump. They cleaned the pieces and stitched them together. The Buddha expected his disciples to focus on spiritual purity and their personal cultivation, avoiding the pursuit of luxury. Today’s material abundance obviates the old need to stitch cloth together, but the spirit behind the ancient Buddhist method of making monastic robes remains alive.

Because of the chilly climate in northern China, the three robes are not warm enough. Monastics there wear an additional suit beneath the *kasaya* called common garb, which is simply the clothing of ancient Chinese laypeople with a slight variation. The color of the common garb was stipulated by imperial edict during the Ming Dynasty. It was tea-brown for monastics practicing meditation, blue for those giving Dharma discourses, and black for adherents of the Vinaya school. In the Qing Dynasty there was no official regulation, though yellow was the color of the common garb of most monastics in Vinaya temples.

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**Q 64: What about burning-dot scars on the head of monastics?**

▶▶A: Under the Buddhist system, a shaved head, dyed garments, and ordination are the prerequisites for monkhood. The tonsure and dyeing of garments signify giving up adornment to lead a plain, spare life. The

burned scars on top of the head are not a precondition of ordination. This tradition may be related to the Bodhisattva precepts in the *Brahmajala Sutra*, which mention setting oneself on fire to show devotion to the Buddha. After the Tang Dynasty, there was a custom of scarring the top of the head with an ignited moxa cone. The cone burns until it goes out and leaves a **scar on the head**. This practice is to demonstrate the sincerity of initiates into the monkhood. The number of dot-scars varies according to the wishes of the monastics -- one, two, three, six, nine and twelve. Twelve scars represents receiving the highest level of Bodhisattva precepts. The scar-burning is only a tradition of Han Chinese monks, not those of other nationalities.

## 4. Buddhist Centers of Teaching

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**Q 65: What's the difference among *si* (monastery or temple), *yuan* (court) and *an* (nunnery)?**

**▶▶A: Monastery** originally was the name of a government institution in ancient China -- for example, the Dali Temple. During the Han Dynasty, there was a Honglu Temple to host visitors. After the introduction of Buddhism into China, more and more monks came from the Western regions, so the government established White Horse Monastery in Luoyang as a residence for foreign monastics. Thenceforth, monastery became an exclusive name for Buddhist teaching and practice.

**Court** at first meant a particular part of a temple. Later the term was used for stand-alone residences, which are usually smaller than monasteries.

**An (nunnery)** originally meant a secluded hut. It is the smallest Buddhist teaching center, usually a residence for nuns.

The temples, courts and nunneries of Buddhism are different from the halls, monasteries and temples of Daoism. They should not be confused.

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**Q 66: Why is the entrance of a Buddhist monastery called “mountain gate”?**

▶▶A: It is called “**mountain gate**” or “**mountain gate hall**” because most Buddhist monasteries are located in mountains or hills. There are usually three gates at the temple entrance, which symbolize emptiness (central gate), formlessness (east gate) and non-action (west gate). So the entrance is also known as the “**hall of three gates.**”

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**Q 67: How are Buddhist monasteries laid out?**

▶▶A: The construction of temples varies according to the different Dharma schools. For example, Ch’an monasteries have the meditation hall as its center, while the core of Vinaya temples is their ordination platforms. Tibetan monasteries differ from those in Han regions.

Today, most Han temples have maintained the unified layouts dating from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Usually, just beyond the entrance is the **Hall of the Heavenly Kings**. The statue of Bodhisattva Maitreya is placed in the middle of the hall, with the Four Heavenly Kings on both sides. At the back of Maitreya is a statue of Bodhisattva Skanda.

**Bodhisattva Maitreya** is a disciple of the Buddha. He attained nirvana earlier than the Buddha and was reborn in the Maitreya Pure Land. The Buddha predicted that Bodhisattva Maitreya would appear in our world in 5,670 million years and gain Buddhahood there. During the Five Dynasties (907-960) there was a potbellied monk in Fenghua, Zhejiang, named Ciqi. Carrying a large cloth sack and a bamboo stick, he smiled to everyone and urged them to believe in Buddhism. His words could be

unpredictable but they often proved true. People called him the “Cloth-Sack Monk.” As he was about to pass away, he spoke a *gatha*: “Maitreya is the real Maitreya, with countless incarnations. He constantly appears before people, but they don’t realize it.” Subsequently, he was said to have been an emanation of Bodhisattva Maitreya. Many temples used his image to make statues with a broad smile and big belly, and honored them as images of Bodhisattva Maitreya.

The **Four Heavenly Kings** are Buddhism’s guardian deities, commonly known as the “Four Guardian Warriors.” They are Vaisravana (or Duowen, who hears everything), Dhrtarastra (Chiguo, who upholds the realm), Virudhaka (Zengzhang, who causes things to grow), and Virupaksa (Guangmu, or he who sees all). Vaisravana is the guardian of the north and is associated with green. He carries an umbrella in one hand and a snow weasel in the other. Dhrtarastra protects the east, is linked with the color white and holds a *pipa* in his hands. Virudhaka, associated with blue, is guardian of the south and wields a sword. Virupaksa, who guards the west, is red-themed and accompanied by a dragon.

**Bodhisattva Skanda** is also a protector deity of Buddhism. Garbed in the armor of an ancient warrior, he holds a vajra scepter.

The **Bell Tower** is to the east of the Hall of Heavenly Kings, with a large bell hanging there. In its basement, some temples place a statue of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha with two attendants, Daoming to his left and Mingong to his right.

The **Drum Tower**, holding a large drum, lies to the west of the Hall. Some monasteries have a statue of Guanyu as a guardian deity. He has

two attendants, Guanping on the left and Zhoucang on the right.

The **Grand Hall** is the main structure of Buddhist temples. Usually it hosts three Buddha statues, or just one. A trio would normally be the Buddhas of the Three Directions, Three Time Frames or Three Bodies. Some Grand Halls have images of Bodhisattva Maitreya, Shakyamuni Buddha and Amitabha Buddha. Those with a single Buddha mostly honor Shakyamuni Buddha, with two bhikkus at his side. If one of the bhikkus is young and the other elderly, the former would be Ananda and the latter Kasyapa. If the two are close in age, they would be Sariputra and Moggallana. In some monasteries, the statues in the Grand Hall represent the Three Sacred Beings of the Western Pure Land, or the Three Avatamsaka Sacred Beings.

To the back of Shakyamuni Buddha is normally a relief carving of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Statues of 16 or 18 Arhats are located on the east and west sides of the Grand Hall.

To the east and west of the Grand Hall are side halls. The statues there vary among Dharma schools. Some **side halls have the Three Sacred Beings** of the Western Pure Land, others contain **Ch'an lineage masters**, still others honor Guanyu.

Beyond the Grand Hall are Dharma halls for teaching and assembly. Besides Buddha statues, they have speakers' seats and platforms, as well as bells and drums.

An essential part of a monastery is the **abbot's quarters** -- where the abbot lives and receives guests. In the Pure Land school it is known as Hualin Quarters, while the Ch'an school calls it Prajna Quarters.

In addition, there is the **Sutra Library**, where the scriptures are kept.

Today's urban temples even have facilities with relatively practical functions, such as reading and computer rooms. The entire layout may be streamlined into a single building complex.

**Q 68: Besides Maitreya, aren't there many more Bodhisattvas -- for example, the familiar Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Guanyin)?**

▶▶**A:** That's right. The main ones are Manjusri, Samantabhadra, Avalokitesvara and Ksitigarbha, collectively called the **Four Great Bodhisattvas**. A resolution to liberate oneself and others, and to achieve enlightenment as well as help others to attain it, is called developing *bodhicitta* (bodhi mind). People who make such a vow can also be called "Bodhisattvas," but before reaching enlightenment, they remain at the level of ordinary beings.

Having resolved on *bodhicitta*, a Buddhist has to practice the Dharma lifetime after lifetime to achieve Buddhahood. There are 52 stages for Bodhisattvas. The Four Great Bodhisattvas, as well as Maitreya, have attained the highest rank -- "Enlightenment-Equivalent Bodhisattva." The Mahayana scriptures highlight the transcendent wisdom of Manjusri, the resolute action of Samantabhadra, the capacious compassion of Avalokitesvara and the great vows of Ksitigarbha.

Mt. Wutai in Shanxi Province is the dedicated "Dharma field" of Bodhisattva Manjusri. The counterparts for Bodhisattvas Samantabhadra, Avalokitesvara and Ksitigarbha are Mt. Emei in Sichuan, Mt. Putuo in Zhejiang and Mt. Jiuhua in Anhui respectively. They are collectively known as the **Four Sacred Mountains** of China.

**Manjusri**, meaning “Gentle Glory” in Sanskrit, symbolizes the *prajna* (transcendent wisdom) and virtue of all the Buddhas. He is the left attendant of Shakyamuni Buddha, holding a sword that represents sharp wisdom, and riding a blue lion symbolizing great intelligence.

**Samantabhadra** means “Universal Worthiness” in Sanskrit. He is associated with action. The right attendant of Shakyamuni Buddha, he rides a white elephant with six teeth, symbolizing the Six Paramitas.

**Avalokitesvara** “perceives the cries” of people who recite “Namo Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara” in times of crisis, and rescues them via different manifestations according to circumstances. So there are various names and images of Avalokitesvara (“Guanyin” in Chinese) -- such as Guanyin in white robes, Guanyin sending off a child, Guanyin with fish basket, Guanyin in moonlit water, and Guanyin with a thousand arms and eyes. Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was originally depicted as male in India. After Buddhism came to China, starting from the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589), Avalokitesvara became a female figure. That was because the female temperament is closer to the spirit of compassion and is readily accepted by the public.

**Ksitigarbha** is Sanskrit for “Earth Treasury” — as stable and steady as the earth, and as quiet and deep as hidden treasure. Shakyamuni Buddha instructed him to teach beings in our world in the Buddha-less era between his own nirvana and the arrival of Maitreya Buddha. Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha is known for his great vow: “Only when all sentient beings have been delivered shall I achieve enlightenment; I vow not to become a Buddha until all hells have been emptied.”

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**Q 69: The murals of some Buddhist temples depict fierce faces that aren't even human. Why is that?**

▶▶A: All the images of Esoteric Buddhism have specific significance. For example, the lotus flower at the base of Buddha statues stands for the aspiration to transcendence, the moon represents *bodhicitta* and the sun symbolizes wisdom — the wisdom of understanding that everything is empty. The implements held by the figures represent various vows, wisdom and merits of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Those with grim faces usually are Heavenly Kings — the Buddha's warrior attendants. Possessing great powers, they are guardian deities of Buddhism who keep the armies of evil at bay. In addition, there are many other images of divine beings.

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**Q 70: What does the “卍” on the chest of Buddha images mean?**

▶▶A: “卍” is just a symbol, not a character. It can be pronounced “wan” in Chinese, which means “auspicious appearance amid a sea of clouds.” That is one of the 32 physical characteristics of great beings (such as Buddhas).

The symbol rotates right (卐) on some statues and left (卍) on others. Most rotate right.

“卍” represents the boundless wisdom and compassion of Buddhas. The rotation stands for the unlimited functioning and extension of their power to save countless sentient beings in the ten directions.

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**Q 71: When do Buddhist temples usually hold Dharma services?**

►►A: Generally on the first and 15<sup>th</sup> days of the lunar month and on Buddhist festivals. In Han-inhabited regions, there are three important festivals. The first is **Buddha's Birthday** on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, which is also called Vesak Day. The second one is on December 8<sup>th</sup>, which commemorates Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment. It is commonly called the **Laba Festival**. The third falls on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh lunar month -- the **Ullambana** or **Chungyuan Festival**, honoring the spirits of the deceased.

On Vesak Day, monasteries usually hold a "Buddha-bathing" Dharma service, with monastics offering flowers, lamps, candles, tea, fruit and delicacies to the Buddha. They also pour scented water on an image of the new-born Shakyamuni Buddha. The service remembers the Buddha's birth.

During the Laba Festival, temples hold services to mark the Buddha's enlightenment. Because the Buddha accepted milk gruel from a shepherdess prior to his enlightenment, monasteries make porridge on this occasion and offer it before Buddha images. There is a folk custom in China to have "Laba porridge" on the same day, which was first recorded in the Song Dynasty.

"Ullambana" is a Sanskrit word that means helping people who are hanging upside down. One of the Buddha's disciples, Moggallana, saw his deceased mother suffering in hell. He asked the Buddha to save her, as he was helpless. The Buddha asked him to prepare a hundred items of food and drink to offer monks from everywhere on lunar July 15, tapping

their strength to save his mother. Later, Buddhist monasteries held Dharma activities that day every year to deliver the spirits of ancestors.

Besides the three festivals, the eighth and 15<sup>th</sup> days of the second lunar month commemorate the Renunciation and Parinirvana of Shakyamuni Buddha respectively. The 19<sup>th</sup> days of the second, the sixth and the ninth months mark the Birthday, Enlightenment and Renunciation of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara respectively. The 30<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh month is the Birthday of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, and the 17<sup>th</sup> day of the eleventh month is the Birthday of Amitabha Buddha. Temples usually hold memorial activities.

**Q 72: What are pagodas for?**

▶▶A: “**Pagoda**” is also called “Buddha stupa,” translated from Sanskrit. It means “outstanding” or a “grave.” Generally, a pagoda is used to store the Buddhist relics. Some are unrelated to relics and merely serve symbolic or commemorative purposes.

**Q 73: What is a consecration ceremony?**

▶▶A: Buddhist monasteries usually have consecration ceremonies, which resemble secular ribbon-cutting festivities. They celebrate the completion of Buddha statues and inspire people’s devotion. It is sometimes said that “consecration is necessary for an image to be efficacious.” This is not appropriate. The Buddha’s light is present wherever there is a statue, whether or not there has been a consecration ceremony. The ritual is just to spread the word and to inspire people.

**Q 74: Besides monasteries, what places are there for Buddhist activities?**

▶▶A: Since the beginning of the last century, Buddhist **lay lodges** have been opened throughout China. These are places for householders' activities. Modern lay communities have sprung up in such forms as study groups, colleges, viharas, lotus associations, bodies for collective practice, youth entities and Amitabha-recitation halls. Their activities include Dharma discourses, research and study, group practice and circulation of printed and other materials on Buddhism.

Chapter

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2

# Buddhist Teachings



# 1. The Four Noble Truths

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## **Q 75: What are the basic Buddhist teachings?**

►►**A:** In summary, the basic Buddhist teachings are the **Four Noble Truths:** suffering, the cause of suffering, the extinction of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. They are also called the “Four Truths.” Our lives can be encapsulated by these Four Truths: First, life is suffering (the Truth of Suffering); second, suffering arises through the accumulation of delusion and negative action by sentient beings (the Truth of the Cause of Suffering); third, suffering can be eradicated (the Truth of the Extinction of Suffering); fourth, there are many ways to eliminate suffering (the Truth of the Paths Leading to the Cessation of Suffering).

The Truths of Suffering and of the Cause of Suffering illustrate life’s essence and the causes of its formation. The Truths of the Extinction of Suffering and of the Paths Leading to the Cessation of Suffering illuminate the destination of our lives – liberation, and the way to liberation.

Buddhist scriptures, however voluminous, do not go beyond the Four Noble Truths.

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**Q 76: What sufferings are there in life?**

▶▶A: The Buddha’s teachings often mention the **Eight Sufferings** of life. They are the sufferings of –

*Birth:* As fetuses, we live in darkness and experience heat and cold, as well as the pressures of confinement. We are uncomfortable. At the time of birth we feel great pain – like being clamped by huge blocks.

*Old age:* As we age, we become deaf, blind and bent. We lose our teeth, and illnesses grip our bodies.

*Sickness:* When we fall ill, we’re mentally and physically exhausted, unable to escape the torment.

*Death:* When death approaches, we’re like an ox being skinned alive or a turtle being shelled. It’s as if we are being torn apart by piercing winds or cooked in boiling oil. We feel choked and dejected.

*Encountering those we hate:* We constantly meet people whom we dislike or resent.

*Separating from those we love:* Our loved ones will inevitably leave us.

*Not getting what we want:* Things we long for are beyond our reach.

*Being burned by the Five Aggregates (skandhas):* We are entangled by the burning vexations of body and mind, unable to escape. The Five Aggregates, or *skandhas*, are form (*rupa*), sensation (*vedana*), perception (*samjna*), mental formations (*sankhara*) and consciousness (*vijnana*).

They constitute the material and spiritual elements of body and mind.

Buddhist scriptures also mention the **Three Sufferings**:

*The suffering of suffering, or painful experiences* (dukkha-dukkha): Suffering caused by cold, heat, hunger, thirst, illness, maltreatment, labor, disasters or other miserable conditions.

*The suffering of decay* (viparinama-dukkha): Once our enjoyable moments are disrupted, they can transform immediately into sadness, disappointment and loneliness.

*The suffering of change* (sankhara-dukkha): Every worldly phenomenon (called “conditioned dharma” in Buddhism) is subject to change and disappearance, bringing us stresses of emptiness and insecurity.

The fundamental suffering of life is impermanence. Our bodies and minds arise and cease from moment to moment. They are not persistently abiding. This runs counter to our instinctive pursuit of permanence and happiness.

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**Q 77: Where does suffering come from?**

►►A: This is the second of the Four Noble Truths. The cause of beings’ distress can be summarized as “karma created through delusion, leading to suffering.”

None of the things and phenomena in the universe exist in isolation. They arise from the convergence of manifold factors. Sentient beings are also a combination of material and spiritual elements. Like worldly

phenomena, they change ceaselessly. But we don't understand this principle of impermanence. Deluded and confused, we vainly seek happiness that lasts. All worldly things are impermanent and cannot be grasped. This conflict drives us to produce incorrect thoughts (delusions) and take selfish actions (karma) – negative karma. The accumulation of such karma inevitably reaps for us negative consequences (suffering) in this or future lifetimes. That is why beings reincarnate in different forms life after life. In each lifetime, the inherent vexations of birth and death intensify our unwholesome thoughts and delusions, generating new negative karma and aggravating our samsaric afflictions. This is a vicious circle without end.

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**Q 78: The term “karma” (*ye* in Chinese) appears often in Buddhist teachings. Does it carry the same meaning as “undertaking” or “career” (*shiye*)?**

▶▶A: No. “Undertaking” is a modern word. The original meaning of **karma** is “action,” referring to all our physical and mental activities, including deeds, words and thoughts. They are our physical acts (deeds), verbal utterances (words), and mental cognitions (thoughts). Every deed, word or thought, however tiny, plants a karmic seed which has the power to bring consequences in the future. This is the **“force of karma.”** To put it simply, “Beings suffer because of the pull of their karmic force.”

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**Q 79: Can suffering be eliminated?**

▶▶A: Absolutely. This is the Third Noble Truth – of the Extinction of Suffering. If we can awaken from ignorance and delusion, practice the right Dharma path to eradicate vexations, and cease all the physical

and mental deeds causing samsaric afflictions, we will achieve nirvana. This is a realm that transcends time, space and the cycle of rebirth. It is without birth or death, and is full of serenity, peace and joy.

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**Q 80: How can suffering be eradicated?**

►►A: That is the substance of the Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering. It's the way towards liberation and nirvana. Practicing the path is the only way to achieve Buddhahood. To attain the serenity of nirvana, we must extinguish vexations and deluded thoughts by cultivating the Three Learnings, the Noble Eightfold Path, and other peerless Dharma practices.

The **Three Learnings** are the precepts (*sila*), meditative concentration (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*prajna*).

The **precepts** guard against vices and wrongdoing. Practitioners should scrupulously observe the disciplines formulated by the Buddha. To start with, they should act and talk discreetly to prevent their deluded thinking from triggering physical and verbal karma.

**Meditative concentration** means to stop thinking and clinging and to stay in a quiescent state of mind. Our delusions will naturally cease to grow. The root trouble of beings is constant restlessness, and meditation is a necessary corrective.

**Wisdom** enables us to eradicate illusions and realize the truth – to be enlightened about ultimate reality. When such wisdom emerges, one can perceive everything without obstruction and dispel delusions thoroughly.

The Three Learnings are complementary. Focusing the mind is a part of the precepts, upholding the precepts leads to concentration, and concentration yields wisdom. Once we perfect our practice of the Three Learnings, our afflictions and karmic habits will be eradicated.

The Three Learnings are generic methods to escape samsara through self-power practice.

Out of compassion for beings who are unable to achieve perfection of the Three Learnings, Shakyamuni Buddha taught a special method to free ourselves from the cycle of rebirth – the Pure Land path of Amitabha-recitation. If we recite the name of Amitabha Buddha and are reborn in the Land of Bliss, relying on the power of his vows (other-power deliverance), we can also eliminate our afflictions and attain nirvana.

The **Noble Eightfold Path** consists of Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

***Right View:*** To understand correctly – to see things in light of the Four Noble Truths.

***Right Thought:*** To think correctly – to consider issues according to the Four Noble Truths.

***Right Speech:*** To speak properly – to abstain from lying and empty talk.

***Right Action:*** To act properly – to refrain from all evil doings.

***Right Livelihood:*** To live in an appropriate way – to comply with the Dharma when earning a living.

***Right Effort:*** To apply oneself with suitable diligence – to practice single-mindedly without interruption.

***Right Mindfulness:*** To contemplate correctly – to apply true wisdom to invoke the right path, without incorrect notions.

***Right Concentration:*** To meditate correctly – to enter a pure, flawless mindset, according to Right View.

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**Q 81: So many terms. They are hard to remember. Is there a basic, underlying principle?**

▶▶A: The Law of Dependent Origination is the fundamental rationale on which the Four Noble Truths are based. It's the fountainhead from which all Buddhist teachings flow.

## 2. The Law of Dependent Origination

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### Q 82: What is the Law of Dependent Origination?

▶▶**A: Dependent Origination** means that “dharma arise from causes and conditions.” In Buddhism all material and spiritual phenomena are called “dharma.” Such terms as “all dharma,” “various dharma” appear often in the scriptures; they mean “all things” or “phenomena in the universe.” Briefly, all things and phenomena arise because of circumstances. They exist in co-relationships and according to conditions – without which not a thing or phenomenon can arise. “Causes” are the internal reasons. “Conditions” refer to external circumstances. They are generally explained as relationships and conditions.

The Buddha defines “Dependent Origination” as follows: “If this exists, that exists. If this arises, that arises. If this doesn’t exist, that doesn’t exist. If this ceases, that ceases.” The four sentences point to interdependent relationships, both simultaneous and non-simultaneous.

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**Q83: What are “simultaneous and non-simultaneous interdependent relationships”?**

▶▶A: At a specific time or in the present moment, a thing is an aggregation of various conditions. Without them, that entity doesn't exist. This is why “if this exists, that exists; if this doesn't exist, that doesn't exist.” That is a simultaneous, interdependent relationship. Consider the relationship between teachers and students. Only if there are teachers are there students, and vice versa. Without teachers, no one can be called students, and vice versa.

In terms of time's passage, something that now exists is the result of things that existed but are now gone – and the cause of something that will arise in the future. All phenomena are in the process of sequential arising and ceasing, in a chain of causality. Therefore “if this arises, that arises; if this ceases, that ceases.” These are non-simultaneous, interdependent relationships. Take the link between seed and sprout. A seed exists first, then grows into a sprout. Given the sprout's current presence, its previous form can be called seed. That's a non-simultaneous, interdependent relationship. From another perspective, the seed ceases to exist as soon as the sprout comes into being, and the sprout arises when the seed ceases to exist. Such phenomena of arising and ceasing constitute a simultaneous interdependent relationship.

To sum up, all phenomena invariably exist in certain interdependent relationships, either simultaneously or non-simultaneously. Nothing can exist by itself.

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**Q 84: Are interdependent relationships equivalent to causality?**

▶▶A: Yes. In the case of non-simultaneous interdependent relationships, the seed is the cause and the sprout the effect. This is **non-simultaneous causality**. In simultaneous interdependent relationships, the teacher, if taken as the prime agent, represents the cause and the student the effect – and vice versa if the student is the principal. This is **simultaneous causality**.

In fact, causality is extremely complicated. A cause produces a specific effect from one point of view. And the same cause leads to another effect if observed from a different perspective. For instance, A is B's teacher in a teacher-student relationship, but is C's father in terms of parentage, and D's husband as far as marriage is concerned. When A is taken as cause, B, C, D and all others are effects. That is one cause with multiple effects. If others are causes, A would be the effect – multiple causes with a single effect. Actually there is no absolute (non-relative) cause or absolute effect.

Thus the world is a boundless network, linked by countless sequential causalities in time and interdependent relationships in space.

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**Q 85: Is the Law of Dependent Origination a teaching unique to Buddhism?**

▶▶A: Yes. The Law of Dependent Origination comprises four major points: 1) no creator of all things; 2) egolessness; 3) impermanence; 4) seamless cause and effect.

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**Q 86: What does “no creator of all things” mean?**

▶▶A: It means there is **no divine force that created the universe** and all its phenomena. Since “dharma arise from causes and conditions,” there cannot be an independent creator. Causes originate from (other) causes, and conditions arise from conditions. Every cause has its own causes and every condition its own conditions. There is no beginning or end to time, or to space. The conclusion: There is no absolute cause.

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**Q 87: That makes Buddhism seem atheistic. Why are there numerous deities in Buddhist stories?**

▶▶A: Yes, from the perspective of its denial of a creator, Buddhism is **atheistic**. But it doesn’t negate the existence of deities; it regards them as beings within the Six Realms. Some of them are protectors of the Dharma.

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**Q 88: What is “egolessness”?**

▶▶A: Every sentient being is simply an aggregation of material and spiritual elements. There is no unchanging, determinant ego. Each element arises and ceases from instant to instant, depending on conditions. So we cannot find a fixed, independent “I” that dominates our bodies and minds. This is “**egolessness**.”

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**Q 89: What is “impermanence”?**

▶▶A: All phenomena in the universe exist in interdependent relationships, wherein if this arises that arises, and if this ceases that ceases. There is **no permanent existence**. Phenomena are impermanent in nature,

arising and ceasing instantly. As the scriptures say, “Formations are impermanent. They are the dharma of arising and ceasing.” “Formations” denotes all things and phenomena. The term **“formation”** carries the meaning of continuous change – phenomena are transforming all the time, so they are called “formations.” **“Arising and ceasing”** signifies the stages of “arising, abiding, changing and ceasing.” The origination of a phenomenon is called “arising”; it is “abiding” while it remains functional. Despite its functioning, it is concurrently transforming – “changing.” And “ceasing” denotes its extinction. An **“instant”** is an extremely short time. A finger-snap spans 60 instants, says a sutra. “Arising and ceasing instantly” means covering the four stages in a single instant.

For example, a human lifespan as a whole is a single phase of arising, abiding, changing and ceasing – namely birth, aging, sickness and death. But each part of the person goes through the four stages instant by instant, that is, physiological metabolism. An object’s arising, abiding, changing and ceasing and a world’s formation, existence, destruction and emptiness both consist of continuous instants of arising and ceasing. All phenomena arise and cease every instant. So the myriad things exist on an illusory, temporary and imaginary basis. They are not permanent. All are void. Buddhism calls this principle **“Dependent Origination and Empty Nature.”**

All things are impermanent and empty. But that’s not to deny the existence of objective phenomena. The formulation penetrates the essence of existence, allowing us to perceive that we live in an illusory, ultimately insubstantial world. With this insight, we can let go of our avaricious pursuit of material comforts, fame and wealth.

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**Q 90: Is Buddhism itself also subject to the law of impermanence?**

▶▶A: Yes. The Buddha predicted that his teaching would spread in the world over three successive phases. The first was the Age of Correct Dharma, characterized by the rise of Buddhism. Then came the Age of Semblance Dharma, or the evolutionary era. Third is the Age of Dharma Decline, when decay sets in. The Buddha also spoke of a future Age of Dharma Extinction. “Formations are impermanent,” and Buddhism is no exception.

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**Q 91: What is “continuous cause and effect”?**

▶▶A: Matters that originate from causes and conditions are impermanent, arising and ceasing constantly. Yet they succeed one another continuously, the way a steam flows – what precedes disappears, giving way to what follows. Causes produce effects without pausing. This reflects the vertical aspect. From the horizontal perspective, categories of causality involve innumerable differences. Though intricate and complex, they are governed by rigorous laws and operate with perfect accuracy. Where there is a cause, there is an effect. A type of cause brings the same type of effect. Positive causes produce positive effects, and negative causes generate negative effects. Causes conform with their effects, and effects correspond to their causes. For example, one who kills cuts short another being’s life, sowing the seeds for his own life to be shortened. One kind of cause cannot generate effects of a different kind. One who sows gourds can only reap gourds. This is the **Law of Causation** (“karma”) taught by Buddhism.

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**Q 92: Good people suffer misfortune while evildoers prosper. This tends to make people skeptical about the Law of Causation.**

▶▶A: Saying that good people suffer misfortune while evildoers prosper is a bit exaggerated. In reality good people are mostly safe and sound, living peacefully and contentedly, while evildoers often face mishap, sickness and other troubles. Yet occasionally bad things happen to a virtuous person or good fortune anoints an evildoer. Such cases contravene common sense and therefore leave a deep impression. Certainly, they exist.

The workings of cause and effect (karma) in Buddhism cover three time frames – past, present and future. Causes created in the present lifetime may bring effects either in this life or after many subsequent lives. A person may plant good seeds this life but may not reap positive fruits immediately for lack of the necessary external conditions. At the same time, negative seeds from her past lives may meet the requisite circumstances and ripen, producing misfortune in her present life. Moreover, one may subsequently regret positive behavior as well as repent negative acts. And good and evil deeds may not actually be what they seem. Given the complexity of causality, it isn't appropriate to draw simplistic conclusions on the basis of superficial indications.

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**Q 93: If one has created a negative cause by committing a karmic offense, is it possible to prevent the negative consequence by way of penitence?**

▶▶A: If it is light, bad karma can be eliminated through repentance. Penitence means honestly confessing one's wrongdoing before the Buddhas or an assembly of people, repenting it without reservation, and resolving never

to commit the same offense again. With great sincerity, one washes away the internal filth, dispels the inner darkness and restores purity of mind. If the penitent subsequently “sees signs of the purification of offenses” – such as viewing or dreaming of sacred beings, light, palaces, the sun, the moon or other positive images – it can be ascertained that the unwholesome seeds have been eradicated. This is called **“purification of bad karma.”**

Substantial negative karma can only be cleansed by the recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name.

**Q94: As previously mentioned, “where there is a cause there is always an effect.” Does that contradict the notion of “purifying negative karma”?**

►►A: As a sutra says, “Countless *kalpas* may pass, but the karma of our deeds does not disappear.” That, however, is directed at those who lack Dharma wisdom and know nothing about the transfer of karmic consequences. From a wisdom-infused perspective, the principle of Dependent Origination and Empty Nature also applies to karmic causes, so they can be eliminated or transferred. If every karmic cause had to manifest its effect before vanishing, we would never be delivered from the cycle of rebirth.

**Q95: Can we offset our accumulated negative karma with good deeds?**

►►A: One’s good and evil actions produce their own effects – neither can be offset by the other. Negative karma cannot be canceled by positive deeds. But by cultivating virtuous seeds and accumulating good karma,

we can keep negative conditions at bay and prevent their unwholesome effects from materializing.

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**Q 96: Our past lives impact our present circumstances. Can this explain why people are born different?**

▶▶A: Yes. There are great circumstantial disparities among children born in different places and families. Newborns are unable to create karmic causes, so it seems that they shouldn't be different. Our differences at birth are the consequences of causes created during past lives. Our present form, male or female, beautiful or ugly, rich or poor, intelligent or dull, is the reward for how we acted in previous lifetimes. So it is called our "reward body."

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**Q 97: So it's not correct to say that "the Jade Emperor and King Yama [the rulers of heaven and the netherworld respectively] control our destinies"?**

▶▶A: Of course not. What life form we take and how much joy or suffering we experience are not decided by God or by chance. They derive from the minds of sentient beings themselves. Our fate is in our own hands, as we are entirely capable of determining the motivations of our behaviors.

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**Q 98: If we can control our own destiny, why does fate toy with some people?**

▶▶A: Because they haven't found the way to determine their own fate. To improve our destiny, we should sow positive karmic seeds, instead of scrambling for worldly advantage.

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**Q 99: Earlier you spoke of “egolessness.” Now you say our destiny is in our control. Doesn’t this “our” point to an “ego”? If there is no “ego,” who receives the positive and negative karmic payback? Who is liberated through practice? Doesn’t everything seem meaningless?**

▶▶A: While stressing the elimination of the “view-of-self,” at the worldly level Buddhism acknowledges subjective personality, the “I” or “me,” that distinguishes self from others. All living phenomena originate from conditions, arising and ceasing constantly without a permanent, determinant ego. But these phenomena, while emerging and vanishing instantly in a continuum of cause and effect, must be manifest in a tangible entity, namely the **“worldly I”** or “false ego.” The body and mind of this “worldly I” persist from thought to thought, appearing stable on a periodic basis.

Buddhism calls “egolessness” and other absolute principles “ultimate truths,” “supreme truths” and **“first-principle truths.”** Secular principles relating to phenomena produced by causes and conditions are known as **“worldly truths.”** The Buddha’s teachings emphasize the “interpenetration of the ultimate and the worldly” – the two aspects of the same truth. Absolute truths do not conflict with relative, secular truths.

## 3. Rebirth in the Six Realms

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**Q100: Does the aforesaid “past lifetime” refer to the “previous life” that people often mention?**

▶▶A: Yes. According to the Law of Dependent Origination, every human being is a complex aggregation, which can be traced materially and spiritually back to causes and conditions existing before his or her birth.

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**Q101: Does it mean the life before the present lifetime, or what many call “reincarnation”?**

▶▶A: Yes. The Twenty-Four Histories, which is the official history of China, contain many cases of people and events relating to reincarnation. In modern times, television, newspapers and magazines also frequently report similar occurrences, domestically and internationally. These events really happened and shouldn’t be dismissed as superstitious.

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**Q102: So Buddhism doesn’t agree with the idea that “a person’s death resembles a light being extinguished”?**

▶▶A: Buddhism calls the notion that “a person’s death is like a light going out” a “**nihilistic view.**” If such a conclusion could be established,

death would signify an end to continual cause and effect, rendering untenable the Law of Dependent Origination. By observing our surroundings, however, we cannot find anything that goes against the Law of Dependent Origination. The most immediate evidence to refute the “nihilistic view” is pre-life memory. Past and present, there are many cases around the world of people remembering their past lives.

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**Q103: But not everyone can remember his or her previous lives.**

►►A: That’s true. The process of transmigration is full of intense, complex changes in body and mind, plus ten months of fetal gestation. Most people cannot remember anything of their pre-lives. In fact, we can’t even remember what happened during our infancy, let alone anything before birth. Without memories, there seems no evidence. So for most people, the existence of rebirth is more or less a matter of faith.

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**Q104: Then I can continue to believe that “a person’s death is like a light being extinguished,” as most people do? I feel this is freer and easier.**

►►A: Faith cannot be forced. What happens after death is mysterious, unknowable. We ordinary beings cannot see it with our own eyes. If we rely on our perceptions, we may easily conclude that “a person’s death is like a light going out.” Insofar as life is concerned, however, it would be better to acquire greater understanding. If it turns out that there really is a realm beyond death and we know nothing about it, wouldn’t it be too late for regrets?

“A person’s death is like a light being extinguished” is perfunctory talk by those who dare not face the end of life. Confronting a real and deadly

threat, no one can casually let go of his life, “like a flame going out.” He would try his utmost to live on, using every means to extend his life.

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**Q105: More understanding may do some good. Besides, I am curious. Can you speak more specifically about it?**

▶▶A: When a lifetime ends, life itself does not disappear with the dispersal of physical elements. A part of the spiritual element continues to exist. Buddhism calls it *shenshi* – “mind knowledge,” “spiritual consciousness” or just “spirit.”

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**Q106: Is that the “soul” of common parlance?**

▶▶A: Somewhat similar, but that’s not quite accurate. It’s a subtle topic to discuss. Reincarnation cannot be understood simply as a worm crawling from one leaf to another, as that would violate the Law of Dependent Origination – “arising and ceasing instant by instant” and “egolessness.” A more apt metaphor would be “one torch igniting another.” The afterlife isn’t the present life. And there isn’t anything constant and changeless passing from this life into the next one. Yet the two are closely associated in the form of successive causality. For general comprehension, we may assume a connecting bond that carries karmic seeds and ensures the continuity of causes and effects. But that’s not the soul people often talk about.

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**Q107: What happens to the mind consciousness?**

▶▶A: It will be propelled by the karma of the lifetime preceding death to another one.

A life ends when a sentient being's karmic good fortune or retributions are exhausted. The being will then be born into another life. Births and deaths continue like a wheel, revolving in endless cycles. That is **samsara**, or the **cycle of rebirth**. "Sentient beings reincarnate in the Six Realms like a wheel, having neither beginning nor end," says a sutra.

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**Q108: So a person after death can be reborn as a human again?**

▶▶A: That's not certain. The common belief that "people become ghosts after death" is also inaccurate. After we die, we may be reborn as humans, ghosts or other life forms.

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**Q109: Does that mean we may be reborn as animals, such as pigs and sheep?**

▶▶A: Nothing unusual about that. Every sentient being is a participant in the cycle of rebirth.

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**Q110: Were flowers and trees reincarnated from humans?**

▶▶A: No. The cycle of rebirth is limited to living entities with emotive consciousness, or "sentient beings," as Buddhism calls them. Some people say that experiments prove plants also have emotion. That's because invisible sentient lives may attach themselves to plants.

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**Q111: Reincarnation transforms one life into another. The latter is not the former. So why should the innocent new life bear the consequences of the negative karma produced by the old one?**

▶▶A: The body and mind of a new life are the continuation of the previous one, so it has the qualifications and responsibility to assume the karmic effects of its predecessor. A sutra contains this parable: A man throws a spark to a woodpile, setting it on fire. The fire spreads and burns down dozens of villages. When he is caught, the man quibbles, “I only tossed a tiny spark, which went out long ago. The later fire was not set by me.” Others retort, “The villages were not ignited by you personally, but the conflagration was caused by the spark you threw. You are the one who created the fiery disaster!”

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**Q112: How many kinds of life form are there?**

▶▶A: There are many more types of life form than we imagine. They are roughly divided among six or five realms. The “Six Realms of Rebirth” is a term frequently used in Buddhist texts. The **Six Realms** are inhabited by celestial beings, humans, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings. The first three enjoy comparatively benign living conditions, and are collectively known as the “**Three Virtuous Realms.**” The others subsist in comparatively malign environments – the “**Three Wretched Realms.**” Some scriptures refer to **Five Realms**, classifying different types of asuras as celestial beings or hungry ghosts.

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### Q113: How are living conditions in the Six Realms?

►►**A: Celestial beings** have dignified appearances, radiant bodies and long lives. They are happy, carefree. Their karmic rewards are supreme among the realms.

**Human being** is “*manusya*” in Sanskrit. The term means “consciousness” or “thought.” That is to say, the conscious mind is a distinctive characteristic of humans. Yet our physical and mental behaviors are restricted by our corporeal bodies and material environment. Unlike celestial beings, we cannot act as we like. Most people are driven by desires for food, clothing, fame and wealth, and live without freedom.

**Asuras** is translated as “non-deities,” because they enjoy heavenly blessings but lack celestial virtue. They are similar to, but are not, deities. The term is also rendered as “undignified,” since male asuras are ugly. Their realm is characterized by material abundance and spiritual poverty, while they have an inborn aggressiveness.

Beings in the Realm of **Animals** range from large ones like pigs, horses, cattle and sheep to diminutive insects and reptiles. They are ignorant by nature. Some are bred by humans and others eat one another.

**Hungry ghosts** come in many types. Their suffering and enjoyment vary greatly as well. Most look vulgar and deformed. They are craven and cowardly, desperate for food and drink. They suffer untold misery.

**Hell beings** are subject to extreme penalties and endure all kinds of torment. They live without hope or joy. Wishing for a death that doesn't

come, they whine all the time.

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**Q114: There are so many kinds of beings, but why can we only see humans and animals?**

▶▶A: Because other sentient beings are made of superfine substances or exist only as consciousness. They cannot be discerned by the naked eye or even by scientific and technological means.

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**Q115: Is the often-mentioned heaven the Realm of Celestial Beings?**

▶▶A: Yes. Buddhism doesn't deny the existence of the Great Brahman, Lord of Brahmanism, but does not take him as the creator and master of all things. We may also consider the Jade Emperor of Daoism and the gods of other religions in a similar manner.

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**Q116: Who enters heaven and who goes to hell?**

▶▶A: That certainly isn't randomly arranged, but is decided according to our own actions, as causes must match their effects. Good seeds lead to birth in the Virtuous Realms and bad ones in the Wretched Realms. At the point of death, the good or the bad, whichever is stronger, will draw the person into the corresponding realm.

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**Q117: But there seems no absolute criteria for good and bad ...**

▶▶A: In the form they take, good and evil have no absolute criteria in different times and regions. But in terms of essential intention, there are certain norms. Simply speaking, benefiting others is good and hurting others is

bad. Buddhism classifies wholesome and unwholesome deeds into ten types. The **Ten Good Actions** are avoidance of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive talk, harsh speech, flowery words, greed, anger and ignorance. Doing the opposite are the **Ten Evil Actions**.

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**Q118: Do the “ten unpardonable offenses” of common usage refer to those Ten Evil Actions?**

▶▶A: The “ten unpardonable offenses” are not the same as the Ten Evil Actions. The former refer to wrongdoings that are too weighty to be pardoned, such as plotting treason. The **Ten Evil Actions in Buddhism** are:

*Killing* – taking the life of a sentient being.

*Stealing* – committing theft, fraud or robbery.

*Sexual misconduct* – engaging in sexual activity outside marriage.

*Lying* – reversing right and wrong or speaking contrary to one’s thinking.

*Divisive talk* – stirring enmity or sowing dissension.

*Harsh speech* – speaking dirty, abusive words, or slandering or insulting others.

*Flowery words* – making speech that is ornate, flattering, mocking others for pleasure; composing songs or music associated with worldly desire and passion, or writing books that stir lust or covetousness.

*Greed* – having unbounded desires and never being satisfied.

*Anger* – raging against others or resenting them.

*Ignorance* – lacking wisdom, sticking to skewed views, disbelieving karma and the cycle of rebirth.

**Q119: Is killing evildoers also forbidden? Is hating enemies bad too?**

▶▶A: Good or evil only concerns one’s own deeds, words and thoughts; it doesn’t vary according to objects. A criminal is brought to justice because he broke the law and deserves legal sanction. It’s not because any specific person wants him to die. Shakyamuni Buddha forbids killing but he does so to regulate individuals’ activities, as well as to avert violation of the law. He always taught his followers to abide by worldly laws. The two are disparate matters and shouldn’t be discussed together, to avoid confusion. The Buddha’s compassion embraces all beings. He sees that evildoers will suffer in hell and tries every means to save them.

However, Buddhists often face dilemmas. There’s a story in a sutra: Shakyamuni Buddha used to be a guide for a merchant ship in a previous life. To save his shipmates, he killed a pirate who intended to murder others for money. He did so without harboring any hatred for the pirate or any intention of ridding the community of an evil. He thought: If the pirate got his way, his companions would suffer and the killer would go to hell. If I told the truth, unwholesome thoughts would arise among my shipmates and they would go to hell too. I’d rather kill the pirate and fall into hell myself.

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**Q120: If a person who was bullied by another takes revenge as worldly people do, does he violate the Ten Good Actions?**

▶▶A: Yes.

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**Q121: What should he do then?**

▶▶A: Regard the situation as paying off a debt. According to the law of causality, we are bullied because we once bullied the other; the present pain we feel is the same suffering we previously inflicted on the other. If we can willingly put up with it, the debt will be discharged forthwith.

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**Q122: If we constantly concede, isn't that cowardly?**

▶▶A: It shouldn't be considered so. In such cases, being bold may lead to rash action. One who expects to benefit from the Dharma should discard worldly notions of "justice," because an-eye-for-an-eye retaliation produces negative karma and endless entanglement from which it is hard to escape.

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**Q123: Greed, anger and ignorance are merely mental activities. If they aren't carried out, do they still produce negative karma?**

▶▶A: Among the three activities – deeds, words and thoughts – Buddhism especially emphasizes the purity of the last one, action of the mind. That's because deeds and words derive from thoughts. Greed, anger and ignorance are called the "**Three Poisons**" since they are the source of all negative karma and can poison our efforts to cultivate wisdom.

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**Q124: Everyone has unwholesome thoughts. Does that mean we've all planted seeds of rebirth in the Wretched Realms?**

▶▶A: Yes. But the final result will be assessed on a comprehensive basis. If we're aware of this and forsake the unwholesome for the wholesome, exercising prudence in our thoughts, words and deeds, we will change our lot for the better.

Generally speaking, beings that undertake the Ten Good Actions with upper, middle and lower grades will be reborn in the celestial, human and asura realms respectively. Those who commit the Ten Evil Actions with the equivalent grades will fall respectively into the hell, hungry ghost and animal realms.

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**Q125: How are we to distinguish among the three grades?**

▶▶A: The differentiation is based on the strength of conviction that accompanies the various actions.

*Upper grade:* doing things with fervor and full force.

*Middle grade:* doing things with moderate conviction.

*Lower grade:* doing things with a sluggish, indifferent attitude.

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**Q126: How many beings of the Six Realms are there in the universe?**

▶▶A: The universe is infinite. The world discernible with our naked eyes is defined as a small world in Buddhism. A thousand small worlds compose

a **small chiliocosm**; a thousand small chiliocosms form a **medium chiliocosm**; a thousand medium chiliocosms make up a **great chiliocosm**. The universe consists of countless great chiliocosms.

A great chiliocosm is the territorial orbit in which a Buddha teaches and transforms sentient beings. Therein, innumerable beings live in their respective states of suffering and joy.

The great chiliocosm where we live is called the “**Saha world.**” “Saha” means “endurable” – that is, beings there endure various vexations but are reluctant to leave.

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**Q127: Many people don’t seem to feel that they are enduring vexations.**

▶▶**A:** This shows that their minds have been assimilated by vexations. Consider a room filled with cigarette smoke. A non-smoker entering it would find it hard to bear, but a regular smoker wouldn’t have any special feelings. Sensory experience is even more illusory and ephemeral than the material world. When a person is distressed, the world loses its luster; as her troubles diminish, she becomes cheerful and everything turns beautiful and brilliant. We regard such relative, mentally fabricated experiences as reality, and fail to perceive the suffering that envelops us. That’s like someone who has been in a poorly ventilated room for some time, and isn’t aware of the dirty air.

As for the illusory nature of sensory experience, there is a well-known example in a Buddhist scripture: Clear water is seen as clear water by humans, as a home by fish, as pus and blood by hungry ghosts, and as a resplendent treasure by celestial beings. Which perspective is correct?

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**Q128: Each person’s behavior in this life is a mixture of good and bad. Which kind brings karmic payback first?**

▶▶A: Consequences come upon us according to gravity, habits or thoughts.

*Gravity:* If one’s good karma during life outweighs the bad karma, one will first be reborn in a Virtuous Realm. After payback for the heavier karma has been exhausted, the person would experience the consequences of lighter karma. Substantial karma, whether good or evil, is called “**fixed karma**”; its effects are destined to manifest first. (Amitabha-reciters’ exclusive practice of name-recitation and aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land is fixed karma.)

*Habits:* Consider a person who accrues no fixed karma in life and whose positive and negative karma are evenly balanced. If she has a strong karmic habit, after death she will be reborn towards the direction of such a habit. (So reciters of Amitabha’s name should cultivate the habit of name-recitation during their lifetimes.)

*Thoughts:* In the absence of fixed and habitual karma over a lifetime, one’s emotional state at the time of death would be decisive. Negative thoughts and mental formations upon death – such as fear, anxiety, clinging and hatred – make it hard for the dying person to avoid falling into a Wretched Realm. So it’s vital for him to remain at peace as death comes. Family members should not weep. They should induce him to recite Amitabha Buddha’s name. That would help him gain rebirth in the Pure Land, through the power of Amitabha’s vows.

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**Q129: Since beings of the Celestial Realm are happy and long-lived, perhaps we should try to be reborn in heaven.**

▶▶A: While there is happiness in the Celestial Realm, it also has deficiencies. The biggest is that its denizens are subject to birth and death. Even the longest-lived celestial beings will be reincarnated according to karma when their good fortune has been spent. When they find that their bodies are no longer as pure, bright and exalted as before, they would know that death is approaching. Especially when they see the places where they will fall, they feel even more miserable and scared. The suffering surpasses that of the hell domains.

Lacking difficult circumstances to spur them on, celestial beings mostly indulge in leisure and pleasure, enjoying the karmic blessings they accumulated from previous lives. So their merit and wisdom cannot grow. This brings them no benefit in terms of liberation from samsara, but rather delays it.

Therefore, compared with the Buddhas' pure lands, the Six Realms are all unfortunate. They are generally called the “**Six Wretched Domains**” or the “**Five Wretched Domains**.”

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**Q130: So in the Six Realms we cannot find anywhere to live in peace and safety?**

▶▶A: That's right. Beings in the Six Realms do not understand the principles of impermanence and egolessness. We seek permanent happiness in an impermanent world, and cling to the “self” in a self-less, conditioned realm. Hence we are subject to countless vexations, such as greed, anger,

ignorance, arrogance, suspicion, false views .... Such afflictions trigger unlimited negative karma, producing an endless cycle of rebirth.

So there is no safe place in the Six Realms, unless we can transcend samsara.

## 4. General Methods of Transcending Samsara

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**Q131: Does transcending samsara mean to “exit the Three Domains and be free of the Five Elements?”**

▶▶**A:** Something like that, though this is just a folk saying. The “Three Domains” is a Buddhist term while the “Five Elements” (metal, wood, water, fire and earth) is an indigenous Chinese expression, a generic reference to the material world. Buddhism uses the “**Four Elements**” to describe the physical world: earth (solid in nature), water (wet), fire (warm) and wind (motional).

The “**Three Domains**” are those of Desire, Form and Formlessness. The concept is another way of categorizing the beings of the Six Realms. Six kinds of lower-level celestial beings plus beings of the other five realms are classified under the **Domain of Desire** because they have desires for food, sexual pleasure and sleep. Eighteen heavens into which beings are born through four types of meditation constitute the **Domain of Form**. They are free from desires but remain confined in physical bodies. Through deeper meditation, beings can be born in four other heavens in which they have no physical bodies but only mental consciousness,

abiding in contemplative bliss. These comprise the **Domain of Formlessness**. The longest-lived celestial beings reside in that domain's "Heaven of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception." They have a life span of 80,000 great *kalpas*.

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**Q132: What does “*kalpa*” mean?**

▶▶A: “*Kalpa*” is a Sanskrit term. It’s an extremely long time unit, incalculable by years, months and days. In Buddhist texts, the length of a *kalpa* is described with the analogies of “rock *kalpa*” and “mustard seed *kalpa*.” The former is longer than the time needed for a rock of 40 *li* in perimeter to be ground down by the soft garment of a deva, who brushes it once a hundred years. The latter is the time needed for all the mustard seeds filling a city of 40 *li* square to be removed by a deva who takes away one seed every century.

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**Q133: By contrast, our human lives are too short!**

▶▶A: Yes, not only short but full of suffering. So eliminating the vexation of death is the premier task of our present life.

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**Q134: Some people may have the terrifying notion of committing suicide. Does that count as a method to eradicate the death vexation?**

▶▶A: People who lack understanding of life may think so. In fact, suicide also falls under the karmic offense of killing, especially when the victim harbors strong hatred. In that case, the painful consequences would be a billion times more intense than the suffering of this lifetime.

A Bodhisattva who sacrifices himself to rescue other beings is another matter entirely. He is practicing the Bodhisattva path, which is fundamentally different from suicide.

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**Q135: Can we escape reincarnation by performing charitable deeds?**

▶▶A: The effect of doing charitable deeds is to be reborn in the Human or Celestial Realms, but those are still within the cycle of rebirth. To transcend reincarnation, it's not enough to do good deeds only.

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**Q136: Doesn't Buddhism teach us to perform good acts and accumulate virtue too?**

▶▶A: Yes. But those aren't the entirety of Buddhism. Ordinary people can hardly rise above mundane good and evil; they merely try to escape the negative worldly causes and effects. They don't know that positive causes and effects of this world also anchor them in the Six Realms. So the focus of the Dharma is **supramundane methods** – to eliminate afflictions, attain enlightenment and transcend samsara.

However, it is difficult for us to accomplish that formidable task within one lifetime because our capabilities vary and our lives are short. This is why the Buddha first taught the Dharma's **mundane aspects** – practicing precepts and virtuous deeds to retain human form or gain rebirth in the Celestial Realm. By such means, practitioners can access the supramundane Dharma and obtain a guarantee to practice lifetime after lifetime.

Buddhism's special characteristic is extra-worldly: to transcend the everyday world.

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**Q137: Supramundane, transcending the world – isn't that passive and evasive thinking?**

▶▶A: The purpose of transcending the world is not to seek personal peace and happiness, but to perfect a state of being and acquire the ability to deliver beings from worldly suffering. So it is neither passive nor evasive.

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**Q138: What worldly and extra-worldly teachings did the Buddha reveal to us?**

▶▶A: To summarize, he delivered teachings of the “**Five Vehicles.**” “Vehicles” means conveyances that transport passengers to their respective destinations, whether nearby or far away. Vehicles are compared to various doctrines that guide people to different stages of attainment, in the context of liberation from samsara. The Five Vehicles are those of humans, celestial beings, Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas and Bodhisattvas. The first two are mundane teachings, and the other three are supramundane.

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**Q139: These terms sound unfamiliar. Can you please explain?**

▶▶A: The **human vehicle** requires practitioners to believe deeply in good/evil and cause/effect, and to reflect on human life and understand it. They should comprehend the difficulty of obtaining human form and hearing the Dharma, cherish their present lives, strive diligently to elevate their character, and activate the mind for self-improvement. They should also take the Three Refuges (in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and adopt the teachings as their compass in life) and strictly observe the Five Precepts

(no killing, theft, sexual misconduct, lying or alcohol). Those who take the Three Refuges and uphold the Five Precepts without fail will not lose human form after death, and may be reborn as humans.

The human vehicle also includes many regulations for worldly life. They include filial piety towards parents, respect for teachers, care for relatives and friends, hard work, reasonable expenditure and the rule of law.

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**Q140: Seems it's not easy to be reborn as a human!**

▶▶A: That's right. The Five Precepts appear simple, yet upholding them over a lifetime without lapses is no easy task. That's why the Buddha said, **"Human form is hard to obtain."** People who fall into the Wretched Realms after death are as copious as the soil of the earth, while those reborn as humans are as scant as the dirt wedged in a fingernail. To be born a human being in the endless cycle of rebirth, says a sutra, is less likely than **"a blind turtle encountering a floating log with a hole in it."** A log with a hollow in it is floating on a rough sea, and a blind turtle rises from the sea bottom to the surface once a hundred years. To be born a human is more difficult than the turtle reaching the log and putting its head through the hole.

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**Q141: Then we should cherish our human lives?**

▶▶A: Yes. In the Three Domains, a human body is the best vehicle for practicing the Dharma. We should do so diligently, to realize the true value of life.

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**Q142: The vehicle of celestial beings must be more difficult to achieve?**

►►A: Yes. By performing the Ten Good Actions and practicing generosity, one may be reborn in a heaven within the Domain of Desire. If one concurrently practices meditation, rebirth may be possible in a celestial realm within the domains of Form or Formlessness.

The human and celestial vehicles may offer benefits and joys in the present and subsequent lives, but their teachings lack the wisdom embedded in dependent origination and emptiness. So the two vehicles contain only worldly Dharma and cannot help us transcend rebirth in the Three Domains. Even so, they may be considered preparatory stages for extra-worldly Dharma. The Buddha emphasized taking the Three Refuges to plant in us the Bodhi seed (aspiring to Buddhahood to deliver others), so we can transcend samsara when we resume Dharma practice in subsequent lives.

People who do not encounter the Dharma but naturally act in tune with the karmic causes of the human or celestial vehicles, may also be reborn in the Human or Celestial realms.

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**Q143: How can we transcend the Three Domains?**

►►A: By means of the supramundane Dharma taught by the Buddha: the vehicles of Sravakas, Pratyekabuddhas and Bodhisattvas.

**Sravakas** (“voice-hearers”) are those who eradicate delusion and realize the truth after hearing the Buddha teach the Four Noble Truths. They are also called **Arhats**, the meanings of which include “non-birth,”

“foe-destroyers” and “worthy recipients of offerings.” “Non-birth” means ending birth and death, while a “foe-destroyer” is a terminator of afflictions. “Worthy recipients of offerings” are those who deserve such from humans and devas.

Adherents to this vehicle hear the correct Dharma, generate the mind of renunciation, take and uphold the Three Refuges, and strictly observe the pure precepts. They begin their practice by contemplating their own impurities and beings’ afflictions. They observe that all realms within and outside their bodies and minds are vexatious, empty, impermanent and without self. They cease deluded, jumbled thoughts, and meditate on the Four Noble Truths with right concentration (*samadhi*). Whether in or out of *samadhi*, they constantly reflect on the correct Dharma. The profound subtleties of the Four Truths manifest naturally and intuitively, rather than through rational inference. They gradually attain the four sacred stages: Sotapanna, Sakadagami, Anagami and Arhat. Their **delusion of views** (perspectives contrary to the truth, such as the views of self, permanence and nihilism, obtained through superficial, deductive thinking) and **delusion of thoughts** (emotive afflictions such as greed, anger and ignorance arising out of behavior according to circumstances) are eradicated. Thus they extinguish the causes of rebirth in the Three Domains. No afflictions will arise in their minds. They are liberated, at ease.

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#### Q144: What are Pratyekabuddhas?

►►A: **Pratyekabuddhas** (“awakened to conditions”) are also known as solitary realizers. They are those who achieve enlightenment on their own. They realize the Buddha’s doctrine of the “Twelve-fold Dependent

Origination” and become enlightened (awakened to conditions). Or, in a time or world without a Buddha, they observe in their own wisdom the essence of all things – a convergence of karmic conditions – and thus awaken to the principle of “Twelve-fold Dependent Origination” (solitary realizers). Their practice consists of ten levels of attainment, with the highest being Pratyekabuddha. The meditative wisdom attained by Pratyekabuddhas is more profound and subtle than the Sravaka Vehicle’s method of the Four Noble Truths and thus superior to that of Arhats.

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**Q145: What is “Twelve-fold Dependent Origination”?**

►►A: **“Twelve-fold Dependent Origination”** is a chain of twelve links of causality that illustrates pure or impure causes and effects. It’s also the driving force of the life circle: The world is a place full of anxieties and suffering. No being can escape old age and death (the link of Aging and Death); the cause of aging, death, sorrow and grief is birth in this world (Birth); birth in the Three Domains results from the previous creation of relevant good and bad karma (Becoming); the creation of such karma is due to grasping minds (Clinging); a grasping mind originates from desires and attachments (Craving); desires and attachments arise out of sensations of pain and joy (Feeling); sensations derive from contact with the external environment (Contact); such contact is the function of sense organs (Six Organs); sense organs comprise physical and spiritual elements formed in the embryo (Name and Form); an embryo is the product of a reincarnating consciousness (Consciousness); consciousness is generated from ever-changing conditioned phenomena and the arising and ceasing mind (Formation); and the arising and ceasing mind grows out of ignorance (Ignorance).

**Ignorance** is the inability to recognize the truth that all phenomena rise and cease according to conditions and are impermanent, without an inherent, unchanging self. In particular, ignorant beings cannot realize that their bodies and minds arise from causes and conditions but believe that there is a permanent, determinant self. By clinging to this “self,” they generate feelings of joy or pain when they face external objects. These feelings further cause greed, anger, delusion and other vexations, and consequently they create good or evil karma. According to the Law of Dependent Origination, “If this exists that exists. If this arises that arises.” Pursuing this trail in our minds, we discover in the end that the cycle of rebirth and all sufferings are rooted in ignorance.

The Law of Dependent Origination also shows that “If this doesn’t exist that doesn’t exist. If this ceases that ceases.” By observing in reverse the way to eradicate suffering (birth, aging, sickness and death), we find that if we eliminate the ignorance arising from our minds, the causal links that follow are inevitably severed. To rid ourselves of ignorance, we must rely on true wisdom to observe things as they are (reality). That is “to cut off the root of afflictions with the sword of wisdom.”

The Sravaka and Pratyekabuddha vehicles are called the “**Two Vehicles**,” or collectively the “**Lesser Vehicle**.”

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**Q146: Is the Vehicle of Bodhisattvas a part of the Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) tradition?**

►►A: Yes. **Bodhisattva** is a Sanskrit term. “Bodhi” means “enlightened” and “sattva” means “sentient being.” Briefly speaking, an “enlightened being” is one who embraces the lofty aspiration to deliver herself and

all other beings from misery and suffering to the realm of ultimate peace and joy (deliverance of self and others). She wishes to release herself and others from delusion and attain perfect enlightenment (enlightenment of self and others).

According to the law of dependent origination, a dharma (phenomenon, entity) arises upon the condition of all other dharmas. It is in turn a condition for the arising of all other dharmas. So everyone is related to all other beings in a single entity, the way a tiny bubble of seawater relates to the entire ocean. That's why a Bodhisattva "considers every sentient being my only child," and even that "all beings are my parents." From this notion, he develops the supreme *bodhicitta* (gaining Buddhahood to save others), and "serves sentient beings" tirelessly by giving them joy (kindness) and removing their grief (compassion). In a world where everything arises and ceases as a result of conditions, he fears not the cycle of rebirth, voluntarily entering samsara to become a family member, friend or even servant to sentient beings. His purpose is to guide them on to the path towards Buddhahood. He combines the work of delivering himself as well as others.

In terms of specific practice, besides cultivating Theravada teachings, Bodhisattva aspirants must make the **Four Great Vows**, and diligently perform the Six Paramitas (Six Perfections) and the Four Samgrahas (Four All-Embracing Virtues). They must "take Great Bodhi as the cause, and kindness and compassion as the foundation, progressing from the expedient to the ultimate." The final goal: to achieve Buddhahood and transform sentient beings.

The progressive sequence of practice and attainment in the Bodhisattva

Vehicle comprises 52 levels. They include the Ten Faiths, Ten Abidings, Ten Practices, Ten Dedications, Ten Stages, Equivalent Enlightenment, and Wonderful Enlightenment.

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#### **Q147: What are the Four Great Vows?**

▶▶A: “I vow to deliver the innumerable sentient beings; I vow to terminate the endless afflictions; I vow to learn the countless Dharma teachings; I vow to accomplish the supreme path of the Buddha.”

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#### **Q148: What are the Six Paramitas?**

▶▶A: “**Paramita**” is a Sanskrit term, meaning “reaching the other shore.” That is, to depart from this shore of afflictions and arrive at the other shore of awakening. The **Six Paramitas** are six ways to reach the other shore:

1. *Generosity (dana)*. It consists of three kinds: (i) “the giving of wealth,” which includes both external assets (money and other worldly possessions) and internal attributes (one’s physical strength, brain power and even head, eyes, hands and feet); (ii) “the giving of fearlessness” -- helping and rescuing others when they encounter troubles and grief, freeing them from terror and pain, and providing them with a sense of security; (iii) “the giving of the Dharma” -- edifying and helping sentient beings with worldly skills (virtuous Dharma) and extra-worldly wisdom and liberation methods (Buddhist teachings), so they can benefit from the Dharma. To propagate the Buddha Dharma and benefit living beings with the truth represents the highest level of generosity.

2. *Precepts (sila)*. Besides the precepts in common with the Theravada tradition, there are Bodhisattva Precepts specific to the Mahayana. They fall under three categories, and are known as the “Three Pure Precepts.” They are (i) “precepts against evil-doing” – averting negative actions and upholding all disciplines that lead to purity and liberation; (ii) “precepts for practicing good” – performing good actions and learning and mastering all Dharma teachings of purity and liberation; (iii) “precepts to benefit sentient beings” – bringing benefits to sentient beings, making the greatest effort to save them from suffering, and delivering all karmically affiliated beings. Failure to deliver anyone who can be saved constitutes a violation of the precept.
  
3. *Forbearance (khanti)*. It means to build indomitable willpower. There are three kinds of forbearance: (i) “enduring resentment and harm” – withstanding others’ slander, insults, maltreatment, injury and provocations without being angry, and facing others’ compliments and commendations without being prideful; (ii) “enduring pain and suffering” – bearing cold, heat, hunger, thirst, disease and pain without being distracted from practicing the Dharma; (iii) “persisting in attentive observance of the Dharma” – scrutinizing and reflecting on the profound, abstruse principles of Buddhism thoroughly and persistently, and being able to accept them without astonishment or skepticism. Bodhisattvas understand that karmic consequences are unavoidable, and that self and others are empty. Each arises and ceases instantly and are without permanent, unchanging substance. Bodhisattvas do not discriminate between good and evil. Faced with adversity in terms of people, affairs or the environment, they can remain calm, genial and unperturbed. They

do not become emotional or fearful, and can graciously handle all things with determination and patience while keeping a cool head.

4. *Diligence (viriyā)*. This is to make tireless efforts to accomplish deliverance and enlightenment for oneself, as well as for others. There are three types of diligence: (i) “armor-like diligence” – undertaking a vow with great determination to practice the Dharma, the way a warrior dons his armor before fighting in the battlefield; (ii) “diligence in practicing good” – making resolute, unremitting efforts to learn and practice the Dharma; (iii) “diligence in benefiting sentient beings” – engaging actively and persistently in endeavors to benefit others, and never regressing in one’s pursuit of the Dharma.
  
5. *Meditation (samādhi)*. The practice aims to focus the mind on a single point in order to eliminate stray thoughts. A still, serene mind can unleash unfathomable special powers, creating things and benefiting beings. There are three kinds of meditation: (i) “calmly abiding meditation” – avoiding mental lethargy and disturbance, concentrating the mind, and calmly abiding in a quiescent state; (ii) “triggering meditation” – applying the right *samādhi* to trigger special powers and wisdom; (iii) “servicing meditation” -- benefiting sentient beings and solving their practical problems, such as averting calamity and developing wisdom.
  
6. *Wisdom (prajñā)*. There are three kinds: (i) “wisdom based on worldly truths” – being versed in philosophy, medical science, languages, engineering technologies and other types of worldly knowledge and techniques; (ii) “wisdom based on transcendental truths” – personally realizing the transcendent wisdom grounded in

ultimate reality and the emptiness of self and all phenomena, and relying on such wisdom to sever afflictions and exit samsara; (iii) “wisdom to benefit sentient beings” – knowing various methods and skills to assist or deliver others.

The Six Perfections have two major aspects. The first five are collectively called “expedient means,” their purpose being to accumulate blessings. The sixth, *prajna*, aims at cultivating wisdom. The practice of the Six Perfections must be “guided by *prajna*.” “*Prajna* is like the eyes and the other five, the feet,” goes a saying.

One should perform the Five Perfections with a mind that conforms with ultimate reality. Though one is practicing diligently, one’s mind is free of attachment and doesn’t cling to the subject, object or merits of the practice. For instance, when practicing the Perfection of Generosity, one does not distinguish between the object that receives the benefit, the thing being offered and the subject that gives. Nor does one calculate the merit that derives from the giving. One’s mind accords with *sunyata* (emptiness), is carefree and attains the “emptiness of the three wheels.” Only this way can the practice be called “paramita,” and the practitioner be delivered to the other shore of nirvana.

**Q149: What are the Four Samgrahas (Means of Attraction)?**

►►A: They are the four Dharma methods that Bodhisattvas employ to attract, guide and edify sentient beings. While believing in the Dharma themselves, they employ these ways to teach others and persuade them to have faith in it. The **Four Samgrahas**:

1. *Generosity (dana)*: That means to provide relief to impoverished sentient beings, and to instruct and inspire those who lack understanding. It is to accommodate and sympathize with others, and to offer them support, mediation and guidance so as to diminish and eliminate their worries and distress. By eliciting joy in their hearts, Bodhisattva practitioners draw them close and make them more receptive to the teachings of purity and liberation.
2. *Kind speech (priyavadyata)*: This is to commend earnestly sentient beings when they are enjoying favorable circumstances, so they will continue to do good. When they face adverse conditions, use gentle words to comfort them, so they can overcome hardship. Persuade beings who are confused or deluded to stop negative acts and perform virtuous deeds. Bodhisattva aspirants should themselves refrain from lying, divisive talk, harsh speech and flowery words. They avoid all concealment and deception, and use kind speech to win others over, making them more receptive to the Dharma path of purity and liberation.
3. *Beneficial acts (arthakriya)*: In order to deliver beings, Bodhisattvas act regularly to benefit them. Such actions include being as self-effacing as servants and as attentive as filial children. Bodhisattvas distance their minds from arrogance, treat beings on a basis of equality, clasp compassion and kindness, make things convenient for others, boost their spirits, and help them accomplish positive undertakings and attain their goals. Eventually they draw others close and make them more receptive to the teachings of purity and liberation.

4. *Empathy (samanartha)*: Bodhisattvas frequently gather together with sentient beings. They participate in others' undertakings, live, work and establish friendships with them, become a part of them, and share their joys of success. They draw others close and make them more receptive to the teachings of purity and liberation.

Bodhisattvas apply these four methods to establish karmic connections and amicable relations proactively with sentient beings. Gradually, they attract them to the Buddha Dharma.

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**Q150: How long does it take to attain Buddhahood by practicing according to the Bodhisattva path?**

- ▶▶A: The path to Buddhahood is extremely long. Even a person with superior capabilities who has already reached the brink of liberation from samsara must spend anything from one lifetime to a hundred *kalpas* in order to become an Arhat. The status of Pratyekabuddha would take another four lifetimes to a hundred *kalpas* to accomplish. Further attainment is much more difficult, and generally requires three great *asamkhyeya-kalpas* (meaning three great uncountable *kalpas*).

The *Precious Necklace Sutra* says that cultivation of non-retrogressive faith takes between one and three *kalpas*. This marks the start of the first great *asamkhyeya-kalpa*. The second begins when the stage of Seeing-the-Path is reached, and the third commences when all afflictions have been eradicated. After completing three great *asamkhyeya-kalpas* of practice, one becomes an equivalent-enlightenment Bodhisattva (of the highest level) -- like Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta, Manjusri, Samantabhadra, Maitreya and Ksitigarbha. Another hundred *kalpas* are

needed for exclusive cultivation of the 32 marks before Buddhahood is obtained.

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### **Q151: Is there a realm higher than Buddhahood?**

▶▶A: No. Buddhahood means one has arrived at a state of perfection.

The domains of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Pratyekabuddhas and Sravakas are collectively known as the “**Four Sacred Dharma Realms,**” while those of celestial beings, humans, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings are the “**Six Ordinary Dharma Realms.**” Together, the sacred and ordinary domains are called the “**Ten Dharma Realms.**”

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### **Q152: What is the realm of Buddhas like?**

▶▶A: It is unfathomable and indescribable. We may obtain a rough understanding from the ten designations applied exclusively to a Buddha – the “**Ten Names of the Tathagata**”:

1. *Tathagata* (thus-come one, or *ru-lai*) – He takes the path of truth (*ru-shi*) and follows it (*lai*) to attain perfect enlightenment.
2. *Arhat* (one worthy of offerings) – He has accomplished all virtues, and possesses complete merit and wisdom. He is most noble and esteemed, one who deserves offerings from the nine Dharma realms.
3. *Anuttara Samyaksamuddha* (one with correct and universal knowledge) -- He has attained complete wisdom and truly understands all phenomena.

4. *Vidyacarana-Samanna* (one perfect in wisdom and action) – He has eradicated ignorance and fully accomplished all practices to manifest the virtues of a Buddha.
5. *Sugata* (well-gone one) – He can enter the ordinary world at will to deliver sentient beings, as well as freely transcend it to abide in nirvana.
6. *Lokavid* (one who knows the world) – He understands all worldly things and principles.
7. *Anuttara* (unsurpassed leader) – Within the Dharma realms, he is the wisest, most virtuous, most powerful, supreme and peerless teacher.
8. *Purusa Damya Sarathi* (trainer of men) – He is a venerated great being who can steer towards liberation sentient beings susceptible to being taught and transformed.
9. *Sasta Devamanusyanam* (teacher of gods and humans) – He is mentor to all human beings and deities.
10. *Buddha-Bhagavat* (the enlightened, World-Honored-One) – Having attained supreme enlightenment, he is worthy of respect by everyone.

In addition, Buddhist scriptures also introduce the Buddhas' Three Virtues, Ten Powers, Four Kinds of Fearlessness, Five-Fold Dharma Body, Eighteen Special Qualities, etc. There are numerous terms, which we need not discuss here.

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**Q153: Are Buddhas omniscient and omnipotent?**

►►A: The question should be considered in specific terms. A sutra says that a Buddha has **three bodies** (*trikaya*). Each produces marvelous effects in different realms.

1. **Dharma Body** (*Dharmakaya*): This is the body fashioned from the Dharma, sometimes called the “True-Nature Body” or the “Dharma-Nature Body.” It aggregates truth and the wisdom that realizes truth. It is pure, formless, unchanging, beyond birth and death. It is one with all phenomena and a part of ultimate reality (*tathata*). It suffuses all times and places. The Buddhas of the ten directions and three time frames (past, present and future) have one and the same Dharma Body.
2. **Reward Body** (*Sambhogakaya*): It’s also called the “Enjoyment Body,” which is the reward obtained by a Buddha from countless eons of practice and accumulation of merit and wisdom. It is a Dharma body that has form. In the domains of arising and ceasing, a Buddha, relying on his experience and inclination, makes vows, undertakes practices and makes known his name. He manifests a unique body that distinguishes him from other Buddhas, seamlessly continues his past life, and inherits his previous experience and merits. A Reward Body is forever enjoyed by a Buddha, and allows sentient beings to identify him.

There are two types of Reward Body: (1) the **Self-Enjoyment Reward Body**, which is used by the Buddha himself; and (2) the **Other-Enjoyment Reward Body**, which takes the form of a

Bodhisattva above the First Stage. The Reward Body of a Buddha resides in his Pure Land. It is tall, dignified, pure and free. It has infinite life and does not change.

3. ***Manifest Body (Nirmanakaya)***: It is also known as the “Transformation Body.” According to the aptitudes and circumstances of the sentient beings to be delivered, a Buddha’s Reward Body produces multiple Manifest Bodies to appear in their worlds. Their form coincides with the expectations of those beings, in order to save them.

The two types of Manifest Bodies are: (1) the **Response Body**, a Buddha’s body that resembles the human physique, but has perfect features as well as the 32 marks and 80 physical characteristics of a Buddha. This body undergoes the stages of being born, becoming a monk, attaining enlightenment, and guiding sentient beings in various ways. It passes away when the karmic conditions for delivering beings cease, so as to alert them to impermanence. (2) The **Variable Body**, which is revealed according to karmic conditions and is without fixed form. It may manifest at one or more places and as a Buddha, Bodhisattva, celestial being, human, asura, hell being, hungry ghost, animal, or even non-sentient forms such as a mountain, grass or a tree. It serves to benefit karmically affiliated sentient beings.

Shakyamuni Buddha is a Manifest Buddha. His “Self-Enjoyment Reward Body” is Vairocana Buddha, who resides in the “Lotus-Treasury Adorned World.” The “Other-Enjoyment Reward Body” of Shakyamuni Buddha is Lochana Buddha, who lives in “Akanishtha Heaven,” the top level of the Form Realm, and regularly teaches the Dharma to Bodhisattvas

of the Tenth Stage. “Shakyamuni” means “capable and kind” as well as “quiescent and silent”; “Vairocana” is “all-encompassing”; “Lochana” means “universal illumination.”

Even a Manifest Buddha who appears specifically for sentient beings has a realm that is beyond comprehension.

Are Buddhas omniscient and omnipotent? As far as the Dharma-Body Buddha is concerned, the Dharma Body is truth itself, and truth is certainly omniscient and omnipotent. The Manifest Body we may consider omniscient but not omnipotent. Shakyamuni Buddha knew about all sentient beings’ past, present and future. But he said that he could not deliver any person who is not karmically connected with him, nor could he transform the fixed karma of sentient beings.

Omniscience and omnipotence in Buddhism are not the same as for the gods of other religions, who created and control everything. A Buddha merely teaches sentient beings so as to awaken them or, by making rational use of the Law of Dependent Origination, assumes their negative karma by the power of his vows in order to rescue them.

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**Q154: Can everyone attain Buddhahood?**

►►A: Yes. When Shakyamuni Buddha achieved enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, his first utterance was: “How wondrous! All sentient beings have the Tathagata’s wisdom and virtue, but they fail to realize it because of their deluded thoughts and attachments.” All sentient beings have Buddha-nature and can gain Buddhahood.

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**Q155: If anyone can become a Buddha, there must be lots of Buddhas in the universe?**

▶▶A: Yes, there are countless Buddhas. Buddhist scriptures often refer to “the sundry Buddhas, as innumerable as grains of sand in the Ganges River.” They compare the number of Buddhas to the grains of sand in the Ganges.

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**Q156: If Buddhas were to apply their wisdom and abilities to national development, wouldn’t they bring more benefits to humankind?**

▶▶A: The Buddha teaches us to eliminate our inner afflictions, achieve complete liberation and, eventually, the perfection of Buddhahood. All efforts of Dharma practitioners are focused on this fundamental objective. If this goal can be attained through worldly methods, it would not have been necessary for the Buddha to leave home to become a monk and practice towards enlightenment.

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**Q157: So the sole purpose of learning Buddhism is to become a Buddha?**

▶▶A: Yes.

## 5. A Special Method of Transcending Samsara

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**Q158: How often have people achieved liberation from samsara through methods of self-cultivation?**

▶▶A: During the time Shakyamuni Buddha taught the Dharma, many who heard him in person attained liberation. That's because the Buddha was capable of discerning the aptitudes and dispositions of sentient beings and taught them the most effective ways to transcend the cycle of rebirth. In addition, those who were close to him had deep virtuous roots from past lifetimes and possessed superior capabilities. So they succeeded in their self-cultivation.

As time passed, the capabilities of sentient beings deteriorated. During China's Sui and Tang dynasties, there were still practitioners who freed themselves from birth-and-death through their own efforts. Nowadays there are few enough who can observe the precepts flawlessly. Even harder to find are those capable of achieving meditative concentration through the precepts, or manifesting wisdom through concentration.

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**Q159: Why are there fewer and fewer successful practitioners?**

▶▶A: There are many reasons. In terms of time, Shakyamuni Buddha's era is increasingly remote and we are unable to obtain his personal empowerment and guidance. As for the aptitude of sentient beings, our wisdom is shallow and meager while the principles of the Dharma are subtle and profound; it's difficult for us to understand them properly. So far as our living environment is concerned, we are in an **“unwholesome world of the Five Turbidities,”** where disasters are frequent, evil-doing is rampant, superstition is epidemic, vexations are powerful, and life is short. We can see growing moral degeneration and emotional restlessness. Sentient beings are becoming increasingly self-centered, so it's hard to resolve on *bodhicitta* (achieving Buddhahood to help others). Even people who wish to follow the Dharma path often cannot gain support from those around them.

The abundance of impediments means many aspirants will lose their resolve. Those who are already practicing may become attached to certain states they experience and fail to make further progress. Besides, there are non-Buddhist paths that resemble Buddhism but cannot lead to liberation. Many people cannot tell the difference.

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**Q160: So we have no choice but to practice the human and celestial Dharma vehicles, with a hope to continue Dharma cultivation in future lives?**

▶▶A: According to the Buddhist scriptures, we are now in a morally corrupt macro-environment. It will be worse in future lifetimes. Besides, due to our weak capabilities, we are more likely to be reborn in the Three

Wretched Realms than in the Human Realm the next life. Once we fall into the Wretched Realms, we may not be able to leave them for countless *kalpas*. The Buddhist teachings will remain in our world for 10,000 years. Thereafter, it will cease to exist here for five billion six hundred and seventy million years, until the birth of Maitreya Buddha. During this long period, what significance would there be even if we escape the Wretched Realms and are reborn as humans?

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**Q161: Does that mean this life is the last chance?**

►►A: We should spur ourselves on in this way. We must accomplish the task of transcending *samsara* in this life! If we broadly cultivate all virtues during this life but fail to extricate ourselves from the cycle of rebirth, we would **“come to grief in the third lifetime.”** That’s because practice in the present lifetime leads to enjoyment of karmic good fortune in the next one. But such enjoyment inevitably creates negative karma, which results in rebirth in the Hell Realm in the third life. Purification of the Hell karma will lead to rebirth in the Realm of Hungry Ghosts. And elimination of the karma for the latter will give rise to rebirth in the Realm of Animals. It would be extremely hard to obtain human form again.

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**Q162: But it’s so difficult to accomplish the precepts, meditative concentration and wisdom. What can we do?**

►►A: Bodhisattva Nagarjuna summarized everything we spoke of above as the **“Difficult Path.”** They are the common methods for liberation that rely on self-power practice. Among the Buddha’s teachings, there is also an “Easy Path” in addition to the “Difficult Path.”

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**Q163: Does that mean people who cannot accomplish perfectly the precepts, meditative concentration and wisdom also have a chance of liberation?**

▶▶A: Yes. In addition to the 84,000 common-path schools of Dharma practice, Shakyamuni Buddha introduced a special path – the path to “attain nirvana without eradicating vexations.” That is the Pure Land school. It relies on other-power deliverance through recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name.

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**Q164: Isn’t it said that “we reap what we sow”? How can we be delivered through other-power?**

▶▶A: To go by the law of karma, with sentient beings reaping the consequences of what they sow, it would be impossible for us to transcend the Three Domains (samsara). But the result would be entirely different if we rely on the karmic power of a Buddha. A sutra uses this metaphor: A grain of sand may be very light, but when thrown into the sea it invariably sinks. A big rock is heavy, but if put on a boat it doesn’t sink and can be safely shipped to the opposite shore.

If we depend on our own practice, we cannot achieve liberation from the rebirth cycle even if a tiny bit of delusive, afflictive karma is not eradicated. But if we rely on the power of the compassionate power of Amitabha Buddha’s vows, we can **be reborn in the Pure Land**, which he established for us. We can cross the sea of birth-and-death and reach the other shore of nirvana. This is to “attain nirvana without eradicating vexations.”

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**Q165: What does “to be reborn in the Pure Land” mean?**

▶▶A: It means to go to the Western Land of Bliss and be born from transformation in a lotus flower there.

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**Q166: Is the Land of Bliss a heaven or paradise?**

▶▶A: No. It’s a Pure Land in the west. It is far superior to any heaven or paradise.

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**Q167: Buddhists greet one another by saying, “Amitabha Buddha.” Is that because they all want to be reborn in the Land of Bliss?**

▶▶A: It should be so.

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**Q168: How did Amitabha Buddha and the Land of Bliss come about?**

▶▶A: Countless *kalpas* ago, Lokeshvararaja Buddha appeared in the world. A king heard him teach the Dharma and aspired to become a monk. His Dharma name was **Bhikku Dharmakara**. After hearing Lokeshvararaja Buddha’s teaching, Bhikku Dharmakara observed that sentient beings were incapable of escaping the bitter sea of reincarnation. He resolved to establish a Pure Land where beings can be reborn and attain Buddhahood in one lifetime. After five *kalpas* of reflection, he made 48 great vows. Then he cultivated and accumulated incalculable virtuous Bodhisattva practices over countless eons. When he perfected all merit and practices ten *kalpas* ago, he fulfilled his aspirations, achieved Buddhahood and established the splendid Land of Bliss. The *Amitabha Sutra* says:

“To the west of here, passing 10 trillion Buddha realms, there is a world named Bliss. In that land dwells a Buddha named Amitabha, who is now teaching the Dharma.”

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**Q169: So the Land of Bliss is so far away. I used to think that “the west” referred to India. What’s it like in the Land of Bliss?**

▶▶A: Just as Bhikku Dharmakara conceived it. The Land of Bliss is vast and full of splendors. The ground is made of soft gold and decorated by countless treasures. The climate is mild, refreshing and comfortable. There are no seasons, neither cold nor heat. Magnificent palaces, Dharma halls and monasteries can be seen everywhere. They are naturally forged from assorted treasures.

Resplendent seven-jeweled ponds are distributed all around, with beds of golden sand and lined with jewel-adorned pathways. The ponds are filled with the sweet water of eight meritorious virtues. On the surface of the water are beautiful lotus flowers of various colors, the size of chariot wheels. They bloom with dazzling brightness, together with subtle fragrance and purity. Around the pathways are rows of trees that emit perfume and are covered with jeweled nets. Anyone who wishes to view Buddha-lands of the ten directions can see scenes of them manifest among the jeweled trees, as clearly as if they were reflected in a mirror.

Various birds perch on the trees. They make chirping sounds to teach Dharma principles that people wish to learn, evoking in them the joy of reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name. The air in the Land of Bliss is full of heavenly music with harmonious, delicate melodies. Such mellifluous sounds awaken in those who hear them the aspiration for perfect

enlightenment. Large, precious lotus flowers can be seen everywhere. On such flowers sit Amitabha Buddha and Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta (the “**Three Sacred Beings of the Land of Bliss**”), expounding the subtle Dharma teachings.

Inhabitants in this land have the same bodily form and appearance as Amitabha Buddha. They have infinite life and infinite light and can hear Dharma teachings at will. They may, as they wish, observe other worlds and visit them to propagate the Dharma and deliver sentient beings. Food, clothing and utensils materialize as one thinks of them. If one wants to get dressed, “a fine Dharma robe will spontaneously appear on the person’s body.” If one wishes to take a meal, “food and drink of sundry taste will spontaneously and fully manifest.”

Beautiful scenery offer comfort and joy to body and mind but do not incite a single greedy, clinging thought. There is nothing negative in the Land of Bliss; not even the names of unwholesome things can be heard. Inhabitants constantly assemble with great bodhisattvas. They are free of worries and suffering of body and mind, and only enjoy immeasurable purity and bliss.

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**Q170: The Land of Bliss is such a supremely wondrous realm. Why do you speak of food and clothing?**

►►A: Because some people in the Saha world are short of clothing and food. Mentioning superior food and clothing is a means of attracting sentient beings. The acclamation of each aspect of the Land of Bliss corresponds to a specific defect of the Saha world. Its purpose is to inspire revulsion for this world and yearning for rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

In fact, the lofty subtleties of the Land of Bliss are far beyond the perception of ordinary beings. But a Dharma teaching for our deliverance must accommodate our mindset. Master Shandao calls this “indicating the direction to establish the entity.” It means to point out the location (in the west) and to set up some forms (such as the physical characteristics and marks of Amitabha Buddha and the splendors of the Land of Bliss). The goal is to have sentient beings fix their minds on such elements. Master Ouyi calls this “teaching according to sentiment” – meaning to adapt to the dispositions and preferences of ordinary beings to facilitate teaching and transformation.

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**Q171: If a sentient being is willing to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, how can he or she go there?**

▶▶A: Recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha.”

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**Q172: What does “Namo Amitabha Buddha” mean?**

▶▶A: In literal terms, “Namo” is a transliteration from Sanskrit, meaning to entrust our lives, to depend on and to show reverence. “Amitabha” means infinite, including the implications of “infinite light,” “infinite life,” etc. It denotes unlimited brightness and longevity. To recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha” is to entrust our lives to Amitabha and accept his deliverance.

Master Shandao, founder of the Pure Land school, gives a more profound explanation of the six-character name. He says: “ ‘Namo’ means to entrust our lives, as well as to aspire to rebirth [in the Pure Land] and dedicate merit towards it. [Reciting] ‘Amitabha Buddha’ is the

practice. That is why rebirth is certain.” This means the “Namo” -- two characters -- that we recite is itself reverential trusting (faith), as well as a resolve to dedicate merit towards rebirth (aspiration). Recitation of “Amitabha Buddha” -- four characters -- is the action we take to gain rebirth (practice). The six-character name encompasses faith, aspiration and practice, containing all the merit and virtues required for our rebirth in the Pure Land.

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**Q173: What is to dedicate merit?**

▶▶A: Dedication of merit means to direct all our positive roots, merits and virtue towards the goal we wish to attain. For example, the natural karmic consequence of positive actions is rebirth in the human and celestial realms. But the practitioner may re-direct the result towards rebirth in the Pure Land.

The natural consequence of reciting “Namo Amitabha Buddha” is rebirth in the Pure Land. So the Buddha’s name itself possesses the function of dedicating merit towards rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

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**Q174: Can we really be reborn in the Pure Land just by moving our lips and reciting Amitabha’s name? Surely that’s unreliable?**

▶▶A: By flipping a few buttons on a smartphone, we can talk to a friend a thousand miles away. This is inconceivable to our ancestors. Therefore, some matters exceed the present scope of human experience. It is not strange at all. Through Amitabha-recitation, we can be reborn in the Pure Land. This was taught by Shakyamuni Buddha himself.

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**Q175: In which sutra did the Buddha teach this?**

▶▶A: There are three sutras that specifically teach the method to gain rebirth in the Pure Land. They are the *Infinite Life Sutra*, the *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* and the *Amitabha Sutra*. They are called the Three Pure Land Sutras.

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**Q176: What do the Three Pure Land Sutras say?**

▶▶A: Fascicle 1 of the *Infinite Life Sutra* narrates how Amitabha Buddha first became a monk as Bhikku Dharmakara, made his vows, undertook Dharma practices, and established the Land of Bliss. Fascicle 2 of the sutra describes the resplendent features of the Land of Bliss, and urges sentient beings of all aptitudes -- upper, middle and lower -- to recite exclusively the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life (Amitabha). It also depicts the suffering of the Sara world, prompting sentient beings' aversion towards it. Finally, Shakyamuni Buddha tells Bodhisattva Maitreya that Amitabha-recitation encompasses great, unparalleled merit and benefits, and that one should break through all obstacles to hear, believe and practice the teaching. In the future, after the Buddhist scriptures and teachings have perished, this sutra will be preserved in the world for a hundred years so that afflicted sentient beings can still be delivered in the Age of Dharma Extinction.

The *Contemplation of Infinite Life Sutra* was spoken at the behest of Queen Vaidehi. Despite her exalted position, she encountered family tragedy. Her son imprisoned his father the king -- her husband -- and even tried to harm her. She was profoundly vexed and sought advice

from the World-Honored One about how she could get far away from this turbid, unwholesome world. Emitting a flood of light from between his eyebrows, the Buddha manifested before her the pure lands of the ten directions. Queen Vaidehi chose Amitabha's Land of Bliss and asked the World-Honored One how she could be born there through meditation and contemplation.

To guide sentient beings, the Buddha first introduced the Three Meritorious Practices (the Ten Good Actions, observation of precepts, and Mahayana cultivation) to embrace beings who have agitated minds and are incapable of practicing visualization. Then he broadly taught the Thirteen Meditative Contemplations and the Nine Levels of rebirth. He also described in detail the attributes of the Land of Bliss and the circumstances at the time of death, so as to arouse beings' aspiration for rebirth. Though he first spoke of the Thirteen Meditative Contemplations, the Three Meritorious Practices and the Nine Levels of rebirth, in the end he exhorted Ananda to recite the name of the Buddha of Infinite Life.

The *Amitabha Sutra* was delivered by Shakyamuni Buddha on his own initiative, without prompting, as he was about to enter nirvana. It recounts magnificent scenes from the Land of Bliss, and repeatedly urges and encourages sentient beings to aspire to rebirth there. It no longer mentions expedient means such as the dedication of merit from virtuous acts, meditative contemplation, the Three Meritorious Practices and the Nine Levels of rebirth. It directly presents the correct, primary cause of rebirth: steadfast recitation of Amitabha's name. It designates such practice as the causal condition of plentiful virtuous roots and meritorious blessings. If a sentient being single-mindedly recites "Namo Amitabha Buddha" for the rest of his life, Amitabha Buddha will comply

with his own Fundamental Vow, made in the causal ground, and appear before the person at the point of death to guide him. When the being sees the presence of the Buddha and the sacred assembly, his mind will not be confused. He will rejoice and follow Amitabha Buddha to the Land of Bliss.

Concerned that sentient beings may not believe the teaching of a single Buddha, Shakyamuni tirelessly conveyed corroborative messages from Buddhas of the ten directions. His purpose was to activate sentient beings' faith that "they would certainly be reborn in the Pure Land if they recite Amitabha Buddha's name." It is evident that the Three Pure Land Sutras expound the same thing: gaining rebirth through Amitabha-recitation.

All the common Buddhist schools that seek to eradicate delusion and realize truth through self-power practices may be classified as **schools of the Sacred Path** (the "Sacred Path" means the "path in this world that leads to sacredness," which only those with saintly roots can practice successfully). To gain rebirth and Buddhahood in the Pure Land by reciting "Namo Amitabha Buddha" and relying on the power of Amitabha Buddha's vows is called the special, unique Pure Land path. This is the Pure Land school's overall classification of the entire Buddha Dharma.

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**Q177: Since “gaining rebirth through Amitabha-recitation” is a teaching of the Buddha, we should believe it. But name-recitation is so easy and rebirth in the Pure Land is so sublime. The teaching seems very hard to believe. Please explain the principles behind it.**

▶▶A: Amitabha Buddha established the Land of Bliss, and delivers sentient beings to be reborn there. So we only need to look at the pact Amitabha Buddha made with us when he undertook his vows. The 18th of his 48 vows says, “If, when I achieve Buddhahood, sentient beings of the ten directions who earnestly believe and rejoice, wish to be reborn in my land and recite my name, even ten times, should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment. Excepted are those who commit the five gravest transgressions or slander the correct Dharma.” So long as sentient beings “earnestly believe and rejoice, wish to be reborn in my land and recite my name, even ten times,” they can obtain Amitabha’s guarantee that “should they fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.” “Earnestly believe and rejoice” represents faith, “wish to be reborn in my land” is aspiration, and “recite my name, even ten times” signifies practice.

What is special about the Pure Land school is that sentient beings of any aptitude can, this very lifetime, attain rebirth and subsequently Buddhahood by relying on this simple combination of **faith, aspiration and practice**. The goal is no different from that of the Sacred Path, which requires difficult, ascetic practices over countless lifetimes to cultivate precepts, meditative concentration and wisdom.

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**Q178. Why would “sentient beings of the ten directions” readily, “earnestly believe and rejoice”? What are they happy about?**

▶▶A: They certainly aren't happy without reason. Doesn't the vow say, at the beginning, “If, when I achieve Buddhahood ...”? The reason for rejoicing is that they know Amitabha Buddha has achieved Buddhahood.

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**Q179. Why are sentient beings happy about Amitabha's achievement of Buddhahood?**

▶▶A: Sentient beings have been sinking in the rebirth cycle over countless *kalpas*. Even if we previously encountered the teachings of the Sacred Path, we've had no hope of escape. During the interminable darkness of night, we have been desperately hoping for dawn. Now, we know that a Bodhisattva has practiced over countless eons towards the liberation of all beings, and that he has established a Pure Land of Bliss in which every being can be born through recitation of his name. That means our liberation from samsara -- the major issue that has perplexed us -- is finally settled. So we “earnestly believe and rejoice.”

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**Q180: “Wish to be reborn in my land” – that is easy to understand. To “recite my name, even ten times” seems very easy to do.**

▶▶A: To “recite my name, even ten times” is explained by Master Shandao as “from ten recitations up to a lifetime of recitation.” It means to recite Amitabha's name all life long, to make a habit of recitation, and always to recite whenever we remember.

“Ten recitations” applies to those who lack the karmic conditions to

hear and believe in Buddhism during their lifetimes. Only when death is approaching do they realize how terrible the rebirth cycle is, and the urgency of leaving it. They hear about the deliverance of Amitabha Buddha, recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha” for ten times, and are reborn in the Land of Bliss as a result. That’s because they have so little time left to live. If they had more time, they would surely continue reciting Amitabha’s name.

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**Q181: By the Dharma’s standards, I have been doing so badly in many respects. How can a person like me expect to be reborn in the Pure Land? It wouldn’t be so bad to obtain human form in the next life**

...

►►A: Please don’t think that way. Master Yinguang said that to be reborn as a human being is even harder than to be reborn in the Land of Bliss. That’s because to be reborn as a human depends on self-power practice, while rebirth in the Pure Land relies on the power of Amitabha Buddha. How can our self-power compare with Amitabha’s Buddha-power? No matter how heavy our negative karma, so long as we repent and recite Amitabha’s name, he will assuredly deliver us! Master Yinguang said that anyone who has deep faith, aspires [to rebirth] and recites the name will be reborn in the Pure Land. That’s why it is said: “If ten thousand people practice [recitation], ten thousand will be reborn.”

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**Q182: Were many people reborn in the Pure Land? How do we know they were reborn there?**

►►A: *Records of the Effects of Amitabha-Recitation* documents many cases of rebirth and recounts the various circumstances at the time of rebirth.

According to the teachings of the Pure Land school, exclusive practice of name-recitation is the “karma of assurance” (i.e., cause of assured rebirth). Therefore those who have complete faith and aspiration, and recite Amitabha’s name exclusively during their lifetimes, will definitely be reborn in the Pure Land. Whether they fully possess faith and aspiration is difficult for others to ascertain. The latter can only observe their outward behavior.

In general, those with full faith and aspiration will appear serene as death approaches, or even show a joyful smile. Some may speak of seeing Amitabha coming to receive them. Some have soft bodies long after the point of death. Since ancient times, those reborn in the Pure Land have displayed other auspicious signs, including foreknowledge of their time of death, dying (being reborn) while sitting upright or standing, fragrance permeating the room, and heavenly music echoing in the air. All these can be taken as supporting evidence of rebirth in the Pure Land.

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**Q183: Since many people have been reborn in the Land of Bliss, why haven’t we seen any of them coming back to tell us something?**

▶▶**A:** If any member of the sacred assembly in the Land of Bliss returns to this world, that would be a case of “willful reincarnation.” Bodhisattvas so reincarnated take whatever forms they deem necessary to deliver sentient beings. They all regard themselves as ordinary beings, instead of claiming that they are reincarnated Bodhisattvas.

However, since antiquity there have also been many cases of people reborn in the Pure Land informing, in various ways, one or more of their family members and friends of conditions in the Land of Bliss.

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**Q184: Did every person who aspired to be reborn in the Pure Land attain rebirth?**

▶▶A: Some of them weren't reborn.

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**Q185: What caused their failure?**

▶▶A: There are two main reasons. One is that they weren't willing to be reborn in the Pure Land. They may speak of their own willingness, but actually seek the karmic result of human or celestial birth. The other reason is that, though they were willing to be reborn in the Pure Land, they didn't understand the teachings underpinning rebirth. Therefore they did not exclusively practice Amitabha-recitation to accept the merit and virtue dedicated by the Buddha, but engaged in **mixed practice**.

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**Q186: What is mixed practice?**

▶▶A: The Land of Bliss is a realm of unconditioned nirvana. Rebirth there can only be achieved with genuine merit and virtue. Such genuine merit and virtue derive from the six-character name – “Namo Amitabha Buddha.” Amitabha Buddha made a pact with every sentient being about how to obtain his deliverance: To have faith in and accept his deliverance, aspire to rebirth in his Pure Land, and recite his name. If we follow his prescription, Amitabha will present us, free of charge, the perfect merit and virtue he accumulated over countless eons, for us to use as qualifications for rebirth in his Pure Land.

Those who perform mixed practice try to dedicate the merit from their Dharma deeds towards rebirth in the Pure Land. Because of deficiencies

in capability, however, they cannot eradicate all their afflictions and attachments. Their practice does not meet the Bodhisattva realm's standard of "Essential Emptiness of the Three Wheels." That means it is entirely devoid of the genuine merit and virtue needed for dedication towards rebirth.

There are also people who appear to practice name-recitation exclusively, but use Amitabha's name as a tool to still anxiety and concentrate the mind. Their purpose for name-recitation is to seek the first or other stages of meditative concentration, as they think that only such attainments would qualify them for rebirth in the Pure Land. However, very few practitioners can achieve meditative concentration. The inability to do so leads many ordinary people to lose even their faith and aspiration.

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**Q187: Isn't the purpose of Amitabha-recitation to overcome vexations and purify our minds?**

▶▶A: People often use the common-path Dharma teachings of precepts, meditative concentration and wisdom to interpret the Pure Land school. They think that Amitabha-recitation too is for the purpose of attaining meditative concentration and wisdom, so as to eliminate afflictions. Isn't that turning things around to fit the concepts of the Sacred Path schools? In fact, many practitioners worry that they cannot achieve purity of mind as they recite Amitabha's name. That is a misunderstanding of the purpose of Amitabha-recitation.

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**Q188: Then what is the aim of recitation?**

▶▶A: It is to rely on the power of Amitabha’s vow directly to attain rebirth in the Pure Land. The vow says if those who “recite my name, even ten times, should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.” Amitabha doesn’t require that we reach any levels or states during our recitation. Reciters needn’t first achieve merit and virtue themselves, and then dedicate the same towards rebirth in the Pure Land. His name itself constitutes all the merit and virtue that Amitabha Buddha bestows on us for our rebirth. By reciting the name we obtain his genuine merit and virtue, thus becoming qualified for rebirth. This is the “other-power” taught by the Pure Land school. People who undertake mixed practice are too attached to their own abilities (self-power). It’s hard for them to rely on Amitabha Buddha’s other-power. That’s why Master Yinguang said, “Get rid of self-power and embrace the Buddha’s empowerment.”

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**Q189: But why “get rid of self-power?” Needn’t we strive to achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth?**

▶▶A: The notion of “self-power” needs to be clarified. Generally, people tend to interpret texts literally. They think that relying on Buddha-power means to be lazy and make no effort. The word “power” in the term “self-power” should be understood as “ability,” instead of “effort.” Master Yinguang called self-power a person’s “own ability attained through cultivation.” It means a practitioner achieving liberation from samsara by dint of his own efforts: Such a person possesses self-power. Ordinary beings, however, do not have such ability; they have no “self-

power” at all. But we often believe, erroneously, that we have such “self-cultivated capability,” and that rebirth is the result of our own efforts. We lose sight of the power of Amitabha Buddha.

If we have a clear and realistic understanding of the circumstances, single-mindedly rely on Amitabha Buddha, and wholeheartedly trust in his power to deliver us, then all our efforts (developing faith, aspiring to rebirth and reciting his name) are transformed to a practical action – to depend on Amitabha’s power. This is to “**rely exclusively on Buddha-power.**”

To “get rid of self-power” means abandoning our persistence in pursuing liberation through reliance on our own ability. It doesn’t mean that we should stop making efforts.

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**Q190: There are many Buddhist schools. Why is the Pure Land school specially recommended?**

▶▶**A:** As previously mentioned, there are three successive phases during which the Buddha’s teachings remain in this world. They are the **Age of Correct Dharma**, the Age of Semblance Dharma and the Age of Dharma Decline. In the first phase, the teachings spread far, adherents performed real Dharma practice and some achieved sacred status. That was the era in which teaching, practice and realization all existed. Five hundred years later, during the **Age of Semblance Dharma**, the capabilities of sentient beings gradually deteriorated. No one attained genuine enlightenment. It was a period with teaching and practice, but no realization. A thousand years afterwards, in the **Age of Dharma Decline**, even people engaging in genuine practice are nowhere to be found,

though Buddhist teachings continue to exist. There is teaching only, but neither practice nor attainment.

Now we are in the Age of Dharma Decline, characterized by the absence of real practice. So Dharma schools whose followers rely on genuine practice to attain success are declining gradually. This results from the ability of sentient beings, the times and karmic conditions. It's not because these schools aren't superior.

The Pure Land school is centered on deliverance through the power of Amitabha Buddha's vows. It is the only Buddhist tradition in which realization does not depend on sentient beings' own achievements in practice. Even if none of our afflictions are eliminated, we can be reborn in the Western Land of Bliss by relying on Amitabha's compassionate power. That is why the Pure Land path "embraces all three kinds of capabilities and benefits both the smart and the dull." Accordingly, Pure Land lineage masters throughout history strongly advocated this tradition, which enables the attainment of liberation this very lifetime.

One can also achieve liberation in the present life by practicing according to the Ch'an and Esoteric schools. But practitioners without superior capabilities reap no actual benefit. Even an accomplished adherent with certain attainments may believe he has entered deep meditative states, when in fact he hasn't yet reached the First Dhyana (first of the four stages of concentration). And someone who achieves meditative concentration may cling to her contemplative joy, unwilling to make further progress. In sum, there are subtle distinctions that must be discerned at each stage. Practitioners must be guided by enlightened masters who are familiar with these accomplishments. Such masters are hard to find.

It is different with Pure Land, even though “only the Buddhas can truly fathom its ultimate meaning, and Bodhisattvas of the Ten Stages do not know even a bit of it.” Out of compassion for sentient beings, Shakyamuni Buddha didn’t go into the profound, abstruse theories and principles behind the Pure Land path when teaching it. Instead, he said clearly that he delivered the Three Pure Land Sutras specifically for ordinary beings. Therefore, it is sufficient to maintain the tradition by using language comprehensible to ordinary beings. Even if they cannot receive instruction directly from enlightened masters, Pure Land practitioners may establish the correct faith and attain rebirth through reading the works of the patriarchs. In short, Pure Land is the only school where ordinary people can obtain liberation by simply practicing according to the texts.

## 6. The Practical Significance of Buddhism

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**Q191: Through your introduction, I am now aware of Buddhism’s rich content. I used to think it was just spiritual balm for the weak.**

▶▶A: Those who know little about Buddhism easily have false impressions, considering it insubstantial and mystifying. They think enjoying life is more practical and down-to-earth. Actually, it is the complex affairs of the world that are truly illusory. Otherwise, why would so many men of letters proclaim that “life is like a dream”?

“Balm for the weak” seems to be derogatory. But if something does soothe the disadvantaged and enhances social harmony, how bad can it be?

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**Q192: So Buddhism can have positive effects on society?**

▶▶A: Of course. Since ancient times, Buddhism has always strongly enhanced the public’s peace of mind. It opens expansive, boundless vistas of life and the universe. It broadens our minds and lets us acknowledge our own smallness, inducing us to treat all others with modesty.

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**Q193: That’s true. But the Buddha says, “Life is suffering.” Isn’t that a bit pessimistic?**

▶▶A: The Buddha spoke about the truth of life’s suffering because he did not want us to rest just being aware of suffering. He wished to arouse in us a revulsion for suffering, so we could eventually leave it for joy. Worldly phenomena are constantly changing; they bring deficiencies into our lives. Wealth, social status, health, happiness -- all are impermanent. If we fail to understand that, we will have no inner motivation to escape suffering. A sick person, for example, won’t be willing to be treated by a doctor unless he knows he is seriously ill. Freedom, peace, joy, purity and even perfection are ideal states that every person is capable of attaining.

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**Q194: “The Four Elements are all empty,” “Form is emptiness.” Don’t these Buddhist sayings indicate passive sentiment?**

▶▶A: The “**Four Elements**” are four aspects of “form” (material substance). They are earth, water, fire and air. The two statements mean that while the material elements comprising a human body or even the world have appearance, status and function, they result from the convergence of multiple causal conditions. When these conditions arise, they arise. If the conditions cease, so do they. They are neither constant nor in control of their own destiny. That is the basic principle of “Dependent Origination and Empty Nature.”

“Empty” means “insubstantial,” not “non-existent.” It’s not the emptiness that follows the destruction of matter, nor an emptiness beyond matter. It is the “emptiness in the immediate moment” of all things. All forms

arise from conditions and have no constant substantiality. That's why **“form is emptiness.”** Since there is no substantiality, forms arise when the causative karmic circumstances are present. That is why **“emptiness is form.”**

Similarly, the spiritual elements that make up a human being -- feelings (sensory experience), perception (sensory and mental process), volitional factors (action) and consciousness (discernment) -- are also subject to the law of “Dependent Origination and Empty Nature.” Collectively, **“the Five Aggregates are empty”** as well.

The original intention of the teaching that “all are empty” is not to discourage us from making appropriate effort. It is to induce us to abandon our fixation on our bodies, minds and all external things, and to stop expending our energies on the pursuit of wealth, sex, fame and gain. Then we can focus on the more valuable aspects of life, to understand it and to improve it. As a result, we would be able to take in stride all the changes in our lives.

As for the law of “Dependent Origination and Empty Nature” and the teaching that “the Five Aggregates are empty,” even if we cannot realize them personally, we could acknowledge them in principle. Our bodies and minds would be cool and peaceful.

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**Q195: Must Buddhists see through the red dust (secular world) and retire into the mountains and forests?**

▶▶A: The term “red dust” is a literary expression, not a Buddhist term. It compares the prosperous phenomena of the world to floating dust. Nor is “seeing through the red dust” used by Buddhists. It describes ancient

recluses who, tired of illusory pursuits in government circles, yearned for an idyllic life in the mountains.

Literary works often have the following narrative: A person whose career fails or whose family is broken feels frustrated and proclaims that he “sees through the red dust”; he then becomes a monk and lives out the remaining years of his life. That is not the proper motivation to enter Buddhism’s door.

To learn the Dharma is something positive. It is definitely not for escaping reality. If a person becomes a Buddhist and intends to stay away from other people, he violates a central goal of Buddhism: to deliver all sentient beings.

### **Q196: Is the Law of Causation the same as fatalism?**

►►**A:** There are indeed people who fail to grasp causation and misunderstand it. If it is perceived as mechanistic fatalism – with everything in this life being pre-determined – all effort would be meaningless and Buddhism would have no value.

In teaching the Law of Causation, the Buddha did not intend that we should know our destiny and be content with it. Instead, he wanted us to activate the will to better ourselves, accumulate positive causes and good karma, and improve our destiny. Further, he hoped that we would develop the mind of renunciation and aspire to enlightenment, so we could eventually transcend the rebirth cycle. The primary focus of Buddhist teachings is not worldly causality, but causes and effects relating to transcendence of the mundane world.

**Q197: Would the Law of Causation suppress human nature or obstruct social progress?**

▶▶A: The notions of “human nature” and “social progress” are open to discussion. One thing is certain: No matter how civilization develops, it cannot deviate from basic ethics and morality. For example, each ethical system seeks to establish a theoretical foundation to encourage good deeds and inhibit negative conduct. The most sensible and reasonable one is the Law of Causation.

Why should we do good and refrain from evil? To instill such behavior by speaking of spirits and deities inevitably relies on divine authority. Those who don't believe in gods would simply ignore the teaching. Worldly education can hardly avoid imposing a group's values on individuals. A disenchanted maverick might totally disregard it. If a doctrine is underpinned by human conscience, those who yearn for fame and wealth might just walk away. Only the Law of Causation teaches the natural consequences of every person's activities. Even if someone is wicked, once he understands the Law of Causation, he will consider his own interest and be alert to his actions.

The Law of Causality affirms the free will of human beings. It encourages people to be proactive, take charge, vigorously pursue what is good and pure, improve their own spiritual condition, and elevate their lives to a new level.

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**Q198: Does becoming a Buddhist make life complicated or less free?**

▶▶A: Benefiting sentient beings is the starting point of Buddhism. All the precepts and disciplines are established for us to leave suffering for joy. The end purpose is to help us break the tether of karmic obstructions and gain freedom and liberation. Those who understand the teachings and accept the guidance and regulations will experience a refreshing joy, not constraint. Buddhists' lives only become simpler and simpler, not more and more complex.

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**Q199: Would life become boring?**

▶▶A: For most people, “having fun” is simply beer and skittles. It does not bring us genuine happiness. We are not actually happy but would say it's fun because we have formed bad habits, the way one is addicted to smoking. What truly deserves our dedicated pursuit is the Buddha Dharma, as it is the fountainhead of happiness. The joy it brings us is pure, untainted. It cannot be compared with the Five Worldly Desires.

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**Q200: Theistic religions and evolutionism hold different views on the origin of humankind. What do the Buddhist sutras say?**

▶▶A: The issue concerns the formation, existence, destruction and emptiness of this material world. We are now in the stage of “existence.” It is a relatively stable period during which life flourishes. When the stage of “destruction” begins, “*kalpa*-disasters” will gradually undermine this world. Fires, floods or windstorms will kill all sentient beings except those celestial beings in the upper levels of the Form Domain and in the

Formless Domain. The interval between the end of destruction and the beginning of regeneration is the stage of “emptiness.” It will last a long time until huge clouds emerge in the dark void. Heavy rain will fall, with material seeds of all phenomena embedded in the “water wheel.” The world will form again, and the Six Realms will incrementally be filled up.

A sutra says that after the Earth took shape, denizens of the sixth heaven of the Form Domain – the Heaven of Light Sound – flew over to our planet. They loved and ate the food here, so that their bodies became coarse and heavy. They lost their radiance and supernatural powers, and had to settle on Earth. They were the ancestors of humankind.

As the Six Realms formed, celestials witnessed the successive emergence of the sun, moon, stars and living beings of lower levels. So they considered the universe their creation. This may be the origin of God the Creator.

Evolutionary theory is now widely challenged in the West. It is only mentioned to meet a psychological need and as a matter of habit. It cannot answer the question: Why did the remaining apes not evolve into humans?

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**Q201: This question may be more remote. Most people are concerned about how to live more happily ...**

►►A: Seeking happiness is a proper pursuit. But pleasure at the material level and at the lower spiritual levels cannot be enjoyed on a perpetual basis -- because worldly phenomena are impermanent. And ever-expanding material desires usually make us more and more unhappy.

To guide sentient beings towards a genuinely joyous realm, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas use special expedient means. As the saying goes, “First lure beings with desire, then lead them into Buddha-wisdom.” Many people visit Buddhist temples for good luck or to ward off calamities. Not a few do obtain the wealth and blessings they prayed for. For Buddhist beginners, it is better to plead with the Buddhas for what they want according to Dharma principles, than to seek it by secular means. However, the purpose of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in fulfilling our requests is to arouse our faith in the Dharma and to guide us “into Buddha-wisdom,” so we can truly escape suffering and attain happiness. Worldly pleasures cannot be compared with the joys of the Dharma.

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**Q202: What is the principle behind the eradication of ill fortune?**

►►A: While reincarnating over countless lifetimes, we have accumulated karmic debts as well as credits vis-à-vis countless sentient beings. We are entangled with one another in intricate and complex ways. It’s hard to tell who first owed whom. Some of the beings involved sink into the Realm of Hungry Ghosts. Harboring grudges, they are always biding their time for revenge. They are the “**karmic creditors**” of our previous lives. Many of our illnesses and calamities are attributable to their vindictive actions.

We should have compassion towards them, and open their minds and ease their hearts with the Dharma teachings. We should also dedicate the merit from Amitabha-recitation to them, so they may be freed from suffering through the power of Amitabha’s vows. That can dissipate their resentments, and they’ll desist from vengeance and further debt-collection. This is how ill fortune is removed.

**Q203: People all wish to live long lives. Does Buddhism have any good suggestions?**

▶▶A: According to the sutras and commentaries, a human life ends for one of the following three reasons: (i) expiry of one's lifespan – experiencing a natural death; (ii) depletion of one's good fortune – though life hasn't reached its natural end, the person dies because his karmic rewards have been exhausted; (iii) an untimely or violent demise – though neither the natural lifespan nor karmic rewards are finished, death comes from an accident, such as a car crash or drowning.

It is difficult to forecast our allotted spans, meritorious rewards or potential accidents. But we can strive to make things better. For instance, according to the Law of Causality, “compassion begets longevity.” We should regularly take good care of other sentient beings and avoid hurting them. We should actively release doomed animals as well, so as to nurture our compassion. And we can increase our good fortune by practicing generosity. By cherishing our blessings, we can prevent their rapid exhaustion. Acting prudently and kindly brings us closer to good karma and keeps bad karma at bay. That reduces the chances of accidents.

In fact, if we've gained some understanding of the Dharma, we would know that our lives can become far more ideal. We would no longer wish to live a long life in the Saha world.

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**Q204: What is to cherish blessings?**

▶▶A: Our meritorious blessings in this life result from our practice of generosity in previous lifetimes. Enjoying good fortune is like withdrawing money from a bank account. The more we draw, the less remains. Eventually the account will be drained. Even as we accumulate positive karma, we should cherish our blessings. Live a simple life. Refrain from extravagance and waste. That way, we can achieve a perfect balance of blessings and virtues. To cherish our blessings is an excellent idea. We should do so even if we aren't seeking longevity.

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**Q205: Why do some Buddhist believers still suffer fatal illness, family breakups or miserable lives?**

▶▶A: Karmic causes and effects are complex. We cannot think simplistically that once we believe in Buddhism, we would never meet with setbacks. Nor should we attribute life's hardships to Buddhism, thinking it unreliable. Birth, aging, sickness, death, separation from loved ones -- these are the stuff of our lives. Faith in the Dharma isn't meant to eliminate such phenomena. It's to help us understand impermanence through them.

In terms of the Buddhas' and Bodhisattvas' deliverance, why are some people's wishes fulfilled while others' aren't? Because the Buddhas use two types of method to deliver sentient beings – the compliant and the non-compliant. People of gentle character are mostly delivered by compliant methods. Their wishes are granted and they are gradually guided onto the path to enlightenment. With prideful persons, the

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will use non-compliant methods. They subdue such people's arrogance with adversity, so the latter will settle down to study the Dharma seriously.

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**Q206: Does Buddhism conflict with modern life?**

▶▶A: No. Buddhism can give direction to our lives at all times. Since the French Revolution, liberty, equality and fraternity have been general pursuits for mankind. But only in Buddhism can such principles be truly manifested. Learning the Dharma enables us to release our afflictions, setting our minds free from worries and obstructions. This is genuine liberty. All sentient beings have Buddha-nature and the opportunity to attain Buddhahood, and that is real equality. Loving and protecting all weaker beings, the way we do ourselves, is true fraternity.

The World-Honored One broke the race-class barrier by welcoming people of all castes into his order. He even declined a king's invitation in order to give a Dharma teaching to an unfortunate woman. Such examples reflect the spirit of equality and fraternity.

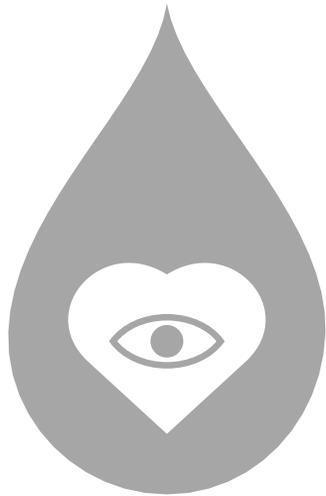
In ultimate terms, Amitabha Buddha compassionately delivers all sentient beings, without exception. This is genuine fraternity. Any being, good or evil, wise or foolish, may recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha* and be reborn in the Pure Land to attain Buddhahood. This is real equality. After rebirth in the Land of Bliss, one transcends physical and mental obstacles and the suffering of samsara. This is true liberty.

Chapter

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3

Mystical Phenomena



## 1. Resonances and Auspicious Signs

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**Q207: To most people, Buddhism seems to be complex and mysterious ...**

▶▶A: The realm of liberation is beyond comprehension. But the teachings of Buddhism are simple, unadorned and without mysterious overtones. All phenomena have reasonable explanations.

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**Q208: You mentioned before that people reborn in the Land of Bliss manifested many inexplicable signs. What's all that about?**

▶▶A: In the causal ground, Amitabha Buddha vowed: "If any sentient being has faith in my deliverance, wishes to be reborn in the Pure Land and recites my name, I will appear before him upon his death and welcome him to the Pure Land." In their final moments, many Amitabha-reciters saw him coming to guide them. That is how the Buddha redeems his promise. When he appears their hearts are glad, and they feel serene and comfortable. Those who recited diligently attain rebirth while sitting or standing upright. Other auspicious signs include light, heavenly music, and unusual fragrance. With assisted recitation by others, their bodies remain soft, and even generate *sarira* (miraculous remains) after cremation. These can be considered expedient means used by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to arouse faith among more people in the Dharma.

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**Q209: What is *sarira*?**

►►A: *Sarira* is a Sanskrit term, translated as “relics” or “bodily remains.” They are the crystal-like substance left behind after cremation of the Buddha’s or Buddhists’ bodies. They take various forms -- round, oval, lotus-shaped, or the contour of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. Their colors: white, black, green, red or mixed. Some *sarira* are transparent, others are radiant. In modern times, Masters Hongyi (弘一), Yinguang (印光) and Taixu (太虛) left behind a considerable number of *sarira*. The most sublime are the relics of Shakyamuni Buddha. They have hard texture, are unbreakable by worldly objects, and can increase or decrease freely. They are unfathomable.

A sutra says: “*Sarira* result from the cultivation of precepts, concentration and wisdom. They are rare and serve as a supreme field of merit.” There are also *sarira* that are not remains of bones. For example, when some people in Song Dynasty engraved the text of the *Longshu Pure Land Anthology*, they found three grains of *sarira* in the wood being carved. A kind woman embroidering a sutra found one under her needle point. A bathing monk had his disciple rub his back when a *sarira* fell from his body to the ground. In the Song Dynasty, after Ch’an Master Xian of Changqing died, there was a sudden gust of wind at the time of cremation. It blew smoke 40 miles away and scattered *sarira* on rooftops, trees and grass. Forty buckets of them were gathered. *Sarira* of this type are mostly generated through transformation. They manifest as a result of the devotees’ absolute sincerity and the power of the Buddhas’ compassion.

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**Q210: It is said that there are many magical, auspicious signs in Tibetan Buddhism.**

▶▶A: Yes. For example, practitioners of the “Great Perfection Heart Essence” of the Nyingma school can attain the “**rainbow body.**” When they die, their bodies emit light slowly, or shrink to a height of about 3cm with the physical proportions remaining unchanged. Their bodies may also disappear completely, leaving only nails and hair.

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**Q211: How should we understand such phenomena?**

▶▶A: There is a reason behind all things. Ordinary people lack wisdom. They consider the aforesaid signs miraculous and peculiar. The Buddhas and great Bodhisattvas have attained the realm of non-duality of form and emptiness. For them, such phenomena are as normal and natural as flowers blooming in spring and leaves falling in autumn.

Buddhists should not seek what is special or mystical. Ancestral masters showed auspicious signs to arouse people’s confidence in the Dharma. After becoming a Buddhist, one should establish a correct faith according to the Buddha’s teachings.

Master Shandao of the Tang Dynasty achieved profound *samadhi* at the age of 20. A ray of light emanated from his mouth whenever he invoked the name of Amitabha Buddha. He was dubbed “Master Light.” He could also manifest visions of the Pure Land for others. Yet he expounded the Pure Land teachings in a plain, simple style and skirted the abstruse, so that everyone could practice and benefit from them.

## 2. Supernatural Happenings

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### Q212: Does Buddhism speak of special powers?

▶▶A: Yes. There are three sources of special powers:

1. *Reward*: All celestial beings as well as ghosts, spirits and asuras have special powers. Such abilities derive naturally from the beings' karmic rewards. Ghosts and spirits can also take control of the sensory organs of ordinary beings, making the latter seem to have special powers.
2. *Cultivation*: Sacred beings of the Three Vehicles can obtain special powers by accomplishing the Three Learnings -- precepts, meditative concentration and wisdom. Non-Buddhist practitioners too may gain such powers through meditation.
3. *Transformation*: Buddhas and Bodhisattvas use special powers to manifest in various physical forms and lands.

There are six types of special powers:

1. ***Divine vision***. One's sight is not limited by distance, darkness or physical obstacles. It can transcend time and space. The person is

aware of the births, deaths and whereabouts of sentient beings in the Six Realms.

2. ***Divine hearing.*** One's hearing is not restricted by distance, weight or obstacles. One understands the languages of beings in the Six Realms, and can even "hear" thoughts arising in their minds.
3. ***Mind-reading.*** The ability to communicate with the minds of sentient beings in the Six Realms, and to know their thoughts and their habit energies.
4. ***Fate-knowing.*** The ability to know one's own and others' past lives, including previous places of residence, virtuous and negative activities, joys and sufferings, as well as particulars of transmigrations.
5. ***Fleetness of foot.*** One can come and go swiftly, pass through obstacles, change one's own and others' physical forms. The possessor can also manifest or disappear in one or more forms at many places in an instant.
6. ***No more defilements.*** One has eradicated defiled thoughts and actions and extinguished negative karma, such as greed, anger and ignorance. He has eliminated afflictions and obtained genuine wisdom. She is light, at ease, carefree. Such a being abides constantly in the realm of liberation.

Divine vision and hearing that are developed through meditative concentration enable one to directly observe the cycle of rebirth. Such attainments surpass the sacred revelations of other religions and the

speculative deductions of philosophy.

Within the Six Realms, celestial beings, ghosts and asuras have the first five special powers. Humans may also manifest these powers, or at least one of them, in a state of meditation. Sravakas (voice-hearers) and those sacred beings above them possess all six special powers. And for each higher stage, the powers become tens of millions of times stronger than for the one below.

If we deeply believe in Amitabha's wisdom, aspire to rebirth in the Land of Bliss and regularly recite "Namo Amitabha Buddha" this life, we will be reborn in the Pure Land at the time of death. Once there, we'll acquire the six special powers, with strength similar to those of the Buddhas.

Though anyone can obtain a special power through some kind of practice, Buddhism has always been against the improper pursuit of such abilities. Even if one acquires a special power without deliberately seeking it, he should not reveal it in public. "The six special powers are illusory," as the teaching goes. They cannot alter karmic consequences, or increase our blessings or wisdom. Nor do they provide any practical benefits in terms of our liberation from samsara.

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**Q213: Is there such a thing as "possession"?**

▶▶A: There are people whose bodies and minds are temporarily possessed by spirits. They would show a sudden change of personality and speak in the voice of a dead person, talking about things known only to him or her while alive. Most such cases are verifiable. They are known as "**possession by spirits to pass messages.**" The messenger is

not the original consciousness of the possessed person. When the latter awakens, he or she would not remember what was said. Possessors are mostly ghosts who died suddenly. The possessed often are sick or frail people, women or children, or those who are feeble-minded.

An intermediary who is to be possessed to pass messages should make devout prayers or take drugs to foster illusions. The medium must enter a state of non-thinking before a spirit can possess his or her body.

Spirits possess human bodies in order to receive offerings or accumulate virtue and merit.

People who practice blindly or in a misguided manner may have mystical experiences, induce spirits to possess them, and enter a seemingly meditative state. They explicate Buddhist scriptures, write books, establish theories and gather disciples according to the spirits' instructions or their own perceptions. Some even claim to be emanations of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. They explain the past and predict the future. Buddhism terms these **“demonic phenomena.”**

One who practices according to Buddhist teachings may relax and enter a state of stillness during meditation. His self-consciousness is diluted and his mind becomes vacant. He's apt to be possessed by a spirit or achieve a certain resonance, thereby manifesting a special power or a supranormal ability. We should know that these powers and abilities are serious obstacles to Dharma practice.

A practitioner who lacks correct views and seeks special powers or worldly attachments often attracts demonic phenomena.

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**Q214: Is that *zouhuo rumo* (“entering a demonic state”), or deviant practice?**

▶▶A: Yes. The affected person would mistakenly believe she has acquired a special power through her own practice. But most likely she would end up mentally disordered. The reason: her fickle, deluded mind is obsessed with attaining certain spiritual realms.

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**Q215: Do Buddhas and Bodhisattvas possess human beings as spirits do?**

▶▶A: No. Those who undergo some kind of mystical experience may believe that they have obtained a supernatural ability, or that a Buddha or Bodhisattva has manifested. That is incorrect. The transcendent capabilities of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are all-embracing. Whoever perceives them is directly connected with them. How could they choose a particular person as their representative?

If anyone claims to be an emanation of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, he is either telling a “great lie” to seek fame and benefit, or possessed by a spirit who shows paranormality to delude people. Even if he can accurately explain the past and predict the future, we shouldn’t get confused because all spirits have this ability.

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**Q216: There are people who enshrine an immortal at home. What’s that about?**

▶▶A: It is a folk belief in “**family protectors.**” Due to the lack of right faith, some people improperly seek blessings by enshrining and making

offerings to such immortals. The latter use their petty special powers to help their worshippers. But they do so not because they seek *bodhicitta* and aspire to deliver and transform sentient beings. Instead, most pursue offerings from worshippers. When such a relationship of mutual advantage becomes untenable, the worshipper often suffers great mental torment.

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**Q217: Some worshippers of immortals have special powers. Why is that?**

▶▶A: Anyone who cultivates special abilities deliberately would become a spirit medium, known as a psychic or warlock. She can communicate with spirits, order some of them to expel others, or ask them to help people overcome hardships in daily life and to satisfy their desires. But such help provides only temporary relief. It's like robbing Peter to pay Paul, which does not really solve problems.

There is also a phenomenon called “descent of a spirit.” In such a case, illusory light and sound are taken as the manifestation of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. The affected person gives skewed interpretations of scriptures according to the will of the spirit. Or he follows the spirit's instructions to summarize a set of practices, calling it “esoteric Dharma” or “great Dharma.” When taught to others, such methods may generate mysterious sensations for them. They produce certain results.

However, there is a serious after-effect. It's easy to call in a spirit but hard to send it off, as a saying goes. Once such a method proves effective, the one using it will become obsessed. She has to accept control by the power of the spirit and loses her free will. Her speech, behavior and eye expressions seem different from those of normal

people. To leave the wayward path, she will need to undergo mental and physical suffering.

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**Q218: After becoming a Buddhist, should one remove the shrine for the immortal?**

▶▶A: Yes.

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**Q219: What if the immortal stirs trouble?**

▶▶A: As Amitabha-reciters, we have the Buddha's light shining above our heads. Bodhisattvas protect us and celestial beings respect us. The spirits wouldn't dare make trouble. Certainly, we should not be hostile towards them, even though we have stopped making offerings. Instead, we should have compassion for them, and persuade them to recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha* and aspire to rebirth in the Land of Bliss. They too are beings trapped in the cycle of rebirth.

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**Q220: What is planchette writing?**

▶▶A: Planchette writing is a process in which someone voluntarily invites a spirit to possess him so as to pass on messages. A wooden stylus with a phoenix head is hung on a frame. A "phoenix boy" (spirit medium) holds the frame while the stylus draws characters and writes sentences on a sand table, indicating the spirit's instructions. This sometimes does cure illness, persuade people to do good, foretell their future and help them avert calamities. That is why common folk would "believe in witch-doctors rather than doctors." But the effectiveness is questionable, and the reliability isn't high. Only a few experience positive results, but their

stories are spread widely by word of mouth -- and believers flock in.

A planchette writer sometimes uses the name of a familiar Buddha or Bodhisattva. In that guise, he takes his position on an altar. He refers to several short scriptures. For example, the *High King Avalokitesvara Sutra*, the *Blood Bowl Sutra* and the *Sun Sutra*. The content of some such texts resemble Buddhism or Daoism. Others mix the two with Confucianism. They confuse the Buddha's teachings with sayings about spirits and deities, and mix up gods, immortals, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Though the texts encourage virtue and filial piety, they are hardly real Buddhist scriptures. Beginners are deceived when they see the name of a Buddha or Bodhisattva in such a book and read it as a Buddhist text.

The first generation of spirit mediums rarely underwent training. Most were possessed suddenly by spirits, a phenomenon known as "god-buddha borrowing the body." Their successors have to be trained. Sensitive children and youths are selected and given special drills. They learn how to receive possession by spirits. After years of practice, they develop reflexive reactions. The more believers they have, the stronger their "psychic power." An adult spirit medium can make appear anything he thinks of. A child responds according to the manipulator's hints and his training.

Such phenomena may result from descended spirits, mental sickness, or the instigation of wizards or warlocks. In the first case, the spirits' wisdom vary, and it is uncertain if they are good or evil. So a phoenix altar may receive instructions from different spirits at different times. If the process is manipulated by a spirit medium or warlock, the effects would be more serious. The wizard may save people, but also tell lies. A

careerist could even plant the seeds of turmoil. History has many cases of such rogues bringing calamity to their nation or spreading fallacies to deceive people. These incidents are the consequence of such activities.

## 3. Distinguishing the True From the False

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**Q221: Many people are unfamiliar with religions. Might they aspire to enlightenment but stray into heresy?**

▶▶A: Yes, it's possible. Since World War 2, many new religions have emerged around the globe. They are spreading quickly. Some of them establish new, original doctrines to attract young people who seek the unconventional or unorthodox. Some borrow the terms or teachings of traditional religions, using them as cover.

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**Q222: How do we identify them?**

▶▶A: Pseudo-Buddhist cults have one or more of the following features: They form associations secretly, intervene in governance or establish political parties. There are abnormal sensations between the master and disciples, which are used for spiritual control. They reject Buddhist monks and nuns, deny Shakyamuni Buddha and Buddhist texts, spurn Dharma sects and schools, and interpret scriptures out of context. They borrow the names of Maitreya, Ksitigarbha, Jigong or any sutra that is familiar to the public, but they do not teach the Dharma. Instead, they propagate the

instructions they receive from phoenix altars or other spirit mediums, and give arbitrary interpretations of the Buddhist sutras.

They bear the coloring of spirit/deity teachings, and advocate a combination of three creeds (Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism) or five doctrines (Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity and Islam). They use various religious doctrines to rationalize their own teaching, and absorb folk beliefs in Tianzun (king of heaven), Tianhou (queen of heaven), the Jade Emperor and the Queen Mother. They speak of “God Buddha,” “Fairy Buddha” and “Yuanshi Tianzun” (the original king of heaven), mixing the terms of multiple religions. They threaten people: “Anyone who slanders us will certainly fall into hell.” They tout the arrival of the end of the world, and claim they are the sole savior.

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**Q223: Some people pretend to be Buddhist monks or nuns to cheat money out of others. How can we distinguish them?**

►►A: They are easy to identify. Their sole purpose is to get money. Generally, they would offer amulets, pendants or similar items, and hint that the recipients should make a donation or buy safety with money. What they speak of are not genuine Buddhist doctrines. They are like curbside fortune-tellers. Some play up their mystique to attract attention. They can usually present complete credentials. If questioned about Buddhist teachings, however, they will soon give themselves away. Real monastics tend to be quiet, speak little, and have a pure, peaceful gaze. Fake monks and nuns seem “ardent and proactive.” They are impetuous and shallow.

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**Q224: Does Buddhism reject fortune-telling and geomancy?**

▶▶A: Shakyamuni Buddha forbade his disciples from engaging in astrology, geomancy and fortune-telling.

These activities are not without validity. They are based on natural laws that are unknown to most people. After mastering the rules, one can make certain predictions about the future. Such activities are not magical or mysterious.

If they are an established custom in society, we can adopt the following attitude: For our own sake, we needn't believe them. To accommodate social habits and console members of the public, however, we may consider the findings of experts. That's harmless enough. But such findings should be for reference only. Otherwise, they would create distress and inconveniences in life.

Actually, what truly and thoroughly reveals destiny is Buddhism's Law of Causality. Causes in the past produce results in the present. Results of the present become causes of the future. Earlier causes determine later consequences. So destiny is predictable. But it is not unalterable. Our inborn conditions are important, yet the efforts we make in our lifetime are more decisive. Rather than focus on minor details, we'd be better off concentrating on fundamentals. We should diligently plant wholesome roots and reap positive consequences.

The underlying intention of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes) was not to teach fortune-telling, but to help people understand the ways of heaven, earth, people and affairs. It inspires us to mind our thoughts and deeds,

and to think and act, according to the right path. That way we can effectively pursue good fortune and avoid disaster.

Few professional astrologers and geomancers have managed to find beneficial geomancy for themselves, or to change their own destiny with their knowledge. There is no lack of ignorant, duplicitous people in this world. If we blindly follow them, we will distance ourselves from the correct Dharma.

Buddhists should focus on the Buddha's teachings. If we're curious about numerology, astrology and geomancy, we'll waste our time, for such pursuits will distract us from right practice. That is to mistake the branch for the root.

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**Q225: A Dharma master who gives discourses on sutras and presides over Dharma ceremonies would not be a fake monk, right?**

▶▶A: If he does so purely for personal fame or gain, he could be considered a **false master**. A genuine Dharma master doesn't pursue wealth or fame. He neglects himself, but consistently acclaims and expounds the Buddhas' compassion and the patriarchs' teachings. By contrast, a false master shows an arrogant, prideful air. He exhibits peculiar guises, performs divination, or advertises his own virtues. He utters lofty words to persuade the public that he is an exalted, enlightened monastic. With the reputation of a renowned master, he accepts lots of disciples, and brags about how others show respect and make offerings to him. His goal is to pursue more gain.

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**Q226: Does Buddhism provide criteria for assessment?**

▶▶A: Yes -- the Law of Origination: no creator of all things, egolessness, impermanence and seamless cause and effect. These four points can be summarized in two notions: impermanence and egolessness. Impermanence means all phenomena are arising and ceasing sequentially. It connotes “emerging and vanishing instantly” and “seamless cause and effect.” Egolessness means non-existence of a determinant power either inside a person or within the universe, which corresponds with “no creator of all things.”

“Formations are impermanent; dharmas are without self.” This is an overall explanation of the universe and its phenomena. In other words, it’s the general law of all things. So the doctrines of “impermanence” and “egolessness” are referred to as the “**Dharma Seals.**”

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**Q227: What does “Dharma Seals” mean?**

▶▶A: A king’s “seal” authenticates documents, allowing bearers to have unobstructed passage. Metaphorically, conformity to a “Dharma Seal” signifies that a doctrine is an authentic teaching of the Buddha. The **Three Dharma Seals** are: “Formations are impermanent; dharmas are without self; nirvana is quiescent.” And the **Four Dharma Seals** add “All flawed phenomena are subject to suffering” (“flaw” means affliction).

Mahayana Buddhism further sums up the Law of Origination with the principle of “Dependent Origination and Empty Nature.” Empty means impermanent, egoless, and without inherent nature or substantiality. “Dependent Origination and Empty Nature” is the actual status of the

universe and all phenomena. That is the “ultimate reality of all dharmas.” It is called the “**Seal of the One Truth,**” taking ultimate reality as a Dharma Seal. All Mahayana teachings are verified with the principle of ultimate reality.

## 4. Transforming Customs

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**Q228: It seems Buddhism has a rigorous theoretical system. I used to think it superstitious.**

▶▶A: A **superstition** involves blindly holding a belief while being ignorant of what is true. Superstitions are widespread. They include such beliefs: all humans become ghosts after death; people's fates are determined by their birth date and hour, geomancy, or their facial features; one's fate is pre-destined and unalterable; a bad year or an inauspicious star brings adversity; being of service to spirits generates good fortune. Buddhism opposes such notions. The Buddha revealed to us the truth of life and the universe. He urged us to eliminate delusion and realize our own Buddha-nature. Buddhism has always stood against superstition.

The opposite of superstition is blind negation. It means to judge something as erroneous before finding out the truth. Such an attitude is also inappropriate.

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**Q229: Does the popular activity of burning joss paper work?**

▶▶A: Burning joss paper for the deceased became a custom during the Han Dynasty. Since then, it's been a way for the Chinese to honor the

memory of their ancestors and pay them respect. It has an ethically transformative effect on society. If a person believes in an after-life, he should find it easier to accept the faith of Buddhism. It is inadvisable to reject this custom too strongly. But we do not encourage it either. Not all humans become ghosts after death. And for those who do, Buddhism provides a genuinely effective method of deliverance and liberation.

Buddhists should transform the custom. We may accommodate it, if that does not cause waste and extravagance. We should then induce people to recite Amitabha Buddha's name, so that their ancestors can obtain real benefits. Amitabha-recitation is the best way to remember and benefit our forebears.

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**Q230: People speak of the Jade Emperor, King Yama, netherworld judges, city divinities and earth gods. Do they exist?**

▶▶A: Yes. But they only handle affairs according to laws, the way worldly adjudicators do.

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**Q231: How should we regard them?**

▶▶A: Like us, they are ensnared in the cycle of rebirth. They enjoy certain meritorious blessings because they created positive karma. We should show them respect, but needn't worship or make offerings to them as we do with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

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**Q232: Some immortals and goddesses in temples seem very efficacious at delivering what is asked of them. Wouldn't it be better to enshrine them in addition to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas?**

▶▶A: Some ghosts and spirits are efficacious. They can grant people's wishes. But their abilities are inferior to the vow-power of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Nor can they help us solve our fundamental problem – the issue of death and rebirth. Our aim is Buddhahood, so we must learn from the Buddhas single-mindedly. If we draw close to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas but simultaneously interact with ghosts and spirits, our minds would be distracted. When death comes, we might forget the Buddhas and follow the ghosts.

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**Q233: If we make a promise but forget to carry it out, would the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas punish us?**

▶▶A: Making promises and redeeming them are not Buddhist activities. They are part of the folk beliefs relating to spirits and deities. To make such a pledge means to pray to a god for something and make a payback if the wish comes true. To redeem a promise is to fulfill what was pledged after the prayer is answered.

Whether to make good a promise is the sentient being's own business. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have resolved on *bodhicitta* (gaining Buddhahood to save others), wholeheartedly devoting themselves to the benefit of beings. They are compassionate, full of mercy. Their interactions with us are not commercial transactions. Much less would they would punish anyone.

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**Q234: Would non-believers in Buddhism be chastised by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas?**

▶▶A: Non-believers will continue to reincarnate in the Six Realms according to their karma. This is the Law of Causality, with sentient beings reaping the consequences of what they sow. It is not punishment by Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. The idea of chastisement originates from a belief in deities or spirits, who bear grudges and punish people who disobey them. With *bodhicitta*, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have great unconditional kindness and universal compassion. They never punish anyone.

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**Q235: If we encounter problems that we cannot solve, can we pray to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas?**

▶▶A: Of course. And we should. Strong faith on the part of the beseecher can prompt a resonance with the power of Buddhas' and Bodhisattvas' great, compassionate vows. For example, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara vowed to listen to the cries of beings in distress and rescue them from suffering. If anyone in trouble deeply believes this and recites "Namo Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara," she will have an unfathomable resonance and turn the calamity into a blessing. Amitabha Buddha vowed to deliver all beings who recite "Namo Amitabha Buddha" from the bitter sea of reincarnation to his Land of Bliss. If we have profound faith in this and practice Amitabha-recitation exclusively, we will connect with the energy of Amitabha's vows and be reborn in his Pure Land.

### **Q236: Can we pray when we are sick?**

▶▶A: Yes. Praying can at least keep a sick person in positive spirits, which facilitates medical treatment and accelerates recovery. But we should not become obsessed, using prayer as the sole means to deal with sickness. During the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, monks who suffered external or internal ailments and injuries used medical decoctions for treatment.

There are three types of sickness:

1. *Physiological*. This includes illnesses caused by external factors such as wind, cold, summer heat and dampness, as well as internal disturbances like pleasure, anger, worry and fear. They upset the balance between yin and yang.
2. *Psychological*. Ailments inflicted by failure to fulfill personal obligations, ethical misconduct, bottled-up anger and resentment, abnormal external behavior and breaches of social norms.
3. *Karmic*. This kind of sickness is caused by beings that the ailing person hurt in a past lifetime or the present one. Harboring resentment, they retaliate by making the latter suffer. Unless their grudge is dispelled, the pain and suffering will not vanish. Such illnesses often seem strange and come fast and ferocious. Their onset doesn't accord with what's standard, and conventional treatments have little effect.

Since our physical bodies are within the Three Domains, physiological diseases should be treated with the methods of the Three Domains. These include medicine, acupuncture and massage. Psychological illnesses

should be dealt with through the healing of the heart. Sufferers should rectify their errors thoroughly, practice loyalty and filial piety, and fulfill their obligations. Those who suffer karmic diseases should sincerely repent the hurt they caused other beings, beg their forgiveness, refrain from eating meat and release doomed animals. They should also recite *Namo Amitabha Buddha*, dedicate the merit of recitation to their victims, and persuade the aggrieved to be reborn in the Land of Bliss and attain Buddhahood.



Chapter

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4

# A Fulfilling Life



# 1. Exclusive Recitation of Amitabha Buddha's Name

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## **Q237: What kind of spiritual quest do Buddhism learners go through?**

▶▶**A:** Though people today do not lack for food or clothing, they have not become happier. Material desires keep expanding and pressures seem always present. We often hear complaints about an inability to steer one's own life. Those who can't bear lowering their ethical bottom lines yet again have begun to reflect. They are returning to time-honored ways, in particular taking an interest in religion. After comparing the views of several traditional religions on issues relating to life and the universe, some have chosen Buddhism.

Of course, very few people resolve to achieve *bodhicitta* (gaining Buddhahood to help other beings) when they become Buddhists. Most at first merely seek good fortune and happiness in this lifetime. Though the Dharma has always stressed impermanence and selflessness, these are hard to accept genuinely. But after experiencing the vicissitudes of life and observing the processes of birth, aging, illness and death, some Buddhists abandon their reflexive hankering after worldly joys to reflect on the fundamental issues of life and death.

When first encountering the many paths to liberation, seekers are often delighted. Subconsciously they believe themselves to possess superior roots and capabilities. With determination, even abstruse and difficult paths can be achieved. Some may heed the advice of lineage masters and other accomplished Buddhists to adopt Pure Land practice. Even so, it's hard for them to undertake Amitabha-recitation simply and conscientiously. They think it would be better to perform many other forms of practice and self-cultivation as well.

It takes time to abandon personal pride. Some take decades to do it. In the long process of self-cultivation, there are many ups and downs. But ultimately, what fuels the motivation is anxiety and fear relating to life and death.

In the end, after coolly assessing our own capabilities, we start truly to choose a Dharma path. We let go of all-round practice and pick a single way.

The Dharma comes alive in the hearts of those who adopt an exclusive path and achieve peace of mind. They reach a state of non-retrogression -- free of anxiety while alive, unperturbed as death approaches.

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**Q238: If people knew Buddhism were this good, wouldn't everyone learn it? Yet there seems little interest ...**

**▶▶A:** This can be explained by the Law of Dependent Arising. It's because they currently lack the karmic causes and conditions.

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**Q239: So it depends on the efforts of believers to propagate Buddhism?**

▶▶A: That's one aspect. The most important point is that we must have correct beliefs and action. Once we have a bedrock for the great issue of life and death, we would naturally feel gratitude towards the Three Gems and other sentient beings. Our words and deeds become modest and respectful, our temperaments moderate. We become confident in our faith. All this will spontaneously affect those around us.

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**Q240: To be reborn in the Pure Land and become Buddhas merely by reciting “Namo Amitabha Buddha” seems truly unfathomable. Please say more about the underlying principles.**

▶▶A: Most people think reciting the six characters of Amitabha's name is too easy. But they did not come by easily! They were created after five *kalpas* of contemplation and countless eons of practice by Bhikku Dharmakara. And we are willing to recite them only after earnest exhortations by all the Buddhas. How can they be called easy?

The six characters contain all the merit and virtues accrued from the self-cultivation of Amitabha Buddha since time immemorial. Believe in them, recite them -- and all those virtues will become ours. That's because Amitabha Buddha dedicated every iota of merit from his practice to us sentient beings of the ten directions. And he made a compact with us, using the simplest method: If those “who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, wish to be reborn in my land and recite my name, even ten times, should fail to be born there, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.” Amitabha's great vow is the guarantee of our rebirth; the

Buddha's great actions (practice) provide the credentials for it. Putting it simply: To recite the name of Amitabha Buddha is to rely on the power of his vow, which leads to certain rebirth.

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**Q241: When should Amitabha-recitation be done?**

▶▶A: Anytime, anywhere. We can recite when we are traveling in vehicles, walking in the street or cleaning cooking utensils. Except when performing tasks that require concentration, we can recite -- walking, standing still, sitting or lying down. (In such special situations as lying down, bathing or using the toilet, we can recite silently, as doing so aloud seems disrespectful. If on a sickbed or about to pass away, however, sincere recitation out loud is all right; it is more a case of circumstantial limitations than disrespect.) Moreover, recitation can focus our minds and wills, leading to clearer heads and greater work efficiency. To sum up, recitation does not interfere with daily life, even as it guarantees our liberation from samsara. This is why Amitabha Buddha chose the easiest method of name-recitation as the practice for rebirth in the Pure Land.

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**Q242: Even reciting while walking, staying still, sitting or lying down doesn't seem so easy.**

▶▶A: People used to worldly perspectives may find it unfamiliar. But habits are changeable -- and that of Amitabha-recitation can be nurtured gradually. Pure Land is a Dharma path of deliverance, the Easy Way. We should not over-imagine its difficulty. Since Amitabha Buddha wishes to deliver us, he would not have picked a practice for deliverance that we could not accomplish.

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**Q243: Could someone be reciting with his mouth but harboring negative thoughts?**

▶▶A: Because of the low capabilities of ordinary beings, various uncontrollable notions may arise from their subconscious while they are reciting. This is different from deliberately thinking negative thoughts. It won't impede Amitabha's deliverance of sentient beings.

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**Q244: Is it best not to have such miscellaneous thoughts while reciting?**

▶▶A: To have no stray thoughts would of course be ideal. But it's hard for ordinary beings to do, nor did Amitabha Buddha make such a requirement. So we need not go out of our way to seek such a situation. The purpose of recitation is to rely on the power of Amitabha's vows, not to rid our minds of stray thoughts. So long as we have faith (in Amitabha's deliverance), aspire (to be born in the Pure Land) and recite the name of Amitabha, we can depend on the power of his vows and gain rebirth even if we have not eliminated a single affliction. If we doubt his deliverance because we have stray thoughts, our loss would be great indeed.

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**Q245: But ordinary beings are full of uncontrolled thoughts. Isn't it a bit disrespectful to recite indiscriminately?**

▶▶A: That is true. It's best to recite sincerely and respectfully, and to try and restrain our stray thoughts. There are two ways to try and focus. One is to "**listen to our own recitations.**" When reciting, we enunciate distinctively and listen clearly -- so that each word originates in our

hearts and returns to our hearts via our hearing. Over time, stray or miscellaneous thoughts will naturally lessen. Our hearts will be at ease. The second method is to “**count recitations in tens.**” With ten recitations as a cycle, we are aware of the sequence of each as we recite. The cycle repeats after reaching the count of ten.

The purpose of focusing is to recite as respectfully as we can. But if we think that rebirth in the Pure Land is impeded if we are unable to concentrate, we would lose our faith and aspiration.

To sum up, being lax would incline us towards laziness, while being overly demanding would make us impatient and presumptuous. We should simply try our best, according to our abilities and circumstances.

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**Q246: Some people hold recitation beads in their hands. What is the purpose of that?**

▶▶A: Recitation beads are also called Buddha beads or counting beads. During recitation, they are used to count and to focus the mind.

Nowadays, we can also use something more convenient -- an **electronic recitation counter**. We press a button with each recitation and it is added to the count. The device enables us at a glance to see our cumulative tally for the day. We can also use a single press to register several recitations. It's up to the individual.

Amitabha Buddha did not set any numerical benchmark as a condition for rebirth. But to counter the proclivity of ordinary beings towards laxness, we use this method to spur ourselves on. When sitting quietly and reciting, we needn't do this, so as not to ruffle our minds.

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**Q247: What are recitation devices for?**

- ▶▶A: **Recitation devices** continuously sound the name of Amitabha Buddha. They can create a solemn and dignified atmosphere, while reminding us to recite.

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**Q248: Busy people are unable to recite often. What should they do?**

- ▶▶A: They can set aside a short period in the morning and evening to recite. Having a ritual at set times helps make the practice sustainable. In the morning and evening, they can press palms together, face west and recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha” a few thousand times or several hundred times. Or they can recite for a number of minutes, or for **ten breaths** (after a deep breath, recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha” continually during the exhalation; do so for ten breaths). The precise method depends on how busy the person is. Apart from these times, name-recitation can be done anytime, anywhere. We should try to make a habit of it.

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**Q249: Should we recite aloud or softly?**

- ▶▶A: Both are fine. It can also be done silently, in our hearts. Dharma friends often do “**vajra recitation**”-- moving our lips, but at a volume only we can hear. This allows for the longest recitation time.

These four methods -- to recite aloud, softly, silently or in the vajra manner, can be applied alternately.

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**Q250: Since we can free ourselves from samsara by elusively reciting Amitabha's name, why did the Buddha teach so many sutras and mantras?**

▶▶A: Because of the lofty and wondrous nature of the Western Pure Land, ordinary beings find it very hard to believe. That's why Shakyamuni Buddha unfolded 84,000 Dharma paths. They ultimately converge in the Pure Land way, which is suitable for people of superior, average and lesser capabilities. The purpose of all the sutras and mantras taught by the Buddha is to guide beings of every inclination and ability towards the Western Pure Land.

The Dharma's great value lies in **going deeply into a single teaching and practice**. Only those who do so with persistence will feel a sense of accomplishment. With exclusive recitation, firmly clasping the great six-character name "Namo Amitabha Buddha," Pure Land practitioners not only achieve rebirth in the Pure Land but also gain benefits in this lifetime. Name-recitation encompasses the rewards of all sutras and mantras.

We should guard against an insatiable impulse to try things that are new and unfamiliar -- for example, learning Pure Land today and switching to the Esoteric path tomorrow, seeking rebirth in the Western Pure Land in the morning and wanting it in the Eastern Pure Land at night.

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**Q251: In bookstores there are lots of titles containing koans from the Ch’an tradition. Can Pure Land learners use them for reference?**

▶▶A: “**Koan**” (*gong’an*) originally referred to official records of government rulings. The exemplary words and deeds of Ch’an lineage masters can be used to assess a learner’s progress, so they are known as koans. Their function is to teach the karmically compatible, using non-standard words and actions to penetrate obstacles posed by feelings and conscious knowledge. The aim is mind-to-mind transmission, leading the practitioner into “non-discriminatory wisdom.”

There are some 1,700 Ch’an koans. If an adherent has undertaken all the relevant precepts and practices, and has superior capabilities enabling him to master the school’s core aims, he would benefit from sustained cultivation. Being up to the standards, he naturally gains a sound understanding. However, it’s hard for beginners to avoid attachment to words, interpreting the teachings literally and ruminating on them. Mired in verbal gymnastics, they are hard put to grasp the meaning beyond the words. They become entangled in the koans, feeling lost or misunderstanding their substance. What they achieve is “verbal *samadhi* (concentration).”

Koans seem plain and carefree, but contemplating them isn’t easy. Ch’an Master Congshen of Zhaozhou took monastic vows at an early age, and was still traveling in his eighties. “At 80, Zhaozhou was still wandering, all because his heart wasn’t yet at peace,” so it was said. “Ch’an Master Huileng of Changqing wore out seven meditation mats before achieving [initial] awakening.” When enlightenment is so difficult even for such distinguished masters, what about those with far lesser capabilities?

Even those who awaken through koan contemplation need to turn to the path of Amitabha-recitation. Master Ouyi of the Ming Dynasty once said, “Without aspiring to rebirth in the Pure Land after awakening, I daresay you haven’t awakened.”

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**Q252: Can Amitabha-reciters practice *qigong* as well?**

▶▶A: Though various types of *qigong* often borrow Buddhist concepts, the breathing exercises are entirely different from Buddhism. There’s no problem with doing *qigong* to enhance health, but organized activities should be avoided in case of interference with correct Buddhist beliefs.

## 2. Dutiful Discharge of Worldly Responsibilities

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### **Q253: Besides Amitabha-recitation, what does a practitioner need to do?**

▶▶**A:** If you are a worker, you go to work. If you are a student, you study. If you are a housewife, you take care of household matters. Similarly, as a Buddhist, you should act like a follower of the Buddha. That includes believing firmly in the law of cause and effect, forsaking evil for good, cultivating virtue to nurture wholesome consequences, and to support the Dharma. In the Pure Land school, reciting Amitabha's name and being reborn in the Land of Bliss are at the level of ultimate truth. Rebirth is assured if we recite single-mindedly! In terms of worldly truth, we naturally want to be a worthy Buddhist to repay the immense grace of Amitabha. We wish to see the Dharma remain in the world and benefit sentient beings. As Master Yinguang said, "Dutifully discharge your worldly responsibilities. Avoid evil and cherish good. Steer clear of malice and practice virtue."

The elements in this question should be discussed separately. As far as rebirth in the Pure Land is concerned, Amitabha-recitation is entirely sufficient. As Buddhists, we should diligently observe the precepts and

practice virtue. If we mix the two and think, “Without the precepts and meritorious acts, recitation is not enough to gain rebirth,” we would be misreading the intent of the sutras. There are also rash assertions that “Amitabha-recitation isn’t virtuous.” The lineage masters say that recitation is the most virtuous of virtues.

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**Q254: Is the “dutiful discharge of worldly responsibilities” the oft-mentioned supporting practices to the principal practice of recitation?**

▶▶A: That is different from the “principal karma of assurance (assured rebirth)” and “supporting karma” taught by Master Shandao. If we believe that the principal and supporting practices are both -- like the wings of a bird -- essential for rebirth, that would run counter to the scriptures. “Supporting” means helping and guiding us towards the “principal karma of assurance”; it does not imply that exclusive recitation isn’t sufficient for rebirth and that various virtuous acts are needed in support. If that were the case, Amitabha-recitation could not be called the “principal karma of assurance.”

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**Q255: Do married practitioners have to suppress desire?**

▶▶A: The Buddha required only that his lay disciples abstain from “sexual misconduct”; he did not demand “suppression of lust.” Normal relations between husband and wife are permissible.

Shakyamuni Buddha taught his lay followers much about worldly matters. They include proper relationships between parents and children, teacher and student, husband and wife, master and servant, and

monastics and householders. He also spoke about vocational training, thrifty housekeeping, making virtuous friends and managing state affairs. It's not that you need to cut yourself off from worldly engagements once you become a Buddhist.

## 3. The Three Refuges and Five Precepts

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### **Q256: What are refuge-taking ceremonies at monasteries?**

▶▶**A:** To take refuge, as mentioned before, means to seek harbor with or to depend on. Before becoming Buddhists, most people have had some contact with various types of religious belief. When they discover that only Buddhism can thoroughly relieve their vexations and afflictions, they naturally adopt it as their lifelong faith. If one has made a decisive choice in this matter, one could be said to have taken refuge in Buddhism.

Why is a ceremony necessary? Through a dignified ritual, one can register officially to become a Buddhist. Its solemn declarations and pledges can reinforce our faith.

The triple-refuges ceremony is administered by a monk who has undertaken full vows. He introduces and affirms the ritual, and explains the substance and meaning of the three refuges. He also leads the assembly in announcing the oaths.

Buddhism emphasizes that one takes refuge with the Buddha, the

Dharma and the monastic Sangha, not a particular monk. All monastics are our teachers, not just the one who presided over our refuge-taking. The latter represents the permanent Three Gems as a witness to our act.

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**Q257: Does not taking refuge affect rebirth in the Pure Land?**

►►A: In a reference to the “three sources of good fortune,” the *Contemplation Sutra* mentions “to undertake and uphold the triple refuges.” The Buddha’s underlying intention is, through this, to guide us eventually towards faith in the Pure Land. In the passage on the nine levels of rebirth, those who haven’t taken refuge can still be reborn by reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha. So the three refuges are not a precondition for rebirth, but they help us build and maintain faith in the Pure Land.

The two elements can also be considered separately. If we only seek rebirth in the Pure Land, single-minded Amitabha-recitation alone is enough. If we wish to become a Buddhist officially, we need to take refuge in the Three Gems.

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**Q258: Do we have to respect and make offerings to monastics who are unable to observe the precepts strictly?**

►►A: Though they have renounced household life, monks and nuns are still ordinary beings. There is no guarantee that they can uphold the precepts flawlessly. Even so, they remain capable of administering the Dharma, which generates unlimited merit. When people see a monastic, they naturally associate him or her with Buddhism. So the existence of the monastic Sangha represents the Dharma’s presence in the world. Lay

practitioners should therefore feel grateful towards monks and nuns.

How someone observes the precepts is a personal matter; it is subject to karmic causes and consequences. So long as a monastic holds correct views and can propagate the Dharma, he or she is qualified to receive respect and offerings from householders. The scriptures say that there is no difference between making offerings to ordinary monks and sacred ones; both acts produce immeasurable merit.

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**Q259: Buddhism seems to place special emphasis on upholding the precepts.**

►►A: That's right. A Sangha without precepts is like a military troop without discipline. It may exist in name, but the substance is absent. There is nothing mysterious about the Buddhist precepts. They are entirely rational: Practitioners must refrain from actions that harm them physically, verbally or psychologically. That's because unwholesome karma leads to suffering. Lengthy immersion in negative karma generates bad habits that are hard to break, producing even greater pain. So the Buddha formulated the precepts to cut off evil that has already formed, and to forestall new negativity. The rules help his disciples regulate their bodies and minds, remove vexations and obtain joy and peace of mind. The dignified air of those who observe the precepts also boosts the faith of non-believers, as well as the appeal of the Sangha. That enhances the Dharma's staying power in the world.

**Q260: How were the precepts devised?**

▶▶A: At the beginning, the Buddha's followers had great capabilities, and their words and deeds naturally accorded with the teachings. There was no need for precepts. Later one disciple had a moment of weakness and returned home to cohabit with his wife. He returned to the Sangha with deep regrets. It was then that the Buddha assembled all his monks and set down the **five fundamental precepts** for monastics: 1) do not kill, 2) do not steal, 3) do not engage in sex, 4) do not lie, and 5) do not drink alcohol.

On the basis of these Five Precepts, the Buddha devised different regulations for disciples undertaking various levels of practice. They include the Ten Precepts for monastics, as well as specific rules for monks, for nuns and for those committed to the Bodhisattva path. For householders, there are also the Five, Eight and Bodhisattva precepts.

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**Q261: Is it best to choose the highest level -- the Bodhisattva Precepts?**

▶▶A: One has to look at the specifics. If we are up against insufficient determination, incorrigible bad habits or forbidding circumstances, it's best not to overestimate our capabilities.

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**Q262: Which precepts are most suitable for those who recite Amitabha Buddha's name and seek rebirth in the Pure Land?**

▶▶A: As we are in the Age of Dharma Decline, sentient beings have inferior capabilities. For most people it is not feasible to undertake the precepts of the Sravaka or Bodhisattva vehicles. As Master Yinguang

recommended, “Roughly observe the major precepts. Single-mindedly recite Amitabha’s name, and simultaneously practice worldly good.” In extra-worldly terms, Amitabha-recitation is the main focus. In the mundane context, strive to uphold the Five Precepts and the Ten Good Actions.

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**Q263: Fishermen need to catch fish and farmers must kill bugs with insecticide. What should I do if I want to be a Buddhist, but my livelihood conflicts with the Five Precepts?**

▶▶A: It would be ideal if one could give up one’s livelihood to uphold the precepts. But most people aren’t able to do this. So next best would be to **undertake the Five Precepts partially**: upholding one or two is “minority observance,” while three or four is “majority observance.” (All five would be full observance.) We should uphold however many we are capable of. That also produces merit from observing precepts.

We must undertake the precepts cautiously and seriously. Once we do, we should adhere to them strictly. If we lack the confidence to do so, we needn’t force ourselves. We could undertake just three precepts.

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**Q264: The Five Precepts include a prohibition on consuming alcohol. Should it cover smoking and drugs too?**

▶▶A: The Buddha forbade alcohol not because not because drinking it was itself a karmic offense. It was because doing so could make a person lose his or her rationality and commit unwholesome deeds. Alcohol also has narcotic and stimulative effects. Prolonged use could lead to addiction that’s hard to break. There are analogies with the consumption of tobacco and drugs, as well as with gambling.

## 4. Releasing Animals and Eating Vegetarian

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### Q265: Why does Buddhism advocate the release of animals?

▶▶A: The practice of **releasing animals** stems from Mahayana scriptures, and is prevalent in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Those who follow the Mahayana Bodhisattva path consider all sentient beings to be their relatives in former lifetimes. To kill them would be like taking the lives of erstwhile parents, to release and save them would be akin to rescuing the same. So we not only refrain from killing but go a step further to release otherwise doomed animals.

According to the principles of causality and reincarnation, “a human dies and is reborn as a goat, while a goat perishes and become a human,” and “eat half a catty of its meat in this life, repay eight taels (i.e., half a catty) in the next.” In the endless cycle of rebirth, each person has accumulated both good and bad karmic links to countless other beings. In their taking and repayment, they are forever entangled. To release animals is to forfeit the collection of karmic debts from previous lifetimes, severing specific chains of causality. If we can recite Amitabha’s name on behalf of the beings released and explain Buddhist principles to them, that

would create additional positive supporting karma. The lives of the released beings would be extended. In the next life, they may be born in a Fortunate Realm, encounter the Dharma and achieve full liberation.

There are those, too, who worry about heavy bad karma from their taking of life. So they release animals often, so as to accumulate powerful positive karma and change their own future for the better. Some also make releases hoping to improve the health of their relatives or lighten their negative karma. All that accords with the laws of causality.

#### **Q266: How are such releases done?**

▶▶**A:** If you see people mistreating or about to kill small creatures, try to stop such acts and release the animals back into the natural environment. When you see living beings awaiting slaughter in marketplaces or restaurants, take pity on them. Buy them and set them free. When you receive such gifts as live fish, turtles or fowl and can't bear to kill and eat them, release them into nature or the pools or gardens of temples built for the purpose. If there are mosquitoes or other bugs in your home, trap them in a glass and free them outdoors.

In ancient times, there were formal procedures for releasing animals. The first step is to administer the Three Refuges to the beings to be released, followed by that chanting of sutras and mantras. Then comes their release into nature. Yet for individual practitioners, the procedures needn't be complicated, because the animals to be released are trapped. They are fearful and about to die. The rites should be simple: Just recite Amitabha's name on the creatures' behalf and wish them physical and mental safety and happiness -- as well as future rebirth in the Virtuous

Realms, and a chance to hear the Dharma and achieve liberation.

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**Q267: Can't we even kill flies, mosquitoes, cockroaches or rats?**

►►A: No. Unlike worldly values, the Dharma does not separate living creatures into “harmful” and “beneficial” categories. Each kind of animal and insect exists for a reason, and nature’s choices are always the most reasonable. Human interventions seldom produce wholesome results.

However, there are always situations beyond our control. For example, when we’re walking or cleaning house, it’s hard to avoid inadvertently harming insects such as ants. Precedents were set during the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. Once, his monastic disciples’ bathroom became infested with insects after a period of disuse. The monk responsible for cleaning did not know what to do. The Buddha advised, “Drain the dirty water and clean the bathroom.” Said his disciple, “That would injure the insects.” The Buddha responded: “Your intent isn’t to harm the insects but to clean the bathroom.”

We should try to avoid using insecticides, of course. It would be best just to sweep and clean. If we constantly keep our environment clean, there won’t be many insects.

Should we find that we have inadvertently harmed small and weak beings, we ought to take pity on them. We should recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha” on their behalf and hope that they will be reborn soon in the Pure Land. If we have no regrets about taking life, we would be devoid of compassion.

To avoid killing stems from the merciful spirit of taking all sentient

beings as equals. Every being has a right to live. Like ourselves, all sentient beings are afraid being hurt. So the key point about not taking life is to nurture our own compassion, going beyond merely wishing to avoid karmic retribution.

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**Q268: If no creatures are killed, won't they proliferate calamitously?**

▶▶A: We needn't worry about this. Nature has its own, reasonable laws of survival.

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**Q269: Living space for animals is being diminished today. If they are recaptured after release, what then?**

▶▶A: There are indeed certain problems that need attention. If we release unlimited numbers of water-dwelling creatures into ponds, the ponds may become saturated and many of the creatures will die. Our well-intentioned act would produce negative results. Sometimes we don't understand the nature of animals and release them into environments that aren't conducive to their survival. Also, some just aren't able to live in natural circumstances. Setting them free would then be sending them to their deaths. Moreover, in anticipation of regular large-scale releases, some suppliers would stock up. That would have the unfortunate effect of "encouraging capture for the purpose of release."

We need to be more thoughtful, and perform such releases as appropriately as possible. At the same time, we should feel regretful that ordinary beings like ourselves aren't able capable of performing virtuous acts perfectly or thoroughly.

That's why when our lineage masters advocated the release of animals, they also urged people to undertake vegetarian diets. A person who doesn't eat meat spares all forms of sentient life.

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**Q270: Is it mandatory for Buddhists to follow a vegetarian diet?**

▶▶A: Though Buddhism encourages vegetarianism, it does not require all adherents to eat vegetarian diets. **Vegetarian eating** is a special characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism. Its purpose is to cultivate compassion towards all sentient beings. There are passages in Mahayana scriptures forbidding the consumption of meat. Chinese monastics are Mahayana followers; besides the vows of bhikkus and bhikkunis, they also adopt the Bodhisattva vows. That's why monastics and even many householders in Chinese-speaking regions abstain from meat. Historically, this tradition became widespread after Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty promoted vegetarianism.

In their diet, monastics from the southern transmission of Buddhism follow the practice from the time of the Buddha -- "a bowl for a thousand households." They seek food with their alms bowls, or neighboring families take turns in offering them sustenance. They eat whatever they are given, vegetarian or not. Nothing in a bhikku's vows proscribes the eating of meat.

Mongolian and Tibetan monastics are Mahayana practitioners as well. But vegetables are hard to come by where they live, so they normally eat meat. They do not perform the slaughter themselves, however.

Since the first of the Five Precepts is to refrain from killing, it would

be best for Buddhists to eat vegetarian. If it is hard for family or social reasons to sustain vegetarianism, then take meat with a sense of regret. Desist from direct slaughter and from asking someone to perform it.

We shouldn't artificially inflate the standards required of Buddhism learners by demanding compulsory vegetarianism. That is not a requirement in either Refuge-Taking or the Five Precepts. Those who undertake the Four Great Vows or the Bodhisattva Precepts, however, must adopt vegetarian diets. Some people ask every Buddhist they meet, "Are you a vegetarian? Why aren't you one even after becoming Buddhist?" By taking vegetarianism as a requirement for learning Buddhism, we would be impeding propagation of the Dharma.

### **Q271: Vegetarianism means not eating meat, right?**

►►A: That is not entirely accurate. A vegetarian refrains from consuming foods that smell or taste "pungent or fleshy." "**Pungent**" refers to **strong-smelling, stimulative vegetables** -- notably garlic, scallion, leek, shallot and asafoetida. When eaten raw, these substances can raise tempers; cooked, they may stimulate sexual desire. They impede discernment and are conducive to greed, anger and ignorance. Since they induce odors in people's breath, they could even affect collective Buddhist practice. For these reasons, the five pungent vegetables are prohibited in both Mahayana and Theravada traditions. It's the "fleshy" smells or tastes that refer to meat. So it's not appropriate to mix the avoidance of pungent foods with not eating meat.

**Q272: And vegetarianism is the same as *chizhai* (various forms of abstinence)?**

▶▶A: They are not the same. *Chizhai* means to avoid eating after midday, using perfume or makeup, engaging in song & dance, watching dramatic entertainment, and using luxurious seating and beds. If these forms of abstinence cannot be maintained every day, one could do so on specific days each month. For example, people often undertake them for six days or ten days. Six days would be the 8<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and final two days of every lunar month. And ten days are the 1<sup>st</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 24<sup>th</sup> and last three days.

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**Q273: Why no food after midday?**

▶▶A: According to rules devised by the Buddha, monks do not eat after noontime. Their food consists of offerings by the community of believers. By doing one alms round daily and eating at midday, bhikkus reduce the burden of the community. Moreover, avoiding food after midday facilitates meditative concentration. Most Theravada countries still follow this tradition. After noon, adherents can take tea, soft drinks, fruit juice and even sugar; the strictest drink only plain water. In the Chinese Ch'an tradition, monks customarily perform agricultural labor and need to eat in the evenings. So most monasteries have exempted them from the no-food-after-midday rule.

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**Q274: If we decide to follow a strict vegetarian diet, is it best not to eat eggs?**

▶▶A: Eggs are “fleshy” food. It would be best for those who adopt a vegetarian diet to purify themselves to avoid them. A Mahayana scripture says, “Do not eat any form of ovum.”

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**Q275: Do vegetarian diets conflict with modern lifestyles?**

▶▶A: Today’s society likes luxury and extravagance. There are more and more wasteful people. From this perspective, there is conflict.

We should adopt a broader view. If we eat vegetarian foods with low production costs, we can substantially cut the consumption of natural resources. That would also slow global warming and the degradation of our natural environment. At the personal level, vegetarianism allows us to avoid sicknesses that arise from today’s overly rich diets. People who suffer from high blood pressure, fatty liver or gout are advised by doctors to avoid oily foods and eat plenty of vegetables.

It is far better to adopt a healthy lifestyle than allow a desire for tasty foods to harm our bodies. In different times, many non-Buddhists have chosen vegetarianism -- for example, Tagore, Tolstoy and Einstein. Einstein once said, “A vegetarian diet allows our wisdom to remain unclouded. The resulting purification and transformation of character brings considerable benefits to humankind. So vegetarians are auspicious. Nothing enhances human health more than vegetarianism. It also increases our chances of survival on this planet.” He added: “If the whole world ate vegetarian, mankind’s destiny would be changed.”

Dietary habits can be nurtured. If you are used to pungent and fleshy foods, you will find a vegetarian diet lacking in taste. But if you are accustomed to vegetarian eating, pungent and fleshy food will be unappetizing.

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**Q276: If I can't change my habits immediately, is some compromise possible?**

▶▶A: If you sincerely wish to go vegetarian but find it difficult, you could take the “three kinds of clean meat.”

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**Q277: What are the “three kinds of clean meat”?**

▶▶A: This is when you “neither see nor hear the killing, and it isn't performed specially for you.” That is, 1) you didn't witness the actual slaughter of the animal; 2) you didn't hear its cries as it was killed; and 3) it wasn't slaughtered specifically for you. If you are unable to adopt a vegetarian diet, you may eat the “three kinds of clean meat.”

## 5. Home Altars

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**Q278: If we wish to consecrate a Buddha image at home, which one should it be?**

▶▶A: It would be best for Pure Land practitioners to choose Amitabha Buddha or the Three Sacred Beings of the Pure Land (Amitabha plus Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta). A figure or an illustration would do. Or we could consecrate the six-character name, “Namo Amitabha Buddha.” As our lineage masters taught: “The name is the body.” Where his name is, there Amitabha Buddha manifests.

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**Q279: Where should we place the consecrated object?**

▶▶A: It would be best to have a quiet Dharma hall. If that is not possible, place the Buddha image in a respectful place in your living room, dining room or entrance hall. Try not to put it in your bedroom or near the bathroom.

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**Q280: If I can’t find a suitable location, can I not consecrate a Buddha image?**

▶▶A: Yes. If you perform morning and evening devotions, you can use sacred texts instead. Or you can just face West, press your palms together and

recite the name of Amitabha Buddha.

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**Q281: What kind of offerings should we make to the Buddha?**

▶▶A: Incense, lights, flowers, water, fruit and rice would be fine.

Incense symbolizes the virtues of the Buddha. There are the “Dharma-body’s five kinds of incense” -- The incense of precepts, of meditative concentration, of wisdom, of liberation and of the perfect knowledge of liberation.

Lights represent the light of the Buddha’s wisdom. Offering lights can bring radiance and wisdom. Candles were used in ancient times. Today we can switch on candle-shaped lights.

Flowers signify the blossoming of the myriad practices and the resplendent fruit of Buddhahood. Flowers also have the virtue of being soft, warming people’s hearts.

Water stands for purity and equality. To offer it is to remind ourselves that our state of mind should be as pure and equal as water. After the offering, the water can be poured into another vessel and drunk.

Fruit signals that upon seeing clean fruit (effects), we should think about cultivating pure causes. After the offering, the fruits can be shared by the whole family.

Rice suggests that when we see food, we should recall with gratitude the grace of the Buddha. We should admire practitioners of the Buddha’s time for being able to make offerings to him in person. So we bring rice

before an image of the Buddha to express our respect and remembrance. It's not because the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas need to eat the rice. When offering rice, we cannot offer alcohol or pungent and fleshy foods. Such offerings can be consumed later.

The purpose of the offerings is to create a dignified atmosphere through simple rituals, to show our respect for the Buddha. It would be best if fresh offerings could be made daily, though not necessarily each type. At the simplest, an offering could consist of a cup of water before the Buddha's image.

**Q282: What reverential actions should we take before the Buddha?**

▶▶A: We can make prostrations and bows, or press our palms together. Prostrations are the most respectful. They eliminate the greatest amount of bad karma and are most auspicious.

When we make our reverences, we should be respectful and sincere. We need to think of the Buddha image as a real Buddha.

**Q283: Excuse me for being blunt, but isn't that like worshiping idols? Modern people enjoy freedom and human rights. Why should they prostrate themselves like the ancients?**

▶▶A: Portraits of famous persons are placed in schools and memorial halls. When people pass these images, they can't help feeling admiration. Since we pay respects to our parents as well as worldly sages, why shouldn't we do so with the compassionate Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who graced us with deliverance? Besides showing respect, prostration allows us

to emulate the worthy, connect with the Buddhas' vows, temper pride, repent karmic wrongdoings and nurture virtuous roots. The benefits of reverencing the Buddhas can only be appreciated by those who have done so.

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**Q284: Do we have to kneel before a Buddha image while doing our morning and evening practice?**

▶▶A: Not necessarily. Amitabha-recitation can be done kneeling, sitting, standing or walking. The important thing is to be sincere and respectful.

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**Q285: If we practice too long, household chores could be affected. Too short, and there might be no effect. How do we find the right balance?**

▶▶A: The popular *Practice and Chants for Morning and Evening* is used by the monastic sangha. Such communities comprise several hundred practitioners from all schools, so the contents must be comprehensive to cater to them all. A reading would take a long time.

Home practice needn't be like that. We can choose the parts that relate to the school we are following, as the value of practice lies in going deeply into a single path. Practitioners today should pick an appropriate regime. Their practice should not adversely impact their family relations.

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**Q286: Such a format for Amitabha-recitation seems too simple. Can you recommend a complete set of practice?**

▶▶A: Every morning and evening, after washing your face and brushing your

teeth, light incense and press your palms together respectfully before an image of Amitabha Buddha. You may kneel, sit or stand.

1. Recite “*Namo* to the greatly merciful and compassionate Amitabha Buddha of the Western Land of Bliss.” Make a prostration before the Buddha.
2. Follow this with recitations of “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*”— maybe several hundred times, maybe several thousand times, perhaps for a quarter-hour or a half-hour, depending on how busy you are. Sitting, kneeling and standing postures are all acceptable, as is circumambulatory movement and prostration. Most practitioners choose to recite sitting straight.
3. Conclude by reciting the “*Gatha of Dedication*” by Master Shandao: “May the resulting merit [of this practice] be distributed everywhere without discrimination. May we all aspire to perfect enlightenment for the sake of other beings, and be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy.” End with three prostrations.

**Q287: What is the meaning of “great compassion”?**

►►A: “Great compassion” is the most important special characteristic of a Buddha. “Compassion” is *cibei*. “*Ci*” means to give joy -- to impart happiness to sentient beings with deep love and affection. “*Bei*” is to relieve suffering -- to diminish the suffering of others with profound sympathy. A Buddha feels the pain of sentient beings as his own, so he rescues them unconditionally, removing their suffering. That is “unconditional compassion and conjoined mercy.” When compassion is extended without limit so that it covers all good and evil beings, it is

called “great compassion.”

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**Q288: What does the “Gatha of Dedication” mean? What purpose does it serve? Please explain its wording.**

►►A: “*Dedication*” (of merit) implies turning over to, returning to, flowing towards. It is to gather and direct the virtues and merit of Amitabha’s name towards a specific target -- aspiration to rebirth in the Pure Land, along with other beings. In a worldly environment, ordinary beings can hardly avoid the pursuit of such blessings of the human and celestial realms as fame, profit, health and longevity. Regular recitation of the “Gatha of Dedication” can remind us clearly of the ultimate purpose of Amitabha-recitation.

- “May the resulting merit”: May the complete and perfect merit of the six characters *Namo Amitabha Buddha* ...
- “Be distributed everywhere without discrimination”: Be dispersed on an equal basis among all sentient beings.
- “May we aspire to perfect enlightenment for the sake of other beings”: Let us together resolve to achieve *bodhicitta* and aspire to be reborn in the Pure Land ...
- “And be reborn in the Land of Peace and Joy”: Achieve rebirth in Amitabha’s Land of Bliss.

## 6. Buddhist Rituals

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**Q289: When entering a monastery or temple, what should we pay attention to?**

▶▶A: Monasteries and temples are pure, quiet places where the Three Gems reside. When we visit them we should be respectful, cautious in speech and dignified in bearing. We should enter and exit doors by the side and avoid stepping on their thresholds. While inside the halls, make the Amitabha mudra, with right palm on top of the left and both facing upward. Thumbs should touch at the tips, with right fingers resting on top of left fingers. Lower arms are horizontal and eyes gaze ahead. We should curb our restlessness and try to focus.

With monastics, strict regulations apply. The “3,000 rites and 80,000 minor practices” cover virtually every aspect of their daily lives.

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**Q290: Which rituals do householders use most often?**

▶▶A: When lay practitioners meet in a Dharma center or at home, they can press palms together to greet one another, saying “Amitabha Buddha” or “Namo Amitabha Buddha.”

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**Q291: To “press ten fingers together” (*heshi*) is the same as to press palms together?**

▶▶A: Yes. The standard way is to **hold the palms together**, with all ten fingers touching. The center of the palms should be slightly arched, and they should be pointing upward. The wrists should be level with the chest.

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**Q292: Is it the same when we are doing this before a Buddha image?**

▶▶A: In front of a Buddha, our heels should be about two inches apart and our toes some eight inches separate. We should focus our minds and close our eyes respectfully.

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**Q293: When encountering a Dharma master, should we also press palms together and say Amitabha Buddha?**

▶▶A: Yes. In addition, we should make the gesture of greeting (*wenxin*).

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**Q294: How do we make the greeting gesture?**

▶▶A: Press palms together and bow nearly 90 degrees. Then return to the standing posture, with palms still together.

Another type of **greeting gesture entails mudras**. Press palms together and, during the bow, make the Amitabha mudra at the stomach level. When returning to the upright position, both thumbs and forefingers touch at the tips, forming the Vairocana mudra. Raise the hands (and the mudra) to a position between the eyebrows, then conclude by pressing palms together.

Such a greeting is more respectful than merely pressing palms. It is often used in halls or during assemblies, when prostration may not be suitable.

Both hands are used in the gesture of greeting. If we are holding something in our hands, it is all right to show respect with a simple bow. We must not extend a single hand in a greeting.

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**Q295: What does making a prostration (*dingli*) mean?**

▶▶A: Prostration is the most respectful ritualistic gesture, known as “paying respects by holding our head and face to the (recipient’s) feet.” It connotes touching the Buddha’s two feet (symbolizing virtuous fortune and wisdom) with our head and face -- commonly referred to as “**pressing the ground with five appendages.**” The five appendages are the elbows (arms), knees (legs) and forehead (head).

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**Q296: How do we make a prostration?**

▶▶A: Before doing so, stand upright and press palms together. While inclining downward, keep the left hand still and place the palm of the right hand on the ground. Kneel on one, then both, knees. Place the left palm on the ground, in an upper-left position. Slide the right palm forward so it is aligned with the left. The hands should be at the same width as the shoulders. With palms flat, arms extended and body bent over, place the forehead on the ground, between the hands. Form fists with the hands, then turn them over and open them, so that the palms face skyward (symbolic of receiving the Buddha’s feet). Pause for a few moments.

To begin rising, make fists again with the hands (facing up). Turn the

fists over and extend fingers, so that open palms are again pressing the ground. Lift the forehead off the ground and raise the body by pressing the ground with the right hand. The left palm rises to chest level. The knees leave the ground and the legs stretch gradually upward. As the left and right palms meet and press together, the body returns to full standing posture.

With the prostration complete, conclude by making a greeting gesture with mudras.

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**Q297: When should we make prostrations?**

►►A: When undergoing the refuge-taking ceremony, we should make prostrations to the Three Gems. After entering a monastery, we should go to the main hall and do so before the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Then we do the same with the temple's abbot. These prostrations are repeated when we leave the monastery.

When making them, we can say, "I pay my respects to the Master with three prostrations." If the master says "one prostration" or "one gesture of greeting," we should do exactly that. We must not go against the instruction and insist on making three prostrations. If the master is modest and does not accept prostrations, a greeting gesture with pressed palms will suffice.

When Dharma masters are reverencing the Buddhas, meditating, chanting scriptures, eating, sleeping, circumambulating, going to the toilet or brushing their teeth, it is not appropriate to pay respects.

Making prostrations before Dharma masters should only be done

inside temple halls. It wouldn't be suitable to do so in such places as the roadside or in transport terminals.

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**Q298: What is the proper way to ask a monastic his or her name?**

▶▶A: “Master, what is your name of virtue?” To show respect, we should not directly say a monastic's name. Use “Master” or “Dharma Master” instead. Senior monks can be called “Elder” or *Shangren* (“Esteemed Person”).

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**Q299: How should we offer incense?**

▶▶A: The forms of incense include sticks, coils, logs and others. Standing incense sticks are widely used. Householders may offer three sticks before a Buddha image in the morning and evening every day. If the space is small, one stick will do.

First, light the incense (shake out the flame on the match, and fan the one on the stick with a hand to put it out). The left palm faces inward, with the last four fingers close together. Hold the incense between the second and third fingers. Use the right hand to hold it also between the second and third fingers, overlapped with the four fingers of the left. The two thumbs press against the stick-end. Put the incense stick before the chest horizontally, with its tip pointing at the Buddha image. Raise the incense to the eye-brow level for a moment, then lower it back to the chest.

When offering a single stick, insert it with both hands in the central area of the burner. If three are offered, use the right hand first to insert the middle one, silently saying “I offer this to the Buddha”; insert the left

stick with the left hand, saying “I offer this to the Dharma”; then use the right hand to insert the final one, reciting “I offer this to the Sangha.” Afterwards, press palms together, do three prostrations, and make the gesture of greeting.

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**Q300: At Dharma centers, we often see people walking one after another and reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name. What is that all about?**

▶▶A: That is **circumambulation**, to show respect and admiration for the Buddhas. This method can be used during Amitabha-recitation too. Known as “walking practice” or “scriptural walking,” it can prevent dozing off.

During circumambulation, assembly members should be careful to maintain proper spacing on both sides, as well as front and back. They should also maintain a neat and orderly queue. The movement must be clockwise, in the order of east, south, west and north. Participants should look straight ahead and not allow their eyes to gaze in various directions.

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**Q301: What is empowerment (*guanding*, or *abhiseka*)?**

▶▶A: “*Guan*” means to protect and remember with great compassion, while “*ding*” is supreme Buddhahood. When the Buddhas empower someone with the waters of great compassion, that person can achieve perfect merit and virtues. When a king ascended the throne in ancient India, water from the Four Seas was sprinkled on his head to represent good wishes. In esoteric Buddhism, **empowerment** is conducted on an altar to initiate practitioners into a lineage. It also symbolizes transmission of the tradition.

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**Q302: What are mantras?**

▶▶A: A **mantra** is a *dharani* of “true words.” According to esoteric Buddhism, mantras are utterances representing the inner wisdom realized by the Buddha; since they reveal the ultimate reality of all phenomena, they are known as “true words.” The literal meaning of *dharani* is “retention.” Each sound or word of a mantra holds countless Dharma principles and contains immeasurable power and wisdom. By tapping into the power of mantras, one can achieve remarkable things.

Esoteric Buddhism emphasizes rituals. Following specific rites involving altars, offerings, mudras, dharani chanting and visualization, adherents seek to transform their thoughts, words and deeds into the **esoteric thoughts, words and deeds of the Buddhas**. (The thoughts, words and deeds of Buddhas are inconceivably subtle, so they are called esoteric.) They would thus speedily attain wisdom and special powers. The esoteric path can also avert calamities, boost good fortune and subdue demons.

Since ancient times, however, *Namo Amitabha Buddha* has been known as the “king of mantras.” Its six characters contain the virtues and merit of all mantras.

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**Q303: What kind of mantra is “*Om mani padme hum*”?**

▶▶A: *Om mani padme hum* is the six-syllable *dharani* that Amitabha Buddha spoke to Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. The pronunciation is “oom ma net beh meh hong.” “*Om*” contains all the true words that empower pure karma, including the Buddhas’ thoughts, words and deeds, light,

compassion, and precepts, meditation and wisdom. “*Mani*” means a precious “muni” pearl or an auspicious pearl. It symbolizes the steadfast and distinctive virtues of the Dharma, which accommodates, encompasses everything and answers all requests. “*Padme*” is Sanskrit for lotus flower. It represents purity, spotlessness, perfection and all achievements. (“*Mani padme*” can also be rendered as “diamond-like wisdom.”) “Hum” is the “true word” for our various resolutions. It can be explained as “paramita.”

This six-syllable *dharani* can thus be literally translated as “I pray to ride on the precious pearl and lotus flower,” or “diamond-like wisdom paramita.”

“*Om mani padme hum*” has the function of reducing the suffering of sentient beings in the Six Realms and blocking the paths to the Realms. Those who chant it with a pure mind can obtain liberation from samsara. Tibetans like to write these six characters and put them into cylindrical scripture tubes. People hold and turn them, or do so with pinwheels or waterwheels. They wish to be free from the cycle of rebirth, and be born in the Land of Bliss.

### **Q304: Can we buy Buddha images and scriptures in monasteries?**

▶▶A: To request or purchase such Dharma-related items as Buddha images or scriptural texts is suitably referred to as “to invite” them. Most temples have available for the public various Dharma items, some of which are offered free of charge. Buddha images and sutras should be carried respectfully in front of our chest, or wrapped decorously. They should not be laid on our legs or held with a single hand, pointing downward, or

clasped in our armpits. When holding a sutra, our thumbs and forefingers should be placed on the cover while the other fingers are on the back cover.

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**Q305: Can cards with little Buddha images serve as protective talismans?**

▶▶A: Buddhism beginners can think of them like that, as an expedient means. Though such small Buddha images are easily available, we must think of them with respect and consider them hard to encounter. They should be placed in a pocket in our upper garments, not in a trouser pocket. When we change or wash our clothes, they should be respectfully put in a pure, clean place.

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**Q306: Do amulets really have protective functions?**

▶▶A: They do. If “Namo Amitabha Buddha” is engraved on them, they contain Amitabha’s unlimited virtues and merit. Wherever the name is, there also is the Buddha’s light, which protects.

Of course, the six-character name derives from the power of Amitabha Buddha’s vow. It does not stop with a **talisman**, but will enter the hearts and mouths of practitioners. By that time, they will undoubtedly have received the ultimate protection.

## 7. Studying the Scriptures

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**Q307: What should we pay attention to when reading the Buddhist scriptures?**

▶▶A: While reading the sutras we should clean our hands as well as the desk. We should sit upright, refrain from speaking and focus our minds. As we read, we ought to hold the text in our hands or lay it on the desk. We should not put it on our knees. When finished, mark the position with a bookmark; never fold page corners.

If there is dust on the pages, wipe it with a clean cloth. Do not blow on the page. Refrain from placing worldly reading matter or miscellaneous items on a scriptural text.

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**Q308: Chinese sutras were written in classical Chinese. If I find them hard to read, what can I do?**

▶▶A: You can read the commentaries of the patriarchs, as well as modern annotations by accomplished masters that are based on the patriarchs' works. If you wish to learn the Tiantai teachings, for example, you should study the primary texts of the school -- the *Lotus Sutra*, and the works on which Master Zhizhe founded the school (*Underlying Meaning*

*of the Lotus Sutra, Phrases From the Lotus Sutra and Great Meditation*). You should also refer to contemporary explications relating to these works.

If you want to study Pure Land Buddhism, you likewise need to focus on the school's core texts -- the *Infinite Life Sutra*, *Contemplation Sutra* and *Amitabha Sutra*, as well as Master Tanluan's *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*, Master Daochuo's *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy* and Master Shandao's *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*. Look too at modern annotations connected with these texts.

Modern mass media are increasingly developed. Cassettes and videotapes, which were widely used to disseminate discourses on scriptures, have been replaced by VCDs and DVDs. These disks have clear visuals and audio. They are ideal teaching materials.

One point should be noted, though. If scriptures are too easily available, a respectful attitude would be harder to come by.

**Q309: Can we study the Dharma on the internet?**

▶▶A: The internet has many excellent Buddhism websites, such as [www.purelandbuddhism.org](http://www.purelandbuddhism.org).

**Q310: Many Buddhist groups have teachers or tutors. What do they do?**

▶▶A: Teachers in Buddhism are known as “knowledgeable masters” or “Dharma mentors.” They clearly understand the pure lineage of their Dharma schools, and can help adherents avoid mistakes and detours.

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**Q311: Are all famous Dharma teachers “knowledgeable masters”?**

▶▶A: Not necessarily.

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**Q312: Some Dharma teachers are said to be exalted, enlightened monastics. When they conduct Dharma ceremonies, miraculous, auspicious phenomena reportedly occur. Should we follow such teachers?**

▶▶A: We should ground our faith in the Dharma teachings, rather than any miraculous phenomena. Non-Buddhist religions may also manifest auspicious signs.

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**Q313: Then how should we identify “knowledgeable masters”?**

▶▶A: There are three points for consideration. First, whether a person’s teachings are based on Buddhist sutras. Second, whether the person understands and explains scriptures according to the works of patriarchs, and whether he has a pure lineage. Third, whether the objectives he describes can actually be realized through practice. The first two issues are about “consistency with principle.” The last point requires “compatibility with the capabilities of sentient beings.”

In general, one would tell others about the part of the Dharma she considers most rewarding. With the Pure Land school, a propagator would speak consistently of Amitabha-recitation and rebirth in the Land of Bliss. If, after listening to her, we become fonder of reciting, more certain about rebirth, and warier of all unwholesome deeds, we can be sure she is a good Pure Land teacher.

The *Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* provides specific methods for assessment – the “**Four Reliances**”:

First, rely on the Dharma, not the person. We should follow the principles in sutras and the transmissions of lineage masters, but not a teacher’s personal views. Someone with fame, knowledge, qualifications and status can easily win the trust of others. But if what he teaches is different from the true meaning of the Dharma, we should not accept his words. On the other hand, even if a person is not famous and lacks practice, so long as her remarks conform to sutras and patriarchs’ commentaries, we should trust such interpretations.

Second, rely on the meaning, not the words. We should follow the genuine substance and principles of the Dharma, not the superficial or technical meaning of the language and words in scriptures. The true significance of the Dharma resembles the bright moon. Language and words are like the finger pointing to the moon. We shouldn’t only see the former but miss the latter. Instead, we should recognize the moon by virtue of the finger. That is to understand the true meaning of the Dharma through language and words.

Third, rely on the ultimate, not the expedient, meaning. “**Ultimate meaning**” is thorough, truthful. “**Expedient meaning**” is for convenience, provisional. The Tripitaka comprises sutras of ultimate as well as expedient meaning. We should abide by the former, not the latter.

Fourth, rely on wisdom, not knowledge. That means the wisdom of sacred beings, which conforms with Dharma-nature. Knowledge denotes the discriminative views generated from our sixth sense (*vijnana*, or consciousness). We should defer to true wisdom, not deluded

consciousness. Since ordinary beings lack wisdom, we have to count on the wisdom of lineage masters. When propagating the Dharma, we must not contravene the patriarchs' teachings.

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**Q314: Why do you repeatedly stress the wisdom of patriarchs?**

▶▶A: Buddhists often encounter a problem: When we study a sutra, we may come across several, or dozens, or even hundreds of interpretations. Each is backed by quotations from scriptures. Which represents the true Dharma, the real and ultimate meaning, and wisdom? It is impossible for us to judge, with the knowledge and logical deduction of ordinary beings. If we rely on our own understanding to take the “strong points” of all explications, the results would assuredly be counterproductive.

Each of the “Four Reliances” requires the use of true wisdom in making judgments. For us ordinary beings, only one of the four is feasible: the “reliance on wisdom” -- patriarchs' wisdom. Lineage masters attained *samadhi* and realized the true meaning of the Dharma. Their achievements have been verified by history. Therefore they are reliable.

## 8. Assisted Recitation and Deliverance of the Deceased

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**Q315: Many lay practitioners are especially concerned about death. Some are fearful. Why is that?**

▶▶A: They possibly misunderstood a key phrase in the *Amitabha Sutra*: “His mind will not be severely confused.” They think that unless a dying person can keep his mind free of confusion, Amitabha will not come deliver him. Recitation with a concentrated mind in ordinary times is mistaken for a practice to ensure that the practitioner attains *samadhi* at the point of death, or at least avoid the pains of illness and be fully mindful when dying. No person can be absolutely certain about what will happen in the final moments. That is why people are anxious and fearful. So they promise one another to provide assisted recitation.

From the textual sequence in the *Amitabha Sutra*, we see that the dying person is not severely confused because Amitabha Buddha and the sacred assembly have appeared before him. The *Contemplation Sutra* describes circumstances of the Nine Levels of rebirth: Also, after Amitabha and the sacred assembly have appeared, the dying person rejoices and follows the Buddha to the Pure Land.

If a person has full faith and aspiration in regular times and practices name-recitation all life long, she is assured of rebirth in the Land of Bliss. This is so even if no others help with recitation when she's dying.

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**Q316: What is assisted recitation?**

▶▶A: Assisted recitation was advocated by Master Shandao, the founder of the Pure Land school. It is based on the text of the *Contemplation Sutra* concerning the Lower Level of rebirth in the Land of Bliss. The practice was established specifically for those who haven't heard of or believed in Amitabha-recitation during their lifetimes. A sentient being of the Lower Level is one who has committed the Ten Evil Actions, broken the precepts, or committed the Five Gravest Transgressions (patricide, matricide, and other extremely heavy offenses). Just before death, he encounters a Dharma mentor who guides him to recite Amitabha's name ten times or even one time and consequently he is reborn in the Pure Land. In view of this, Master Shandao called on Pure Land followers to provide supportive recitation for non-reciters who were dying. First, the background to Amitabha's 48 Vows is explained to them and the resplendent features of the Pure Land are described. Then they are led to recite Amitabha's name.

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**Q317: In assisted recitation, should we use "Amitabha Buddha" or "Namo Amitabha Buddha"?**

▶▶A: Assisted recitation is intended to serve the dying person. The choice depends on his or her circumstances. At the point of death, one's body undergoes dissolution of the Four Elements. One suffers physical agony and is short of breath. In an emergency, we can recite "Amitabha

Buddha” at a quick pace. Under relatively relaxed conditions, we may slow down the recitation, or recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha,” to the extent that the dying person can keep up.

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**Q318: What if the dying person is unconscious?**

▶▶A: Treat her as if she were awake; guide her and recite Amitabha’s name for her all the same. Though she seems comatose, her spiritual consciousness may be more awake than ever. This has been proven in many near-death experiences.

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**Q319: Is assisted recitation only to recite Amitabha’s name?**

▶▶A: Yes. The supportive recitation mentioned in the *Contemplation Sutra* is only to help the dying recite Amitabha’s name. This name is easy, simple and convenient for the person to recite along. If we chant a sutra, he or she would not understand it, let alone chant after us. We should always keep to scriptures, and strictly comply with Dharma principles.

Recitation helps who see a dying person confused and floundering sometimes switch to reciting the name of another Buddha or Bodhisattva, or chant a sutra or mantra, to try and eliminate karmic obstacles. This doesn’t accord with what the sutras say. For eradicating negative karma, nothing compares with recitation of Amitabha’s name. The *Contemplation Sutra* depicts a dying person who attains rebirth at the Upper Grade of the Lower Level. At the point of his death, he heard the titles of Mahayana sutras and was relieved from negative karma accumulated over a thousand *kalpas*. Then he recited “Namo Amitabha Buddha,” which removed his evil karma from five billion *kalpas*.

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**Q320: How long should assisted recitation last?**

▶▶A: Generally, we may stop recitation eight hours after the last breath of the deceased. If the person establishes faith in Amitabha Buddha at the point of death, she can immediately follow him to the Land of Bliss. But if she still has some attachments, we should not leave until eight hours later, when her body becomes fully cold. To be on the safe side, assisted recitation should continue for eight hours after death.

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**Q321: If a dying person is reluctant to leave this world, would it be hard for him to be reborn in the Pure Land?**

▶▶A: Yes, it would. There may even be people who have practiced recitation for many years but at the time of death suddenly change their minds. They cling to their families and no longer wish to be reborn in the Pure Land.

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**Q322: What should we do then?**

▶▶A: First, guide the dying person to face reality properly and make known his will clearly. There shouldn't be any unfinished business to trouble his mind. Persuade his family to care for him in the right way; they should compose themselves beforehand, and avoid weeping and disrupting the tranquility of the dying person's final moments. Place an Amitabha image where it's visible to him. Turn on an Amitabha-recitation device and create a dignified atmosphere.

Praise the person's positive deeds, and describe the splendid features of the Pure Land to him. Let him know it is the true home of all

who wander the Saha world, and that Amitabha Buddha expects and welcomes every sentient being to be reborn in his Land of Bliss. Lead him to recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha.” Organize his family members and other reciters into shifts. If the dying person cannot chant along, let him listen quietly to others’ recitation. Guidance may be given to him several times during the course of assisted recitation.

Please note that when and after the person breathes his last, do not move or clean his body, or cry, or change his clothes. That’s because his feelings are greatly magnified at the point of death. Any disturbance to his body would bring intense pain. Aroused and angry, he would fall into a Wretched Realm. Or, if he sees his family weeping, his affection for them would cause him to give up the Pure Land.

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**Q323: If we waited eight hours to change clothes for the deceased, wouldn’t the body have stiffened?**

▶▶A: If so, use a hot towel to warm and soften the joints. In fact, after assisted recitation, the body of the deceased should remain soft and malleable.

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**Q324: If reciters arrive after the dying person has stopped breathing, would assisted recitation still be effective?**

▶▶A: Yes of course, because the spirit consciousness hasn’t left yet. It is easy to communicate with it.

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**Q325: If people only become aware of assisted recitation after the funeral, is there any remedial measure?**

►►A: Yes. Posthumous guidance and Amitabha-recitation are called “prayers” or “ **blessings** ” for the dead, or “ **deliverance of the deceased.** ” The dead person’s spirit consciousness is subject to self-attachment and habit energies, so it will generate a form that bears a strong resemblance to that existing before death. Since this form is born from consciousness, it is known as a “ **mind-made body.** ” It exists in the intermediate state between death and rebirth, so it’s also called the “ **intermediate form.** ” It often remains in a coma. Even if it awakens, it is always in an extremely confused mindset due to constraint of miserable surroundings. It would even refuse to admit the person’s death. Since it is produced by consciousness, however, it has some special powers. It can easily be guided and be touched by the sincerity of the dead person’s family.

The intermediate-form state would generally last no more than 49 days. We should use that time to recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha” for the deceased so that he or she can be delivered.

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**Q326: Can I recite Amitabha’s name for a family member who has been dead for many years?**

►►A: Yes. It is never too late to deliver our late family members. If any of them has fallen into the hungry ghost or hell realm, recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha” for him so he will be reborn in a Virtuous Realm. If she is already in the human or animal realm, recitation of Amitabha’s name will change her circumstances.

Dedicate the merit of name-recitation or virtuous deeds to a deceased relative, and the latter will reap one-seventh of the benefit.

## 9. Life's Haven

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**Q327: When we practice Amitabha-recitation exclusively for rebirth in the Pure Land, can we simultaneously seek worldly benefits? Some Buddhists chant mantras with effective results. Should we follow suit?**

▶▶A: That's not necessary for those who recite Amitabha's name exclusively. If a person fully understands the importance of rebirth in the Pure Land, he would make light of worldly benefits. Yet such an attitude may be hard for beginners to attain. People wish to have happy and peaceful lives while in this world. This can be achieved according to the Buddha's teachings. Here are some general methods: To seek wisdom, declaim the name of "Great Wisdom Bodhisattva Manjusri." To avoid calamity, chant "Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara." To pursue longevity, say "Bhaisajyaguru Vaidurya Prabhasa Tathagata (Medicine Buddha)." To eliminate karmic obstacles, declaim "Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha."

Amitabha-reciters do not have to do this, however. We just recite "Namo Amitabha Buddha." This name alone contains all virtues and merits. On the causal ground, Amitabha completed all cultivation perfectly, including sutras and mantras. He dedicated all the merit from his practice to us in the form of his name. By reciting his name exclusively, we

garner all merits without omission.

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**Q328: What benefits can we get from Amitabha-recitation then?**

▶▶A: According to Master Shandao, Amitabha-recitation engenders five augmentative causes: 1) elimination of negative karma; 2) protection and care by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; 3) seeing Buddhas; 4) deliverance to the Pure Land; and 5) Buddhas' verification of rebirth in the Pure Land.

Master Yinguang said, "We must know that if a person truly invokes Amitabha Buddha without seeking earthly karmic rewards, he will naturally receive such blessings, including a long life without illness, harmonious family relations, flourishing descendants, fortunate circumstances, and all manner of auspicious things."

"Namo Amitabha Buddha" contains infinite merit, which can eradicate boundless bad karma, and thus change ill luck into good fortune. Amitabha Buddha is the Buddha of Infinite Light. Infinite light can banish darkness and therefore manifest luminous wisdom. Amitabha Buddha is also the Buddha of Infinite Life. By reciting his name, we naturally recover from illness and prolong our lives. For Amitabha-reciters, the more we invoke the Buddha, the less we mire ourselves in worldly delusions, the purer our bodies and minds become, and the calmer and happier are our lives.

The biggest benefit in our present lives that Amitabha-recitation offers is that we no longer fear aging, illness and death. All our worldly suffering brings our hearts closer to the Pure Land.

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**Q329: Would all people who recite Amitabha’s name have long lives, good health, good luck and happiness?**

▶▶A: That depends also on each individual’s karma. For example, if a person has created extremely evil karma from killing, it would be quite hard for him to live a long life. The aforementioned “longevity, healthiness, good luck and happiness” are desirable from a worldly perspective. In fact, the longest-lived being in this world cannot compare with the sacred assembly in the Land of Bliss. The former’s life would only be as short as a flash. The utmost happiness in this world is exceeded ten-thousandfold by the joys of the Pure Land. If we confine our vision to worldly rewards, the benefits we obtain would be inferior. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to break through the constraints of these earth-bound notions of good and bad and attain complete liberation.

A person with full faith and aspiration would be “happy even when falling ill.” Given a choice, she would rather go to the Pure Land as early as possible so she can become a Buddha and deliver others. Master Yinguang said, “It doesn’t matter to an Amitabha-reciter whether he dies today or 120 years later. He accepts whatever may result from his past karma. He doesn’t engage in vain calculations.”

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**Q330: What attitude should we take towards adverse circumstances that we encounter?**

▶▶A: When we face difficulties, time seems to crawl. But when a crisis is over and we look back on it from a Buddhist perspective, we may feel grateful that it happened. If everything in the life of an ordinary being

goes according to his wishes, he would inevitably become mired more and more deeply in the Five Worldly Desires. He would lose the chance for liberation from samsara.

Hardship gives us first-hand experience of the Buddhist notion of impermanence. It teaches us to accept calmly the consequences of negative seeds we sowed, so we can perceive life more insightfully. Actually, the adversity endured by the Buddhas in saving sentient beings and by patriarchs while propagating the Dharma far exceed the pains we are suffering. To free us from misery, Amitabha Buddha practiced over countless eons and established the Pure Land of Bliss. No matter how we might have violated the correct Dharma, so long as we repent and recite his name, Amitabha will deliver us to the Pure Land without fail. When we remember this, how can we not recall the Buddha's beneficence and recite his name diligently?

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**Q331: People with affluent lives and successful careers are hard put to develop the mind of renunciation. How should we look at this issue?**

▶▶A: The differences between the rich and the poor only exist in the minds of ordinary beings. From the perspective of sacred or enlightened beings, both are the same: They are wicked, afflicted sentient beings. Delight in worldly wealth comes from comparison – the rich worry a little less, so they think themselves happy. They have more assets than others, and consider themselves well-heeled.

Such positive feelings, however, cannot continue forever because all worldly things are impermanent. The fundamental imperfection is that even our lives are impermanent. When we leave this world, we can

carry nothing with us. Our assets and social status may seem very real for a time. But many years later, strangers will take possession of them. Foolish people go astray without knowing how to return. The wise lose no time seeking liberation. Before the invaluable Dharma, we should regard ourselves as newborn babies, shrug off earthly attributes, and pursue real benefits and joys together with others.

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**Q322: Someone once said, “Amitabha-recitation is a kind of recreation for men of letters to pass their leisure time. How can those who are busy making a living enjoy such niceties?”**

▶▶A: If a person is busy all the time making a living and cannot even stop for a day, he is the one who is most in need of deliverance. And he is precisely the kind of sentient being for whom Amitabha Buddha has compassionate concern. That’s why he made a compact with us on a method of liberation that doesn’t hinder our work – reciting “Namo Amitabha Buddha.” People of all occupations can recite the name while working. They will achieve liberation on an equal basis with reciters who practice full-time in Dharma centers, day and night.

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**Q333: I am a wicked person with set ways. If I recite Amitabha’s name, I’m afraid I’ll bring shame on the Buddha ...**

▶▶A: What Amitabha has sympathy for is precisely our wickedness, as it leads to negative karmic consequences. When Buddhas see sentient beings doing evil, they take pity on the latter for their delusion and stupidity. As an old saying goes, “Lay down the butcher’s knife and immediately become a Buddha.” The *Contemplation Sutra* depicts a thoroughly evil person attaining liberation by reciting Amitabha’s name ten times. We’re

hardly as evil as that person and we have certainly recited Amitabha's name more than ten times. The sooner we start reciting, the earlier we reap benefits. We need not wait until we have turned ourselves into thoroughly virtuous people.

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**Q334: If an illiterate old lady recited Amitabha's name, would her recitation be effective?**

▶▶A: If only well-educated people who have studied Buddhism for years are qualified for rebirth in the Pure Land, Amitabha Buddha would not be able to save all sentient beings of the ten directions. "How to allow foolish people as well as doddering, old aspirants to be reborn in the Pure Land?" That was the very question Bhikku Dharmakara contemplated for five full *kalpas*. As a result, he chose an easy practice for us – anyone who recites Amitabha's name with faith and aspiration will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land.

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**Q335: Does that mean young people needn't recite for the moment?**

▶▶A: "Don't wait until you're old to cultivate the Way; solitary graves are filled with young people." So goes a traditional verse. Even those who have not encountered Buddhism are probably mindful of impermanence. By reciting "Namo Amitabha Buddha," we obtain the benefit of rebirth in the Pure Land as well as benefits in our present lives. It helps us distance ourselves from the burning afflictions of this vulgar world, and abide peacefully in the coolness of the Dharma. Why shouldn't we enjoy doing it? If we wait until an advanced age to start reciting, the karmic habits of a lifetime would become obstacles.

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**Q336: So we shouldn't lose any time reciting "Namo Amitabha Buddha"?**

▶▶A: Let's start now!

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**Q337: Namo Amitabha Buddha.**

▶▶A: Namo Amitabha Buddha.

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**Q338: Namo Amitabha Buddha.**

▶▶A: Namo Amitabha Buddha.