

Chapter 6

Principles of Buddhist Practice

Buddhism is not an abstract theory; it offers concrete principles of conduct for people to follow. The many ways to attain enlightenment are called paths to Buddhahood, or the Buddha's teachings in the words of Buddhist masters. This chapter will explain cultivating methods to readers, who will be eager to know about how to take the path to Buddhahood when they realize the core value of Buddhism.

The Buddha says that there are eighty-four thousand permutations of the Buddhist teaching; this is a convenient way to connote the infinity of Buddhist teachings. We ought to know that Buddhism offers infinite paths to help us attain the same aim of enlightenment.

In addition, because of their different backgrounds, Buddhist learners vary in understanding the teachings. The method for one may not suit the others. Suppose a Buddhist teacher asks you to study five books, which makes you feel perplexed at first sight, but which enlighten you when you have read them several times. This is referred to as "gradual enlightenment". The same teacher may ask another student to read the same books. The other student may immediately understand what enlightenment is by glimpsing at the first few pages. This is so-called "sudden enlightenment". This type of enlightenment is not in contradiction to "gradual enlightenment".

The Empress Wu Zetian (648-705), the only female ruler in Chinese history, firmly believed and advocated Buddhism. As the supreme leader of the empire, she made the order to summon Huineng, the sixth patriarch of the Zen school, to come to court. Huineng declined the royal decree. Empress Wu was infuriated, and was about to issue the order to arrest Huineng when she suddenly realized that Master Huineng was teaching her through the refusal. She decided not to blame Huineng and force him to come, but instead generously bestowed on him. The Zen school thus widely spread in the South. Having attained a higher level of Buddhist understanding, the Empress herself allegedly wrote the opening chant of a sutra: “Hard it is to meet with the teaching that is unsurpassed, most profound, most excellent, in myriads of eons. Now we have met with it, may we realize the true meaning of the Buddha!”

It is said that the renowned poet Su Dongpo of the Song dynasty was another enlightened person. One day, when he saw some green bamboo leaves and a stream of water, he was suddenly enlightened:

“The sounds of running stream are the Buddha’s oral preaching in a broad and long tongue; the sight of mountains is the pure Dharma body”.¹ Anything we see could help us realize the Truth about Buddhism. There are various ways for one to cultivate our understanding, since there are endless causes to enlighten one. The *Diamond Sutra* stresses that “all things are Buddha-dharma”.²

¹ “溪聲盡是廣長舌，山色無非淨法身。”

² 金剛經第 17 分：“一切法皆是佛法。”

The highest form of Buddhist learning is called the “supreme perfect enlightenment”³ (Skt. *anuttarāṃ samyak-saṃbodhim abhisambuddhāḥ*). The *Diamond Sutra* also notes that there is no set doctrine to attain the supreme perfect enlightenment, which illustrates that “all things are Buddha-dharma”. We understand that Buddhist teaching is vastly inclusive, which have developed a variety of schools in the past centuries. We will discuss these different schools in Chapter 20.

This chapter, which provides some cultivation guides for peer practitioners, is divided into two parts: Part I contains some quotations of scriptures that categorise the three levels of achievement in Buddhism. It begins with the most basic level, instructing us on moral restraints and rules, which are comparable to the Ten Commandments in Christianity. Part II offers some advice on how to cultivate. These guides are intended to be of great practical value to beginners.

Part I: An outline of cultivation in terms of Buddhist scriptures

Now, let us focus on a direct method of cultivation, which is the “three kinds of meritorious behaviour” or “Three Blessings of Tranquility”⁴ taught by the Buddha in the *Contemplation Sutra*.

Three Blessings of Tranquility

The *Contemplation Sutra* records the Buddha’s elucidations in response to the questions raised by Vaidehī, the wife of King

³ 無上正等正覺.

⁴ 淨業三福.

Bimbisāra of Magadha. Understanding the essence of every meritorious behaviour (“Blessing”) is the key; each of them represents one stage in the path to attainment.

1. The Blessing of Heaven and Man⁵

This first “blessing” teaches us the obligations and responsibilities we need to fulfill. It especially emphasizes the importance of filial piety for parents and respect for teachers. Whether you are a disciple of Hinayana Buddhism or Mahayana Buddhism, you will have to follow what you have learned. It teaches us the following:

- 1) We must support and take care of our parents.
- 2) We must pay attention to our teachers.
- 3) We must remain compassionate and refrain from killing any humans or animals.
- 4) We must cultivate the ten kinds of benevolent behaviours
 - a. not killing
 - b. not stealing
 - c. not committing adultery
 - d. not being greedy
 - e. not being angry
 - f. not having wrong views
 - g. not lying
 - h. not speaking harshly
 - i. not speaking divisively
 - j. not speaking idly

⁵ 人天福.

Items a, b, and c are behavioural; items d, e, and f are psychological; items g, h, i, and j are verbal.

Filial Piety

According to Chinese culture, filial piety possesses the greatest virtue. It is often said that “Filial piety is the foundation of all virtues”. This principle is far more than loving one’s parents and providing financial support to them. Parents are always concerned about the happiness of their children. As their children, we must avoid doing anything that would potentially worry them. People come to realize that parents expect their young children to become benevolent, law-abiding, and responsible citizens. One would be considered to be filial only if one lives up to such parental expectations.

Filial piety is also the primary quality a Buddhist follower has to learn in the initial stage. A person cannot be considered successful in cultivation without such quality. Some Western scholars comment that the value of Buddhism contradicts that of Confucianism. Buddhists seemingly advise sons and daughters to leave their families and get away from the secular world; in contrast, Confucians consider the family as the foundation of a society. However, I am afraid that I have to negate this point of view. This is because Buddhism never asks a young person to renounce the secular life against the wishes of his or her parents. Truly speaking, both Confucianism and Buddhism take filial piety as the most important virtue.

2. The Blessing of the Second Carriage⁶

This “blessing” involves methods and ritual protocols of Buddhism. It begins from the ritual of converting to Buddhism, a process that is quite similar to Christian baptism. The second “blessing” asks Buddhist learners to fulfill three requirements:

1) Taking Refuge in the Three Treasures.

This refers to the rituals of formally joining Buddhism, which include:

- a. taking refuge in the Buddha, that is, to be awakened to the reality without perplexity;
- b. taking refuge in the Dharma, that is, to have correct understanding without deviation;
- c. taking refuge in the Sangha, that is, to attain purity without pollution.

Huineng, the sixth patriarch of the Zen School, refers to the same process with a different name. He calls this the “triple jewels of one’s intrinsic nature”, which include “refuge to awakening, refuge to correct knowledge, and refuge to purity [of mind]”.

2) Maintaining the precepts

The precepts are: (1) not killing, (2) not stealing, (3) not committing adultery, (4) not lying, and (5) not drinking. The first four of the five precepts are precepts of a fundamental nature that are applicable to everyone. The

⁶ 二乘福.

fifth belongs to precepts for faults that require special restraint; this precept applies only to those who have accepted these rules. The prohibition of drinking aims to prevent drunken mistakes from happening.

3) Refraining from misconduct of the practices

This means that our conduct and behaviours shall be honourable but not shameful in upholding Buddhism.

3. The Blessing of the Big Carriage⁷

This “blessing” refers to:

- 1) Awakening to the aspiration for enlightenment for the sake of helping all living beings. This requires the combination of great intelligence, compassion, and bodhisattva practices.
- 2) Profoundly believing in the law of cause and effect.
- 3) The need to read and appreciate the Big Carriage scriptures.
- 4) Encouraging others to accumulate virtue.

This third Blessing of the Big Carriage deals with a person’s mindset in the final state of cultivation. The selfless Bodhi-wisdom to help other sentient beings is pivotal and ultimate in Buddhism. We have to strive to restore our “intrinsic nature”; in order to do so, we have to help others selflessly and not allow our minds to be concerned with anything else. In other words, we must help others for the

⁷ 大乘福.

sake of others, but not for public approval or fame. We must not bear in mind the reward it has for now and the benefits it will reap in the future. We have to keep in mind that compassion has to be intrinsic, and therefore we shall utilize all kinds of opportunities to cultivate our compassion. Our compassion shall never be caused by any other motive, even if it comes out of our responsibility to do good deeds.

The first and second blessings are regarded as Hinayana teachings, while the third one is seen as the core of Mahayana Buddhism. Three kinds of blessings offer a step-by-step approach for followers to learn Buddhism. The Buddha has pointed out this out in the *Buddha Conservation Sutra*: “If a student of Buddhism does not continue his learning from Hinayana to Mahayana Buddhism, then he is not qualified as a true Buddhist”. That is to say, a Buddhist student has to begin with the first and second prior to learning the third blessing.

Chapter 19 will explain the distinctions between the Hinayana tradition and the Mahayana tradition. While Hinayana Buddhism is extremely widespread among Southeast Asian countries, Mahayana Buddhism is mostly practiced in mainland China and Taiwan. Conventionally, many Western scholars of Buddhism have sought guidance from Buddhists living in Southeast Asia; this is why they often have focused on Hinayana doctrines and teachings, which differ from the Mahayana tradition.

As the *Buddha Conservation Sutra* demonstrates, the Buddha considers the two traditions as teachings at two different levels. The Hinayana tradition belongs to the elementary level; it lays down a necessary foundation for further cultivation. This is why a person has to study the Hinayana tradition before advancing to the higher level.

Today, we have explained the distinctions between Hinayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. This provides a perfect response to the viewpoint that the two traditions are contradictory. Chapter 19 will further elaborate on the two traditions. According to statements made over two thousand years ago, Hinayana and Mahayana teachings belong to two different levels of cultivation.

In Buddhism, what is the most important attitude we shall adopt when we deal with others? Is there a certain route to follow in the process of Buddhist learning?

The most important attitude in Buddhism is compassion. There is no set route. The best way to learn is to find the dharma gate that is most suitable and convenient for you personally. That is to say, “compassion is the foundation, and convenience is the method”.

Part II: Some advice on how to cultivate

Below is some basic advice for those who would like to further explore Buddhism and obtain concrete methods after reading this book. The author suggests that readers should repeatedly study the following items after finish reading the book. This practice will remind readers of dos and don'ts during cultivation.

1. Comprehend fundamental concepts of Buddhism.
2. Be vigilant about craving, aversion, and ignorance. Avoid delusion, discrimination, and clinging. Although these things are not easy, we shall at least endeavour to do. Even the slightest achievement with respect to any of these is praiseworthy.
3. Learn the three kinds of meritorious behaviour ("Blessings").
4. Learn the Six Paramitas. (These will be explained in Chapter 11.)⁸
5. Remember that Buddhism teaches us to "learn from different kinds of suffering".⁹ Do not indulge in luxurious enjoyment, but live a moderate life. The *Platform Sutra of*

⁸ The Six Paramitas are: giving away, observing precepts, patience, diligence, deep concentration, and wisdom.

⁹ "以苦為師". This idea originally appeared in the *Sutra of the Deathbed Injunction*, in which the Buddha has pointed out that disciples of the Buddha should take the precepts and sufferings as their teacher. He noted that "[Precepts] are your Great Teacher, which are as me [the Buddha] in this world without any differences."

the Sixth Patriarch notes that “the Buddha’s teachings in this world cannot be appreciated without worldly references”.¹⁰ Buddhist learners shall always be prepared to set examples for others. If I were a businessman, I ought to do what a businessman shall do and set a good example for fellow businessmen. The same principle applies to political leaders.

6. Understand Section 17 of the *Diamond Sutra*, which states that “All dharmas are the Buddha-dharma”¹¹. Any event we come across may be the Buddha’s dharma that triggers enlightenment. During cultivation, we call the highest state of mind the “supreme correct enlightenment”, or “anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi” in Sanskrit. The *Diamond Sutra* points out that the mind of “supreme correct enlightenment”¹² is caused by the absence of a set doctrine, which can be used to explain the saying that “All dharmas are the Buddha-dharma”.
7. Cherish and appreciate everything you encounter in life. You will be tested by ordeals in different stages of your life: sometimes everything goes smoothly without a hitch; at other times, you will encounter challenges. You may suffer from different levels of difficulties and hardships. You shall always maintain such an attitude that takes every experience as a learning opportunity.

¹⁰ 六祖壇經: “佛法在世間, 不離世間覺.”

¹¹ 金剛經第 17 分: “一切法皆是佛法.”

¹² 無上正等正覺.

8. Confucius once said, “walking among three people, there must be someone from whom I can learn”. Both good people and bad people are our teachers. We shall learn about benevolent behaviours from good men and avoid vicious crimes of bad men.

Attention: everywhere you stay could be a site of enlightenment for self-cultivation. Everyone you meet, whether a good person or not, can be seen as a mirror to you. They are your teachers, while you are the only student.

9. If for some reason(s) you are deceived, you can take the deception as an opportunity of a trial for you to detach from wrath, one of the three poisons. When one is fooled, one would very likely get angry; however, this is not an appropriate attitude, as one shall not let others' crimes damage one's own cultivation.
10. The third doctrine of the “Six Paramitas” teaches us to be patient and tolerant. (This will be explained in Chapter 11). You may treat someone with sincerity, but somehow this person is always devoid of gratitude, deceiving you, hurting you, and defiling you. You may therefore question where the justice is. But in effect, you shall take this matter as an opportunity to test your patience. If you understand the principle of the inevitable relationship between cause and consequence, you will realize that the injustice and predicament you are suffering from might have been caused by something you did to some people in your past lives. The enemies you encounter in this life

may have been trying to let you repay your debts. You shall have the courage to take on the results as to avoid endless mutual injuries. Some of our friends with secular views might consider that you are making such a major concession to relinquish your interests. And yet, Buddhism tells us that what we have attained in our cultivation could be wiped out in a day if we do not practice patience.

11. What is the correct attitude towards fortune? Should we be eager to get rich? Should we yearn for higher social status? About the first question, we must ensure that we do not acquire our wealth through improper means, which is to say that we cannot comprise ourselves to craving, aversion, and ignorance. Besides, if one's original motive already takes the interests of others into account, then there is no problem for one to pursue social status and wealth (a right behaviour of the eight noble paths). Buddhism is not opposed to people like Bill Gates earning worldly wealth through correct paths, and encourages them to run charities with their money.
12. If you live comfortably and your career goes smoothly, you shall pause to contemplate, feeling grateful for what you own, and choose a moderate rather than a luxurious life even if you would like to treat yourself generously. Maintaining a reasonable living standard sets a role model for people with the same social status. We shall always remember to avoid craving, aversion, and ignorance. The Buddha teaches us that what we possess and enjoy are illusions and bubbles. Nothing is eternal

and the environment constantly changes. We must learn the necessity of giving away.

13. When handling our relationships with others, we must bear in mind the teachings of Buddha and maintain five states of mind: i) sincerity, ii) purity, iii) equality, iv) correct awakening, and v) compassion.¹³
14. There are five attitudes to life¹⁴: i) to see through things; ii) to cast off attachment; iii) to feel comfortable in spite of such abandonment; iv) to be in accord with circumstances; v) to remember the teachings of Buddha.
15. We shall continuously practice paramita of giving away, for example, helping others without asking for anything in return. During the process, you should “give away to help others without any link or attachment to other considerations”¹⁵, as the *Diamond Sutra* asks. This is considered the highest aim of cultivation. The ultimate purpose of cultivation is to learn and practice Bodhi Resolve; the goal is to reach perfection.
16. Human life is as fragile as morning dew and as ephemeral as lightening—it can disappear anytime. As the Diamond Sutra says, “An illusion, a drop of dew, a bubble, a dream, a flash of lightning’, a thunder cloud - This is the way one should see the conditioned”. It is clear that we will not be able to take away with us anything after death, except for

¹³ 真誠; 清淨; 平等; 正覺; 慈悲.

¹⁴ 看破; 放下; 自在; 隨緣; 念佛.

¹⁵ 應無所住行於布施.

the wholesome and unwholesome actions we have done in the past. Thus, it is said that “All kinds of things but karma will be gone”.

In the above, we have discussed different cultivating methods from two perspectives. The first is to learn from Buddhist classics (the *Contemplation Sutra*); the second is to collect some advice on how to cultivate. Buddhist sutras have offered so many invaluable methods that help people to cultivate. I will share with readers two of the methods:

Method 1:

The *Diamond Sutra* says that “when giving away to help others, there should not be any link or attachment to other considerations”.¹⁶ This straight-forwardly expounds the correct attitude one shall hold. This means that we should not become attached to the faculties of form, sound, smell, taste, tactility, and thought while making generous donations. Consequently, this indicates that, when practicing giving away, one shall not stick to the conceptual marks of self, personhood, sentient being, and being long-lived. We shall always help others with a pure and unsullied mind.

The aforementioned method that applies Buddhist theories to real life is so easy; but the question is, can we ordinary people cast off the attachments?

¹⁶ 應無所住行於布施. Section 4 of the *Diamond Sutra*.

Method 2:

The author suggests that we also read the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, which quotes the *Sutra of the Bodhisattva Precepts* that “My intrinsic nature is originally pure...I see my pure nature in each recitation; I cultivate and practice myself, and establish my path to the Buddhahood”¹⁷.

The phrase of “my intrinsic nature is originally pure” demonstrates that the original nature of human beings is pure, which more or less resonates with the Confucian discourse of the Goodness of Human Nature.

The *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* says that “The intrinsic nature is originally pure and certain, but defiled and polluted because we long for the conditions we once perceived”. In the thinking processes, our originally pure nature is defiled and polluted. The sutra also states that “[We ought to] cultivate and practice ourselves, and attain Buddhahood”. But how so? The sutra provides detailed methods of cultivation. The sixth chapter, which is on repentance and reform, says that “To take refuge is to rid your self-nature of egotism and unwholesome thoughts as well as of jealousy, obsequiousness, deceitfulness, contempt, pride, conceit, and deviant views, and all other unwholesome tendencies whenever they arise. To take refuge is to be always aware of your own transgressions and never to speak of other people’s good or bad traits. Always to be humble and polite is to have penetrated to the self-nature without any obstacle”.

¹⁷ 菩薩戒經: “我本性元自清淨.....於念念中自見本性清淨, 自修, 自行, 自成佛道.”

How does one attain Buddhahood by one's own practice? "Practice" here refers to *prajñā*, the Buddhist wisdom. Chapter 2 of the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, "Prajñā" states that "If we steadily, at all times and in all places, keep our thoughts free from foolish desire and act wisely on all occasions, then we are practicing the *paramita* of *prajñā*. One foolish notion is enough to shut-off *prajñā*; one wise thought will bring it forth again". This discourse, along with the above quotation from the *Sutra of the Bodhisattva Precepts*¹⁸, vividly illustrates the Way of Personhood.

Below is the "Formless Verse"¹⁹ taught by Master Huineng. Instead of promulgating superstitious beliefs, it teaches Buddhist followers about the ways of self-cultivation at home.

For a fair mind, observation of precepts is unnecessary.

For straightforward behaviour, practice in contemplation may be dispensed with.

On the principle of gratefulness, we support our parents and serve them filially.

On the principle of righteousness, the superior and the inferior stand for each other [in time of need].

On the principle of mutual desire to please, the senior and the junior are on affectionate terms,

On the principle of forbearance, we do not quarrel even in the midst of a hostile crowd.

¹⁸ *Sutra of the Bodhisattva Precepts*: "My intrinsic nature is originally pure [...] I see my pure nature in each recitation; I cultivate and practice myself, and establish my path to the Buddhahood."

¹⁹ 六祖壇經：無相頌.

If we can persevere till fire can be obtained through
rubbing a piece of wood,
Then the red lotus [the Buddha-nature] will shot out
from the black mire [the unenlightened state].

That which is of bitter taste is bound to be good
medicine.

That which sounds unpleasant to the ear is certainly
frank advice.

By amending our mistakes, we get wisdom.
By defending our faults, we betray an unsound mind.

In our daily life we should always practice altruism,
But Buddhahood is not to be attained by giving away
money as charity.

Bodhi is to be found within our own mind,
And there is no necessity to look for mysticism from
without.

Hearers of this stanza who put its teaching into actual
practice,
Will find paradise in their very presence.²⁰

²⁰ “心平何勞持戒？行直何用修禪？
恩則孝養父母，義則上下相憐；
讓則尊卑和睦，忍則眾惡無喧。
若能鑽木取火，淤泥定生紅蓮。
苦口的是良藥，逆耳必是忠言；
改過必生智慧，護短心內非賢。
日用常行饒益，成道非由施錢；
菩提只向心覓，何勞向外求玄？
聽說依此修行，天堂只在目前。”