

## **Chapter 2**

### **What is Buddhism?**

#### **What are the Main Ideas in Buddhism?**

Buddhism is a profound and comprehensive philosophy that investigates the truth about human beings and the universe. Similar to other religions, Buddhism explains the conditions of being after death. Buddhists believe in rebirth following death, even as an animal or other forms of life, unless the dead ascends to Heaven or descends to Hell.

Just as the previous chapter discussed, “Religion is a philosophy or a teaching developed from the belief that the spiritual nature of a person continues to exist after the death of the body and a reward or a punishment would be accorded depending on his or her behavior; and through which philosophy or teaching, there are certain guidelines devised for people to follow.” Because Buddhism conforms to all of the above conditions, it is undoubtedly a religion.

Prince Siddhartha, the founder of the Buddhist religion who was active in India around 2,500 years ago, abdicated the throne, left the royal palace, and set out to seek enlightenment. After achieving enlightenment, he was revered as Buddha Shakyamuni. Buddha is a title given to a person who has attained full awakening or enlightenment. A buddha is not a god. The goal of Buddha Shakyamuni’s teaching is to demonstrate to the interested persons his path to

enlightenment. He did not require adherents to believe in miracles. As a result, there is no need for Buddhist learning to be riddled with superstition.

Whereas all the religions expound the conditions of human beings after death, Confucianism does not; for this reason, it should not be counted as a religion. Many scholars argue that Confucianism, together with Daoism, and Buddhism, represent the three schools or a harmonious aggregate of the “Three Teachings”. Some foreign scholars mistakenly take Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism as three religions. But, these are just three schools of thought - not three religions. Due to various historical factors, Western scholars never sufficiently examine the correct definition of religion, and thus deem Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism as three main Chinese religions.

Christianity formulates an unambiguous concept about the conditions of human beings after death. Each one of us stands before the judgment of God, who replays each individual's entire life in order to determine where the soul is to spend the rest of eternity, be it Heaven, Earth, or Purgatory. Some Christians might raise the following questions: If Buddhist followers do not believe in the existence of God, the creator of the Universe, then who will be the judge of good and evil? Are humans responsible for not committing evils, but doing all that is good? What will serve as a substitute for God's judgment? We will find answers to these questions in the discussions below.

## Two Core Concepts of Buddhism

What is at the core of Buddhism? The single most fitting word to describe the theme of Buddhist belief is *enlightenment*<sup>1</sup>. The next question is, what do we know after our enlightenment? Answering these two questions will bring about two crucial principles of Buddhism, with which we will begin to see the central theme of Buddhism. These two principles are:

1. The recognition of intrinsic nature.
2. The relationship between cause and consequence.

### 1. The Recognition of Intrinsic Nature (Self-nature)

The recognition of intrinsic nature can be articulated through the phrase of “enlightening one's mind, and seeing one's Buddha-nature” (*ming xin jian xing* 明心見性).

Ming (明) = to illuminate or to clarify  
Xin (心) = mind  
Jian (見) = understand  
Xing (性) = intrinsic nature

“To know one's fundamental mind, to see one's Buddha-nature”, as a Buddhist saying goes. Buddhist philosophy espouses that all sentient beings possess thusness or intrinsic nature, which is pure and benevolent.<sup>2</sup> Intrinsic nature as the intelligence of Buddha<sup>3</sup> was originally possessed by all people, but hindered

---

<sup>1</sup> 覺悟.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Intrinsic nature’ (自性), (Skt. *svabhāva*) is also called original nature (*prakṛti*), self-nature, original reality, or thusness (*tathatā*).

<sup>3</sup> An enlightened person is called a ‘buddha.’ According to Buddhism, everyone has the chance to attain enlightenment by removing craving, aversion, and ignorance.

by craving, aversion, ignorance, pride, and doubt since time immemorial. These obstacles are originated from delusive conceptualization, discriminative mind, and lasting attachment. According to Buddhist teaching, all sentient beings return to intrinsic nature through cultivation.

If we can rediscover our ‘intrinsic nature’, we will be able to change delusion into awakening, and keep to the correct path. This is the exact purpose of our Buddhist learning. Without recovering our ‘intrinsic nature’, we would always be living in befuddlement. However, many critics of Buddhism do not see through this point. The leading opponent of Buddhism Saint-Hilaire once wrote, “In Greek philosophy, Socrates and Plato have won imperishable glory by giving to the conception of goodness its real place in the soul of man, in the world, and in God; and the fire they kindled has continued to burn and throw more and more light among us. In Buddhism, on the contrary, not a gleam of this divine flame has shown itself, not a single spark has flashed out; and the sun of intelligence, as Plato calls it, has never enlightened those of the Buddhist world”.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, this author did not realize the existence of ‘intrinsic nature’. One of the most influential Mahayana sutras of Buddhism, *The Great Means Expansive Buddha Flower Adornment Sutra* (Skt: *Buddhāvataṃsaka-mahāvaipulya-sūtra*) records Shakyamuni Buddha’s first sermon after his enlightenment, declaring “How strange, how strange! All sentient beings are vested with the wisdom and virtuous

---

<sup>4</sup> Saint-Hilaire, J. Barthelemy, *The Buddha and His Religion*. (New Delhi: Rupa Co, 2002).

characteristics of Buddha, but are hindered from enlightenment by delusive conceptualization and attachment”.<sup>5</sup>

In another Buddhist scripture, the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment*, Buddha similarly states that “All sentient beings had originally been Buddha”.<sup>6</sup> One’s immaculate ‘intrinsic nature’, initially possessed by all sentient beings, could be hindered and obstructed when one’s thought is moving in the mind to discriminate between he, you, and I, or when one’s conduct is enslaved by selfish interests.

The understanding of and the possibility of restoring ‘intrinsic nature’ is at the core of Buddhism. It is possible to enlighten one’s mind and to see one’s Buddha-nature through the sequential cultivation of eradicating craving, aversion, and ignorance. To attain enlightenment is to successfully remove the three basic afflictions. When a person awakens his mind and sees his Buddha-nature, the person will have thorough and perfect awareness of all the phenomena of the universe and of our lives. He will have accomplished Buddhahood. Buddhist practitioners say that one directly accomplishes Buddhahood when one sees one’s own nature. The same idea has been reiterated in many other Buddhist scriptures. It would be a great mistake not to realize this idea during the process of Buddhist learning.

The goal of Buddhist learning is to attain enlightenment, to change delusion into awakening, and to escape suffering and attain happiness. This means that:

---

<sup>5</sup> 大方廣佛華嚴經: “奇哉奇哉! 一切眾, 皆有如來智慧德相, 但因妄想執著而不證得。”

<sup>6</sup> 圓覺經: “一切眾生本來是佛。”

1. 'Intrinsic nature' is vested in human beings.
2. The afflictive hindrances of intrinsic nature that are caused by craving, aversion, and ignorance brings about suffering.
3. The way to eliminate suffering is to eradicate craving, aversion, and ignorance through the practices of morality, meditation, and wisdom. When we 'give away to help others, there should not be any link or attachment to other considerations'.<sup>7</sup> Through continuous practices in the light of this way, we will expand our mental capacity. We will come closer and closer to Buddhahood. When we gradually understand the truth of things, we will have naturally removed our suffering.

Some people think that the very purpose of life is to seek happiness. And yet the definition of happiness can be highly subjective. For many, wealth, fame, and glory are the main sources of happiness. Of course, we cannot possibly goad people into pursuing this kind of pleasure. I believe that *happiness*, as the meaning of life, must be understood as the happiness gained through changing delusion into awakening, and escaping suffering.

It is noticeable that a number of English manuscripts on Buddhism have portrayed the Four Noble Truths as the essence of Buddhist teaching. While understanding the Four Noble Truths is inherently important and necessary to every serious

---

<sup>7</sup> 無所住行於布施.

Buddhist practitioner, these forms are meaningful only under the condition that our 'intrinsic nature' is restored. In other words, it would be a serious omission not to offer an explanation of 'intrinsic nature' in Buddhism, at the same time when Buddhism is to be acknowledged as a religion without God.

Can we eradicate the three afflictions - craving, aversion, and ignorance? In principle we can, but in reality barely anyone can fully achieve it. As long as we partially eliminate the three poisons, and decrease the attachment to an enduring, inherent self, egoism, and selfishness, we will be able to feel the joy through 'intrinsic nature' after the expansion of our mental capacity to some extent. In other words, only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.

Enlightening one's mind, and seeing one's intrinsic nature will allow one to acquire true liberation (referred to as nirvana). Buddhist philosophy teaches us that we, and only we ourselves, are capable of realizing enlightenment. The Buddha is here to point us to the way of cultivation, but we have to walk it by ourselves.

Even some distinguished Professors of Buddhism have paid little attention to 'intrinsic nature'. During Scott London's interview, Professor Ninian Smart from the University of California, Santa Barbara stated that 'craving, aversion, and ignorance' are the major problems of human beings in the eyes of the Buddha. Although his statement is quite right, Professor Smart made no mention of intrinsic nature and the consequences of obstructing it.

Many eminent monks repeatedly teach us to watch our conduct. Examples include: “We must be compassionate”, “We must be sincere and enthusiastic when dealing with others”, “We must be patient”, and “Do not do to others what you would not like to be done to you”. These adages are surely correct, but many teachers outside Buddhism could speak similar words. People might be asking: What is most appealing and transcendental aspect of Buddhism? The answer is: Only when we comprehend the ‘intrinsic nature’ of humans, and regain it through cultivation could we appreciate the value of Buddhism. The perfectness of this ‘intrinsic nature’ is comparable to that of God understood in Christianity.

The charm of the idea of ‘intrinsic nature’ lies in the consummate intrinsic nature vested in every one of us that enables us to stay as close to perfection as we wish.

**An excerpt from a scholarly writing on ‘intrinsic nature’<sup>8</sup>:**

“What is the ultimate purpose of meditative practice? It is to enlighten one’s mind, and to see one’s Buddha-nature. What is the result of such practice? It is to penetrate through the basis of our existence, to get through with life and death, to transcend the triple realm without undergoing subsequent rebirth, to liberate self and others, and to universally benefit all beings. This is the ultimate goal of returning to intrinsic nature. In order to enlighten one’s mind and to see one’s intrinsic nature, one has to understand what mind-nature is, which is the

---

<sup>8</sup> Fa Yi Buddhist Lodge (法雨精舍-法雨精舍思慮手冊: 參禪之目的).



originally pure mind of all sentient beings. Intrinsic nature also has variations in different branches of East Asian Buddhism, ranging from ‘Buddha-nature’, ‘thusness’, ‘thus-come’, ‘one’s true nature’ or ‘pure Dharma-body’ in Chan Buddhism, ‘manifested from one’s own mind’, or ‘perfectly accomplished nature of reality’ in Yogācāra Buddhism, ‘Dharma-body in a pure land’, or the ‘pure land of eternally tranquil light’ in the Pure Land School, ‘true insight’ in the Three Treatise school, ‘the original intrinsic nature’ or ‘adamantine jewel precepts’ in the Vinaya School, ‘the precious likeness of Buddha as intrinsic nature’ in Lotus Sutra school, ‘one true realm of reality’ in the Flower Ornament School, and ‘pure bodhi mind’ in the True Word School. The various terms in effect refer to the same entity. The *Discourse on the Perfection of Consciousness-only* states that “Truth is the true form of something, which is apparently not delusive deception; thus, something that has an outward appearance that is immutable, it denotes ‘as usual’. It is said that the truth is in all dharmas, which is as perpetual as its self-nature, and is therefore called thusness”. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, “The so-called thusness is neither plural nor diverse”. The *Diamond Sutra* also states, “He who is called ‘the Realized One’ (*tathāgata*), has not come from anywhere, nor has he gone anywhere”. However, this mind-nature refers to true mind and intrinsic nature, but not any other kind of mind in other thoughts. The quotidian sense of mind is a deluded mind, nescience. The mind we desire to illuminate now is the ultimate true mind, which is the true reality of existence”.

The above text is particularly noticeable in proclaiming that “the various titles in effect refer to the same entity”. We have realized that the same idea is manifested in various terms, including ‘intrinsic nature’, ‘thusness’, ‘Buddha-nature’, ‘the nature of emptiness’, ‘mark of emptiness in all dharmas’, ‘true mind’, ‘pure mind’, ‘womb of the Tathāgata’, and ‘the essential characteristic of thusness’. The more we read these terms, the better we understand ‘thusness’ and ‘intrinsic nature’.

When we translate Buddhist scriptures and epithets into foreign languages, we easily lose some subtle and profound elements. This dilemma in effect reflects the difference between Eastern and Western Buddhist cultures, which is the reason why Eastern and Western scholars have often found it hard to communicate with each other on approaches to studying Buddhism.

The many different nomenclatures of the important concept of ‘intrinsic nature’ are further explained here. (The explanations are excerpted from *The Common Buddhist Glossary*, 佛學常見詞彙):

**Intrinsic Nature (自性):** 1) one’s original nature; the unchanging, immutable essence in all dharmas; 2) the Buddha-nature vested in all sentient beings (p. 287).

**True Mind (真心):** the mind that is real and beyond all obstacles; a synonym for Buddha-nature (p. 416).

**Thusness (zhen ru 真如):** ‘zhen’ denotes ‘the real’, and ‘ru’ means ‘thus always or eternally so’. This term implies something both real and unchanging as usual. As the precious likeness of all dharmas and the universal essence, thusness never changes. It is neither created nor destroyed, neither defiled nor pure, and neither increases nor diminishes. This is the so-called Unconditioned Phenomena. This innately pure mind of all sentient beings is also called Buddha-nature, Dharma-body, the precious likeness of Buddha, Dharma-realm, Dharma nature, and perfectly accomplished nature of reality. The Awakening of Faith (大乘起信論) states that “All the dharmas since the very beginning transcend characteristics of discourse, transcend the characteristics of naming, and transcend the characteristics of cognitive objects. They are absolutely undifferentiated, changeless, and indestructible. There is nothing but this One Mind and for this reason it is nominally called Thusness (p. 417)”.

**True Form of Thusness (zhen ru shi xiang 真如實相):** ‘true (zhen)’ means not false, ‘as usual (ru)’ denotes immutability, and ‘real (shi)’ is a quality that is distinguished from emptiness. ‘Zhen ru’ (真如) refers to the innately pure mind of all sentient beings, which is also called Dharma-body, womb of the Tathāgata, Dharma nature and Buddha-nature. It is real but not false, and is thus titled ‘True Form of Thusness’ (p. 417).

## **2. The Inevitable Relationship between Cause and Consequence**

Another core notion in Buddhism is ‘the relationship between cause and consequence’. This means that regardless of the scale or nature of our actions, they will generate inescapable consequences. Good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil.

Because of the notion of cause and consequence, Buddhists believe that there exists a system of successively cyclic existence of myriad things, sustaining the rebirth of humans and all the life forms after death.

Based on this notion, some critics remark that “Buddhists merely expect to be rewarded”; that is to say, doing good deed now is done in exchange for something good received in the future. With their mistaken view of the Buddhist notion of cause and consequence, they turn the original practice of good deeds into a mercantile transaction.

Seemingly reasonable at first glance, this accusation fails to recognize that Buddhist teachings aim at reinstating one’s ‘intrinsic nature’ and ‘pure mind’ by steering one’s thoughts and conduct, the cultivation of one’s pure mind, and the attainment of enlightenment. The perfection of pure mind, as far as moral standing is concerned, is the goal of Buddhism. Certainly, pursuing perfection is also the aim of Christianity.

If we comprehend intrinsic nature, its hindrance and restoration, we will naturally understand the inevitability of the law of cause

and effect; with this comprehension, we master the core of Buddhist teaching. If we continue cultivating ourselves, we will eventually become enlightened, the highest realm of human life. Enlightened beings transcend the ordinary and attain sainthood, whereas the un-enlightened beings remain at the mundane level of cognition and practice.

In the following chapter, we will compare the logical similarities and differences between Buddhism and Christianity.

### **A Summary of the Basic Understanding of Buddhism**

Buddhism is a philosophy of human life and afterlife taught by the Buddha. An enlightened sage himself, the Buddha taught people the idea of enlightening one's mind and seeing one's (Buddha-) nature, and he provided numerous approaches to attaining enlightenment. It is the truth to all dharmas in the world, transforming delusion into awakening, escaping suffering and attaining happiness. If we want to be a follower of the Buddha, our ultimate aim is to learn how to attain enlightenment.

In order to attain enlightenment, we ought to grasp two principles: the first is that there is an inevitable causal relationship; the other is that everyone can restore their intrinsic nature and become a Buddha through individual effort.

Buddhism espouses cyclic existence that abides by the law of cause and effect. According to this law, one will be reborn in one of the six realms of existence after one's bodily life has ended in this life. If one could attain enlightenment and become a buddha, one would be able to escape from the suffering of the recurring cycle of rebirth and attain nirvana. In order to become a buddha, we have to observe certain disciplines; these keep us from the three poisons of craving, aversion, and ignorance, and help us cultivate the mind-condition of non-self.

The Buddhist cycle of rebirth is strikingly similar to the Christian God's last judgment that determines one's final ascent to Heaven or descent to Hell. Through recording the Buddha's life-long teachings, the canons of Buddhism teach how to righteously carry out one's lives. The chapters below will expound some of the important Buddhist notions and theories, promoting a better understanding of Buddhism.