



Why?

Buddhism in Every Step

(英文版)

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Venerable Master Hsing Yun

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Why?

“Why?” is a simple question, but it is also an important one.

The *Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise* says, “Only those who have faith can enter the great ocean of Dharma.” Faith is the foremost element for entering the path of Buddhism. Besides faith, there is yet another important way to enter the path—looking at “why?,” which is entering the path from the perspective of “doubt.”

There is a saying in the Dharma: “Little doubt gains little awakening. Great doubt gains great awakening. No doubt gains no awakening.” Doubt is also a method for entering the path of Buddhism. If there is no question, there will be no answer. A question will trigger thinking, which results in answers. When a question is answered completely, faith is developed, and a person can be correctly introduced

to more profound Dharma studies. As a result, Chan Buddhism advocates developing a questioning mind the most. Chan starts with a topic for discussion, followed by raising questions. From there, everyone develops doubts and investigates “why?”

“Why?” is a question that is very profound, but also one that is wondrous yet difficult to answer. A simple question becomes not so simple when several “whys?” are asked. “Why do we eat?” “Because we are hungry.” “Why do we need to eat when we are hungry?” “Because we are full after eating.” “Why do we feel full after eating?” Since ancient times, people have taken eating for granted. If we answer those questions with “digestion,” “nutrition,” “excretion,” and so on, then the questions are not simple anymore. This is also why Dr. Sun Yat-sen used “eating” as part of the foundation for his theory of “Knowing why is difficult, doing is easy.” The more questions are raised, the more profound the questions become.

In studying Buddhism, we hope to further explore the immeasurable Dharma. Perhaps some people do not totally believe in Buddhism, or they even study Buddhism with a skeptical attitude. This is fine because Buddhism does not mind doubt and can withstand it. Doubt can stimulate thinking and help us understand our true nature and enlighten our

minds. This is exactly where Buddhism differs from all other religions.

Here we will illustrate several questions that people have doubts about, and will provide answers to them. Readers will be guided to the principles of Buddhism.

I. One is not little; one trillion is not much

The commonly held perception is that one is the first integer, and one trillion is a huge number. (Zero was not accepted as a number until the early modern period. Since we are discussing countable things, zero is not included in this discussion.) Why do we say, “One is not little; one trillion is not much”? It is not that Buddhism is confused with numbers and quantities or has difficulty with calculations. So why are we saying a small number is not little, but one trillion is not much?

For instance, the powder in chalk is a combination of tiny dust particles. When we think carefully, this chalk is a mixture of plaster, calcium oxide, pigment, and water. Workers pour this mixture into a mold. After exposure to sun and heat, chalk is made.

When we think more carefully: why do workers need to make chalk? It is because they need to make

a living. In order to survive, they need money to purchase food and clothing. When speaking of food and clothing, we think of farmers and tailors. For farmers to plow the field, sunlight, water, and air are also needed.

If we examine further, we will realize that this chalk is a combination of the giant energy and mass of the universe. How can we say this chalk is tiny?

In addition, we use “one” to describe “one” classroom, “one” country, “one” Earth, and “one” universe. There is also “one” in “one dust particle in chalk” and “one void.” Thus, “one” can actually be very huge. Some people ask: where does oneness return to when all phenomena return to oneness and all things in the universe return to oneness? The answer is: oneness returns to all phenomena.

In Buddhism, one and one trillion are not phenomena and cannot be measured as more or less. The *Diamond Sutra* says:

If someone were to fill the three thousand-fold world system with the seven treasures, used them for giving, and attained merit for this, would the merit be great?...
If someone else were to receive and

uphold as few as four lines of verse from this sutra, and if he were to explain them to others, his merit would be even greater than that.

Ordinary people think that the seven treasures in the three thousandfold world system are a large quantity and a four-line verse is a small quantity, and believe that giving away all the seven treasures in the three thousandfold world system is difficult and what a four-line verse says is simple and easy. Actually this is not true. There must be a number for the total quantity of the seven treasures in the three thousandfold world system. Whenever there is a quantity, there is form and abiding. Although a four-line verse is only several lines of Dharma and seems easy, it is not the same.

For instance, when people receive ten thousand, one hundred thousand, one million, or ten million dollars, they are happy. If the money is squandered, it will run out in three to five years. However, if a person is immersed in the Dharma, the Dharma exists endlessly in the field of the person's eighth consciousness. Not only does the Dharma positively influence the person's behavior in this life, but it also enlightens the person's mind and continues the good influence life after life, so that wondrous wisdom is obtained. The benefits of a four-line verse do not diminish throughout

ons and are better than the conditional, limited seven treasures of the three thousandfold world system.

II. A tiny dust particle is not small; a void is not huge

Atoms, electrons, and dust particles are small units. Ordinary people think they are the smallest, but scholars studying Buddhism think they are not so small. A void is huge, but it is also not very huge. Why are small things not small, big things not big?

In the Tang dynasty, Jiangzhou State Governor Li Bo asked Chan Master Zhichang:

The Buddhist sutra saying “Mount Sumeru hides a mustard seed; a mustard seed contains Mount Sumeru” must be overly mystical. How could a small mustard seed hold a big mountain like Mount Sumeru? This is deceptive.

Chan Master Zhichang heard this and responded with a smile:

Many people say that you “have read more than ten thousand scrolls.” Is that true?

Absolutely! How would I have read only ten thousand scrolls?

Li Bo was conceited.

Where are those ten thousand scrolls that you have read?

Li Bo pointed to his head with his finger, and said:

They are all in here.

Chan Master Zhichang said:

That's odd. I see your skull is only as big as a coconut; how could it contain ten thousand scrolls? Are you deceptive as well?

Upon hearing this, at that moment, Li Bo was suddenly enlightened.

We can read ten thousand scrolls and understand them, but why can't we place a book into the skull? We should not separate matters from their principles. We must have a comprehensive understanding of the nature of each matter and its principles. These are the

characteristics of the objectivity and transcendence of the mind.

Using this principle, we can easily understand the nature of matters. Although a tiny dust particle is small, we can still see the three thousandfold world system. This tiny dust particle is a void, and this void is like our mind. Where is the mind? The void does not have a shape or an appearance, nor can it be seen or obtained. However, the mind can contain the cosmos and see countless universes as numerous as grains of sand in the Ganges.

Let's take a look at another example using sound. When we talk inside the house, no one can hear us ten feet outside the house. If you have heavenly ears, however, no matter how far away you are, you can still hear it. When a baseball game in the United States is broadcast, people all over the world can not only hear it but also watch it on TV. Whatever we say will be transmitted to the three thousandfold world system. Throwing a stone into an ocean may not cause big waves, but it is able to cause vibrations in the ocean. Therefore, even though one tiny dust particle is nearly shapeless, one is all, which also means vastness.

We often hear this proverb: "Do not think any virtue trivial, and so neglect it; do not think any vice

trivial, and so commit it.” Trivial virtues can accumulate and become significant virtues. Trivial vices can accumulate and become significant vices. Constant dripping wears a hole in a stone. A single spark can start a huge blaze. Therefore, small things are not really small, and big things are not really big.

III. One ksana (instant) is not short; one kalpa (eon) is not long

In Buddhism, a “ksana” is the period of time between the arising and ceasing of a thought, which is a very short period of time; a “kalpa” is the period of time between the arising and ceasing of a universe, which is a long period of time. How short is one ksana? The sutra says, “In the time of a young man’s single finger snap, sixty-three ksanas have gone by.” How do we interpret the meaning of “One ksana is not short; one kalpa is not long”?

In fact, time is abstract. There is no way to measure the length of time. Some people lament that life is as short as the duration of a finger snap, while others lament that life is so difficult, that one day seems to be one year in length. For those who miss somebody, they lament that missing someone for one day is like being separated for three autumns.

For those who are enlightened, they believe that one hundred years of human life is as transient as lightning and flint fire. Time does not have length; its “length” depends on how a person perceives it under any mental formation. Some microbes are born in the morning but are dead by evening; some animals have a lifespan several times longer than a human’s. No matter how long or short the life is, it is “one” life cycle.

Besides the relative nature of time, in our life there is another form of lifespan that transcends time and cannot be measured by the length of time. If we understand this, we will feel that our life is eternal, even though we may have a very short life, like being born in the morning and dead in the evening of the same day. Life is like this: the universe is a big theater; sentient beings are the guests. Human beings, in essence, never die. If we are not enlightened, even if we were to live one billion years, we would still be loitering and wasting time.

When the Buddha was entering final nirvana at the age of eighty, his disciples were very sad because they thought the Buddha was about to leave all of them, the eyes of humans and heaven would be extinguished, and the world would be in a long darkness. In fact, the Buddha did not leave us. The body formed

through causes and conditions may be extinguished because of the natural cycle of birth, old age, sickness, and death, but the Buddha's wisdom-life entered the formless Dharma nature. We can profoundly understand that if the Buddha were still alive, yet we did not practice the Dharma, then would being alive mean anything to the Buddha? Although the Buddha is long gone, his teachings and truth remain forever. This is the Dharma nature of the Buddha. It is like a torch that lights up the universe forever.

Some people live only a short life but have a timeless impact on the world, such as Master Sengchao, politician Tan Sitong, national martyr Zou Rong, etc. Some people work hard and want to achieve some success, but after encountering obstacles they end up accomplishing nothing, thinking their life is too long. Whether life is long or short, this totally depends on a person's differentiating mind.

In the winter of 1914, Master Taixu had a secluded retreat in Mount Putuo. One night at the moment of the bell ringing for bedtime, his mind went beyond time and space: past and future seemed negated; everything inside and outside of him seemed to vanish. When he came out of meditation it was morning already, but he felt he had been sitting for only an hour.

We do not need to worry about the duration of time; we should only care about the value of what we practice. There is no absolute comparison between long and short in regard to time. You can also refer to Einstein's theory of relativity for a similar explanation of time and space.

IV. Existence is not really existence; non-existence is not really non-existence

Ordinarily, we have this concept: we never say what exists does not exist, or what does not exist actually does exist. For instance, human beings and houses do exist. If we insist on saying they do not exist, wouldn't this be a big lie?

In Buddhism, there are things that, when we examine them through our inherent nature, really do not exist. There are things that we cannot see or hold, yet they do exist. For example, wind cannot be seen or held, but shapeless wind can make trees sway and rustle in the air. Where is electricity? Is it in a copper wire? If we peel the rubber insulation and expose the copper wire, we can feel the electricity in the copper wire but cannot see the electricity. Where in our body do love and hate reside? We do not see love and hate but we can feel them deeply. Therefore, to determine

whether something exists or not is not fully dependent on our sense organs.

Suchness and intrinsic nature fill up infinite space and are spread over the Dharma realm. They are as long as time, as wide as space. Things that do not exist or that we do not see from our perspective actually do exist from the perspective of truth. Even if you say they do not exist, you still cannot deny their existence.

When the Buddha was first enlightened, he lamented:

I could not propagate the Dharma to benefit sentient beings because what I teach is the exact opposite of what people of the world believe. They think money, sex, fame, and fortune are happiness, but I regard them as the root of afflictions and distress. The complete and true nature of suchness that I teach is true purity and happiness, but they think it is purely imaginary and impractical. What I was awakened to is the exact opposite of what they understand.

The Buddha, who has great wisdom, compassion and holiness, was lamenting so deeply; it is clear to see that sentient beings reverse right and wrong and cannot turn around from the wrong very easily.

We can now take a moment and examine whether things that exist really do exist, and whether things that do not exist really do not exist. For instance, when most people see a table, they know it is a table. However when we think further, it is not a table but lumber, because when lumber is manufactured into a table, the lumber becomes a table. When lumber is manufactured into a blackboard, the lumber becomes a blackboard. When lumber is manufactured into a window frame, the lumber becomes a window frame. In fact, the table we see is lumber in essence. The table is only the phenomenal form of the lumber.

What about lumber? Its original phase is a tree, and then the tree is cut down and becomes lumber. What about the tree? The tree is not a tree either. Its original phase is a seed. The seed is also not a seed. It is just a name called “seed.” The original phase of the seed is its causes and conditions. Causes and conditions must be met so that a seed can exist, and the seed requires causes and conditions (soil, water, nutrients, sunlight, air, etc.) so that it can become a tree. The

tree requires many causes and conditions to become lumber, and the lumber needs many causes and conditions to become windows, tables, and blackboards.

Now we see that to say something exists does not mean it actually exists; to say something does not exist does not mean it does not actually exist. What exists is due to causes and conditions. Are causes and conditions not the truth of the universe?

The bonds of our thoughts will naturally be freed once we understand and realize causes and conditions.

In Buddhism, we talk about emptiness; does emptiness mean existence or nonexistence? Some say, “All four great elements are empty. All is empty.” The emptiness that is generally understood is not real emptiness in Buddhism. For this type of emptiness means existence—not emptiness. Being not empty, things will have obstacles. By being empty, things will exist, and matters and principles can then be without obstacles.

If there is no space in a house, how can a person dwell in the house? True emptiness generates wonderful existence. When we think something does not exist, it actually exists. How do we know existence from the aspect of nonexistence (emptiness)? We cannot look for existence from illusory existence. We need to seek existence from true emptiness. Only by

understanding the truth of emptiness can we handle the complex matters.

V. Filth is not dirty; cleanliness is not clean

When seeing an object, all kinds of differentiations arise in our mind: this is dirty and that is clean; this classroom is solemn and grand; that house is shabby. Why can we say filth is not dirty, and cleanliness is not clean? Let's start with human stool. We think our own stool is dirty, but dogs think it is a delicacy and fight with one another for it. Dogs do not think that what we think of as filthy is dirty. What is the reason?

It is because sentient beings have different influences through their karma, resulting in different perspectives of filth and cleanliness. As the Consciousness-Only School explains, heavenly beings see water as crystal, humans see water as water, fish see water as a palace, beings in hell see water as blood, and chemists see water as a compound of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. For the same water, due to different karmic influences or different knowledge, the value of filth and cleanliness is dramatically different.

For instance, some people practice Buddhism by means of eating leftovers and poor-quality food,

but they do not feel miserable. Chan Master Huitung was a herald for six palaces and had a brotherly connection with the emperor. After taking refuge and becoming a monk, he dwelled in a pine tree, enduring hardship and eating poor-quality food. “Living Buddha” Jinshan was known for drinking dishwater for food in the kitchen. Those who like to eat fish and shrimp will feel disgusted if they know that when they take a bite of shrimp, they also swallow its wastes and digestive system at the same time. Pork is tasty, but swine is fed with refuse. Certainly, in order to satisfy the desire for food, people have it in their minds that shrimp and pork are not filthy. So whether an object is dirty or clean depends on the person’s mind.

A sutra says that the Western World of Ultimate Bliss is a pure land, and the Eastern World of Crystal Light is also a pure land. Some disciples skeptically asked the Buddha, “Buddha, why is your world not a pure land? You can see how dirty and filthy the Sahā world is.” The Buddha immediately used his Buddha-power to show the disciples what his world looks like. Instantly, a place having four continents surrounded by sun and moon, a river of gold, flourishing trees, luxuriant grass, and blooming flowers appeared right before the disciples’ eyes. This is exactly the realm that the Buddha experiences.

If the mind is pure, the world will naturally be pure. Such purity is the perfect goal of practitioners and the world in their mind. A practitioner does not see a dirty world because of external filthiness; his mind can transform filthiness in the external world to pureness. Thus, a Buddhist should be independent, not be enticed in the stormy, turbid environment, but further transform the environment. A Buddhist should set aside these illusory ways of duality and use the wisdom that goes beyond duality to attain the profound tranquility of mind.

Nevertheless, in speaking of going beyond the duality of filthiness and pureness, we are to elevate the levels of our state of mind in order to be liberated from the shackles of worldly desires, and not follow those outside of the Way.

VI. Retreat does not mean falling behind; advance does not mean moving forward

Why does retreat not mean falling behind, and advance not mean moving forward?

Take the example of the Earth being round: when airplanes fly forward, they eventually will fly back to where they originally took off. In this case, advance is not necessarily moving forward,

but moving backward. Sometimes we need to take a step back to get a broader and brighter outlook; turn around and look back, and we see the other shore. People studying Buddhism have a different philosophy of life than any other people. Blindly advancing and moving forward does not mean we can always make a breakthrough. Sometimes, turning around and stepping back may provide an easier way to the destination. Similarly, we will feel the roads in our life are wider and the options are greater if we teach everyone in the world with the same mindset of stepping backward and an attitude of turning around. This is real advance.

When we learn how to drive a car, knowing how to drive forward does not make us great drivers, but knowing how to reverse does. When we pilot a boat, we cannot just keep moving straight ahead; sometimes it is even more important to turn or reverse. Jet engines need to push air backward to propel forward. The more the air is compressed, the more internal energy it generates. Soldiers sometimes need to detour or go around to defeat enemies. Farmers must walk backward in order to transplant rice seedlings more efficiently. To conduct oneself in the world, one must be humble, courteous, and considerate. To succeed and make a difference, one must retreat for the sake

of advancing. There are many situations where one has to advance by crawling forward and lowering his or her head in order to attain achievement.

In the past, sages and scholars of heroic virtue have retired from political circles to stay behind the scenes in order to wait for better opportunities at a later time. Some talented and outstanding people have secluded themselves in a forest to wait for a capable and virtuous ruler. Some people conceal their capabilities and bide their time. Some people wait for chances and opportunities suited to the situation. A virtuous, scholarly man understands that “advance cannot be better than retreat.”

During the Three Kingdoms period in China, Liu Bei (courtesy name: Xuande) knew his oldest son, Liu Chan, was incompetent, and wanted Zhuge Liang to ascend to the throne. Because of Zhuge Liang’s humility, he declined Liu Bei’s request, which left him the legacy of being a loyalist. The Duke of Zhou acted as regent for King Cheng of Zhou. Although the Duke of Zhou was an elder, he always considered himself as subordinate. This led to a good reputation for the Duke of Zhou.

In life, what we pursue is to be completely at ease. If we only know how to advance but not how to retreat, we will only experience half of the world. If

we only retreat but do not learn how to advance, we will lose the courage to withstand any responsibility. Therefore, only by knowing advancing and retreating and mastering them well can we elevate life to have the entire world.

This booklet, *Why?*, explains a different understanding of the world: quantity-wise, paying no particular attention to more or less; object-wise, paying no particular attention to big or small; time-wise, paying no particular attention to long or short; space-wise, paying no particular attention to existence or nonexistence; perception-wise, paying no particular attention to filth or purity; action-wise, paying no particular attention to before or after. The old concept we know is not necessarily correct. We should reevaluate what we know about quantity, objects, time, space, perception, and action from a Buddhist perspective.

However, by solely studying theory, we can only gain knowledge; but that is not thorough enough. We should further practice physically and spiritually. Buddhism is different from philosophy; besides comprehension, practice is necessary. One time, Chan Master Zhaozhou Congshen was asked, “How do I practice to attain enlightenment?” Chan Master Zhaozhou did not answer the question; instead, he

stood up and said, “I need to use the restroom.” After he walked several steps, he stopped and said, “Look, even though this is a trivial matter, I still have to do it by myself.” Using the restroom is a trivial thing; however, this old Chan master had to do this himself and nobody could do it for him. In order to completely solve a problem, we have to experience it on our own.

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