

Do Not Misunderstand Buddhism

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Introduction

It has been over 1900 years since Buddhism was transmitted into ancient China, and therefore, there is a very close relationship between Buddhism and Chinese culture. Chinese culture and traditions have influenced Buddhism, and Buddhism has also influenced Chinese culture. As a result, Buddhism here has already adapted to Chinese customs.

Nevertheless, Buddhism originated from Ancient India, and some of the unique cultural aspects of India that reside within Buddhism can be difficult for Chinese people to understand. Due to the influence of Chinese cultural traditions, some aspects of Chinese Buddhism have diverged from the original intent of Buddhism. Therefore, in the Sinosphere, both those who believe and do not believe in Buddhism often misunderstand Buddhism. On the one hand, some people do not understand the original intent of Buddhism, and develop incorrect perceptions about it, leading to the situation that Buddhists are unable to establish right faith in Buddhism. On the other hand, the points raised by those who criticize Buddhism are also not relevant to Buddhism itself.

I think that, for those who believe in Buddhism, and those who doubt and criticize it, the first task is to seek to dispel misunderstandings about Buddhism, so that they can correctly come to know true Buddhism. Now, let us look at a few of the major misunderstandings, and I hope that all who are present for this Dharma talk can develop correct understandings [of Buddhism].

Misunderstandings Due to Buddhist Theories

The theories of Buddhism are profound. Some people understand only the superficial meanings of words without comprehending their deeper meanings. When they happen to learn a few technical terms, they speak to others based on their understanding. As a result, what they say may not accord with the true meaning of Buddhism. The most common [misunderstandings,] for example, relate to the idioms such as, “life is suffering,” “transcending the world,” and “everything is empty.” It is true that the Buddha did present such concepts and, indeed, these

are significant theories of the Buddha-dharma. However, only a few ordinary people can correctly understand these concepts. Now, let us look at them one by one.

Life is Suffering

Life is Suffering in Terms of Impermanence

The Buddha pointed out that this human life is suffering. Those who do not know the true meaning of this concept may develop the misunderstanding that this human life is meaningless. As a consequence, pessimism arises within them and then they lose the will power to diligently improve their lives. This concept is one that is most commonly misunderstood, and ordinary people in society often use this negative, pessimistic interpretation to criticize Buddhism, and [some] followers of Buddhism also adopt this incorrect interpretation.

In fact, the concept that “life is suffering” is not pessimistic at all. When we encounter an experience we dislike, we may experience emotions of suffering, pain, and anxiety. If we adopt this pessimistic interpretation of suffering, then we cannot say that life is suffering. Why? This is because life also has many joyful experiences.

When we hear sounds that we do not like, we detest them, but when we hear nice music, we delight in it. Moreover, when we are sick, experience financial problems, or are separated from loved ones we naturally feel pain and suffering. However, when we are healthy, financially secure, and united with our family, then we are happy. Is this not true? No matter what the situation is, suffering and happiness are both possible. When we meet unfortunate situations then we say that life is suffering, but is that not a distorted view?

So, when the Buddha said that life is suffering, what does “suffering” mean? The *sūtras* say, “suffering is because of impermanence.” That is, everything is impermanent and subject to change. Therefore, on the basis of impermanence, the Buddha said life is suffering. For example, we cannot maintain good health forever, and in time we will age, get sick and die. Those who are wealthy cannot guarantee that they will always be wealthy, because there is a possibility that they can become poor. As for power and position, these are not perpetual, and will be lost eventually.

Viewing life from the perspective of impermanence and change: although happy situations do arise, they are not permanent or perfect. Naturally, when the situation changes suffering may follow. Therefore, when Buddha said that life is suffering, in the broadest sense the term suffering included the ideas of being impermanent, imperfect, and not thorough.

Gaining Ultimate Happiness by Knowing the Causes of Suffering and Removing Them

For those who are learning the Buddha-dharma, if they do not understand the true meaning [of the concept, “life is suffering,”] and think that this human life is imperfect, then they can develop a negative and pessimistic attitude. Those who really understand [the significant theories of] the Buddha-dharma, will have an entirely different outlook on life. One should know that when the Buddha said, “life is suffering,” he wanted us to understand that our present human life is imperfect and impermanent. Only after knowing this, can we start to move towards the ultimate state in which life is perfect and permanent (i.e. nirvana). This is like the case of a sick person. He or she must first know they are sick. Only then will they see a doctor to treat their illness and return to good health.

Why is it that this human life is imperfect, impermanent, and thus is suffering? There must be causes for this suffering. If we know the causes of suffering, then we will endeavour to remove those causes and subsequently be able to attain the state of happiness with perfection. Therefore, the Buddha not only pointed out that life is suffering, he also indicated that there are causes for suffering, and that one will attain true happiness when the causes have been removed. [This shows that] Buddhists should follow and practice the methods taught by the Buddha to change this imperfect human life into one that is perfect. Such a perfect life, in Buddhism, is referred to as being permanent, happy, carefree, and pure.

Permanent means to be everlasting. Happy means to be blissful. Carefree means to be free from bondage, and pure means to be free from defilements or afflictions. When these four descriptions are combined, it means permanent happiness, lasting freedom, and perpetual purity. The most significant goal in Buddhism is not just to reveal that this [present] life is suffering, but more importantly to show that this state can be transformed into another state in which life is filled with permanent happiness, freedom, and purity (in the Consciousness-only School this is called “Overturning the Cognitive Basis,” Skt. *āśraya-parāvṛtti*). [That is, to] reveal what are the causes of suffering and how to practice towards the attainment of this goal, which is the state of permanence, happiness, carefreeness, and purity. This goal is the absolute and ideal state. It is full of hope and is something that everyone can attain. So, how can Buddhism be regarded as negative and pessimistic?

Although most Buddhists will not attain this highest state [in this life], knowing this theory has countless benefits. For example, when ordinary people get stuck in a difficult situation they still know to work hard and be moral, but when they become wealthy, they can forget everything and only focus on self-indulgence, and then they unknowingly head in the wrong direction.

As a Buddhist, not only do we know to work hard towards improvement when times are tough, but we also are mindful when times are good because [we know such] happiness is impermanent and unreliable. If we do not continue to work hard to improve ourselves, sooner or later we will lose everything and regress. “Life is suffering” can be a warning for us to avoid

focusing on indulgence that subsequently leads one in the wrong direction. This is also an important aspect of the deeper meaning behind the Buddha's teaching that life is suffering.

Transcending the World

What is the Meaning of "World"?

The Buddha-dharma talks about the world and transcending the world, but many people misunderstand these concepts and think that "the world" is referring to a place where human beings live, while the transcending the world is somewhere other than this human world.

This is entirely wrong. We as humans live in this world, and when we renounce the home life, we are still living in this world. Those who have become *arhats*, bodhisattvas, and buddhas are the sages, and they are described as those who have transcended the world. But these sages still work in this world to help us humans. Obviously, the meaning of "transcending the world" is not to go to another world.

So, in Buddhism what is the meaning of "world" and "transcending the world"?

[The term "world" refers to the Chinese phrase, *shì jiān* (世間).] According to the traditional Chinese understanding, the character, *shì* (世), has the meaning of "time." For example, thirty years is called one *shì*. In the West, there is a similar meaning where 100 years is known as a century. Therefore, the meaning of *shì* implies a period of time; from the past to the present, and from the present to the future. Therefore, *shì jiān*, which is usually translated into English as "world," encompasses matters within a certain time period. The Buddha-dharma's [explanation] is the same. That which is subject to change over time is called *shì*; any object that undergoes change within a period of time is referred to as *shì jiān*. A period of time here may be from the past to the present and then to the future, from existence to disappearance, or from being whole and complete, to decaying. Everything is constantly changing over time and this is the meaning of *shì jiān* (world).

In addition, world [is also related to the Sanskrit term *saṃvṛti*, which] has the meaning of being shrouded. Ordinary people do not understand the law of cause and effect, which spans three life cycles: past, present, and future. In other words, people do not know where they came from, how to be a human, and where they will go after death. In short, ordinary people do not know the meaning of this human existence and the truth of this world. The situation in which sentient beings are muddled and caught in a cyclic existence of cause and effect over three lifetimes is [another] meaning of "world."

What is the Meaning of Transcending the World?

What is the state of transcending the world? Transcending has the meaning of going beyond or being superior. When one is able to practice the Buddha-dharma, attain wisdom, understand the truth of this universe and human existence, purify their mind and remove defilements, and realize the absolute truth, then this is the state of transcending the world. All buddhas and bodhisattvas have superior wisdom to thoroughly understand the truth, and their minds are pure but they are still present in this world. This is the difference between ordinary people and sages.

Therefore, the term “transcending the world” is to encourage us who learn and practice the Buddha-dharma to progress to be superior people; that is, to totally transform from an ordinary person into a sage. “Transcending the world” does not mean we should go to another world. [Some people do] not understand the meaning of transcending the world and, therefore, mistake Buddhism as an escape from reality and raise criticisms that are irrelevant to the true meaning of Buddhism.

Everything is Empty

True Meaning of “Emptiness”: Arising from Causes and Conditions without a Permanent Intrinsic Entity

The Buddha taught that everything is empty, but some people misunderstand this. They assume that emptiness means non-existence. That is to say, whatever appears in this world is null and meaningless. As a result, they do not do bad deeds, but they do not undertake good deeds either. They live in a muddled state but somehow find their way to continue on living.

In fact, the meaning of emptiness in Buddhism embodies the most profound philosophy. All the buddhas and bodhisattvas are the ones who have realized the truth of emptiness. Emptiness does not mean “void of anything.” Rather, it means that everything exists [dependently], such as this world, human life, suffering, happiness, which shows that everything is present.

In the Buddha-dharma, it is clearly taught that there are wholesomeness and unwholesomeness, cause and effect [and so on]. It is also taught that we should give up unwholesomeness and turn to wholesomeness, which further shows the meaning that undertaking wholesome deeds will result in good outcomes and that practicing [the Buddha-dharma] can lead to Buddhahood. If [emptiness in Buddhism] were meant to be void of everything then why would we need to learn Buddhism? Given that all things, such as cause and effect, good and evil, and ordinary people and sages do exist, then why does the Buddha say that everything is empty? What is the meaning of emptiness?

When [the right] causes and conditions come together things arise in which there is no intrinsic entity that does not change. This is called emptiness. Whatever arises in this world, whether it is wholesome or unwholesome, there is no intrinsic entity that will never change. All things arise depending on causes and conditions, and therefore they will change when the causes and conditions change. Within this process, there is no intrinsic entity, and this is called emptiness.

Let us clarify this with a real example. Say a person faces a mirror, and then an image will appear in that mirror. How does that image in the mirror come about? Well, you need [the conditions of] a mirror, a person, as well as light either from the sun or a lamp, and then you can see the image in the mirror. If any one of these conditions is missing, then there will be no image. Therefore, that image arises on account of many conditions, and it is not something with an intrinsic entity. Although there is no intrinsic entity within the image, the image that is seen is clear and not void. “Everything is empty” is taught based on this meaning of arising from causes and conditions.

“Everything is Empty” and “There are Wholesomeness and Unwholesomeness, Causes and Conditions” Are Taught at the Same Time

Therefore, when the Buddha said that everything is empty, this simultaneously means that all things are existent based on causes and conditions. In other words, we should not only awaken to [the truth] that everything is empty, but also understand [the fact] that there are causes, effects, wholesomeness, and unwholesomeness. For those learning and practicing the Buddha-dharma, we must abandon unwholesomeness and undertake wholesome deeds for the sake of transforming the state of ignorance into that of awakening so that we can come to realize the truth of emptiness, which is to attain the wisdom regarding the perfect harmony of two truths: existence is empty in nature. Ordinary people assume that emptiness in Buddhism means that nothing exists at all, which is negative and pessimistic. This misunderstanding arises because they do not really understand this teaching of the Buddha-dharma, and this misunderstanding is something [we] must correct.

Misunderstandings Due to Buddhist Practices

Buddhism originated in India. In terms of practices, there are some points of difference compared to Chinese culture, such as the practices of renouncing the home life and being vegetarian. People who do not understand or are not accustomed to these practices have many misunderstandings about Buddhism.

Renouncing Home Life

Renunciation is Not Compulsory for the Learning of Buddhism

Renunciation is a practice in Indian Buddhism. For people in Chinese society, especially Confucians, the greatest misunderstanding concerns this issue. In Chinese society, one can hear that if everyone learns Buddhism, then people will become extinct. Why? This is because everyone will renounce the home life. As a result, there will be no marriages and no children. Where can we find people to form society?

This is a grave misunderstanding. I often use the simile of teachers educating students. Is it the case that everyone is taught to become a teacher and this will result in a whole world of only teachers? In the Philippines this [issue about renunciation] is unlikely to be misinterpreted in that way. People here often see the Catholic priests and nuns who also renounce the home life. Although many Filipinos believe in Catholicism, it is not the case that each of them becomes a priest or nun. Yet priests and nuns are only a small portion within the whole Catholic population.

In Buddhism there are renounced practitioners and lay practitioners. Both groups can learn the Buddha-dharma and practice to attain liberation from the cycle of life and death. It is not the case that everyone who learns the Buddha-dharma must renounce the home life. Therefore, it is impossible that human society will come to an end if everyone learns the Buddha-dharma.

One Should Make Great Vows to Renounce the Home Life in Order to Wholeheartedly Spread the Buddha-dharma

Given that those who renounce home life and those who remain in home life both can practice and attain liberation from cyclic existence, why is there a need to renounce? The reason is that there must be a small group of people to take charge of the duties concerning the affairs of Buddhism and the spreading of Buddhism to help it flourish. The best people to take charge are the renounced practitioners. These [Buddhist] monks and nuns do not have the burden of a family, nor do they have any other important responsibilities. Therefore, they can wholeheartedly undertake spiritual practice and propagate the Buddha-dharma. In order to let Buddhism remain in this world, there must be some people to promote it. Hence, there is the long-established practice of renunciation.

Is there great merit in renunciation? Of course! However, those who are not suitable for renunciation as a monk or nun, should not force themselves to do so. At times, those who renounce without proper preparation may not be able to abide well by the precepts, and it would be better for them to remain as lay followers. The higher one climbs, the greater the fall.¹ The merit of renunciation is great, but the regression could be even greater if one is not careful to uphold the precepts properly. [As for renouncing home life,] one should truly make great vows, diligently overcome difficulties to practice, willingly sacrifice oneself for Buddhism, and endeavour to promote the Buddha-dharma. Only then can one meet the criteria of renunciation.

The Buddhist monastics are the core group in Buddhism and the main body that promotes Buddhism. Celibacy is also a practice found in Western religions. In addition, there are many philosophers and scientists who, for the sake of pursuing their studies, also remain single so that they are not burdened by family matters and can focus solely on their field of research. Likewise, the practice of renunciation in Buddhism is to remove the fetters of worldly desires

¹ Here, “the greater the fall” implies regression to the lower realms. If someone chooses to renounce for the sake of gaining great merit but is unable to uphold the monastic precepts well and perform the duties of monastics, then the karma created may lead them to lose the human form in their next life.

so that one can single-mindedly work for the Buddha-dharma. Therefore, renouncing the home life is an action of a great person who must be extremely assiduous. If someone renounces home life carelessly and after renunciation does not undertake the rightful tasks of Buddhist monks and nuns, then they not only gain no benefit, but also cause detriment to Buddhism.

Some people want to renounce soon after learning Buddhism. They feel that learning Buddhism must involve renunciation. Not only have they misunderstood Buddhism, but they also frighten other people away from learning Buddhism. This concept that learning Buddhism involves renunciation must be done away with! One should know that it is not easy to live a monastic life. One should first focus on being a good lay follower and practice the Dharma to benefit oneself and others. If one can truly develop great vows, undertake the practices of monastic life, and devote oneself [completely] to Buddhism, then one can move to a monastic life. In this way, a person can develop their spiritual path steadily and avoid creating undesirable effects for society.²

Two Main Misperceptions of Buddhist Monks and Nuns

Monastics Are Not Living a Comfortable life Without Any Duty

Concerning renunciation, there are two additional points to elaborate. The first is that some people have the following common misperceptions: that “the sun has arisen high above the sky and yet [monastics] are still asleep” or “no comfort is better than half a day’s monastic life, which is full of rest.” This is because these people see the monasteries so grand, beautiful, clean, and peaceful that they envy the monastics and imagine that the monks and nuns live in [the monasteries] and enjoy the support and offerings from the donors without doing any work but simply enjoying these fortunes.

These people do not understand that monastics have their duties. They must undertake their practices diligently. When monastics are undertaking self-practice, even “in the first and last watch of the night they must practice the path diligently.”³ As for teaching the Dharma to followers, they must travel all over the world to promote the truth. [Monastics] live a simple life, like ascetics, and practice hard for the sake of all beings and Buddhism. They benefit themselves and others, and this is extremely precious and hence are called the *saṃgha* gem. How could one say they do nothing and just wait to enjoy the donations from devotees? This misunderstanding is largely because there are many monastics and some do not fulfil the responsibilities of monastics and, hence, this has created a misperception in society.

² Undesirable effects include creating misunderstandings about Buddhism and to create burdens on society, such as renouncing but not properly resolving family or personal matters first.

³ This quote comes from the *Sūtra on the Buddha's Last Discourse* and follows the Indian measure of time in which a day is split into six time periods: three in the day and three during the night. The first watch of the night refers to the period from sunset to around 10.00 pm. The middle watch of the night is from 10.00 pm to around 2.00–3.00 am and the last watch of the night is from 2.00–3.00 am to sunrise.

Monastics Are Educators with Noble Purposes

The second is that some people who oppose Buddhism criticize monastics as doing nothing and having no usefulness, like parasites of society.

Not everyone has to engage in affairs such as farming, manufacturing, and business. Can we say that those who engage in education, journalism, and other independent services are parasitic? It is not the case that monastics have nothing to do. They live a simple life but work diligently for society. The tasks they perform include not only benefiting themselves but also benefiting others, such as guiding people towards wholesomeness, virtuous practices, and spiritual cultivation for the purpose of gradually assisting all followers to improve themselves and ending their cycle of life and death. Monastics can bring such great benefits to people in this world, so how can one say they are a parasite on society?

Monastics are actually religious teachers. In other words, they are noble educators in a broad sense.

Therefore, people who do not understand Buddhism say that monastics are idle or that they have no usefulness, like parasites on society. These views are wrong. A true monastic is not like this at all. In fact, they are not idle but actually are very active; they do not merely use up resources but are truly able to repay the donors for their kindness.⁴

Being Vegetarian

Learning Buddhism is Not Just About Being Vegetarian

Practitioners of Chinese Buddhism place great emphasis on being vegetarian. Therefore, when people learn the Buddha-dharma, they often think that they must be vegetarian. As a result, those who cannot give up eating meat feel that they are not eligible to learn the Buddha-dharma. [However,] if we look at [the situation in] Japan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Tibet, and Mongolia, we can see that not only lay Buddhists but even the monastics also eat meat. Can we say that practitioners in those places are not learning Buddhism and are not Buddhist?

Please do not mistake that one cannot learn the Buddha-dharma if one is not vegetarian. In other words, it is not necessary for someone who learns the Buddha-dharma to be vegetarian. Many people see that some Buddhists learn nothing but how to be vegetarian, which causes their family members to develop strong negative impressions [about Buddhism]. As a result, they assume that being a Buddhist means they must be vegetarian, which causes a lot of troubles. In truth, a person who [really] wants to learn Buddhism should be like this: after beginning their study of the Buddha-dharma they should first understand the [main] doctrines

⁴ Although monastics do not work for a salary and subsist on donations from lay people, they repay the donors (that is, humankind at large) through their practice and teaching of the Dharma so that people can gain the benefits of the Dharma, too.

of Buddhism and behave in accordance with those doctrines when interacting with family and society so that their behaviors are virtuous and their minds become pure.

One should aim to show one's family members that before learning Buddhism one was greedy, easily angered, and lacked responsibility and compassion, but after learning Buddhism one has changed, which includes reducing one's greed and anger, and being more compassionate toward people and more responsible when undertaking tasks. [In other words,] one should cause family members to see the benefits of learning the Buddha-dharma for the family and society. At this point, if you want to become a vegetarian then your family members will not oppose but rather can agree with your intention and they, too, will slowly learn from you. If one starts off learning the Buddha-dharma but only learns about vegetarianism and nothing else, then it is certain that one will encounter many obstacles and stir up criticisms.

Being Vegetarian to Reduce the Karma of Killing and Nurture Compassion

Although it is not compulsory for a person learning the Buddha-dharma to be vegetarian, vegetarianism is a virtuous practice in Chinese Buddhism and deserves our promotion. In the Buddha-dharma, it is taught that being vegetarian can nurture compassion. That is to say, when people cannot bear to harm and kill sentient beings, and to eat their flesh and blood, they not only reduced their karma of killing but also nurture their empathy for the suffering of human beings.

Mahāyāna Buddhism especially advocates vegetarianism because this practice has great virtue in terms developing great compassion. Therefore, if someone becomes a vegetarian but is unable to develop their compassion, then they are merely passively upholding the precept of abstaining from killing, which is not all that different from the *Śrāvakayāna* practitioners.

From the worldly point of view, being vegetarian also has great advantages: it is more economical, has high nutritional value, and can help reduce illnesses. In this present era, there is even an international vegetarian association that welcomes all sorts of people, so long as they delight in being vegetarian. Obviously, being vegetarian is a good practice and, as Buddhist practitioners, we should promote this.

However, we must be careful to avoid setting the standard for learning the Buddha-dharma too high, such as assuming that it is mandatory to be vegetarian when learning the Buddha-dharma. Some Buddhists often ask other Buddhists, are you vegetarian? Why are you not vegetarian after learning the Buddha-dharma for such a long time? When we merge Buddhism and vegetarianism in this way, we will create hindrances to the propagation of the Buddha-dharma.

Misunderstandings Due to Buddhist Ceremonies

Those who do not understand Buddhism and are not aware of the true meaning behind ceremonies in Buddhism, may visit a Buddhist temple and see the ceremonial practices such as prostrating to the buddha [statues], reciting the *sūtras*, repenting for past bad karmas and undertaking morning and evening chanting, and say that these practices are all superstitious. There are many kinds of misunderstanding in terms of Buddhist ceremonial practices, and we will look at a few of the key ones.

Prostrating to Buddha Statues

The Meaning of Prostrating to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

When entering a Buddhist monastery, Buddhists prostrate to the buddha [statues] and make offerings of incense, flowers, and light (candles) to the buddha statues. The Western theist followers say that Buddhists are worshipping human-made idols, which is a practice filled with superstition.

The fact is that Buddha is the founder of our religion. He was a human who became a sage and who is perfect in all aspects. As for the great bodhisattvas, they are people who will soon become buddhas. The Buddha and bodhisattvas are our spiritual guides in whom we take refuge. The respect we have for the Buddha and bodhisattvas naturally has a form of expression [such as prostration], and this is just like showing respect to our parents by being courteous.

When the Buddha was alive, there was no hindrance to showing one's respect because we could pay direct homage to the Buddha in person, but since then the Buddha has entered *parinirvāṇa* (passed away). Although there are buddhas and bodhisattvas in other realms, they are not present in our world. Therefore, our only option is to create statues, pictures, or carvings of the buddhas' images, and use these as the object through which we pay our respects. These statues and so on represent the buddhas and bodhisattvas themselves, and this is why we prostrate to these images. The objects we pay respects to are not just the paper, wood, stone, or clay they are made of.

For example, if someone is patriotic to their country, how is that respect expressed? When they see that the flag of their country is raised, they respectfully salute the flag, which is merely something made of coloured fabric. Can we say that this behavior is superstitious? Catholicism also has statues [as the object for worship]. In addition, although Christianity does not have statues as the object for worship, they do have the cross to which followers pay respect. Some of the Christian and Catholic followers kneel down [in front of these objects] and pray. Is there any difference between paying respect to the cross and to a Buddha statue? When theists criticize the Buddhist practice of prostrating to buddha statues as worshipping idols, this is merely their way of attacking Buddhism with bad intentions.

Offerings of Incense, Flowers, and Light as Symbols of Reverence and Learning from the Buddha

In terms of ceremonial practices of offering incense, flowers, and light, are they meaningful? In Ancient India, when the Buddha was alive, these were the items used as offerings to the Buddha. Light is symbolic of wisdom,⁵ while incense and flowers represent fragrance⁶ and purity. When one has faith in the Buddha, one offers these items to the buddha [statues] to show one's reverence, and at the same time these items symbolize the vow to attain Buddha's wisdom and purity.

It is not the case [as mistakenly believed] that offering flowers and burning incense is to let the Buddha smell the perfume, and that lighting lamps is to let Buddha see everything. Western religions, especially Catholicism, also have similar practices. These ceremonial practices are actually common to all religions.

Prostrating to the buddha [statues] must be done with respect and sincerity. When prostrating, one should visualize that the Buddha is really before one. If someone prostrates with a distracted mind or chats with others, then such behavior is disrespectful and the meaning of prostrating to the Buddha is lost.

Repenting for Faults

Buddhist practitioners often conduct ceremonies of repentance through reciting texts, but people who are from other religions or have no religious beliefs would often mistakenly regard these practices as superstitious.

In fact, the word repentance reflects the Sanskrit word *kṣama* [and *deśanā*], which can mean to admit one's faults after committing mistakes [and seek others' forgiveness].⁷ Each person would have committed many faults and undertaken all sorts of unwholesome deeds in their past and present lives. These mistakes leave behind karmic forces that can result in suffering and hindrances to our path of practice towards liberation. For the purpose of ameliorating and reducing these karmic forces that lead to suffering and hindrances, [Buddhists sincerely] admit

⁵ The Chinese word is literally *guāngmíng* 光明 which translates as brightness. Wisdom in Buddhism has many synonyms, of which brightness is one.

⁶ In the Buddhist context, it is said that wholesome or pure items will release a fragrance that helps people feel at ease. For example, a practitioner who upholds the precepts well will release a precept fragrance.

⁷ In Early Buddhism, repentance is a means of practice [in monastic communities] and is related to the vinaya practice. In *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, repenting for one's misdeeds became a practice undertaken regularly by all Buddhists. *Chàn* (懺) comes from the Sanskrit word *kṣama* (a shortened transcription of *kṣama*), which means tolerance or forgiveness. In its original meaning, if someone has committed an offense, they should ask the other party (an individual or a group) for forgiveness. *Huǐ* (悔) is a translation of the Sanskrit word *deśanā*, which literally means "to speak." When someone has committed a wrong, they should acknowledge and confess their mistakes to the other party. It is not just about admitting fault but also about clearly stating the specific wrongdoing—this is the true meaning of *huǐ*." Source: *Hua Yu Collection*, Volume 2, Page 165

[and repent for] their own past faults in front of the *sangha* members or the statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

In the Buddha-dharma there is the practice of repentance, which is similar to the Christian practice of confession. Such a practice is extremely important in terms of religious cultivation. Repentance must be done in person, and one's mind must be utterly sincere. In this way, the repentance can fully accord with its true meaning in Buddhism.

Most people do not know how to repent, and so how can this be resolved? The ancient masters, accordingly, developed guides for repentance. We are taught to read and recite these ritual texts word by word. As someone reads aloud and also reflects [on these instructions] in their mind, they are able to understand the underlying meaning and repent [properly] for their past faults. Within these ritual texts of repentance, we are taught how to pay respects to the Buddha and seek the compassionate protection and guidance of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. In the process of repentance, we admit our faults, know the faults of killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and so on, and wholeheartedly make vows to repent for past unwholesome deeds and aspire to undertake wholesome deeds from now on. All of these ritual practices were taught by ancient masters and guide us how to repent (Christianity also has prayers that were taught by Jesus). Nevertheless, the key point is that one must earnestly want to repent and change one's behaviors.

Some people cannot read the prepared guides and so they invite monastics to lead and recite the ritual texts of repentance. Gradually, people forget that they themselves should repent and specifically invite monastics to repent for them. When a family member passes away, some people want to rely on the blessings of the Triple Gem to help their deceased family member eliminate bad karma. In this regard, they also invite monastics to conduct repentance services in the hope of helping the deceased gain a better future [life]. Note that if one does not understand the true meaning of repentance and does not believe in the Buddha-dharma or have no ounce of sincerity to undertake repentance, then the meaning of repentance is lost. The practice of repentance in this regard is just to show off or to conform to traditions through inviting a few monastics to conduct repentance services for creating merit.

Toward the later part of Chinese Buddhism's development, the meaning of repentance became obscured. Many lay Buddhists no longer repented personally but asked monastics [to conduct repentance services] for all situations, no matter great or small. This made the monastics very busy each day; one day they conducted repentance services for one family, and then the next day they conducted services to create merit for another family. In some monasteries, these types of Buddhist services became their only activity. As a result, the monastics neglected their primary practices. It is no surprise that Buddhism has begun to decline.

Therefore, the key point about repentance is that one must do it oneself. If one can repent with true sincerity, even for only an hour, the merits gained far exceed the merits from inviting many monastics to conduct repentance services for several days. If someone wants to fulfil their duty of filial piety towards their deceased parents, they will conduct the repentance practice in person for their parents because they know that in this way the merits gained by their parents

will be great due to the close blood and family relationship. Please do not think that repentance services for creating merits are the duties of monastics. Such misunderstandings and acts are of no benefit [to everyone] and merely serve to increase the misconceptions and criticisms from society.

Chanting

Practitioners of Buddhism chant *sūtras* and a buddha's name as well as recollect the Buddha every morning and evening. In Buddhism this is called chanting. Christians say prayers in the morning, evening and at mealtimes. Catholics also read the Bible in the mornings and evenings. These types of religious practices, originally, were not an issue among Buddhists. However, due to these practices, some people have commented to me that, "Before practicing Buddhism, things were fine, but after learning Buddhism, many problems arose. My mother usually requires one or two hours to undertake her morning or evening chanting. If everyone practices Buddhism at home like this, then effectively nothing can get done around the house."

This situation is prevalent amongst a portion of the lay Buddhists and causes people to mistake that Buddhism is for those who are old and who have time on their hands, while being not so suitable for ordinary people to practice. In truth, morning and evening chanting services have no set requirement in terms of which *sūtra* to chant and which buddha's name to recite, as well as recollecting that buddha. Morning and evening chanting need not take a set amount of time. Rather, its duration can be adapted to each person's preference and predicament. The main requirement is to recite the vows of refuge in the Triple Gem. The ten great vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva are also important.

The Buddhist schools that have spread to Japan, such as the Pureland school, Tiantai school, and Esoteric school, have their own types of chanting practices that are simple and do not require much time. These [activities reflect] the factual practices of Buddhism during the Tang and Song dynasties.⁸ The modern Chinese chanting practices are arranged for use in a large monastery where there are several hundred monastics. Much time is required to assemble all the members for a gathering of chanting practice. Therefore, the changing practices are much longer to adapt to this situation. In addition, since the Yuan and Ming dynasties, there has been a trend to cultivate mixed practices from different schools in a monastery. Therefore, the compiler of ceremonial rites included many different aspects to cater to practitioners from different schools. In fact, lay Buddhists need not follow these [monastic] chanting practices exactly.

In ancient Indian Buddhism, *Mahāyāna* practitioners would undertake the five repentances six times a day. It does not matter if we choose a chanting program that is short. It is good for us if the frequency of practice can be increased. In summary, learning and practicing the Buddha-

⁸ During the Tang and Song dynasties, many Japanese monks went to China to study Buddhism and then brought it back to Japan. The style and practices preserved by these Japanese Buddhist schools provide a window to the Buddhist practices from that era.

dharma is not just about performing chanting. Lay Buddhists should ensure that their chanting practices are not too complicated and time-consuming, so as to not disrupt their family duties.

Burning Paper Offerings

In ancient Chinese culture there was a tradition and presumption that burning silk cloth as offerings to the ancestors allowed them to enjoy the offerings. Later, to make it more affordable, [the silk] was replaced with paper. Later generations then used the paper to make different items, such as “gold nuggets,” paper currency, and even houses and cars, which are burned as offerings to their ancestors. Burning paper offerings is a tradition stemming from ancient Chinese culture and is not a practice originating within Buddhism.

This practice of burning paper offerings does have some benefits: namely, it gives children a way to express their filial piety towards their deceased parents. When one eats and drinks, wears clothing and lives in a comfortable house, one also thinks about one’s deceased ancestors and recalls the gratitude of their ancestors. This practice has the meaning of being prudent in performing funerary rites and remembering our ancestors.

When Buddhism spread into China, in order to adapt to Chinese culture, reciting *sūtras* and prostrating to the buddhas were skilfully incorporated together with funeral services. Nevertheless, due to Confucianism’s influence concerning the ideas that funeral matters are very important and that one should give one’s parents grand funerals, it is unavoidable that [people] spend a lot of money and become wasteful: the more the better in terms of burning paper offerings. This situation has drawn criticism from modern intellectuals, and Buddhism has been mistaken as being superstitious and wasteful.

If Buddhist practitioners are aware of the criticism concerning the burning of paper offerings, then it would be best to avoid this practice because no such practice is actually taught in [true] Buddha-dharma. If people want to pay their respects to their ancestors, then they may symbolically burn a little offering. Note that we should avoid burning paper offerings at the monastery. Otherwise, Buddhism may be treated badly due to our wrong deeds.

Drawing Lots, Divination, and Spirit-writing

In some temples there are fortune-telling sticks, divination blocks, and even spirit-writing, which have caused criticisms from society, accusing Buddhism of being superstitious. In fact, real Buddhism does not permit such activities (whether or not they are effective is another matter). A true practitioner of Buddhism only follows the principle of cause and effect. If one has committed bad karmas in the past or present, it is impossible to avoid [experiencing the results of those karmas] through the aforementioned methods.

Undertaking wholesome deeds will yield good outcomes, while committing unwholesome deeds will inevitably result in suffering. If one wants good outcomes, then one should

undertake more meritorious deeds. Buddhist practitioners only bear in mind that they should undertake more good deeds. That is, all that we do should be done lawfully and reasonably without employing opportunistic or underhanded methods. These [practices regarding fortune telling sticks etc.] have no place in Buddhism. If one truly has faith in Buddhism, one should avoid these practices that are criticized as religious activities of superstition.

Misunderstandings Due to Present Situations in Buddhism

Many Chinese people do not understand Buddhism or the situation of international Buddhism. They rely purely on Chinese Buddhism to unreasonably criticize Buddhism. The following discusses two common criticisms.

Misunderstandings that Adopting Buddhism Causes Degeneracy of a Country

Some Chinese people think that the downfall of [Ancient] Indian kingdoms was a result of adopting Buddhism. They want their country to be prosperous and strong, and therefore they irrationally claim that people must not believe in Buddhism.

This [perception] is utterly wrong. Those who have studied the history of Buddhism definitely know that when [Ancient] Indian kingdoms were at their most powerful, that was also when Buddhism was most popular. At the time of King Asoka's reign, when the Maurya Empire ruled over the whole of India, Buddhism had spread all over the world. It was later that Brahmanism flourished again and attacked [Indian] Buddhism, and Buddhism declined. At that time the [Ancient] Indian kingdom also went into decline and chaos. By the time that Islam and the British Empire took over India, Buddhism had already declined, and even disappeared [from India].

Some similar cases are also seen in Chinese history. The present-day Chinese living overseas call themselves "the people of Tang," while the place of mainland China is referred to as "the ranges of Tang." From this we can see just how great the Tang dynasty was in Chinese history. The time of the Tang dynasty was also when Buddhism was at its peak in Chinese history. It was not until the Emperor Wuzong of Tang destroyed Buddhism that the Tang dynasty began to decline. Following the Tang dynasty there was the Song dynasty. The emperors such as Emperor Taizu, Emperor Taizong, Emperor Zhenzong and Emperor Renzong of the Song dynasty all esteemed and believed in Buddhism. Their reigns were also when the Song dynasty was at its strongest. At one time, the Emperor Taizu of Ming was a Buddhist monk and he was deeply devoted to Buddhism during his reign. At that time, his governance was righteous and glorious, and the country was extremely prosperous. These examples all indicate that Buddhism brings very positive effects to the governance of these emperors. Are these examples untrue?

Although Japan lost the war [in 1945], after the Meiji Restoration started in 1868, Japan rose to be one of the strongest countries in the world [in terms of national power]. The Japanese people [at that time] largely followed the Buddhist faith. So, who can say that adopting Buddhism will be detrimental to a country? From histories of the aforementioned countries, it is clear that when a country was strong, it was also when Buddhism flourished [in that country]. Why do Chinese people long for their country to be prosperous and yet they oppose the propagation of Buddhism?

Misunderstanding that Buddhism is of No Benefit to Society

Some modern Chinese people misunderstand that Buddhism is passive and does not proactively undertake things that are beneficial to society. They then conclude that Buddhism is of no benefit to society. This is because they see how the Christians and Catholics set up schools, hospitals and so forth, while Buddhism seldom provides such services.

This is an incorrect line of argument. At most, one only can say that the current Chinese Buddhist followers do not make enough effort to fulfil their responsibilities. It is certainly not the case that Buddhism teaches Buddhists not to undertake beneficial deeds.

Chinese Buddhism in the past [when it flourished], by and large, had engaged in many charitable undertakings. Modern-day Japanese Buddhists have set up many universities, secondary schools and so on, and the monastics have also taken on positions of principals as well as lecturers at these universities and schools. It is also a fact that charitable undertakings are commonly organised by the monastics. The Buddhists followers, especially in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, have maintained a close engagement with educational activities and other charitable undertakings. Therefore, one cannot say that Buddhism does not offer practical benefits to society. One can only say that Chinese Buddhists should reflect that they have not fulfilled their responsibilities as disciples of the Buddha and should make more effort towards such activities. This, then, meets the real intention of Buddhism to heal the world and can help Buddhism to flourish again.

The average Chinese person still has many misunderstandings regarding Buddhism. Today, I have canvassed only a few of the more common situations. I hope that after understanding the true meaning of the aspects discussed you all can be Buddhist followers with right faith. At the minimum, [I hope] you can clarify some misunderstandings concerning Buddhism and help promote the original intention of Buddhism. Otherwise, one may appear to be a devoted follower of Buddhism but in reality maintains many incorrect perceptions. That is, what one believes in is not true [Buddhism]. Accordingly, it is unavoidable that Buddhism draws the criticism of society.

(Notes taken by Mingdao)