



Letting Go

Buddhism in Every Step (D3)
(英文版)

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International Translation Center

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Table of Contents

I.	The Material World	1
II.	Living with Money	11
III.	Healthy Relationships	19
IV.	Community	25
V.	Spiritual Needs	29

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Letting Go

I. The Material World

Those who know a bit about Buddhism may see it as a religion which talks a lot about emptiness and how to live spiritually. Some even close their minds to the religion because they are afraid that if they become Buddhists, they have to give up their nice clothes and comfortable homes. One might wonder, “If I have to give up all these comforts to be a Buddhist, why should I bother?”

Actually, there are many forms of Buddhist practice, and placing too much emphasis on renunciation without understanding its deeper significance will only drive people away. In fact, we see from the description of the Pure Land in *The Amitabha Sutra* that Buddhism and material comfort are not mutually exclusive.

The Amitabha Sutra is a well-known sutra of the Pure Land School of Buddhism, and in it there

are detailed descriptions of Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. The Pure Land is described as a place of grandeur: the ground is paved with gold, and the houses are made of seven kinds of gems. Even the railings and trees that surround the land radiate with beauty. The ponds are made of seven kinds of precious stones, and the water that fills these ponds has eight excellent qualities.¹ In this Land of Ultimate Bliss, those who need clothing will be clothed, and those who are hungry will be fed. To get around people can fly freely from one place to the next. The standard of living in Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land is beyond our imagination. From this sutra we see that Buddhism is not just about suffering: the Pure Land School of Buddhism points out how we can be reborn into a land of unparalleled happiness.

That being said, there is no question that Buddhism speaks of suffering, though it does so merely to state the facts of life. Buddhism also goes a step further and teaches us how suffering can be a form of practice. It does not, however, say that suffering and spiritual growth are the same thing, or that we all have to go through pain to achieve liberation.

In regards to how we should manage our material wants and needs, Buddhism does not suggest that

1. The water is (1) pure, (2) cool, (3) sweet, (4) soft, (5) soothing, (6) calming, (7) thirst and hunger quenching, and (8) nourishing for the senses.

we unduly deprive ourselves. While a life of extreme austerity is lifeless and dull, Buddhism also stresses that we should not be self-indulgent. Our desires can easily become insatiable: once we have a comfortable house, we also want to drive a fancy car. Now that most people have a television set, we long for central air-conditioning. From one desire to another, we can become enslaved to the material world at the expense of our spiritual development. Thus, Buddhism does not endorse either a life of austerity or that of self-indulgence. While *The Amitabha Sutra* speaks of inconceivable comfort in the Pure Land, the environment is purely a means for practicing the Dharma and becoming a Buddha. When *The Diamond Sutra* says, “They should give rise to a mind that does not abide in anything,” this does not mean that we must let go of everything but, instead, that we should practice the Middle Way between the extremes of austerity and self-indulgence.

One way to explain Buddhist practice is through what are called the “five vehicles,” which are five different kinds of religious practice appropriate to people of differing levels of spiritual development. The five vehicles are the human vehicle, the heavenly being vehicle, the sravaka vehicle, the pratyekabuddha vehicle, and the bodhisattva vehicle.

The human and heavenly being vehicles are for lay Buddhists who wish to be assured rebirth as a

human being or in heaven and focus on worldly matters. The sravaka and pratyekabuddha vehicles, on the other hand, named after different levels of Buddhist sainthood, are for those who have renounced the household life and wish to focus on spiritual matters. Practices for sravakas and pratyekabuddhas, such as vegetarianism and asceticism, may not be appropriate to those in the human and heavenly being vehicle stages of spiritual development.

Buddhist literature often talks about making aspirations or setting goals. There are three different kinds of aspiration in Buddhism. The first is the aspiration for a better rebirth, which is the wish to be reborn in the human realm or in heaven. The second is the aspiration toward renunciation, which leads one to become a sravaka or a pratyekabuddha. The third is the aspiration to attain enlightenment and liberate sentient beings, which leads one to become a bodhisattva.

Those who pursue the human and heavenly being vehicles may be blessed with wealth and fame. These are not necessarily deadly poisons that we should all shun. They should, however, be pursued in an ethical manner, and they should be used to better mankind. Within these parameters, the pursuit of wealth and fame is not inconsistent with the Buddha's teachings.

We all have different characters and personalities. Some people are unmoved by wealth and fame,

and they do not hesitate giving them up in the pursuit of truth. Their dispositions are akin to those of sra-vakas and pratyekabuddhas, and they may one day renounce the household life. It is important that we know ourselves. If we do not have the right disposition, even if we were to shave our heads and join the monastic order, in our hearts we would still not be able to truly renounce the household life. Thus, it is unreasonable for some Dharma teachers to expect lay Buddhists to let go of their families, wealth, and fame. As Dharma teachers, we should teach the Dharma according to the spiritual maturity of the audience. If not, we will give people a biased picture of the Buddha's teachings.

Our life in this world cannot be separated from the four basic necessities of life: clothing, food, shelter, and the means to get from place to place. The Buddha's needs were no different, though in his case they took on a different meaning. *The Diamond Sutra* says, "At mealtime, the World-Honored One put on his robe, picked up his bowl, and went into the city of Sravasti to beg for food." After he had gone from house to house, he returned to the grove. When he had finished eating, he put away his robe and bowl, washed his feet, straightened his mat, and sat down."

The opening of *The Diamond Sutra* describes a typical day for the Buddha. On the surface, there is nothing unusual about his daily routine. But if we

look deeper, we will see that the way the Buddha carried out these activities is actually a skillful means to teach us how to conduct our own lives.

“Putting on his robe and picking up his bowl” signifies the observance of precepts. “Going into the city of Sravasti to beg for food” shows generosity—both on the part of those who gave alms as well as on the part of the Buddha who, in return, taught them the Dharma. “Going from house to house” shows patience, for the Buddha went out begging for alms round in an orderly fashion, from house to house, without expressing any personal preferences. Regardless of the condition of the food received, the Buddha consumed the food with gratitude. This is patience, too. “Finishing eating, putting away his robe and bowl, and washing his feet” reflects the Buddha’s diligence. “Straightening his mat and sitting down” shows the Buddha’s commitment to meditative concentration. Through his daily activities, the Buddha showed us that the Dharma is present in each of the four basic necessities of life.

During the Tang dynasty, there was a Chan master named Jiuzhou. Once when someone asked him to explain the Dharma, Jiuzhou replied, “Go eat.” On another occasion of being asked to explain the Dharma, he said, “Go wash your bowl.” When a third person asked the Chan master to show him the wondrous teachings of Chan, Jiuzhou told him, “Go

sweep the floor.” Eating, washing dishes, or sweeping the floor are trivial activities that we all have experienced, so where is the Dharma? The Dharma is in our everyday lives.

Most people do not understand this. They neglect the Dharma in their lives and instead travel afar to seek the truth. During the course of Chan history, there were many masters who became enlightened while eating, cleaning up, or tilling the soil. In our pursuit of truth it is important that we study the sutras and learn from virtuous teachers, but it is equally important that we do not ignore our everyday lives. If we are mindful in our daily activities of putting on our clothes, eating, sleeping, and getting from place to place, we will come to realize that the Dharma is everywhere.

Clothing

How do we see the Dharma in the four basic necessities of life? First, let’s talk about clothing. Most people put a lot of emphasis on how they look. Just go to any department store, and you will be dazzled by the great variety of clothes for sale with different colors, materials, and styles. Regardless of how much we spend on our wardrobe, it only makes us look good on the outside and does not change the inside whatsoever. Expensive clothing cannot mask one’s internal delusions. A compassionate person will command respect regardless of how he or she

is dressed. Buddhism emphasizes inner cultivation, and teaches us to adorn ourselves with grace and elegance. Our inner beauty can be like a wild orchid which emanates its fragrance for miles.

Food

Concerning food, the Buddha points out that our physical body is simply constructed from the four great elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, and lacks any independent nature of its own. Even though our body is empty in this way, we must still take care of it, for without it, we would have no way to practice. Thus, food should be consumed to keep our body healthy, not to indulge our senses. For this reason, the Buddha instructed his disciples not to spend time in preparing meals; instead, they should get the food they need for the day through their alms rounds.

Venerable Hongyi of the Vinaya School² had an excellent attitude in the way he looked at food. One day, Xia Mianzun, a well-known educator of that time, saw the venerable eating his dinner. The venerable ate a simple dinner consisting of a single dish of pickled vegetables. Feeling sorry for the venerable, Xia Mianzun asked, “Don’t you think that the pickled vegetables are too salty?”

Venerable Hongyi replied, “A salty taste has its own appeal.”

2. The Vinaya School concerns itself with life in the monastic order.

After dinner, the venerable poured himself a glass of water to drink. With his eyebrows knit, Mr. Xiao asked, “Why not drink a cup of tea? Water is so bland.”

Smiling, the venerable replied, “Blandness has its own taste, too.” The way the venerable viewed his food revealed not only that he had truly integrated the Dharma into his daily life but also how joyful a life of Chan can be.

Shelter

Some people live in palatial estates while others crowd into small apartments. There is an old Chinese saying regarding our true needs: “A full meal during the day, a bed to sleep in at night.” If we can discern the difference between what we need and what we want, we will see that our basic requirements are quite minimal. Whether we live in a penthouse or a small apartment, at night all we need is a mere three by six foot space.

The first emperor of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, had been ordained as a novice monk for a short time before he became emperor. One night, when he returned late to the temple, its doors were locked. He had no choice but to sleep on the ground outside the temple. While lying down, he looked up at the starry sky and had an epiphany, which he captured in this poem:

*With the sky as a canopy, and the earth as a
blanket,
The sun, moon, and stars accompany me to
sleep.
It is nightfall, and I dare not stretch my legs
For fear of misstepping and shattering the
ocean-wide sky.*

Whether the house we live in is big or small is not important. What matters is how big our hearts are. Someone who is ungenerous and discontent will always find fault with his or her circumstances, even if he or she lives in a mansion. If we apply the Buddha's teachings to our daily life, then regardless of how we live, where we are, or what we are doing, we will still find happiness within ourselves. The Venerable Cihang once wrote, "When one finds peace within oneself, north, east, south, and west are all good." With this mindset, we can feel at home wherever we are.

Transportation

Before the advent of the automobile, people used to marvel at the speed of a bicycle compared to that of walking. Now that the automobile is commonplace, we think of bicycles as slow. On the other hand, traveling by car does not come close to the speed of air travel. What then is the fastest mode of transportation?

Believe it or not, the mind is faster than all of these. *The Amitabha Sutra* says, “To the west, a hundred thousand million Buddha lands away, there is a land called Ultimate Bliss.” How can we possibly travel to a place so far away? To this question, *The Amitabha Sutra* answers, “In a single moment of thought, one instantly attains rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss.” As we can see, the wondrous abilities of the mind are beyond our comprehension.

The Dharma teaches us that what we need and what we want are two very different things. When we are in charge of our mind, we will not let our indulgence in clothing, food, shelter, and transportation run circles around us. When we apply the Buddha’s teachings to all aspects of daily life, we will find happiness within ourselves.

II. Living with Money

There is a saying which playfully captures the influence money has on people: “People mumble; money talks.” For some of us, money can be a temptation that causes us to compromise our morals. Money problems have caused many rifts between once loving siblings. We often read about family feuds that develop due to conflicts regarding the divvying up of inheritances. What then is a skillful way to look at money?

While most of us wish for a comfortable life, not all of us will come into riches. According to the law

of cause and effect, only those who plant the proper karmic seeds will acquire wealth. According to karma, wealth is earned, not bestowed. Even if one was handed millions of dollars, it would be impossible to enjoy these riches without the proper karmic conditions. There is a Chinese folk tale which serves to illustrate this point:

Once, there was a beggar who bought a lottery ticket, and as it turned out, his ticket had the winning numbers. When he found out that he had the winning ticket, he was happy beyond words. However, in those days, there was a waiting period of half a month before the prize could be claimed. Since he was homeless and had no place to safeguard his ticket, he hid it in his walking stick.

During the next few days, he could not stop dreaming about what he would buy with the prize money. A car? A house? Expensive furniture? He wanted them all. One day, as he dreamt of how he would now be able to get married, settle down, and even be able to take his family abroad to travel, he found he had walked all the way up to the pier. As he stood on the pier watching the waves at sea, he could hardly wait any longer to claim his prize money. He looked at his walking stick and was disgusted: he had carried it with him for as long as he had been homeless. To him, it symbolized his life as a beggar, for it had carried him down many empty roads and had

been raised against feral dogs in the night as he laid down to rest. He took the stick, held it over his head, and used all his might to throw it into the sea.

As he watched the waves carrying the stick out to sea, he let out all his anger from living a life of poverty and screamed, “From now on, I am going to be a rich man! I don’t need you anymore!” Only when it was finally time to claim his prize did he remember he had hidden his ticket in the stick that he had thrown out to sea. This drove the beggar crazy. His dream of becoming a rich man was so close, yet so far.

How can we plant the karmic seeds of wealth? Let me tell you a story from the sutras. Katyayana, noted for his talents in debate and persuasion, was one of the disciples of the Buddha. One day, while he was out on his alms rounds, he saw a poor old lady. He went up to her and asked, “I am here for alms. Will you be so kind as to share some of your food?”

The old lady knitted her brow and replied, “I don’t even have enough to eat; what can I give you?”

“You said you were poor. Why don’t you give me your poverty?”

The old lady could not believe her ears. She asked, “How can I give you my poverty? And why would anyone want it?”

“Give it to me. I want it,” Katyayana answered.

“How, then, do I give it to you?”

Katyayana explained, “By practicing generosity. When you give alms, you are planting the karmic seeds of wealth.”

We cannot simply wish for wealth. The Buddha teaches that if we want to be wealthy, we should plant the karmic seeds of wealth through giving. Giving is not just about giving money or material goods. When we give our time, our love, or our compassion, we are also practicing generosity.

Beyond planting the karmic seeds of wealth through giving, the Buddha teaches us to pursue wealth in an ethical manner. The *Agamas* speak of an incident which illustrates that wealth acquired unethically is as poisonous as a venomous snake. One day, when the Buddha and Ananda were out begging for alms, they came across a piece of gold on the road. Pointing to the gold piece, the Buddha said, “Ananda, look, a snake.” Looking in the direction of the gold, Ananda replied, “Yes, Lord Buddha, I see. That is indeed a snake.” The Buddha nodded, and the two continued on their way.

It so happened that a father and his son were working in a nearby field. When they overheard the Buddha’s conversation with Ananda, they were curious and decided to see the snake for themselves. When they got to where the Buddha and Ananda were standing earlier, they were pleasantly surprised to see not a snake but a piece of gold. The father was

ecstatic and said to his son, “This is no snake. The Buddha must have been mistaken. This is gold!” He then picked up the gold and took it home with him.

As it turns out, the gold actually belonged to the king. A thief had broken into the treasury earlier and had dropped a piece of gold on the road as he made his escape. When the king found the missing gold in the farmer’s possession, he arrested the farmer, assuming that he was the thief who had stolen it. It was then that the farmer finally understood that when wealth is not attained in an ethical manner, it is like a poisonous snake.

One factor of the Noble Eightfold Path is “right livelihood.” This means that we should earn our living in an ethical manner. We should not engage in businesses that involve gambling or the buying and selling of intoxicants, sentient beings, or guns. Additionally, we should not make our living by means of fortune-telling, palmistry, or the reading of fengshui. These activities are not consistent with the Buddhist precepts and fly in the face of the teachings of cause and effect.

The Venerable Yinguang showed us through his actions the importance of acquiring wealth in an ethical manner. For many years, he lived on Mount Putuo. During the Japanese invasion, one of his disciples invited him to come to Hong Kong to spread the Dharma. This student was a very successful

businessman and offered a house for the venerable to live in. Though the venerable felt that the cause and conditions were ripe for him to leave Mount Putuo, he was reluctant to accept his student's invitation because he found out that the student had made his fortune by selling liquor. He declined the offer and told his student, "If you really want me to accept your offer, you must stop selling liquor. This is not right livelihood and goes against the Noble Eightfold Path. Thus, I will not accept your offer."

Thus, if we plant the karmic seeds of wealth by giving alms, and if we pursue our wealth in an ethical manner, the road to riches is well within our reach.

While Buddhism teaches us not to be attached to the material world, it does not condemn the material world. Some people believe that one must be poor to be considered a cultivated or spiritual person. This is not true at all. Wealth by itself does not have any ethical value. It is the immoral pursuit of wealth, as well as its ill use, that gives wealth a bad name. Money, if used properly, can be applied to the betterment of mankind. While it is true that money can be compared to a poisonous snake, it is equally true that it can be used to spread the Dharma. If we want to continually encourage new generations to work toward spreading the Dharma, we need to provide good education for the young. This means building schools, and that requires money. We must

hire teachers, and this also takes money. With adequate resources, we can even set up scholarships to provide educational opportunities for those who are unable to afford an education on their own. Only through education can we ensure that the Buddha's teachings continue to shine in future generations. Thus, whether money is a poison or a tool entirely depends on how it is used.

In the sutras, the Buddha gives us some guidelines on how to manage our monetary assets. The Buddha recommended that laypeople divide their wealth into ten parts: two parts should be given to ensure that our parents are secure in their old age, four parts to provide a comfortable lifestyle for spouses and children, two parts to invest in our business or livelihood, one part should be saved for a rainy day, and another part should be given to charity. These of course are only guidelines; it is up to each of us to decide what is appropriate for our circumstances.

There are many ways to measure wealth. Some people measure wealth by how many material possessions they have. I look at wealth differently. I remember how destitute I was when I first arrived in Taiwan. All I had were the shoes on my feet and a few pieces of clothing. As I went from temple to temple looking for a place to stay, I was faced with rejection again and again. During the war years, all the temples were hardly able to care for their own

residents and were thus reluctant to accept a new monk into their ranks. There were days that I went without food.

Finally, I arrived at a temple in Xinzhu County. The abbot of the temple, Venerable Miaoguo, was compassionate and took me in. I was very grateful and was willing to help in whatever ways I could. In addition to teaching, I was also responsible for fetching water from the well for all to use. Every day, I had to fetch hundreds of pails of water, and I did it most willingly.

Even though I had few possessions, I was content and felt I was very fortunate. When I went to the market before dawn to buy vegetables for the day, I had the stars in the sky to keep me company. Flowers and trees were there for me to enjoy, and roads were there for me to travel. During this time, I had the opportunity to meet people from many different walks of life. Though I possessed nothing, I had all the wealth the universe could offer me.

If we measure wealth by how many material things we own, we will never know contentment. Desire is a bottomless pit. Regardless of how much we own, if we do not have inner peace, we will always desire more. It is ironic that we look outside of ourselves in our pursuit of wealth when the greatest wealth of all—our Buddha nature—is right within us.

III. Healthy Relationships

Our relationships play a very important role in our everyday lives. A lot of people make the mistake of thinking that the Buddha's teachings disapprove of relationships. This is far from the truth. Buddhism does not encourage people to shed their relationships but teaches us how to cultivate healthy relationships. How can we ensure that our relationships remain healthy? In this regard, the Buddha teaches us to nurture our relationships with compassion. We think of the Buddha as an enlightened being, but we should not forget that he was also a most affectionate and loving person.

We all have many different kinds of relationships. The relationship between a husband and a wife is different from that between a father and son, between siblings, or between friends. Relationships are the glue that holds society together, for none of us can live in a vacuum. Our relationships with others give us pleasure as well as many headaches. As important as our relationships are, we need to know how to manage them, for if we do not, countless problems will arise. I'd like to suggest the following three points on how to nurture our relationships:

Remember to Give Rather than Take

Our affection for those we love often depends on how they relate to us, and as such, our affection for others

is often egocentric in nature. When we love someone, we feel we have a special claim to him or her. This desire is almost instinctive: even a toddler can be possessive of his or her mom. True love, however, is not about possession but about giving. Relationships that are built on the desire to possess are doomed to failure, for sooner or later the urge to possess will degenerate into jealousy or become an insatiable demand for more and more of the other person.

Once, one of the devotees at a particular temple discovered that her husband had been having an affair. Feeling betrayed, she became angry and began to ignore her husband. She stopped talking to her husband, and whatever conversations they had inevitably ended up in a fight. The husband sensed her hostility and became even more reluctant to spend time at home. Their marriage seemed to be beyond saving.

One day, she came to me in tears, told me her situation, and asked what she could do. I told her, "I know of a way to win his heart back, but I am not sure if you are willing to give it a try."

"I will do whatever you tell me to! Please!"

I explained to her, "First of all, you have to act as though nothing has happened. If you confront your husband directly, it will only drive him farther away. Second, when your husband comes home from work, I want you to really try to understand where he is coming from. When he realizes that he

can also find warmth and love at home, he will realize that he has no need for an affair. Only love can win back love.”

The wife did exactly as I instructed her. Before long, her husband did come around. As it turned out, she was also partly responsible for the problems in their marriage. She was once a demanding and nagging wife. Her overbearing personality gave her husband an excuse to look for “happiness” outside of home. After my conversation with her, her husband sensed a genuine change in her and once more felt loved in his own home.

One day, he asked his wife, “What changed you? You seem like a different person.” When she told him of our conversation, he was very thankful that her religion had played a role in saving their marriage, and he too began to visit the temple regularly.

This may be just one anecdote, and it may not be the panacea for all marital problems. It does, however, help to illustrate the fact that hatred cannot win love. Only when there is an open willingness to give does love have a chance. When a rift develops between a couple, if just one party is willing to give a little extra, there is hope. If both parties refuse to give, even a small squabble may spiral out of control. In a relationship, the desire to control the other party will only snuff out the life of a relationship. Giving is the best nutrient for relationships to grow.

Relationships that are grounded in giving are also trusting and happy ones.

Love without Attachment

Some people mistakenly think that Buddhism teaches us to have no relationships at all when what it is trying to teach us is to not be trapped by the limitations of relationships. There is a certain verse that appears within many Buddhist temples which goes like this:

*Mind not that Buddhism's food and drink
are plain,
And that monastic affection lacks the pun-
gency of worldly affection.*

What this verse is saying is that while the monastic view of relationships is much cooler than the secular view, it is no less sincere.

During the Tang dynasty, there was a monk named Congjian. He came from the city of Nanyang and became a monk when he was middle-aged after he had married and had a son. Having been ordained for twenty years, he had yet to visit his family even once. One day, while he was working in the temple garden, a young man came up to him and asked, "Reverend monk, please tell me where I can find Venerable Congjian?"

Congjian was taken by surprise and asked the young man in return, "Why are you looking for him?"

The young man replied, "The venerable is my father. I have not seen him for twenty years; I just want to pay him a visit."

Pointing to a distant corner in the garden, Congjian told the young man, "You can find your father over there." Congjian then hurried away. When the young man walked over to where Congjian had pointed, he could not find his father. By the time he realized who he had been speaking to, Congjian had already disappeared without a trace.

On the surface, it appears that Congjian was a cold and emotionless man. In reality, he did not acknowledge his son because he was afraid that the love he had for his son would make him lose his resolve to practice the Dharma for the sake of all beings. He loved his son dearly but not in an outward or conventional way.

The famous venerable Hongyi was also married before he became a monk. He, too, refused to meet with his wife when she came to visit. We cannot, because of this, call the venerable a heartless man. The venerable was very compassionate. He did not confine his love only to his family but gave it to all sentient beings. He gave himself to those who needed his help, and his teachings gave many people hope and direction. His contributions to the spreading of the Dharma were immense and definitely not the conduct of an unloving man.

Love without Differentiation

For most of us, we focus our love on those we take a liking to. When we first meet someone, we usually size up whether we have an affinity for the person or not. With someone that we have a good rapport with, we can spend hours in conversation. With those whom we don't have much in common with, even a short conversation is often punctuated by moments of awkward silence, and good intentions are often misread. While it is easy to be kind and friendly to those we like, the Buddha teaches us to love unconditionally and have compassion for all. Compassion should know no discrimination, and we should be kind to friends and foes alike.

Some parents shower their children with attention and hope that their love will be reciprocated during their twilight years. It is unfortunate that, even after giving their children their all, they may find that they desert them in their moment of need. When we concentrate our emotions on only a few people, the potential for hurt is magnified. At the other end of the spectrum, some people have given scholarships to poor students without thinking much about it, only to be pleasantly surprised to learn of the amount of indebtedness these students feel toward their donors. There is an old Chinese saying, "Flowers cultivated with care do not bloom; willows planted without much thought give great shade." We should not limit

our love only to our circle of family and friends; instead, we should extend our embrace to all. We should learn from Amitabha Buddha, who is always there to answer everyone's pleas, without discrimination.

IV. Community

The Four Means of Embracing

If we want to understand how to get along with others, we have to first understand the “four means of embracing.” The Buddha teaches that to get along well with others, we have to first build good rapport, and the means of embracing are tools to that end. The four means of embracing are: giving, kind words, empathy, and altruism.

Some of you may think, “I don't have any money, nor do I know how to teach the Dharma; how can I practice giving?” Actually, we do not need to have great wealth or exceptional skills to give. When you meet someone on the road, give the person a nod or a smile. This is giving. When we show concern for others or when we give compliments, we are practicing giving, too. Even simple gestures like saying “Good morning,” or “How are you?” are giving. These are acts of kindness which do not cost anything and which we are all capable of performing.

We can even practice giving without having anything to give. As long as we are supportive of those who give, we are practicing giving, too. When others show us a nice gesture, we should acknowledge the gesture with happiness in our heart. When others give alms, we should be supportive and happy for the alms-giver. This may not be as easy as it sounds. Some people have the bad habit of second-guessing others' motives when they see others doing good. When others are nice to them, they criticize them as trying to kiss-up. When they see others give to charity, they chide them as living beyond their means. These individuals see the worst in others and refuse to give in any sense of the word.

In addition to giving, the other three virtues are kind words, empathy, and altruism. To use kind words as a means of embracing, we should compliment rather than reprimand, encourage rather than criticize, and use loving words rather than scathing remarks. To practice empathy we must put ourselves in others' shoes. If we talk bits and bytes with an artist, he or she may not be interested. We should see others' points of view and understand where they are coming from. When we are sincere with others, everything will just fall into place. Altruism means conducting oneself for the benefit of others and is about doing your best to help others. As long as we use love to help others, our efforts are never wasted.

The Six Points of Reverent Harmony

We can learn a lot about keeping peace in social living from the six points of reverent harmony that Buddhist monastics observe. These six points of harmony are:

1. Physical Harmony

In the monastic order, monks and nuns observe the same rites and rituals. In society, our actions can be used to help each other and foster respect in the world. In this way, we can peacefully co-exist in the community.

2. Verbal Harmony

In the monastic order, monks and nuns come together through chanting. In society, words, if used improperly, can be the cause of many misunderstandings. We should be sincere, yet tactful, so as not to cause unnecessary conflict.

3. Mental Harmony

In the monastic order, all share the common purpose of spiritual development. In society, when we have concern for others' well-being, we accept others and would not be envious of others' success or critical of others' shortcomings. With harmony in our outlook, every place is the Pure Land.

4. Moral Harmony

In the monastic order, all share the same moral code. In society, everyone should be equal in the eyes of the law. No one should be above the law. When the law is equally applied to all, people will have respect for the law and will try to live within it.

5. Harmony in Views

In the monastic order, monks and nuns share a common view of the Dharma, the guiding principle for all they do. Similarly, a society has a better chance to prosper when its people share common political views. If we look at the different nations of the world, we'll notice that there is a lot more common ground in prosperous nations than in those which are less prosperous.

6. Economic Harmony

In the monastic order, all live an equally simple life and have equal access to communal property. In the secular world, a society is inherently unstable if there is too great of a disparity between the rich and the poor. Thus, those who are well off should help those who are less fortunate. Those who are able should help those who are not.

The Fourfold Assembly

Buddhists can be classified into four groups: male monastics, female monastics, lay men, and lay women.

Together these four groups are called the “fourfold assembly.” Whether we are male or female, lay or ordained, we all can play a role in spreading the Dharma. We should not say one group, or one person, is more important than the other. Let’s take the example of a temple. While monastics have renounced their household lives, they can do so primarily through the effort and support of many lay people. Additionally, in this modern day and age, there are many ways that lay people can also be effective in teaching the Dharma.

Consider the five fingers of the hand; each finger by itself cannot exert much force, but if we curl our five fingers into a fist, we can really pack a punch. In the same way, all Buddhists should stand together. From one temple to another, from monastics to laity, we should embrace each other wholeheartedly. Regardless of whether we practice Chan, Pure Land, or Esoteric Buddhism, we are all followers of the Buddha and as such deserve mutual respect. As long as we are supporting the purpose of the sangha, it does not matter what color our skin is. Under the umbrella of Buddhism, we all share the Buddha as our common teacher. With equanimity, we all should support each other in our common goal of spreading the Dharma.

V. Spiritual Needs

In addition to our material needs, we all have spiritual needs. We all have a desire to know ourselves.

Toward this concern, the Buddha teaches the Noble Eightfold Path, which is the most comprehensive set of teachings regarding spiritual development. The Eightfold Path is not unlike a roadmap for the journey of life. Without this roadmap, we may feel confused, or even overwhelmed, by the twists and turns we encounter. Only when we have a map can we have an idea of where we have been and where we are going.

The Noble Eightfold Path has eight aspects:

- * Right view
- * Right thought
- * Right speech
- * Right action
- * Right livelihood
- * Right effort
- * Right mindfulness
- * Right meditative concentration

Of these eight practices, right view precedes the others and serves as the foundation. It is important to note that here the word “right” does not have the same meaning as right or wrong. “Right” view can also be translated as “complete view” or “wholesome view.” Right view means internalizing the reality of karma and rebirth and knowing the difference between wholesome and unwholesome actions, speech, and thoughts. Having right view is like having the appropriate settings when taking pictures

with a manual camera. If the focal length and aperture of the lens are not set correctly, then the pictures will come out blurred. Without right view, we will not be able to see the truth regarding worldly phenomena or the workings of life and the universe.

We all say things like, “I feel ...” or “I believe...” or “My opinion is...” We all differ in the way we see things, for our assessment of the world is colored by our past experiences and karma. We all have our own individual biases; only a fully enlightened Buddha always sees things as they truly are. The Buddha teaches us that right view is seeing the truth of all things, comprehending worldly phenomena as they are, and experiencing for ourselves the essence of the Dharma. Right view means seeing the workings of the law of cause and effect. This understanding helps us to be at ease with the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Some Buddhists do not have right view. They may say, “I have been chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha for years, but the more I chant, the poorer I get!” They do not understand that chanting Amitabha Buddha’s name is to be reborn into the Pure Land, not to come into worldly riches. Amitabha Buddha is not our personal financial manager; he is not a dispenser of wealth. Wealth is the karmic effect of generosity. We have no one to thank or blame for our circumstances except ourselves.

Some may say, “I have been a vegetarian for years, but my health has been going downhill.” If we have problems with our health, we should seek medical attention. Good health does not mean just eating healthily; we have to exercise, too. We turn to the Buddha and his teachings to gain right view, not so some person or god will take care of us. Buddhism is about giving, not taking.

Throughout the history of Chinese Buddhism, there were, and still are, many cultivated monks who have shown the depth of their convictions. During the Sui dynasty, there was a monk named Xinxing who lived on the steep face of a mountain. When asked why he chose such an inconvenient place to live, he answered that he was needed there. The road next to where he lived was so narrow that only one cart could pass through at a time, and many people would become stuck with their carts. Xinxing walked down the road daily, after his morning devotions, to help people pull their carts out of the congested traffic. In this way, he grounded his own happiness in helping others.

During the Tang dynasty, there was a Chan master named Baizhang who deeply believed in the value of work. His motto was, “A day without work is a day without food.” Each day he would first work before taking his meal. In his later years, when his health was failing, he still insisted on working every day. His disciples could not bear to see him labor, so they

hid all his tools. When Baizhang could not find his tools to start his day's work, he actually refused to eat for that day. Seeing his conviction, his disciples had no choice but to return his tools.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and in the same way, what makes us happy or sad is not absolute or distinct. The same can be said of what we find difficult or easy, what is real and not real, and even life and death itself.

A lay devotee once went to the Chan master Zhizang and asked, "Master, please tell me, do heaven and hell exist?"

"Yes, they do."

"Does the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—exist?"

"Yes."

"Is the law of cause and effect true? Is it true there are six realms of existence?"

"Yes, both are true."

Regardless of what the lay devotee asked Chan Master Zhizang, he would answer in the affirmative. He grew skeptical and finally said, "Chan master, you are wrong."

Zhizhang asked, "How so?"

The man replied, "When I went to the Chan master Jinshan and asked him the same questions, he always answered 'no.' Why is it that you said 'yes' to all my questions?"

Zhizang was not at all surprised. He asked the lay devotee, "Let me ask you, do you have a wife?"

The lay devotee was not sure where the Chan master was going with this, but he answered anyway, "Yes."

"Do you have children?"

"Yes."

"Do you own any property?"

"Yes."

Zhizang switched tone and asked, "Does the Chan master Jinshan have a wife?"

"No."

"Does he have children?"

"No."

"Does he own any property?"

"No."

Zhizang slowly explained, "Do you see? When Jinshan answered 'no' to your questions, he was speaking from his own enlightened point of view. When I answered 'yes,' I was speaking from your worldly point of view." The lay devotee finally was able to understand.

Most of us see a big divide between happiness and sorrow, the good times and bad moments. Thus, we try to avoid what we see as painful and are drawn to what we see as pleasurable. We jump for joy at our moments of glory and wallow in pain in the agony of defeat. If we see that all phenomena are the culmination of causes

and conditions, without any independent nature of their own, then we will be at ease in any circumstances.

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