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Buddhism 101 – Questions and Answers

(A Handbook for Buddhists)

Foreword

Dear Friends in Dharma,

This handbook, Buddhism 101—Questions and Answers, is a selected collection of Buddhist basic teachings for beginners. While composing this book, we thought in particular about those Buddhists who just initiatively started to study and practice Buddhism in environments of multiple religions and multiple cultures. Therefore, the basic themes introduced here serve to provide readers with a general view of the Buddha’s teachings in regard to both theory and practice. Given the limitations of a handbook, we dare not go further into intensive issues of Buddhist philosophy as doing so may lead to difficulties for beginners. However, the selected questions discussed here are the core teachings of Buddhism. As a beginner, you need to master these teachings firmly and precisely before going further into the Buddhist studies. We hope that this handbook will be a useful ladder to help you along the way in your learning and practicing.

Los Angeles, Spring 2009

Ven. Khai Thien, Ph.D.



101 – Questions and Answers

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1. What common feature does Buddhism share with other religions?

Buddhism shares numerous common features with all other religions. All religions encourage human beings to do good deeds, avoid evil deeds, cultivate a life of morality and compassion, and develop human dignity for both oneself and others as well as for family and society.

2. What is the difference between Buddhism and other religions?

The key point in which Buddhism differs from other religions is that Buddhism does not believe in the existence of a Personal God who created, controlled, and governed the life of all sentient beings, including human beings. According to the Buddhist view, suffering or happiness is created not by God, but by each individual person together with the karmic force, which is also the product of each person. The Buddha taught that a person becomes noble or servile not because of his or her origin (e.g., family background or social rank), but because of his or her own actions. Indeed, personal action makes a man or woman noble or servile. In addition, radical differences exist in the teaching of Buddhism and that of other religions. Buddhism considers all dharmas (things or existences, including both the mental and the physical) in this world to be conditional and exist in the mode of dependent origination. No dharma can exist independently and permanently as an immortal and invariable entity. Thus, all existences are non-self. Similarly, no one—either human or non-human—is able to control and govern the life of another person, only the person him- or herself. Consequently, the most essential point in Buddhist humanistic teaching is that all sentient beings have their own Buddhahood; thus, each person has the ability to become a Buddha. Enlightenment and

liberation, in the Buddhist view, are equal truths for all sentient beings, not a holy privilege reserved particularly for a certain person. This great view of equality in Buddhist doctrine is rarely found in any other religion.

3. What is a brief history of the Buddha?

Buddhism was established in India by the Sakyamuni Buddha more than 2,600 years ago. Modern historians believe the Buddha was born in Lumbini Park, Nepal, during the Vesak (May) full moon Poya day around the sixth century before the Christian era. The Buddha, whose birth name was Siddhartha, was born a prince and the only son of King Suddhodana and Queen Mahamaya. Upon growing up, he married princess Yasodhara, and they had a son named Rahula. After deeply realizing the nature of human suffering from birth, old age, sickness, and death, prince Siddhartha decided to leave the palace to look for the truth of enlightenment and spiritual liberation. Working through five years of study with several masters and six years of solitude engaging in ascetic practice in the forests, he finally attained enlightenment under the *bodhi* tree after forty-nine days of motionless meditation. Since this enlightenment, he has been called the Buddha, a person who has reached enlightenment and has been liberated from the cycle of samsāra. After attaining enlightenment, he started to teach the Dharma (the path leading to enlightenment and liberation) and established the Sangha (a community of monastic people such as monks and nuns) over a period of forty-five years. He entered Nirvāna (passed away) at the age of eighty under the twin Sala trees at Kusinara, around 543 B.C.E.

4. What is the essential characteristic of Buddhism?

Traditionally, Buddhism is defined as the path leading to enlightenment as *Buddha* means an awakened person or enlightened person. Thus, the essential characteristic of Buddhism, as the term expressed, is the *path to enlightenment and liberation* from the world of samsāra.

5. Does Buddhism advocate for renunciation of the world?

This question requires a delicate answer. History tells us that the middle-aged Buddha Sakyamuni attained enlightenment and ultimate liberation from the bondage cycle of samsāra. However, he remained with the world for more than forty years to teach the Dharma and bring benefits to all sentient beings. Thus, two important points should be considered:

a) *Buddhist concept of enlightenment (bodhi)*: The term *bodhi* in Buddhism refers to a full awakening or full awareness of the operation of *pratītyasamutpāda*, the law of Dependent Origination, the mental and physical corporeality on which the life of a human being is developed. Based upon this capability of full awareness, the individual is able to overcome all afflictions, delusions, and impurities and create a true life of peace and happiness. In addition, the capability of awareness is, in reality, divided into various levels from low to high; therefore, you should keep in mind that spending a whole life practicing the Dharma does not always mean that you will obtain full awareness (realization of the absolute truth). Although you have the ability to become enlightened, your level of enlightenment always depends on your individual karmic force, which is a personal current of mental cohesion of your own lives in the past.

b) *Buddhist concept of liberation (moksha)*: Literally, the term *moksha* or *mukti* in Sanskrit means *release, transcend beyond, or liberate* from the bondage of samsāra. Thus, liberation in Buddhism also consists of various

levels, from simplicity to absolute freedom. Whenever you transcend beyond the bondages of afflictions and defilements such as craving, hatred, ignorance, self-attachment, and self-pride in your own life, you will reach the realm of liberation. Until you liberate yourself from such afflictions (i.e., your mind is no longer governed or controlled by such mental impurities), you cannot truly enjoy the taste of liberation. However, in order to reach the state of absolute liberation, you must completely eradicate the roots of those afflictions as those roots of impurity are the causes of birth and death (*samsāra*). In other words, to liberate oneself from the cycle of *samsāra*, in the Buddhist view, is to release oneself from one's own life of afflictions and impurities; this is the very concept of *renunciation* in Buddhism. Therefore, it is important to remember that—to be truly liberated—you do not have to go anywhere else but to practice the Dharma right here and right now in this person and this world.

6. Is Buddhism a religion or philosophy?

The modern world is home to various kinds of religion as well as various concepts of God¹; moreover, each religion has its own doctrine and vocation. However, based on the characteristics of religions, we may generalize all world religions into two groups: a) *theistic religions*—religions believing in the existence of either one personal deity (monotheism) or multiple deities (polytheism) such as the Creator, God, Brahma, Gods, etc., who created and controlled the life of human and nature; or b) *non-theistic religions*—religions that do not believe in the existence of any deity whose works create and control the life of both sentient and non-sentient beings. In the limit of this definition,

¹ Atheism (no belief in the existence of God), Agnosticism (“unknowism”), Skepticism (doubting), Naturalism (all is organic to natural reality), Theism or monotheism (belief in a personal deity), Polytheism (belief in various kinds of deities), Henotheism (belief in various kinds of gods in different tribes), Pantheism (belief that God is identical with nature as a whole), and Panentheism (belief that all things exist in God).

Buddhism is a religion that does not have a personal God, but incorporates all the functions of a religion—as characterized by the modern view of religious studies—including conceptions, canonical languages, doctrines, symbols, rituals, spiritual practices, and social relationships. Yet many people today consider Buddhism to be “a philosophy of life” or “a philosophy of enlightenment”; this is just a personal choice.

7. *What is the essential tenet of Buddhism?*

The essential tenet of Buddhism was taught by the Buddha in his first teaching in the Deer Park (*Sarnath*), which focused on the Four Noble Truths (*Catvāri āryasatyāni*): the truth of suffering (*dukkha*), causes of suffering, cessation of suffering, and the noble path leading to the cessation of suffering. Following this first Dharma teaching, the Buddha taught about non-self—i.e., no independent entity is perpetual and invariable in the existence of five human aggregates (form, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness). In other words, nothing in either the physical or mental world can be considered an immortal self or permanent ego. In addition, speaking of the Buddhist essential tenet, it is important to remember a historical fact that, on the way to enlightenment, the Buddha deeply meditated on the law of *Pratītyasamutpāda* (Dependent Origination), during which the Bodhisattva Siddhartha became a Buddha when he himself cut off the series of *samsāra*.² Therefore, we may conclude that the essential tenet of Buddhism includes teaching of the Four Noble Truths, Non-self, and Dependent Origination.

² The series of *samsāra* as explained in the teachings of *Pratītyasamutpāda* include twelve links: Ignorance, volitional actions, consciousness, name and form, six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, old age and death.

8. If Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, can we say that it is a religion of science or one of philosophy?

You can name Buddhism as you choose, but you should keep in mind that, from the beginning, Buddhism has had no purpose to interpret or certify any problem belonging to science, as the industries of modern science do today. Buddhism does not put science at the top of its teachings; it is not inclined to any interpretation of science, although what the Buddha taught was always very scientific. The truth is that, when science is intensively developed, its discoveries help us verify the subtle problems of the Buddhist teachings, particularly those in the field of psychophysical studies. Perhaps, for this reason, Buddhism has become increasingly popular today and has quickly developed in Western countries—particularly in academic environments such as the universities of North America and Europe. However, the most fundamental doctrine of Buddhism is, as expressed in the teaching of Four Noble Truths, to deeply realize the causes of suffering in order to transform them into true happiness and liberation. In reality, Buddhism is often called a religion of wisdom; indeed, one Buddhist expression states that “only wisdom should be a true career.” However, according to Buddhist teachings, wisdom and compassion must always go together. Thus, to be exact, wisdom and compassion are always the true career of a Bodhisattva or a Buddha.

9. If Buddhism already had, from the beginning, its establishment for the path of enlightenment and liberation, why did such concepts as the Great vehicle (Mahāyāna) and Small vehicle (Hīnayāna) subsequently arise in its history?

Three doctrinal movements occurred in the history of Buddhism: Theravāda, Hīnāyana, and Mahāyāna. Theravāda is the primitive form of Buddhism, which began from the time of the Buddha and continued to develop until almost one hundred years after his Nirvāna. Following this original period came the spreading of two major movements: Hīnāyana and Mahāyāna. Generally, the concept of Hīnāyana (Small vehicle) and Mahāyāna (Great vehicle) gradually emerged in the process of the expansion of Buddhist thought and philosophy. The development of these two major movements in Buddhist history gradually diverged into eighteen sub-schools. However, both major movements based their teachings on the same doctrinal foundation (i.e., the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, and Non-self), although each movement had its own views and interpretations on various aspects of personal practice and social relationships. History states that, when a society develops, its languages, thoughts, and practical life also develop, thereby resulting in various views and interpretations of the Buddha's disciples in the stretching of Buddhist history. In particular, after the Buddha had already been in Nirvāna for hundreds of years, his plain and simple teachings had, through the course of time, been covered up with philosophical reasons and social reformations. In regard to the differences in various forms of Buddhism, Buddhists nowadays often use the concept of *traditional Buddhism* and *developed Buddhism* to refer to such diversities.

10. How does the original form of Buddhism differ from its development?

We can summarize some basic differences between the two forms, origin and development, of Buddhism as follows:

a) *Canonical languages*: Primitive Buddhism (Theravāda) uses Pali as their primary language in which the Nikāya sutras (or sutta in Pali form) are the

foundation for their practice. Meanwhile, Mahāyāna Buddhism uses the Mahāyāna sutras, in which Sanskrit is the primary language, together with some ancient languages, such as Tibetan and Chinese.

b) *Thoughts*: Primitive Buddhism is based on the teaching of Dependent Origination (*Patīccamūpāda*), while Mahāyāna Buddhism established two additional major philosophical movements: the Middle Way (*Mādhyamika*) and Mind-only (*Yogācāra*), which are also based on the same grounds of Dependent Origination. Finally, the Diamond vehicle (*Vajrayāna*) was the last school developed in the entire process of Buddhist development. Although these various forms of Buddhism differ somewhat, their fundamental teachings are not contradictory to one another except in regard to the conceptual expansions in the meaning of *spiritual end* and the problem of *saving others*.

c) *Practices*: Primitive Buddhism concentrated on meditation in which the major themes are the four foundations of mindfulness; body, feeling, mind, and mind's objects (all existences). Mahāyāna Buddhism expanded its forms of spiritual practice, such as Zen (meditation), Pure Land, and Tantrism; each school also has several forms of practice.

Diversity themes	Primitive Buddhism	Mahāyāna Buddhism
Canonical languages	Pali sutta/Nikāya	Sanskrit sutra and sutras in Tibetan and Chinese
Central thoughts	Dependent Origination (<i>Patīccasamūppāda</i>)	Middle Way (<i>Mādhyamika</i>) Mind-only (<i>Yogācāra</i>) Tantrism (<i>Vajrayāna</i>)
Practices	Traditional meditation	Zen, Pure Land, and

		Tantrism (various sects)
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11. In addition to the two forms of Buddhism—origin and development—why do we have the names Southern Buddhism and Northern Buddhism?

Southern Buddhism and Northern Buddhism are alternative names used for primitive Buddhism and developed Buddhism. These particular names refer to the directions in which the two Buddhist traditions developed. Southern Buddhism, the primitive branch, was popularly propagated in southern India, moving toward countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao, and Cambodia. Meanwhile Northern Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, spanned to northern India and became popular in countries such as China, Tibet, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

12. Regarding practical activities, is there any difference between Southern Buddhism and Northern Buddhism?

When speaking of monastic lifestyle, Southern Buddhism still maintains the primitive style for everyday activities, which were traditionally set up during the time of the Buddha. In other words, monks in Southern Buddhism all wear yellow robes, eat one meal a day at noon, study and recite the Pali sutras, etc. Accordingly, the specific feature of monks in Southern Buddhism is that they all wear the same style of robes with the same color (yellow) and all recite the same canonical language (Pali). For this reason, monks in Southern Buddhism—even from different countries—can sit down and recite the same sutra expertly and skillfully.

On the contrary, monks and nuns in Northern Buddhism do not keep the traditional lifestyle, as primitive Buddhism does. Rather, they adjusted their lifestyles in everyday activities as well as in spiritual practices, relying on different habits, customs, national cultures, and social requirements. Thus, the lifestyles of monks and nuns in Northern Buddhism are diversely dependent on various traditions of different natives. For example, monks and nuns in Northern Buddhism wear different styles of robes with different colors. Canonical languages are translated into different languages, and followers can eat more than one meal a day, depending on health issues. Generally speaking, Northern Buddhism is a form of development by nature; therefore, it has effectively adapted to social needs to become the first priority in the mission of preaching the Dharma.

13. Regarding the process of enlightenment, is there any difference between Southern Buddhism and Northern Buddhism?

Traditionally, the process of enlightenment and emancipation of a Buddhist Holy One is concretized in the Hearer (*Srāvaka*)—four stages of attainment that include Stream-enterer (*Sotāpana*), One-returner (*Sakadāgāmi*), None-returner (*Anāgāmi*), and Complete liberation (*Arhat*). This process of enlightenment has been explained in detail. A holy man or woman must purify all their afflictions practically by cutting off ten fetters (*samyojana*) as follows:

- Belief in an individual self (*sakkāya-ditthi*),
- Doubt or uncertainty about the Dharma (*vicikicchā*),
- Attachment to rites and rituals (*silabata-parāmāsa*),
- Sensual desire (*kāma-rāga*),
- Hatred (*vyāpāda*),
- Craving for existence (*rūpa-rāga*),

- Craving for non-existence (*arūpa-rāga*),
- Pride in self (*māna*),
- Restlessness or distraction (*uddhacca*), and
- Ignorance (*avijjā*).

Thus, in regard to spiritual training, no difference exists between Southern Buddhism and Northern Buddhism, although the concepts used to describe this process may vary, such as the expansion of the notion “spiritual end” and “saving other sentient beings” in the ten stages of Mahāyāna Bodhisattva development. Briefly, although descriptions of the way to enlightenment may be diverse, the content of spiritual liberation always remains the same—namely, to attain enlightenment, an Arhat or a Bodhisattva must completely delete the ten fetters of defilement.

Process of enlightenment and liberation of a Holy one in Buddhism

Four stages of attainment	Fetters must be deleted	Cycle of samsāra
Stream-enterer (<i>Sotāpana</i>)	Belief in an individual self, doubt or uncertainty about the Dharma, attachment to rites and rituals	At most, seven more births in either humans or devas (like heaven).
One-returner (<i>Sakadāgāmi</i>)	Weakened sensual desire and hatred	One more birth in the sense-sphere realm.
None-returner (<i>Anāgāmi</i>)	Completely deleted first five fetters: belief in an individual self, doubt or uncertainty about the Dharma, attachment to rites and rituals, sensual desire and hatred.	Spontaneous birth in the form realm.
Complete liberation (<i>Arhat</i>)	Completely deleted last five fetters: craving for existence, craving for non-existence, pride in self, restlessness or distraction, and ignorance.	None. Complete liberation from the world of samsāra.

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14. Can you explain more about the ten stages of Mahāyāna Bodhisattva development?

The ten stages of Mahāyāna Bodhisattva development are:

- Pramudita*: joyfulness at having overcome the afflictions and defilements and beginning to enter the Buddha's path;
- Vimalā*: liberation from all possible defilements, the stage of purity;
- *Prabhākari*: the stage of developing wisdom;
- Arcismati*: the stage of shining wisdom;
- Sudurjayā*: the stage of overcoming the utmost or subtle defilements;
- Abhimukhi*: the stage of attaining transcendent wisdom;
- Dūramgamā*: the stage of transcending all notion of self in order to save others;
- Acalā*: the stage of not falling back into impurity;
- Sādhumati*: the stage of skillful wisdom and attained ten powers; and
- Dharmamega*: the stage of absolute liberation and freedom.

A holy one practices ten pāramitās (perfections) in connection to the ten stages above: dāna/charity; sīla/purity or morality; ksanti/patience; virya/progress; dhyāna/meditation; prajñā/wisdom; upaya/skillful means; pranidana/vows; bala/power; and jñāna/true knowledge.

15. Regarding the Buddhist ideal model for practitioners, is there any difference between Southern Buddhism and Northern Buddhism?

This is an interesting question. We know that, in all aspects of humans, the *ideal model* plays an important role in forming a certain personality and lifestyle for each individual, regardless of religion or non-religion. Likewise, the ideal models for practitioners between primitive Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism vary.

In primitive Buddhism, the ideal model is the very image of an *Arhat*, a Holy one who has given up all impurities of the personal life, living in awakening and blissfulness, and teaching and helping others accordingly. However, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the ideal model is the embodiment of a Bodhisattva, who always carries within him- or herself the vow to save others throughout the journey of spiritual training. The ideal of saving others or doing beneficial to all others sentient beings here is a spiritual mission with which a Bodhisattva vows to consecrate his or her life in the spiritual journey, from first vow to the day of becoming a Buddha. Consequently, in order to carry out the vows of saving others, a Bodhisattva endlessly practices and cultivates his or her wisdom and compassion. It is important to note that wisdom and compassion are the true career of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. Furthermore, to fulfill the ideal of saving others, a Bodhisattva must make a vow to enter the mundane world in thousands of worldly forms in order to benefit the world, which is why Mahāyāna Buddhism always modernizes *the way of entrance* to any practical life in order to benefit it. The way of practicing the Bodhisattva's vows consists of the ten pāramitās previously addressed (see question 14), which definitely bears the same traditional characteristics of primitive Buddhism.

16. How many major systems of philosophy exist in Buddhism?

As we have seen, several periods of thoughts emerged in the process of Buddhist development. At least two major systems of thoughts, roughly speaking, closely related to what we call the primitive Buddhism and the developed Buddhism. The first is the *Buddhist history of thoughts*, as defined by Buddhologists such as academician Theodor Stcherbatsky (1866-1942); this division relied on different periods in the whole process of development of Buddhist thoughts. Second is the *history of thoughts of Buddhist Schools*, which includes several Buddhist schools; thus, you need to have time to study doctrines of each single school (e.g., Zen, Pure Land, or Tendai). Buddhism in China, for example, includes at least ten different schools, and each school also has its own system of thoughts and exclusive methods of practice.

We may generally divide the first major system, the *Buddhist history of thoughts*, into two major categories based on history: a) Buddhist thoughts in the primitive period and b) Buddhist thoughts in the periods of development. Buddhist thoughts in the primitive period were established on the foundational teachings of Dependent Origination and non-self, which were taught directly by the Buddha after his attainment of ultimate enlightenment. The central content of these teachings explain that all existences (dharmas) in the three worlds—senses-sphere realm, fine form realm, and formless realm³— are nothing but the products of inter-beings from multi-conditions. They appear in either cosmic mode (e.g., institution, existence, transformation, and destruction) or in the flux of mental transformation (e.g., birth, being, alteration, and death). In this way, all things—both the physical and the mental—are born and die endlessly dependent on multiple conditions in the cycle of samsāra. All that is present through this Law of Dependent Origination is, therefore, impermanent, ever-changing, and without any immortal entity that is independent and perpetual whatsoever. This is the truth of reality through which the Buddha

³ Triloka: Kārmadhātu, Rūpadhātu, and Arūpadhātu.

affirmed that “whether the Buddha appears or not, the reality of dharmas is always as such.” Based upon this fundamental teaching, the Buddhists built for themselves an appropriate view of personal life and spiritual practice: the liberated life of non-self—the end goal of the spiritual journey.

Although Buddhist thoughts in periods of development were gradually formed by various schools, two prominent systems of philosophy emerged: the Mādhyamika and the Yogācāra. Both these two philosophical systems related strictly to the primitive thought of Paticcamūpāda; however, each system has its own approach to interpretations and particular concepts. The Mādhyamika developed the doctrine of Emptiness (*Śūnyatā*), while the Yogācāra instituted the teaching of Mind-only (*Vijñāpati-mātratā*), emphasizing the concept of Ālaya (store consciousness). The doctrine of Emptiness focuses on explaining that the nature of all dharmas is emptiness of essence and that all dharmas are non-self by nature and existences are but manifestations of conditional elements. Thus, when a practitioner penetrates deeply into the realm of Emptiness, he or she simultaneously experiences the reality of the non-self. However, you should remember that the concept of Emptiness used here does not refer to any contradictory categories in the dualistic sphere, such as ‘yes’ and ‘no’ or ‘to be’ and ‘not to be.’ Rather, it indicates the state of true reality that goes beyond the world of dualism. For this reason, in the canonical languages of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the term *Emptiness* is used as a synonym for Nirvāna. In the Yogācāra philosophy, the concept of Ālaya—the most fundamental issue of this system of thought—points out that all problems of both suffering and happiness are the very outcomes of mental distinctions (*vikalpa*) between subject (*atman*) and object (*dharmā*), or between self and other. This mental distinction is the root of all afflictions, birth-death, and samsāra. Thus, in the path of spiritual training, a practitioner must cleanse all

attachments to self as it embodies what we call the ‘I’, ‘mine’, and ‘my self’ in order to return to the realm of pure mind, which is non-distinct by nature.

Based on what has been discussed here, clearly the consistency in Buddhist thoughts—whether origin or development—is that all teachings focus on purification of craving, hatred, and attachment to self in order to reach the reality of true liberation: the state of non-self or Nirvāna.

17. What is the fundamental belief in Buddhism?

Buddhists are encouraged to believe in the Triple Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—and vital teachings of the Buddha as explained in the Four Noble Truths. Put more simply, Buddhists need to believe in the basic teachings of both morality and spirituality, which extend from the Four Noble Truths such as the karmic law of causes and effects; in particular, the *Buddhists must believe in their own ability to attain enlightenment and spiritual liberation*. If you yourself do not practice and transform all negative or even evil deeds in your own life, you shall still suffer. Conversely, if you put your efforts into practicing the Dharma, your life will be happy, peaceful, and free from the bondages of sufferings, depending on your degree of practice. Briefly, these basic teachings of Buddhism help us avoid any karmic actions, cultivate good actions, and purify the mind in order to have a happy and peaceful life. Furthermore, practicing the Dharma will help us transform the current of karmic force in both this life and the afterlife.

18. What is the karmic law of causes and effects?

To be exact, *karma* and *the law of causes and effects* are two most important issues strictly connected to the life of human beings. They are also

considered to be the reason for existence for human beings in the cycle of samsāra. Literally, cause is the original force or reason that produces a direct effect and effect is a mature consequence created by its causes. You can understand the relationship of causes and effects through the correlations of an action, such as when you eat, your stomach is full, or when stay up late, you feel sleepy. Causes and effects are the compensational law, working objectively and correspondingly, but the actual impact is always influenced by psychological elements. Contrastingly, karma refers to a good or bad action that is created and governed by the mind. A proper name for such actions is wholesome karma or unwholesome karma. Accordingly, karma and causes and effects always connect to each other; in other words, *karma is the operation of causes and effects in which the mind always serves as the foundation for any creation and destruction*. Therefore, the current of mental energy is the life of karma. Truly, a good mind produces good karma and a bad mind gives birth to bad karma. Hence, in order to have a life of peace and happiness, you should cultivate the wholesome seeds through your three personal karmas and develop the pure and bright energy of the mind. Buddhism teaches that a practitioner must always nurture and cultivate the four virtues of the sublime mind: loving kindness, compassion, joyfulness, and equanimity.

19. What are the three karmas?

The three karmas are the body, mouth, and mind or the physical, verbal, and mental. Body and mouth belong to the physical realm while the mind is all about psychological activities. However, it is the mind that serves as the decisive factor in creating any kind of karma (*Cittamātram lokam*—the world is nothing but mind.) A natural action like standing, walking, lying, or sitting cannot create karma actually, except that the action is governed by the mind.

Thus, actual karma always comes from a volitional action or an intentional action. For this reason, the Buddha divided the three karmas according to the three aspects of the physical, verbal, and mental into ten karmas:

a) Physical karmas:	Killing, stealing, and conducting sexual immorality.
b) Verbal karmas:	False speech, a double tongue, hateful speech, and slanderous speech.
c) Mental karmas:	Craving, hatred, and ignorance or false view.

These ten basic karmas are the causes that force us adrift in the ocean of samsāra, with its six realms of destination.

20. What does Samsāra mean in Buddhism and how does it work?

In Sanskrit, samsāra means being born, dying, and being reborn in accordance with the continuous karmic circulation, like a wheel circulating endlessly. Thus, samsāra is the cycle of life. However, the concept of samsāra in Buddhism describes the flowing of a sentient being in the three worlds (senses-sphere realm, fine form realm, and formless realm) and six destinations (heavens, human beings, titans, hells, hungry ghosts, and animal kingdom). According to primitive Buddhism, only an enlightened one (such as the Buddha or an *Arhat*) can truly be liberated from the cycle of samsāra. Meanwhile, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Bodhisattvas always vows to return to the world of samsāra to save all sentient beings. Therefore, there are two ways to enter the world of samsāra: a) vow to be reborn, as a Bodhisattva does voluntarily, and

b) be forced to enter a certain realm, like a human, hell, or hungry ghost, by the unwholesome karmas of each individual.

21. If Buddhism does not believe in an immortal soul, then what and who will be reborn in the cycle of samsāra?

This is an interesting question. Buddhism definitely does not accept the belief that there is an immortal and perpetual soul. As mentioned in the teaching of non-self, no permanent self or soul entity exists permanently and invariably—only the current of karmic consciousness of sentient beings flowing constantly like the running of a river. If there were an immortal and invariable soul, an animal would not be able—after cultivating wholesome karmas through multiple lives—to become a human and a human would not be able to become a Bodhisattva or even a Buddha (See Jataka Tales for more information). Here, it is the very karmic current of consciousness that continually operates and transforms itself from this life to the next life in the cycle of samsāra in which the mind of each individual is the only foundation for this operation (see question 18). Consequently, Buddhism does not accept the existence of an immortal soul, although it does accept that a *transformation of the mind* occurs throughout the journey of birth and rebirth. Until a practitioner—after a long term of spiritual training—attains sainted fruits such as Arhat, Buddha, or Bodhisattva in the eighth stage, he or she will break the cycle of samsāra. At this point of spiritual journey, the motivation of birth and rebirth belongs to the devotional vow of each Bodhisattva; it is no longer pushed by the karmic force. Speaking of problems of rebirth or samsāra, you should note that Buddhism does not use the term *soul*, but rather *mind*.

22. How can one know that he or she will be reborn in the cycle of samsāra?

This question goes beyond the ability of human knowledge because we, human beings, are not able to control the problem of birth and death in the cycle of samsāra subjectively. According to the Buddhist view, we are all adrift in the ocean of karma unknowingly and inconceivably. If you were asked “where did you come from?” you would also be puzzled in the same way; however, to the Buddha, Arhats, or Holy ones who all already possessed supernatural eyes (spiritual powers), such a question as “where did one come and where will one go?” is no longer an uncertain matter in the dark. The Buddha in Jātaka Tales told us many of his own stories of previous lives when he used to be a practitioner practicing the noble path. However, as the karmic law of causes and effects has already explained, you need not worry about where you will go after death; rather, what you need to know is how your living is and how your mind develops. Are you cultivating good or bad karmas? The karmic law of causes and effects will itself manage all the remaining matters of your life. However, if you are a practitioner, you may make a devotional vow for your next rebirth depending on your school of practice. For example, a practitioner in Pure Land always wishes to be reborn in the Western Paradise of the Amitāba Buddha after his or her life ends.

23. Buddhist mental formations include such concepts as the mind, thought, and consciousness. How different they are?

In primitive Buddhism, the three terms *mind*, *thought*, and *consciousness* are used interchangeably according to various statuses, despite the fact that these three terms all indicate the entire activities of the mental formations. In

developed Buddhism, particularly in the doctrine of Mind-only (*Vijñapati-mātratā*) of Yogācāra philosophy, the system of mental activities consists of eight consciousnesses categorized as follows:

a) Thought consciousness (*pravṛtti-vijñāna*): This senses-sphere includes six sense organs: consciousness of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and thought.

b) Thinking consciousness (*mano-mana-vijñāna*): This consciousness's function serves as the intermediary connection between the six senses organs and the mind deep inside; it is also referred to as the seventh consciousness.

c) Store consciousness (*ālaya*): This serves as the store that contains all kinds of conceptual seeds (experiential data) of the past and present; it is also named the eighth consciousness.

Together these three consciousnesses are generally called the mind; they all work together in order to produce an actual experience through a process of psychological processing. For instance, when your eyes see a flower, the notion of that flower will be transferred into the store consciousness—where images of all kinds of flowers of the past experience have been stored—through the thinking consciousness in order to process and produce the actual recognition that it is a rose. Subsequently, this rose's characteristics and smells, etc., all must go through a process of mutual recognition so until you are finally able to create an actual experience of the rose that you have just seen.

Briefly, mind, thought, and consciousness are the mental aggregate of human psychological activity. This mental aggregate exists as a whole; it cannot work effectively if we divided it into separate parts. However, you can clarify the basic function of each characteristic of this mental aggregate. The mind is the place where all conceptual data are stored, thought is the mental energy of creation, and consciousness is the ability of recognition and distinction. Suffering or happiness is created by the operation of the mind,

thought, and consciousness; all other realms of sentient beings are also the productions of mind-making.

24. If there is no existence of God, then on what condition is the existence of heaven and hell based?

Everything is mind-made, but you should never use the impure mind of the human realm to think about the blissfulness and happiness of other realms, such as heavens (states of *devas*) or the Pure Land. Doing so would be an impossible task. In much the same way, you cannot truly understand the suffering of lower realms (compared to human realm), such as hell, hungry ghosts, and animal kingdom. However, to a certain extent or in particular cases, you may somewhat experience the suffering and happiness of other realms when your mind is corresponding to those realms. For instance, when nearing the peak of anger, you may feel and experience the suffering of realms that are full of anger. When your mind is no longer infected or disturbed by craving, hatred, and ill-will, you will experience the taste of blissfulness and freedom in the happy realms. According to Buddhist teachings, celestial beings (*devas*) in the realm of fine-form (heavens) live in the blissfulness of their own minds, and all conveniences in those heavens are created by their own minds. However, when their own merits of heaven have faded, those celestial beings will be reborn (falling into) in lower realms. If they put their efforts into practicing the Dharma, they will certainly be free from the cycle of samsāra and attain enlightenment. Similarly, sentient beings in unhappy realms experience the suffering also made up from their minds; however, beings in unhappy realms can still remain free of those states if they have a chance to generate the righteous mind of goodness.

25. If all come from the mind, can a non-Buddhist practice the Buddhist doctrine?

Everyone—Buddhist or non-Buddhist—can practice the noble Dharma taught by the Buddha equally. Certainly, those who follow the way of practicing Dharma precisely and sincerely will be able to change and transform their karmic life of defilements, at least in the present being. For those who are non-Buddhists, their practice in the Buddhist way needs to be guided by a monk, nun, or any layperson who has some experience in terms of spiritual training. As such, you are encouraged to study and examine the Buddhist teachings under the guidance of a master. The practice of Dharma will bring to us actual effects whenever our mental current of greed, hatred, self-attachment, and self-pride begin to change in the tendency of cooling down. If you just study the Dharma or even have a great knowledge of Dharma, but those mental afflictions do not decrease or weaken, you have not practiced the Dharma and never exercised any mental improvement practically.

26. What is the primary core of spiritual practice in Buddhism?

The primary core of spiritual practice in Buddhism—regardless of any school, whether traditional or modern—is to develop ethics (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). First, to practice ethics or moral disciplines is to prevent and avoid unwholesome deeds as well as cultivate human dignity, especially to restrain the ability of making evil deeds potentially hidden in the mind. In other words, developing Sīla is training oneself for a life of ethics, dignity, and noble virtues. Second, practice meditation is the way by which to purify all affections and afflictions in the mind and make it pure, peaceful, and bright. Finally, practicing wisdom means developing the right view,

recognizing truths, understanding the nature of life, and attaining enlightenment. These three aspects of this path of practice always supplement one another. For example, the one who lives a life of high ethical discipline and noble virtues will have a peaceful mind, self-confidence, and fearlessness. The one who develops meditation will have a quiet, calm, and blissful mind. The one who develops wisdom will have a bright, smart, and tranquil mind, always and everywhere. You may gain various results of your mental training, according to the various degrees of practice. Buddhism calls these three aspects of practice the pure studies (*anāsrava*) of deliverance from the passion stream—in other words, you no longer fall into the stream of samsāra, truly liberating you from all impurities of the mundane world.

27. Is there any difference in the manner of practice of Buddhism and that of other religions?

In regards to the manner of spiritual practice, other religions focus on prayers as a way of connecting to the Holy existence; Buddhist practice focuses on developing (*bhāvanā*) the three studies (ethical disciplines, meditation, and wisdom), although prayers are still sometimes applied in the process of practice. The term *bhāvanā* (development) in Buddhism has a special meaning that includes two parts: a) renunciation of unwholesome deeds and b) development of noble virtues such as loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, and performances of pāramitās (see question 14). If you focus on the first part—namely, the renunciation of unwholesome deeds—you are only stopping at the point of not doing evil; at such a point, you have actually not undertaken any spiritual training. For example, an addict who drinks alcohol for many years becomes seriously sick; being aware of his illness, he stops drinking. Such an action means he is just giving up his habit of alcoholic

addiction. The remaining matter with which he has to deal is healing the illness in his body, simultaneously developing his health as well as his wholesome life both physically and mentally. Similarly, in Buddhist practice, you have to do both: quit all evil deeds you have done and cultivate the good deeds you have not done. In brief, the fundamental Buddhist practice is not to do evil, to do good, and to purify one's mind through the noble path of ethical disciplines, meditation, and wisdom.

28. Does one benefit if he practices just one of the three pure studies: moral discipline, meditation, or wisdom?

You should keep in mind that the three pure studies—ethical discipline, meditation, and wisdom—are three facets (more precisely, three elementary characteristics) of spiritual practice in Buddhism. They are considered a *group quality* working mutually and cooperatively. For instance, when practicing ethical disciplines, your mind will be pure, peaceful, fearless, and free from worry and sorrow, which is all about the quality of meditation or concentration. These pure qualities of course will lead you to a higher level of meditation. Furthermore, based on this pure mind, you will be able to set yourself up for the right view and bright choice, guiding you in everyday activities. In this way, it is all about the quality of wisdom. Ethical discipline, meditation, and wisdom are, therefore, a group quality always working together. For example, how can a bank robber be peaceful and tranquil while having true wisdom in life and truths when his mind is full of greed, hatred, and ill will? Accordingly, the greater ethical virtue is, the higher meditation develops and the brighter wisdom will be. Thus, you need not to divide this group of qualities into separate parts in the path of spiritual practice.

29. How can a person become a Buddhist?

Becoming an actual Buddhist, you must take refuge in the Triple Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Buddha is the Full Enlightened One, who had transcended himself beyond the world of defilements (*kleśa*) and samsāra. Dharma is the teachings of the Buddha, the noble path to enlightenment. Sangha is the Buddhist community that lives in harmony and awareness, such as monks and nuns, following the path of the Buddha. However, the Triple Jewels can be understood in various ways, as described in the following table.

Classification	Buddha	Dharma	Sangha
History	The Sakyamuni Buddha	The teachings of the Buddha collected in the Triple Basket (Tripitaka).	Community of monastic persons, including Holy Ones and monks and nuns.
Definition	An Enlightened One	The noble path leading to enlightenment and ultimate liberation.	Those spiritual practitioners who live in awareness, harmony, and purity.
Symbols	Images of the Buddha or Buddhas	The Triple Basket (Tripitaka) or Buddhist scriptures, texts of ethical disciplines (Vinaya), and commentaries (Abhidharmas).	Buddhist monks and nuns.
Philosophy	The Buddhahood or Buddha nature is always available in every	The truth of enlightenment.	The essence of harmony, awareness, and purity in every

	person.		person.
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The basic ethical discipline of a Buddhist is also the foundation of Buddhist ethics, including five precepts: not to kill, not to steal, not to involve in sexual immorality, not to lie, and not to use intoxicants. Being a Buddhist, you must undertake at least one of the five precepts. The more fully you practice the precept, the higher your ethical virtues develop, and the greater dignity you will seek to achieve.

30. Why must a person take refuge in the Triple Jewels to become a Buddhist?

If you do not have a sincere desire to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha (Triple Jewels), it means that your decision and devotion are not strong enough for you to sow the Bodhi seed (seed of enlightenment) in your own mind. In fact, you may ethically perform various wholesome deeds in a very natural way directed by your own congenital temperament. However, if an outburst of rage and ill will suddenly emerges in your mind, it may whirl you, sweeping you impotently into the darkness of your own karmic habits. In such a situation, you may be engulfed in sin after sin, for at this point of life, you still have no *coast of enlightenment* as your own spiritual refuge or shelter. Once you have taken refuge in the Triple Jewels, you have sown a seed of Bodhi in your field of mind. If you always take good care of your own Bodhi tree by practicing the Dharma, you are creating for yourself *an invisible current of protective energy* and bearing that current of energy with you throughout life. Thus, even when the mental storm of greed, hatred, and ill will emerges in your life and disturbs your inner peace, this invisible energy of protection provides the very spiritual shelter for you. It will, at a certain point in your life,

regenerate the Bodhi seed that latently slept in the bottom of your mind—the very enlightened energy you once sowed with all sincerity and devotion. Even if—after taking refuge in the Triple Jewels—you take no care of your Bodhi seed neglectfully or completely, that enlightened seed still sleeps in your mind soundly; it may be awakened at anytime in the right conditions, like an old friend coming back with earnest and love. Now, in the light and love of that spiritual regeneration, you are able to continue to nurture the enlightened source of your own Bodhi tree that was once forgotten. This is why a Buddhist needs to take refuge in the Triple Jewels.

31. Can a person attain enlightenment and liberation if he just practices the Dharma without taking refuge?

Yes, but it is really rare! The Buddha Sakyamuni is the one in history who attained enlightenment based on his self-training, self-discovery, and self-realization; his personal efforts cut off all roots of suffering. He is honored for his attainment of full enlightenment by self-realization of truths. Furthermore, the Buddha's first five Holy disciples as well as other Holy ones in the Buddha's time became enlightened or Arhat not by taking refuge, but by listening to the Dharma directly taught by the Buddha. Likewise, Prateyka-Buddha(s) achieve enlightenment through their own realization of the truth of Dependent Origination. Generally, achieving enlightenment without taking refuge in the Triple Jewels is really rare in the realm of human beings, particularly an ordinary person. You should keep in mind that taking refuge in the Triple Jewels is the first step in becoming an actual Buddhist. However, to be enlightened and liberated or not depends on the ability of your spiritual training. In fact, after taking refuge, a Buddhist must practice the Dharma in a step-by-step manner, such as ethical disciplines, six Pāramitās, or four all-

embracing virtues (*Catuh-samgraha-vastu*), in order to have a peaceful and happy life.

32. Is the moral discipline of Buddhism similar to or different from that of other religions?

Buddhist ethics and other religions have some common features and some differences. The common features belong to *the human base of morality and ethics* relating directly to the life of humanity. Meanwhile, the differences between the Buddhist moral disciplines and that of other religions relate to the *path of enlightenment and spiritual liberation*. Thus, we should be concerned about two aspects:

a) *Human base of morality and ethics*: The Buddhist ethics are based on the five precepts (not killing or doing harm to the life of humans and sentient beings, not stealing things that are not given, not conducting sexual immorality, not lying in order to do harm to self or others, and not using intoxicants that weaken the mind). Christianity teaches ten commandments (worship God, not make yourself an idol, not make false use of the name of God, keep the Sabbath holy, honor and respect your parents, not murder, not commit adultery, not steal, not bear false witness against your neighbor, not covet your neighbor's wife, and not covet things that belong to others). Likewise, Islam teaches some fundamental creeds, such as worshipping the one and only Allah, honoring and respecting your parents, respecting the rights of others, treating all people fairly, giving to and helping the poor, not killing humans except in holy wars, not committing adultery, taking care of orphans and the poor, and being sincere in all of your intentions. In addition, Islam includes some conductive regulations, such as visiting Mecca at least once in your life, not eating pork,

and not drinking alcohol. The issues mentioned here cover the common interests of all religions relating to the human ground of morality and ethics.

b) *Buddhist ethics—the path leading to enlightenment and spiritual liberation*: The five precepts (ethical disciplines) in Buddhism fully associated with the three personal karmas—the physical, verbal, and mental—are physical karmas (killing, stealing, and conducting sexual immorality), verbal karmas (false speech, a doubting tongue, hateful speech, and slanderous speech), and mental karmas (craving, hatred, and ignorance or false view). Therefore, if you are able to keep your three karmas completely pure, you yourself will enter the palace of Nirvāna, truly experiencing the life of true liberation and enlightenment. However, the mental karma—the third one—is here the most fundamental element that governs and drives the other two karmas, the physical and verbal (see question 19). Thus, building an actual right view for your own life is the key that opens the door to spiritual liberation. In Buddhist ethical disciplines, as previously discussed, no precept requires a practitioner to honor or worship a personal God; rather, all that is focused on the spiritual training of personal purification of the three karmas. This is the very difference between the Buddhist precepts and the creeds of other religions. In addition to these five basic precepts, Buddhism also has a special system of moral code—that is more rigorous—for monastic persons (the moral disciplines for Holy ones such as Srāvakas and Bodhisattvas). However, to lay Buddhists, in addition to taking the five basic precepts, you need to practice four virtues of *all-embracing* and six deeds of Pāramitās in order to develop the wholesome roots (wholesome karmas) and nurture the Bodhi mind for your own spiritual life.

33. What are the four all-embracing virtues (Catuh-samgraha-vastu)?

The four all-embracing virtues are four actions concentrating on helping others achieve a true life of peace, happiness, and spiritual liberation. Thus, these four actions are named four all-embracing virtues (*Catuh-samgraha-vastu*) for these actions have the ability to transform others and help them return to the truth of life free from defilements and sufferings. The four all-embracing virtues consist of donation, affectionate speech, the conduction of profit to others, and cooperation with and adaptation of others. The following table describes the general meaning of these four virtues.

Samgraha-vastu	Definition	Categories	Purposes
Donation	Charitable acts of giving, dedicating, or offering to others.	(a) Materials, (b) True knowledge (Dharma donation), and (c) Security (fearlessness, bestowing of confidence)	Sharing sufferings of others and helping them return to the good and happy life.
Affectionate speech	Speeches of kindness, sympathy, and compassion.	True and honest speeches in the right time, right way, and with encouragement.	Encouraging others to live wholesomely and ethically, avoiding doing evil, doing good, and purifying the mind.
Conduct beneficial to others	Doing beneficial acts for others or serving others with kindness and compassion.	Conducting good deeds through personal body, speech, and thought.	Helping others benefit along the path of spiritual practice.
Cooperation with and adaptation of others	Cooperating with others practically in order to help them return to the noble path of	Applying all <i>skillful means</i> of personal ability to help others.	Helping others return to the noble path of spiritual liberation and

34. What are the deeds of pāramita (transcendental perfection)?

Pāramita is characteristic of transcendent perfection that goes beyond the world of dualism, such as attachment to the self and others or the inner discrimination between atman and dharma. This transcendent perfection is also known as the *spirit* of non-distinction and non-attachment. For instance, you give a donation to someone; however, at the back of your mind, you are still entangled in the thinking of that donation, identifying the giver and the receiver. Donations to others in such a manner result in *attachment to the performance of giving*—namely, giving in the bondage of the self and others. It is absolutely not giving from your true heart of compassion without any strings attached. Until you give a gift to someone without any attachment to the notion of the giver, the receiver, or the gift, you cannot truly reach the state of non-attachment to the act of giving—that is, the true giving free from the three-wheeled condition of giver, receiver, and gift. Therefore, practicing the deeds of Pāramita is but training renunciations of self-attachment and distinction. The Pāramita deeds include six factors: giving, practicing ethical disciplines, right efforts, patience, meditation, and wisdom.

35. What is the Bodhi mind (Bodhicitta)?

The Bodhi-mind (*Bodhicitta*) in Sanskrit is the mind (*citta*) of awakening (*bodhi*), also named the *enlightened mind*, the mind orientating toward enlightenment, or the mind that tranquilly resides in the state of awakening. However, the Bodhi-mind is in Buddhist thought understood through two basic

aspects: the conventional—namely, the daily practice of ethics, virtues, and merits in order to achieve the noble happiness and peace in practical life—and the absolute—namely, the full awakening of the Perfect Wisdom, becoming a Holy one, a Bodhisattva, or a Buddha. Thus, the Bodhi mind is the heart of Buddhism, the foundation for the whole process of spiritual training of Buddhist practitioners. Accordingly, if a person does not nurture and take good care of the Bodhi mind, his own Buddhahood will be buried by karmic defilements. You should absolutely keep in mind that the Bodhi mind is the Buddha nature within each person, which is the very seed (potentiality) of true happiness and enlightenment. Traditional Buddhism includes several practices to help you develop the Bodhi mind, including 37 conditions leading to Bodhi (*Bodhipaksika*); four foundations of mindfulness, four right efforts, four steps towards supernatural powers, five spiritual faculties and their five powers, seven branches of enlightenment, and the eightfold noble path.

36. What are the four foundations of mindfulness?

The four foundations of mindfulness (*smṛti-upasthāna*) are the ground of practicing meditation. These four foundations are also known as four themes of mindfulness (*smṛti*) in the process of meditating. They are body, feeling, mind, and the mind and mind’s objects. The following table categorizes the position and functions of these four foundations of mindfulness.

Four themes	Categories	Meanings	Purpose
Body	The entire physical body including the inside and the outside.	Meditate on the body in order to realize its true nature of impermanence and impurity.	Leaving afar or renunciation of the cravings of the senses-sphere realm, fine form realm, and

			formless realm.
Feelings	Feelings of pleasantness, pain, and neutral.	Meditate on the feelings in order to clearly see that they are actually conditions (foods) of the mind.	Cutting off the roots of all kinds of cravings.
The mind	The current of mental energy, which is endlessly flowing.	Meditate on the mind in order to recognize its operation and manifestations through various kinds of thoughts, such as greed, hatred, ill will, self-pride, self-attachment, and doubt.	Removing all kinds of attachment, false views of self in order to reach pure states and develop wisdom.
The mind and mind's objects	All kinds of form (mental and physical), sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and objects of the mind (all things recognized by the mind).	Meditate on form or existing being in order to see its status of changing, such as institution, existence, deterioration, and destruction.	Attaining pure wisdom, blissfulness, and ultimate liberation.

37. What are the four right efforts (catvāri prahāṇāni)?

The right efforts are devotional endeavors toward virtuous life in order to cut off the defiled roots and cultivate wholesome roots in the field of the mind. There are four right efforts with which a practitioner must train for himself on the way of spiritual development: a) the effort to discard all evil deeds that are already done so as not to do it again; b) the effort to prevent evil

deeds that have yet to arise; c) the effort to maintain and promote the further growth of good deeds that have already arisen; and d) the effort to generate and develop unborn good deeds.

38. What are the four supernatural powers (*rddhipāda*)?

The four supernatural powers are four special powers of the pure mind leading to concentration (*samādhi*) and/or working in concentration independent of any ordinary or natural law. They are also known as the four exclusive characteristics of meditation (*dhyāna*). These four powers are: a) the desire of intense concentration (*chanda-rddhi-pāda*)—strong devotion of self-purification that creates extensive concentration during the time of meditation; b) persevering energy or intensified effort (*Vīrya-rddhi-pāda*) that creates the power of concentration (*samādhibala*) in meditation; c) the powerful mind in the stage of freedom from all defilements (*citta-rddhi-pāda*) in meditation; and d) the power of intense observation (*mimāṃsā-rddhi-pāda*) in meditation. When a practitioner attains these four special powers in meditation, he or she perfectly achieves the four supernatural powers of meditation.

39. What are the five spiritual faculties (*pañcānām indriyāṇām*) and its five powers (*pañcānāṇi balānām*)?

The five spiritual faculties are five fundamental agents upon which you may develop your state of spirituality, including belief, persevering effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. The five powers are the five mental forces that arise from the above five spiritual faculties: powers of belief, persevering effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. In the process of spiritual training, you should develop all five faculties because they are

mutually incorporated with one another. For instance, if you have a strong belief in what you are doing, you are then able to put all your efforts into doing it so that you may reach the end goal. In addition, when your effort is directed in the principle of mindfulness, you may generate for yourself an inner source of powerful concentration and wisdom. All Buddhist schools of practice must always consist of these five faculties and their five corresponding powers. The five spiritual faculties differ from the five physical organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body.)

40. What are the seven branches of enlightenment (saptabodhyanga)?

The seven branches of enlightenment are seven elements in the state of awakening or seven factors of a peaceful and liberated life of enlightenment. They consist of mindfulness (*smṛti*), investigation of dharma (*dharma-pravicaya-sambhodyanga*), persevering effort (*vīriya*), rapture (*prīti*), calmness (*prasrabidhi*), concentration (*samādhi*), and equanimity (*upeksā*). If you develop these seven characteristics to the perfect degree, you will attain the blissfulness of enlightenment and liberation.

41. What is the noble eightfold path?

The noble eightfold path is the Holy path to enlightenment; it includes eight branches: a) right view (*samyak-dṛṣṭi*), the view that is always in accordance with the truth; b) right thought (*samyak-saṃkalpa*), the thinking or intention that is accordance with the truth, leading to the virtuous life of true peace and happiness; c) right speech (*samyak-vāc*), the speech of truth that is in accordance with Dharma; d) right action (*samyak-karmānta*), doing good deeds; e) right livelihood (*samyak-ājīva*), the noble life of goodness, virtue, and

ethics; f) right effort (*samyak-vyāyāma*), diligence in practicing ethical disciplines, meditation, and wisdom; g) right mindfulness (*samyak-smṛti*), an action with attention, awareness, and alertness; and h) right concentration (*samyak-samādhi*), the concentration or meditation that leads to the renunciation of craving, hatred, ill will, self-attachment, etc. The eightfold noble path is the guideline for spiritual practice in the Buddhist life. Each branch of the eightfold path works with the others mutually. Thus, you can divide the eightfold path into the pattern of the three pure studies, as follows:

Prajñā (wisdom)	Right view and right thought
Śīla (ethical discipline)	Right speech, right action, and right livelihood
Samādhi (meditation)	Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration

The term *right (samyak)* always stands in front of each branch to remind us of the difference between right and wrong. For instance, the right view (non-attachment to the self) differs from the wrong view (attachment to the self and other); the right livelihood (good life) differs from the wrong livelihood (evil life).

42. Is there any plain and simple teaching that can be remembered most easily?

The Dharma that can be remembered most easily was taught by the Buddha:

- Not to do evil,
- To do good,
- To purify one's mind,

This is the teaching of the Buddhas (*Dhammapada.183*).

43. Why do we eat vegetarian foods?

Maintaining a vegetarian diet has become increasingly popular for several reasons, such as improving health, controlling sexual desire, or protecting animals and environments. Eating vegetarian foods means not eating the meat of any animal. The aim of eating vegetarian foods in Buddhism is to purify your three karmas, particularly the karma of killing sentient beings either directly or indirectly. Refraining from meat is also one way to develop your compassion. As a lay Buddhist, you are not prohibited from eating meat, but you are encouraged not to do so either periodically or permanently.

44. Can a person become a Buddha by eating purely vegetarian foods, and how is vegetarianism related to spiritual practice?

No one in history has ever become a Buddha simply by eating vegetarian foods. You should keep in mind that eating vegetarian foods is one way to support your practice of personal purification, both physically and mentally. However, achieving the life awakening always comprises the three pure studies: ethical disciplines, meditation, and wisdom.

45. Does a Buddhist break the precept of not killing when he eats meat?

By eating meat, you may commit the first precept (not killing) in three specific cases: a) you yourself kill an animal to make food; b) you order other persons to kill an animal to make food for you; and/or c) you are satisfied by seeing other persons kill an animal to make food for you. In these three cases,

the first one directly commits killing while the last two are considered indirectly breaking the precept.

46. What does repentance (Ksamayati) mean in Buddhist rites?

“Repentance” in Sanskrit is *Ksamayati*, translated into the English as repentance and remorse. Basically, *Ksamayati* includes two crucial parts: a) repentance—to feel regret or contrition for a past sin or guiltiness—and b) remorse—to be gnawed at, be distressed by, or suffer from a sense of guilt for past wrongs for which you promise yourself not to commit such wrongs again. Briefly, when you perform repentances, you know that you sinned or were guilty; being aware of that sin, you honestly repent in your own remorse and promise that you will never commit that sin again. However, when performing a repentance ritual, your body and mind must unite together in a respectful manner (e.g., adornments by both physical and mental purification); in the state of one-pointed mind, you earnestly and sincerely pray and make a promise in front of the Triple Jewels. With your true esteemed respect, after repentance, your own body, mouth, and mind will become pure. The level of purification depends on your sincerity; the more profound your sincerity is, the more ease you will feel, regardless of whether you repent in front of the Triple Jewels or face your own conscience. The Buddha taught that two classes of noble persons can be found in the world: the first one is the person who lives nobly and never creates a sin—even a simple one; the second one is the person who has the awareness of sin and is always ready to repent whenever he commits one.

47. Can a person’s unwholesome karmas be eradicated through repentance?

What you have sown (created or done) in the past shall definitely come to fruition when its time of maturation comes. When you honestly repent by your sins properly, you may transform your own karmic force through two aspects: not creating more sin and cultivating good deeds. However, with the mind of purity, tranquility, control, and renunciation (the liberated mind), the mature effect from past deeds—whether painful or pleasant—is not powerful enough and no longer governs the life of your inner peace and tranquility. Until your mind is absolutely pure as snow, no sin remains; even the notion of remorse is removed. At this point of purification, you actually go beyond the dualistic realm of birth and death. In such a state, the problem of causes and effects is no longer discussed.

48. What is the aim of reciting the Buddhas' names?

Recitation of or meditation on the Buddhas' names is a method of cleaning impurities from the three karmas of body, mouth, and mind. When you put your heart and devotion into the chanting of Buddhas' names respectfully, you may nourish the pure and virtuous qualities for your own inner life as well as annihilate all contaminated defilements in your mind. The truth is, if your mind is pure, your world will be pure as well, regardless of where you are. For this reason, the recitation of or meditation on the Buddhas' names can be carried out in several ways. For instance, you may sincerely recite the Buddhas' names out loud or just whisper or mutter them softly. You may also simply sit down and visualize the holy images of the Buddhas or attentively and respectfully chant the Buddhas' names, bowing to the Buddhas. In fact, you may choose for yourself a specific name of either a Buddha or a Bodhisattva, such as "Namo Amitābha" (the Buddha of infinite light), "Namo Sakyamuni Buddha" (the only historical Buddha in the human world), or

“Namo Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva” (the Bodhisattva of compassion). Most importantly, you must put all of your heart into every single sound of chanting (i.e., achieve the state of one-pointed mind through the union of mind and sound) in your practice. In meditation, the body and mind must unite together; likewise, during the recitation of the Buddhas’ names, the mind and the sound of chanting—either loudly or softly—must join together. Reciting the Buddhas’ names in such a manner, your mind will gradually become pure, bright, and tranquil, naturally nurturing your virtue of purity and, of course, making your life happy and peaceful.

49. Would you please explain more about the doctrine of Pure Land School (Sukhāvati) and the practice of reciting the Buddhas’ names?

Reciting the name of the Buddha Amitābha is the principal practice of the Pure Land School (*jìngtǔ-zōng*), which has been popularly propagated in China, Japan, and Vietnam, among other Buddhist countries. The Pure Land School, pronounced *Ching Tu* (淨土) in Chinese, was first established in China by the great patriarch Hui-Yuan or Hui-Yüan (慧遠 334-416). It was then imported into Japan thanks to the great master Ennin (793-864); in the twelfth century, it was officially established in Japan by the great master Hōnen (1133-1212). In Vietnam, the practice of Pure Land was first noticed in the work of K’ang-Sen-Houci (200?-280) entitled *The Practices of the Six Pāramitā* (六度集經, Sanskrit translation: *Saḍpāramitāsaṃgrahasūtra*) around the end of the second century, continuing to develop through various phases of Buddhist development until today. The three fundamental sutras of the Pure Land School are the *Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra*, the *Amitābha-sūtra*, and the *Amitāyurdhyāna-sūtra*. The vital belief in the practice of Pure Land is that a

practitioner who recites the name of the Buddha Amitābha devotionally and respectfully will, after this body ends, be reborn in the Western Paradise of the Amitābha Buddha—the realm of *infinite longevity*, *infinite light*, and *infinite merit*. Thus, the Buddha Amitābha is both the founder of the Western Paradise and the symbol of great compassion (infinite merit), perfect wisdom (infinite light), and immortality (infinite longevity).

50. What is the core teaching of the Pure Land School?

A practitioner in the Pure Land School must always have three prerequisite virtues: belief, practice, and aspiration. Belief is a strong confidence or trust sincerely and completely placed in the Triple Jewels, especially in the path through which a person enriches his training of spirituality. Practice is the diligent recitation of or meditation on the name of Buddha Amitābha to foster and nourish one’s individual Buddha-mind. Aspiration is the devotional vow not to commit evil deeds, but rather to carry out good deeds, particularly the sincere desire of being reborn in the land of infinite blissfulness of the Buddha Amitābha after this physical body dissolves. Consequently, the core teaching of the Pure Land is mindfulness of the Buddha’s name in order to transform all impure defilements of the mind (greed, hatred, and ill will) into meritorious virtue for both this life and the afterlife. This is the meaning of “the pure mind creates the Pure Land.” Essentially, a Pure Land practitioner must establish for him- or herself an *Amitā-nature*, which is forever the spiritual life of infinite longevity, infinite light, and infinite merit.

51. What is meditation?

Meditation or Zen is the basic practice of Buddhism. The aim of meditation is to guide practitioners in returning to the life of awareness and mindfulness in order to attain the state of renunciation, purity, and enlightenment. Several techniques of meditation exist in both the primitive and development of Buddhism. However, we may generalize the characteristics of meditation through the following principal terms. Meditation (*dhyāna*) is awareness, attentiveness, and alertness while concentration (*samādhi*) is the focus of the mind on one object. Buddhist sutras offer two major methods for practicing meditation: a) breathing meditation (*Samatha* also known as *Ānāpānasati*, Skt: *ānāpānasmṛti*) and b) insight meditation (*Vipassanā*). Breathing meditation relies on breathing in and out to dispel thoughts and to control the mind; while insight meditation involves meditating on the four foundations of mindfulness: body, feeling, mind, and mind's objects (see question 36).

52. How is Ānāpānasati meditation related to vipassanā meditation?

Both methods of meditation mutually support each other, although breathing meditation focuses on mental concentration while insight meditation attends to the development of wisdom of reality through the four foundations of mindfulness. In the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, the Buddha taught how to use breaths (bring awareness to breaths) in four main themes of meditation. He also taught that, when a practitioner diligently exercises breathing meditation properly, he or she shall attain the full control of the four foundations of mindfulness and may further achieve the seven factors of enlightenment (see questions 36 & 40).

53. What are the main themes of both *Ānāpānasati* and *vipassanā* meditation?

In the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, the Buddha taught sixteen themes of meditation:

Here, a bhikkhu (monk), gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in mindful he breathes out.

(1) Breathing in long, he understands: “I breathe in long”; or breathing out long, he understands: “I am breathing out long”;

(2) Breathing in short, he understands: “I breathe in short”; or breathing out short, he understands: “I breathe out short”;

(3) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body [of breath]”; “I shall breathe out”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body [of breath].”

(4) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in tranquillizing the body formation”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out tranquillizing the body formation.”

(5) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in experiencing rapture”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out experiencing rapture.”

(6) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in experiencing pleasure”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out experiencing pleasure.”

(7) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in experiencing the mental formation”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out experiencing the mental formation.”

(8) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in tranquillizing the mental formation”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out tranquillizing the mental formation.”

(9) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in experiencing the mind”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out experiencing the mind.”

(10) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in gladdening the mind”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out gladdening the mind.”

(11) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in concentrating the mind”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out concentrating the mind.”

(12) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in liberating the mind”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out liberating the mind.”

(13) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in contemplating impermanence”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out contemplating impermanence.”

(14) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in contemplating fading away”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out contemplating fading away.”

(15) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in contemplating cessation”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out contemplating cessation.”

(16) He trains thus: “I shall breathe in contemplating relinquishment”; he trains thus: “I shall breathe out contemplating relinquishment.”

Bhikkhus, that is how mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, so that it is of great fruit and great benefit.⁴

Version of practice:

(1) “I breathe in long”; “I breathe out long.”

(2) “I breathe in short”; “I breathe out short.”

(3) “I breathe in experiencing the whole body [of breath]”; “I breathe out experiencing the whole body [of breath].”

(4) “I breathe in tranquillizing the body formation”; “I breathe out tranquillizing the body formation.”

(5) “I breathe in experiencing rapture”; “I breathe out experiencing rapture.”

(6) “I breathe in experiencing pleasure”; “I breathe out experiencing pleasure.”

⁴ Bodhi 943-944. See also the *Kāyagatāsati Sutta*, *Satipathāna Sutta*.

- (7) “I breathe in experiencing the mental formation”; “I breathe out experiencing the mental formation.”
- (8) “I breathe in tranquillizing the mental formation”; “I breathe out tranquillizing the mental formation.”
- (9) “I breathe in experiencing the mind”; “I breathe out experiencing the mind.”
- (10) “I breathe in gladdening the mind”; “I breathe out gladdening the mind.”
- (11) “I breathe in concentrating the mind”; “I breathe out concentrating the mind.”
- (12) “I breathe in liberating the mind”; “I breathe out liberating the mind.”
- (13) “I breathe in contemplating impermanence”; “I breathe out contemplating impermanence.”
- (14) “I breathe in contemplating fading away”; “I breathe out contemplating fading away.”
- (15) “I breathe in contemplating cessation”; “I breathe out contemplating cessation.”
- (16) “I breathe in contemplating relinquishment”; “I breathe out contemplating relinquishment.”

54. Regarding the breaths and breathing, how important are they in the practice of meditation?

When meditating, sense organs such as eyes or the tongue as well as other parts of the body temporarily cease to work because of the concentration of the mind, but the breaths still work naturally and even more prominently than others. Thus, you should skillfully employ your breaths, breathing in and

out, as an invisible string to tie the mind and body together, not letting the mind work in a disorderly manner in regards to the complexity of thoughts.

Controlling the breathing in and out firmly and effectively, you shall no more float with thoughts, imaginations, or illusions for which you may rule the current of your own mental operation. This is the way to purify all defilements in the mind and give rise to wisdom. Not relying on tranquilly breathing in and out, you shall not be able to remain firmly in concentration. Therefore, in the process of spiritual training, you should maintain awareness and attention along the flux of mentality following the each breath in and out. It is absolutely not meditation if you stay in one place (here) and your mind stays in another place (there), even though your breathing still works regularly and unintentionally. In meditation, a practitioner is able to reach the state of samādhi only when his breaths are ruled and controlled by his own mind.

55. Would you please explain more about the role and function of the one-pointed mind in meditation?

The state of one-pointed mind is absolutely important in practicing meditation. In order to reach that state of samādhi, you should commit yourself to a long term of practice as the reality of our mind always flows like the flux of a river. As such, if not tied to a certain object of meditation, the mind will work in a disorderly manner, aimlessly thinking—much like a monkey constantly moving from one branch to another. Hence, if your mind does not halt in tranquility, you will not be able to attain the state of the one-pointed mind that is the foundation of tranquility and liberation by nature, regardless of how long you have been involved in the meditative practice. The actual state of the one-pointed mind will bring you an inner peace that transcends all worries,

sorrows, and fears, cleanses all defilements in the mind, and renews your own life through its regeneration of the fresh and pure energy.

56. How does feeling relate to the mind?

The Buddha taught that feeling is food for the mind. Feelings nurture the mind and make the mind develop. Thus, the mind develops depending on each type of feeling (e.g., pleasant, painful, or neutral). For instance, a painful feeling makes the mind develop in the direction of pain; contrastingly, a pleasant feeling leads the mind to the tendency of joyfulness. It is important that you notice that *it is feelings that lead to various kinds of cravings*. When feelings are subjectively ruled, the mind becomes comfortable and free from all psychological urges. However, if you cannot control your feelings and you follow them by all means, your mind will be upset, compelling, and distressed—which is, in fact, the state of being burnt by desire and covetousness of either physical or mental pleasures. In reality, all kinds of feeling develop relying on the contacts between the six internal senses-bases and their corresponding six external senses-spheres (eyes/object, ears/sound, noses/smell, tongue/taste, body/touch, and mind/thought). For this reason, feeling is one of the four foundations of mindfulness.

57. Would you please explain more about insight meditation?

Vipassanā is known as insight meditation, which means *seeing things as they are* by meditating on the four foundations of mindfulness: body, feeling, mind, and existences (the mind's object). Meditating profoundly on these themes enables you to develop wisdom and experience the reality of the non-self. Practicing insight meditation, you must deeply observe each theme of

mindfulness specifically. For instance, when meditating on the body, you will start with the present body with its constituent elements (four fundamental elements: earth, water, wind, and fire), internal and external relationships, body parts, body organs, and even each simple motion of the body (e.g., altering the long-short and birth-death of each breath). Practicing insight meditation helps you realize those subtle realities that cannot be recognized or experienced by our ordinary senses. Consequently, practicing insight meditation over a long period of time will help enhance the practitioner's wisdom as well as lead him or her to discover the truth of life and perceive the true nature of reality.

58. Why does a practitioner have to meditate on the body in such a detail?

In the Buddhist view, the human body is an aggregate of mental and physical elements. Both elements depend on and support each other mutually. Observing the body and mind intensively, you will see the characteristics of impermanence and variability in the entire process of birth and death of each single cell and its real mode of life, by which you may change the direction of your mind into a life that renounces craving and attachment as well as experiences the reality of spiritual freedom. For example, in meditating on the body, you will recognize its two characteristics: the body as the present house of spirituality and the body as the store of defilements and illness. Optimistically, this body is the present house of spirituality, which embraces and fosters our base of virtuousness and noble aspirations as well as our own life of happiness. In contrast, it is this very body and its physiological needs that force us into the roaming life full of sufferings, such as hunger, thirst, heat, and cold, and pushes us to find pleasures to satisfy our own desires and urges. This is why a practitioner must perceive the operation of the five-aggregate

body clearly and precisely and try to control that operation of the body and mind by observing all their creations.

59. What are the five aggregates?

In the Buddhist view, the five aggregates (*skandhas*) are five fundamental elements or five constituent groups that produce a whole person. Five aggregates comprise both physical and mental elements. They are the foundation of senses-spheres (*āyatana*)—namely, psychophysical domains (*dhātu*). The following table briefly describes the five aggregates.

Five Aggregates	Constituent elements
Form or matter (<i>rūpa</i>), including visible and invisible things	5 elements (earth, water, wind, fire, and space) and 6 external senses-bases (form, sound, smell, taste, contact, and mind’s object)
Feeling (<i>vedāna</i>)	Pleasant, painful, and neutral relating to six internal senses-bases
Perception(<i>samjñā</i>)	Words, images, or concepts used to produce an actual experience.
Mental formations (<i>samskāra</i>)	Craving, hatred, and ill will or all kinds of karma, both wholesome and unwholesome.
Consciousness (<i>viññāna</i>)	The mind and all five senses of the body.

60. Why are the five aggregates considered the foundation for the twelve senses-bases and eighteen psychophysical domains?

When speaking of the existence of humanity and its problems, the Buddha always clearly emphasized the relations of the body and mind through

three special terms: aggregates (*skandha*), senses-bases (*āyatana*), and psychophysical domains (*dhātu*). Aggregates consist of five elements (mentioned earlier). Senses-bases include twelve kinds: six senses-organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and six external corresponding senses-spheres (form, sound, smell, taste, contact, and dharma or the mind’s object). Psychophysical domains include eighteen kinds—the sum of the twelve senses-bases plus the six kinds of consciousness of the six senses-organs. For example, an actual perception of the eyes must always have three factors in contact: the eyes (domain of the eyes’ sense), eyes’ objects (domain of the external dharma), and direct consciousness from the eyes (domain of seeing). Similarly, a whole person must always have five aggregates, twelve senses-bases, and eighteen psychological domains. The following table describes the eighteen psychological domains.

Six sense organs	+ Six external senses-bases	+Six consciousnesses
Eyes	Form	Consciousness of eyes
Ears	Sound	Consciousness of ears
Noses	Smell	Consciousness of nose
Tongue	Taste	Consciousness of tongue
Body	Touch/contact	Consciousness of body
Mind	Thought	Consciousness of the mind

61. Why are aggregates, senses-bases, and psychophysical domains analyzed in such detail?

By deeply meditating on aggregates, senses-bases, and psychophysical domains, you will readily recognize the non-self nature of all existences

without using much intellectual reasoning. For instance, the perception of the eyes comes from the contact of three elements: eyes, object, and consciousness. Depending on the specific status (vivid or vague) of both the eyes and consciousness, the object will be recognized in several ways, thereby leading to various perceptions and understandings. This is the very limit of humans' knowledge of *reality*. However, in meditating, when you are truly able to recognize the complexity of an object (i.e., multiple attributes and angles of an object), you shall concurrently reveal its characteristics of dependent origination and non-self. Consequently, by meditating on such themes of reality, you will easily give up your inherent habit of self-attachment.

62. Would you please explain the nature of the self or ego in the Buddhist view?

Usually, the self or ego is identified through three personal categories: the 'I,' 'mine,' and 'my self.' More simply, ego is an individual self to which a person attaches and assumes to be true. According to the Buddhist view, attachment to the self is the most ignorant mistake of humans as it leads humans to float adrift in the ocean of craving and hatred. All human sufferings arise from such an attachment to self. When thoroughly meditating on the five aggregates, you will clearly see that the concept of the self or ego is but an illusion stemming from the discriminations of languages. In reality, *the self or ego of a person is just a combination of the five aggregates and a name.* Without a doubt, no self has been found in the constituent establishment of the five aggregates (see question 59), as we have discussed. Indeed, what we call an *individual self* appears only when the five aggregates are given a name; as such, different names will lead to different kinds of self-attachment, such as Mr. A is different from Mr. B. For this reason, failing to meditate on or be

mindful of this problem, humans will willingly sacrifice their lives just to protect their own *name of self*—particularly when they think that their self is hurt or offended. Therefore, the more you attach to self, the more you will suffer and the more the mind will develop craving, hatred, ill will, and pride. You should keep in mind that the body of five aggregates constantly changes at every moment of life; it also does not carry within itself any individual self or ego. So why do we all work so hard just to embrace the *barren name of self* which itself does not possess any special meaning for our life of true happiness?

63. If there is no individual self or personal ego, who will suffer and who will be happy?

Because of the habitual attachment to an individual self, we always fear that we will someday become nothingness and be forgotten. The truth tells us that the life of true happiness actually does not need a self to exist—and neither does suffering! Just look at the reality of some actual experiences. For example, the most peaceful and soundest sleep is the one that is not sobbing and vacillating caused by the ‘I,’ ‘mine,’ or ‘my self.’ The happiest moments of life are those moments in which we live at ease, in peace and tranquility, without being disturbed by the ‘I,’ ‘mine,’ and ‘my self’ that always make the mind worry, fear, and hope. The greatest feeling of ease is the feeling of pure rapture in which the notion of ‘I,’ ‘mine,’ and ‘my self’ is completely absent. Contradictorily, the status of suffering will increase if it attaches to the presence of ‘I,’ ‘mine,’ and ‘my self,’ such as I lost money, I lost fame, or I lost power. Indeed, happiness and suffering are all manifestations of dependent origination, at which point you should use *the mind of non-self* to look without unnecessarily focusing on the self or its name.

64. What is non-self?

As previously discussed, non-self is one of the essential tenets of Buddhism. The central point of this doctrine can be generalized via three issues: a) rejecting the view that a powerful God exists who created and controlled the life of all sentient beings and non-sentient beings; b) not accepting the view that each individual has a soul that is immortal and invariable; and c) not accepting the view that a perpetual entity or ego exists in the conditional world of dependent origination.

In the *first issue*—rejecting the view that a powerful God exists who created and controlled the life of all sentient beings and non-sentient beings—Buddhism teaches that man and his world are created and formed by innumerable conditions in which man takes the decisive role in (creating) the life of suffering or happiness through his own karmic operation of the physical, verbal, and mental.

In the *second issue*—not accepting the view that each individual has a soul that is immortal and invariable—Buddhism advocates that the life of each sentient being is produced by each individual mind; that the mental current of each sentient being flows endlessly and is always able to change or transform (e.g., from ignorance to enlightenment). Thanks to this very ability of changing or transformation, a mind of ignorance can be awakened and, through spiritual training, that ignorant mind may become enlightened, in either one life or several lives.

In the *third issue*—not accepting the view that a perpetual entity or ego exists in the conditional world of dependent origination—Buddhism teaches that each individual person is mature through the whole process of multi-conditions, including parents, family, society, and culture. Accordingly, the

existence of a person is an aggregate of both individual karma and universal (or common) karma. Each individual always carries within him- or herself various elemental conditions that reflect the meaning of *all in one and one in all* (inter-being). No independent ego or entity can be found here in the existence of a person, except the series of dependent origination as already explained in the groups of five aggregates, twelve senses-bases, and eighteen psychophysical domains. This is core to the non-self doctrine.

65. Does the reality of the non-self relate to nirvāna?

Two perspectives are necessarily considered when speaking about the doctrine of the non-self: the spiritual practice and spiritual liberation. Regarding the former—the spiritual practice—you should profoundly speculate that the existence of a human is nothing other than an aggregate of form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. In other words, that group of aggregates is the body of both the physical and mental elements. Essentially, the innermost characteristics of this body of five aggregates do not possess any self-entity that is immortal and independent of the series of conditional elements. As such, the real nature of this body of five aggregates is emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and non-self (*anātman*). Regarding the latter—the spiritual liberation—relying on the practice of meditation, you can obtain the true state of non-self and transcend beyond the world of dualism in which all the dualistic notions between self and other are fully purified, all attachments to self or other are dropped, and all impure defilements are cleansed. Such a peacefully transcendent and tranquil state is indeed the true life of non-self, the life of nirvāna. Thus, non-self is nirvāna.

66. How can one perceive the meaning of emptiness (śūnyatā) in the presence of things?

To truly perceive emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in the presence of existences, you should contemplate the fundamental characteristics of existences, both physically and mentally, summarized in the following four terminologies: *dependent origination, false name, emptiness, and middle way.*

a) Dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*): An existence (whether physical or mental) always carries within itself multiple conditions of causes and effects; in other words, it is the combination of the series of multiple conditions that gives rise to an existence. Therefore, when those series of multiple conditions are dissolved, the existence constructed from those series would be decomposed as well.

b) False name (*prajñapti*): An existence (whether physical or mental) is given a name depending on various conditions. Accordingly, when those conditions change, the name that stems from those conditions changes as well. For example, the process from a tree to its ashes includes several names used for each period of time of the same material: tree, lumber, table, firewood, and ashes.

c) Emptiness (*śūnyatā*): Although an existence (whether physical or mental) is given a name depending on its functions, its own characteristics would eventually become *empty* (i.e., no independent entity in what we call the *self-nature* can be found in that existence) when those characteristics are thoroughly chemically analyzed because that existence is but the combination of multiple conditions—much the same way as hydrogen and oxygen come together to produce water.

d) The middle way (*madhyamā-pratipad*): The actual value of an existence (whether physical or mental) should be viewed through a series of correlative conditions corresponding to one another in order to avoid all extreme views such as thing(s) are existent/non-existent, ceasing/arising,

annihilation/permanence, identity/difference, appearance/disappearance. Consequently, the *middle way* is the path of transcendence beyond all attachments and leading to nirvāna.

To deeply ponder the four characteristics above, you may perceive the meaning of emptiness in the presence of existence.

67. Why it is said that the middle way is the path leading to nirvāna?

Put more simply, the middle way is the way of *medium*—namely, the way in which we do not tie our views to any extreme, such as existence/non-existence, ceasing/arising, annihilation/permanence, identity/difference, appearance/disappearance. For instance, when talking about the emptiness of all dharmas, a practitioner should not be attached to the concept of nothingness or nihilism so as to hold the view that all is nil or be excessively fond of nihilism. If attached to such a view and resigned to live with it, a practitioner would lose all his or her personal ability to develop virtuous deeds and the Bodhi mind. Contrastingly, if attached to the view that all is true and that each existence has a true self-nature that is immortal and perpetual, holding such a view, practitioners would increasingly try to maintain all the impermanent conditional elements and thus make their life more miserable and anguished. For this reason, the wise choose to go on the *middle way* free from all extreme attachments so as to reach the end of enlightenment and liberation. Just imagine a bicyclist: if he slopes too much to the right or left, the bicycle will fall to the ground and the rider would not continue his journey; however, if he keeps the balance (the middle way), he will finally reach the end. The middle way is therefore the path of releasing all attachments, leading to nirvāna.

68. How can we apply the teaching of the middle way to practical life?

Applying the “spirit” of the middle way to your journey of spiritual training is really necessary. The Buddha himself discovered the significance of the middle way after six years of ascetic practice. He taught that, just like adjusting a musical string, if we stretch the string too tense, its sound will be strident and the string is likely to break; contradictorily, if the string is too loose, it cannot produce a good sound. Only when we properly adjust it—not too tense and not too loose—will its sound be perfectly nice and easy to listen to. Similarly, when applying the “spirit” of the middle way to your life, you should not keep holding the thought that you have to leave the world for nirvāna, but what you need to do is build a life of nirvāna right here in this mundane world. In the same way, although we know that the body of five aggregates is impermanent and ephemeral, if we do not respect it and protect it appropriately, how can we train our life of spirituality in order to reach enlightenment and liberation? The metaphor of “a boat carrying passengers to the other shore” is an excellent illustration for the middle way. As a result, you need to rely on the conventional truth in order to attain the absolute truth because, without reaching the absolute truth, you are not able to *live a life of nirvāna* in the profane world. That is the modus operandi of the two truths of life.

69. Would you please explain more about the two truths?

The two truths are conventional truth (*samvriti-satya*) and absolute truth (*paramārtha-satya*). The conventional truth is the truth of relativity, which refers to temporary means; the absolute truth is the truth of the end, which is forever as such. In the Buddhist sutras, these two truths are defined as the means and the end. Notably, an ordinary person can neither combine the two

truths into one nor choose one of the two as the nature of the two truths are definite not identical. If we just choose one of them, we cannot achieve the end goal of our spiritual journey. The metaphoric images of “a boat carrying passengers to the other shore,” “a handful of leaves,” and “yarn lifting the kite” are examples of the two truths. The boat is the means—i.e., the conventional truth; getting to the other shore is the end—i.e., the absolute truth. If we do not use the boat, we will not be able to get to the other shore; but when we reach the other shore, we should leave the boat behind. The two truths also remind us that we should never use ignorant knowledge full of craving, hatred, and ill will of the human realm to measure the realm of enlightened ones. If we use the ignorant mind to describe the realm of enlightenment, that realm of enlightenment will become the ignorant realm—no more and no less. Thus, we should bear in mind that what we have learned from the Buddha’s teaching or what the Buddha has taught us is just the means (conventional truth), not the end (absolute truth). Just as with nirvāna, each person should perceive him- or herself with the absolute truth because that absolute truth cannot be described by our languages.

70. Is the absolute truth identical to the realm of nirvāna?

Terminologically, nirvāna (Pali: *Nibbāna*) is a combination of the prefix ni[r]—(*ni, nis, nil*) and the root vā[na] (Pali. *vāti*); *nir* means transcending beyond, leaving off, or releasing from, and *vāna* means the passion stream of rebirth or craving. Therefore, basically, Nirvāna is the state of tranquil extinction or the cessation of suffering (*Nirodha*) of the mind, which has already transcended beyond or left off the passion stream of the three worlds (see question 13). It is the state of absolute freedom in which a practitioner experiences of the ultimate truth after having completely purified his or her

own body of both mental and physical defilements. As such, nirvāna is divided into two kinds: a) Sopadhisesa-nirvāna, which means the causes of rebirth have been fully destroyed but the physical effects of those causes still exist; thus, it is called nirvāna with residue—namely, the state in which the existence of the physical body still remains; and b) Anupadhisesa-nirvāna, or the state of complete extinction in which no existence of the physical body remains—that is, the final nirvāna without residue (when the body of a Holy One dissolves). The Lotus sutra describes the Anupadhisesa-nirvāna of the Buddha as *the fire is extinguished as the wood finally burned out*. In the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, nirvāna is Nirodha, the third truth.

71. Would you please explain more about the characteristics of nirvāna?

The *Mahāparinirvāna Sutra* noted that nirvāna has four special characteristics: a) *True Eternity*: no longer be governed or ruled by conditional elements that are impermanent and variable; b) *True Bliss*: the blissful life of the mind stream in which craving, hatred, and ill will no longer exist; c) *True Self*: different from the personal self in the dualistic realm; and d) *True Purity*: absolute purity. Nirvāna is also named as non-birth (*anutpāda*), everlastingness (*aksaya*) beyond the conditional world, and absolute freedom (*mukti*) no longer fastened to the cycle of *samsāra*.

72. Why does a Buddhist expression say that “samsāra is nirvāna”?

“*Samsāram eva nirvānam*” is an expression frequently mentioned in Mahāyāna Buddhist thoughts. The content of this saying emphasizes the work of building nirvāna in the human world; in other words, the saying encourages us to live a life of nirvāna right in this human world using this human body.

This is a warning for those who think that, to enter nirvāna, a person must leave the world of birth and death entirely. The truth tells us that the Buddha and the Buddhist Holy ones (Arhats) have lived a life of nirvāna right in this mundane world and made it beneficial to the world. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Bodhisattvas also vow to reenter the world of samsāra in order to save all sorts of sentient beings, thereby demonstrating the great heart of compassion of a Buddhist Holy one. In another aspect, you should note that we cannot reach nirvāna (the absolute truth) without samsāra (conventional truth) (see question 69) as the world of samsāra serves as the foundation through which we may experience the taste of nirvāna, as already explained in the Four Noble Truths (see questions 68-70). Put another way, nirvāna is the very blissful life of the ultimate liberation and freedom; accordingly, a practitioner who lives a life of nirvāna is completely free from the bondage of the three worlds.

73. What does nirvāna relate to in the doctrine of three Dharma Seals?

In Agama sutras, nirvāna is one of the three seals of Dharma (three special Dharma seals that identify the Buddha's teachings in the whole triple baskets), which include: a) Anicca (Skt: *anitya*): impermanent; b) Anatta (Skt: *anatman*): non-self; and c) nirvāna: free from samsāra. The aim of this Dharma summarization in the three seals of the Holy disciples is that it helps us identify precisely what is taught by the Buddha and what is not. We may briefly understand the three Dharma seals as follows:

a) *All conditional things (sankhara) are impermanent*: All volitional actions and creations of the physical and mental body as well as the natural world are impermanent. They are all products of multiple conditional elements; things will arise when the right conditional elements come together and will

decompose when those conditional elements dissolve. Thus, the nature of things always changing is said to be impermanent.

b) *All conditional things are non-self*: Since the nature of things arises from multiple conditional factors, they do not possess any self-entity that is unique and independent of the constant operation of dependent origination. Thus is the non-self of things.

c) *Nirvāna is nirodha*: In the three seals of Dharma, nirvāna is named *seal of Nirodha* (extinction of all afflictions and defilements). This seal verifies the spiritual state of absolute freedom and liberation of a practitioner. The roots of sufferings in the world of birth and death here are craving (*tanhā*); therefore, when all kinds of craving are entirely deleted, a practitioner will obtain the ultimate state of tranquil bliss of nirvāna.

In the three Dharma seals described here, the first two seals (impermanence and non-self) refer to the characteristic of conditional things; meanwhile, the last one—nirvāna—refers to the state of ultimate reality that is, by nature, non-impurity (*asamkrta*), non-birth (*anutpāda*), and superlative liberation.

74. How can an ordinary person live a life of non-self?

This is an interesting and practical question. Life in modern society always forces people to fully display each personal responsibility and duty in the correlative relations among individual, family, schools, and society. These correlative relations make the *self* of each individual; as such, the ‘I’ and ‘mine’ become excessively dominant in everyday activities. Thus, what should a lay Buddhist do in order to practice living a life of non-self? The following suggestions are very helpful for you.

Instead of living completely *by the individual self* or *for the individual self*, you should generate the thought that you are living not for yourself, but for your family, your beloved ones, or—expanding further—other sentient beings regardless of age, race, sex, or nation. As you generate such thoughts and guide your life in such a direction, you actually begin a life of altruism—namely, living for others—and for which your own life will have more self-confidence, powerful energy, and strong will in order to reach the ultimate goal of life. If any action of yours bears in itself the heart of altruism, you will truly possess the opportunity to cultivate and develop compassion, generosity, and tolerance, through which you may gradually erase the notion of self-attachment. In reality, of course, you lose nothing in directing your life for others; on the contrary, you will have more motivation for a better living. Contrastingly, when you live just for yourself—namely, for the ‘I’ and ‘mine’—you will lose the real significance of life and unintentionally ensconce the immense and marvelous life into the *frame of self* in one way or another. Living such a life is indeed entering the avenue of selfishness, which is—by its very nature—lonely, sad, anxious, and fearful. In fact, the truth tells us that if you have an altruistic heart of compassion and generosity, you will have more friends, more supports, and— following such goodness—a real chance for your achievement in life.

75. How should a selfish and egocentric person practice the Dharma?

If you are truly a person of selfishness, self-attachment, and mental intricateness, the first thing you need to do is protect your mind, your mouth, and your body carefully. Do not allow your individual karma to create more suffering to yourself or others in harmful ways. The Buddha, in the Dhammapada sutta, taught that “The wise are controlled in bodily action,

controlled in speech and controlled in thought. They are truly well-controlled” (234).

When protecting your own three karmas (body, speech, and thought), you also need to meditate on the non-self by talking to yourself either loudly or silently that “*This is not ‘I’; this is not ‘mine’, and this is not ‘my self.’*” Just by practicing talking to yourself in such a way over the long term, the energy of self-attachment will gradually cool down. It is important to note that, if you cannot change your mind, you will not be able to change your life or your world.

In addition, you should practice conducting pure merits (*anāsrāva*)—doing good deeds for others without attaching meanings such as “what I am doing?”, “for whom am I doing it?”, and “What will I get for doing that?” You should just do good to others with all your heart of sympathetic joy and happiness. To do good things without such attachments is to conduct pure merits.

76. Would you please explain the concept of “merit” in Buddhism?

The original Pali term for merit is *punna*, which means “purification”. Thus, to cultivate merit is basically to purify three karmas of the bodily, verbal, and mental aspects specifically by cleaning up craving, hatred, and ill will in the mental flux. Therefore, to cultivate merit is to control and transform craving, hatred, and ill will of the mind into the state of purity. In reality, in order to control and transform these basic defilements, the Buddha taught us skillful means such as dealing with craving or greed by conducting donation and charity, developing compassion to eradicate hatred, and training in wisdom to eliminate ill will. Based on this radical meaning, you may cultivate merit in various ways, such as giving to others, offering to the Triple Jewels, practicing ethical disciplines, diligently doing charity, meditating, chanting sutras, or

reciting the Buddhas' names and fostering the Bodhi mind. Generally, a Buddhist cultivates merits through the directions of four all-embracing virtues and six Pāramitās (see questions 33-35). Most importantly, a Buddhist should cultivate for him- or herself the pure merit of spiritual liberation.

77. What is the characteristic of 'pure merit' and that of 'impure merit'?

There are two kinds of merit: impurity and purity. Impurity-merit (*āsrāva*) is that which still adheres to the operation of causes and effects in the stream of samsāra while purity-merit (*anāsrāva*) is that which goes beyond the karmic stream of causes and effects and leads to the state of nirvāna—namely, ultimate freedom. For instance, when you conduct a merit with the mind of string attached and self-attached (meaning that, when doing a good thing, you expect a good response and consider *that good response* to be the end goal of your action) you clearly do it with an impure mind in which you still cling too much to the desire of the 'I', 'mine', and 'my self.' Therefore, if you sow the seed of impurity, you will correspondingly receive the effect of impurity. Essentially, if you conduct a good deed, but the energetic flux of *giving and paying* still exists in your mind and governs your action, you will be observed in the passion stream of samsāra for the *mental energy of giving and paying* (causes and effects) is itself the very *spiritual leakage* through which you will be born and reborn in the samsāra cycle. Meanwhile, when conducting merit with a true mind of altruism, compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, you are sowing the seed of pure merit, which leads to renunciation and liberation. The three pure studies (ethical discipline, meditation, and wisdom) are the foundation for cultivating the merit of purity.

78. What is the Buddhist view on the issue of "good and evil"?

The Buddhist view on the wholesome (good) and unwholesome (not good) is clearly defined in the teaching of karma, in which three karmas belonging to the physical, verbal, and mental are divided into two categories: ten wholesome (*kusala*) karmas and ten unwholesome (*akusala*) karmas (see the following table).

a) Physical karmas:	Killing, stealing, and conducting sexual immorality.
b) Verbal karmas:	False speech, a double tongue, hateful speech, and slanderous speech.
c) Mental karmas:	Craving, hatred, and ignorance or false view.

Committing the ten karmas above is considered not good (or evil) while not committing these ten karma and trying to save the life of others—providing help, speaking the truth in harmonious and affectionate ways, and cultivating all other virtuous deeds—are called wholesome (good) karmas. However, two important aspects regarding the Buddhist concept of *wholesomeness* should be noted: the human ground of ethics and the spiritual ground of enlightenment and liberation. Ethically, wholesomeness involves practicing the Dharma and the ten wholesome karmas; spiritually, in the noble path of enlightenment and liberation, wholesomeness is itself nirvāna and the Dharmas that lead to nirvāna, including all pure and non-dualistic Dharmas. Thus, the Buddhist concept of wholesomeness has two levels; one carries the meaning of human ethics while the other refers to the spiritual state of supra-mundane, nirvāna.

79. Why are there different viewpoints on the issue of “good and evil”?

The human world has many religions and cultures. Thus, the problems of “good and evil” are also viewed in different manners. For instance, Islamic followers do not eat pork while Hindus do not eat beef. Moreover, modern problems such as abortion and euthanasia are still unresolved subjects of controversy. However, in Buddhism, the matter of good and evil is, as previously discussed, clearly verified in the moral disciplines, spiritual practice, and virtuous deeds (see questions 76-78). In regard to such problems as abortion and euthanasia, Buddhists should use their wisdom skillfully, particularly regarding those problems that “have already been done.” You should notice that, on the way of spiritual training, the Buddha taught us to focus on the mindfulness and transformation of the suffering’s origins—that is, the core practice of Buddhism. Similarly, Buddhists should take good care of education and prepare for themselves as well as for their children before they can become pregnant instead of becoming pregnant and then debating whether to perform an abortion or not. The Buddhist teachings warn us that “*the Bodhisattvas dare to sow the seeds while humans dare to see the fruits.*” The wise always care for the fruits when they sow the seeds while human beings, because of ignorance, do not care for sowing the seeds; rather, they just fear the retribution of fruits (what they have done.)

80. What is ignorance in the Buddhist view and is a wise person like a scientist still ignorant?

The connotation of ignorance (*avidyā*) in Buddhist languages means not truly understanding or realizing the nature of the Four Noble Truths. Thus, ignorance is considered the origin of all sufferings; from ignorance, the defilements such as greed, attachment, and self-pride develop. When a

practitioner truly realizes the Holy Truths—i.e., the Four Noble Truths—his or her inner peace and blissfulness immediately arise; by perseveringly practicing the Dharma, they may reach enlightenment. To human beings, ignorance is the mind of unawareness or foolishness (*moha*), which—in misunderstanding—the so-called individual self attaches to the individual self and regards that self as something real, immortal, and perpetual. By attaching to the self, defilements and sufferings arise and force humans to fall into a cycle of the three worlds. Thus, as long as self-attachment exists, ignorance is still present in our lives. A wise person such as a modern scientist may spend his or her entire life creating extraordinary products, such as space shuttles or atom bombs, but he or she cannot create any “miracle button” that is able to turn off craving, hatred, and ill will immediately except through the practice of ethical disciplines, meditation, and wisdom to the ultimately perfect degree. Therefore, great knowledge cannot destroy ignorance, craving, and self-attachment; only by practicing the Holy Truths can a person completely eliminate ignorance and obtain ultimate enlightenment.

81. How should a person of weighty ignorance practice the Dharma?

Studying and practicing Dharma are the prerequisites for eradicating the mind of ignorance. We should study and contemplate such teachings as the Four Noble Truths, the twelve factors of Dependent Origination, the five aggregates, and the non-self profoundly and diligently in order to develop the true wisdom perceiving reality and the operation stream of life as they really are. In meditation practice, the four foundations of mindfulness are particularly necessary for helping us discover the true nature and operation of one’s own body and mind as well as its connection with the world outside. If you do not practice mindfulness, your wisdom will not develop and your spiritual training

will progress slowly. Therefore, you should practice the three pure studies (ethics, meditation, and wisdom) at the same time.

82. How should a person of weighty hatred (ill will) practice the Dharma?

If you have a lot of anger inside your mind or are easy to anger at anytime, you should be mindful and deliberate on such miserable and bitterly situations as sickness, accident, disasters, death, wars, burning houses, or floods. Mindfulness of the sufferings of these sights will help you cool the mind of envy, revenge, resentment, and jealousy. You should note that the origin of hatred is the excessive attachment to self. Accordingly, when getting angry, you are willingly doing everything to protect your sense of self—especially when you think your self or ego is offended. For instance, a person (either intentionally or unintentionally) backbites you for a few minutes, but you may keep that hatred (of being backbitten) all year long or even ten years or more. This is the long-lasting manifestation of self-attachment. It is necessary to speculate that *when you are angry, you take upon yourself the mistakes of others to punish yourself*. Indeed, despite how luxurious and beautiful of a complexion you have, how precious is the jewelry you wear, or how high class the perfume is that you wear, you become immediately ugly whenever a rage of anger arises inside your mind. Similarly, despite how rich you are and how luxurious your house is, you still suffer and imprison yourself in your own magnificent castle through your anger. Therefore, in order to eliminate the mind of hatred, you need to deeply ponder upon the dangerous and harmful anger in addition to practicing living the non-self and developing a heart of altruism.

83. How should a person of weighty craving practice the Dharma?

Craving is of different kinds, such as five mundane desires (eating, sleeping, sexuality, fame, and money) or the subtle desires in meditative states of the fine form realm and formless realm. Regarding practice, you should identify for yourself what kind of craving is most prominently in your life so that you may find an appropriate way to heal. For example, a money-grubber or a fame-seeker should think about the danger and bitterness experienced on the way to satisfy their cravings as well as contemplate the actual meaning of life. A person who always has a strong desire of sexuality should think of the nasty, impure, and loathsome stinking body. A person who excessively loves eating should think about sickness and sin (e.g., killing or stealing) that come from the passion of eating. Various ways to practice exist according to each specific case. Generally, in order to have a true life of happiness (*in the meaning wholesome karma*), you need to control your craving by living harmoniously in *contentment with reality*—this is, you should live with what you *need*, not with what you *want*.

84. How does the Buddhist concept of happiness differ from the mundane concept of happiness?

The concept of happiness is a broad topic. However, the basic difference between happiness in the Buddhist view and that of the mundane world is defined in two terms: *attachment* or *non-attachment*. Being free from all attachments, Buddhists live happily and freely in the world no matter what circumstances they encounter or how reality affects them. On the contrary, happiness of the mundane world is strictly connected to the notion of ‘I,’ ‘mine,’ and ‘my self,’ which is indeed the conflict of craving and attachment that is always silently destroying the potentiality of true happiness and pulling

you into the realm of bitter regret between gain and loss, pleasure and pain. Thus, non-attachment in the Buddhist view is true happiness.

85. What is the true career of a Buddhist?

This is an interesting question. A Buddhist is simply understood as a child of the Buddha. However, Buddhists include two classes of people: monastic persons (both male and female, like monks and nuns) and lay Buddhists (both male and female). Monastic persons do not get married or have a private family life; their main profession focuses on spiritual training. Meanwhile, lay Buddhists—like any ordinary person—get married and have children; thus, their primary concern concentrates on building a family life of happiness in the most practical sense. However, when speaking of the *true career* of a Buddhist, whether monastic or lay persons, we need to deal with or think about the real foundation of not just a flashing happiness, but a prolonged or lifelong happiness—the sort of happiness that significantly impacts both this life and the future life. Within this sense, the true career of a Buddhist is indeed nothing other than compassion and wisdom. Only with compassion can you nurture the existence of life; only with wisdom will you know how to build for yourself a life of true happiness that is secure and lasts long. In any circumstance, compassion and wisdom will always be the strong foundation for happiness; lacking these two crucial factors, you will be unable to have a true career as such. Moreover, what you try to do for happiness would be like building a castle out of sand. Compassion and wisdom are the true career of not only a Buddhist, but also of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva.

86. Do different methods of spiritual practice oppose one another?

The methods of practice are applied according to the specific person and specific situation, just as different kinds of drugs are used for different diseases. Similarly, when training your spirituality, you should choose for yourself an appropriate application as your spiritual application is the treatment that cures your own problem. The effect and efficiency of various applications serve to heal various kinds of illness. Thus, no opposition exists in the nature of different ways of practice; the only thing we should be concerned with is whether your application is appropriate and applicable or not. For instance, some persons often fall asleep when sitting still in meditation, but when reciting the Buddhas' names their minds become pure and calm. In such a case, you should continue reciting the Buddhas' names instead of sitting in meditation. Contradictorily, some persons' minds continue to move in a disorderly manner when reciting the Buddhas' names, but when sitting motionless and observing their breaths their minds gradually become peaceful and tranquil. In this case, you should keep practicing meditation instead of reciting the Buddhas' names. In addition, depending on the different situations and times, you may change the manner of practice. In reality, if you have already chosen for yourself a suitable application and enthusiastically concentrate on that, you will succeed sooner or later. Although different techniques of practice may support one another—like a dual practice of Zen and Pure Land, for example—you should not constantly change the way of practice as doing so may result in agitating your mind or not getting to the point of focus; consequently, you may lose confidence in your development of spirituality. It is important to keep in mind that all the methods of practice are means, just like different sizes of shoes are used for different feet.

87. Is there any different way of practice between young and old persons?

Because the physiological life between youth and maturity varies, the approach to spiritual practice may be applied in several different modes. Most young persons are interesting in intellectual reasoning; they like to ask questions such as why and for what? This curiosity provides them with a good chance for studying Dharma and developing both knowledge and wisdom. Mature persons should encourage the young to study Dharma as a way of looking for “a philosophy of life” for themselves as well as for their future. We should not push our children to accept religious faith as compulsory dogmas. Therefore, the young should be ethically stimulated to learn and discuss Dharma before they can begin some initial practice, such as charitable work or learning how to develop respectfulness and love for parents, teachers, friends, and others as well as learning how to live and work effectively and carry out beneficial tasks for the self and others. In particular, they should learn how to build for themselves a life of true happiness that is secure and long-lasting.

On the other hand, because their ‘time’ is shortened, the mature follow the beliefs, knowledge, and practice they already have. Almost all mature people like to practice Dharma (such as chanting sutras, reciting Buddhas’ names, or meditating), embracing their own way of living and the inner blissfulness of their spiritual world. With some background experience, the mature can practice Dharma in such a way without the need for any question or answer. As such, the mature’s manner of practice is not applicable to the young. When you see your children bowing to the Buddhas, you are very happy; however, if you do not create an opportunity for them to study Dharma, they will not understand the actual meaning of bowing to the Buddhas and someday, once they are older, they may not want to bow any more.

Generally, the spiritual application of the young emphasizes studying Dharma and exercising wholesome things while the mature focus on a deep drilling of spirituality. However, in order to fully achieve their personal

practice, both the youth and mature should develop all five spiritual faculties and their five powers (see question 39) as previously discussed.

88. How should an aged person practice the Dharma, particularly when his or her time of life is shortened?

For seniors, the path of practice should be steadily formed according to the following suggestions: a) clearly affirm the method of personal practice (e.g., Zen, Pure Land, or Tantrism) rather than simply imitating others by doing whatever they do; b) after verifying your personal path of practice, you should intensively develop it in regards to both theory and exercise; practicing under the guidance of a master is always necessary; c) make a vow so that you are able to be deeply involved in spiritual training as you are building your own spiritual home devotionally and seriously, no matter what your situation is; d) in any practice, develop all five spiritual faculties and their corresponding five powers (see question 39) until the last breath of your life; and e) last but not least, be aware that what you practice today has a great impact on your life—both this life and the future life; ignorance of this correlative karma of cause and effect will result in negligent practice and your will shall not be strong enough to reach the end goal.

89. Why should a person be aware of the future life if he or she practices being in the present?

You should carefully discriminate between the concepts of *awareness in meditation* and *awareness in the intellectual field* used in this context. The awareness of the karmic law of cause and effect (flowing through the cycle of time: past, present, and future) is the intellectual basis for spiritual practice. For

example, a person who does not believe in or is not aware of the cycle of samsāra or the karmic law of cause and effect is absolutely regarded as a non-Buddhist. Meanwhile, when practicing being in the present, if you are not aware of what you are doing but you are just concerned with or focus on the future life, you shall fall into the crazy world of illusion and imagination. Therefore, to be aware of the karmic law of cause and effect of both this life and the future life belongs to intellectual ground, which will help reinforce your will in spiritual training. Meanwhile, practicing being in the present means living in the state of *full awareness* of every single movement of reality. Being in the present does not mean that you need not be conscious of the karmic law of cause and effect. Therefore, you should not confuse these meanings.

90. How should young persons practice the Dharma?

The path of spiritual practice for the youth needs to be prepared according to the following suggestions: a) most of you should build for yourself an ideal about the life of true happiness; of course, true happiness is always established on the ground of true values and true goodness; b) in order to construct true values for one's own life, the first thing you need to do is cultivate for yourself an appropriate view of life and a strong belief in life (right view and right thinking); c) once you possess the appropriate belief and view, you need to have a shelter for your life—namely, your own *philosophy* of life; in this regard, the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path are the foundation for your practice (see questions 7 & 41); d) because life is always changing and also includes difficulties, you need to apply the teaching of the middle way and the two truths into your everyday practices (see questions 67–69); and e) finally, because the life of the youth is often governed by relative elements from family and society, the beginning of spiritual training

is developing via the diligence to do good deeds and avoid evil deeds in order to enrich the base of merit for both the present and future; however, when meeting good conditions, you should start to become deeply involved in some sort of spiritual training so that you can maintain the balance of life, reduce stress, and reinforce the life of true happiness (see questions 84 & 85).

91. How should a person who is experiencing much illness or near death practice Dharma?

This is an interesting question, and the answer depends on what you are really asking. When you know without a doubt that you do not have much “time for living,” you should take full use of it in a skillful manner to contemplate on the teaching of non-self (see questions 73–75) and painstakingly heighten your personal practice (Zen, Pure Land, or Tantrism). Old age is in fact a great opportunity for you to renew your own wills after a long period of time, year after year, wandering about in adventure, because at this point in life, the stressful hardships of life now no longer press down heavily on your shoulders. However, it is your regrets of the past and the fears of leaving the world that create the very innermost anguishes that constantly stir your mind. Thus, at this point in time, contemplating on the reality of non-self will help you renounce all inner attachments more easily because, in one way or another, you actually have experienced either wholly or partly the real nature of life that you have ever been. At the same time, the intensive mindfulness of the karmic law of cause and effect will be a helpful flux of energy that helps you regenerate your ideas of nobility and wholesome aspirations. A strong belief in the karmic law of cause and effect at this point of time will help you carry out self-repentance for any wrong or sin that you have done in the past as well as enhance the mind of wholesomeness that leads you

to develop your own forgiveness and tolerance for all intentional or unintentional obstacles that have had occurred throughout your life. Carefully training the spiritual life through mindfulness and the advancement of the wholesome mind during old age is actually the infinite happiness of a Buddhist! You should keep in mind that, according to the Buddha's teachings, you may become an angel (celestial being) in the Heavens or a holy being in the Pure Land *right after* you utter the last breath if you skillfully and devotionally practice in the last moments of life.

92. What should one do in order to extinguish his or her fear of death?

Death is a truth about which many people do not want to think or speak—even if you believe that you do not fear of death. As Buddhists, we know that death is a part of life's entire process of dependent origination of samsāra. Thus, to see the truth of death as it really is, you will not be afraid of death anymore; rather, you will be afraid of living too long in old age without death! Just think that if you lived until 200 or 300 years old—how suffering, boring, and tiresome old age would be? Similarly, when speaking about the truth of impermanence, many people hastily assume that this is a pessimistic view; in fact, it is indeed truly optimistic because impermanence always brings to our life numerous chances for transformation and alteration in the ever-changing life stream. Thanks to the law of impermanence, evil is able to transform into good or suffering may change to happiness; your present life may shift to a better direction. Death is, therefore, an indispensable fact in the constant stream of samsāra. Buddhism teaches that death is just a matter of removing an old coat while birth is putting on the new one. Therefore, there is nothing to worry about death! What needs to concern us is the state in which you should die so that you are able to really take off the old coat and put on the

new one peacefully and freely. For this reason, practicing the noble Dharma becomes the highest priority. The true practitioner is never afraid of death!

93. Loneliness is an obsession of a person when facing old age and death.

How should one practice Dharma in order to overcome this obsession?

This question is true for persons of any age. If you are not a practitioner, yes old age and death are the very obsessions of loneliness. However, if practicing Dharma properly, you are the only one who is able to enjoy the *taste of inner tranquility* with infinite blissfulness. In order to reach the state of true blissfulness and liberation, you must experience the subtle states in meditation, including the state of bliss stemming from the renunciation of senses-desires, the state of bliss stemming from the act of subsiding from thinking and pondering, the state of bliss stemming from dwelling with equanimity and awareness, and the state of bliss stemming from pure equanimity and full awareness. You may briefly understand this process of mental purification as follows: a) the *renunciation of senses-desires* involves giving up all kinds of attachment, self-attachment, and manifestations of craving, hatred, and ill will in the flux of the mind; b) the *inner tranquility* is the blissful state of the oneness of mind that arises from pure concentration by subsiding thinking and pondering; c) *pure joy* is the state of pure happiness that arises from the original source of mental purity by dwelling with equanimity and awareness; in this state, all kinds of conditional delights and sensation-ecstasies disappear; and d) *absolute purity* is the state in which all kinds of sensations—happiness or unhappiness, joy or sorrow, etc.—completely disappear; this is the final state of pure equanimity and full awareness. These processes encompass the true experience of spiritual purity that you may attain only through meditation—in other words, only by living in aloneness. Consequently, for a true practitioner, *the taste of inner tranquility* is a very noble blissfulness and unthinkable miracle. The truth is that *the taste of inner tranquility* of Holy Ones is indeed

inexplicable; it goes beyond all descriptions of human languages, as Nirvāna. Thus, to a spiritual practitioner, loneliness is a great chance for him or her to experience the noble tranquility and purity, which is definitely not an obsession, as thought by an ordinary mind.

94. How can a person overcome this obsession of old age and death if he or she is unable to appreciate the taste of inner tranquility?

Several approaches may help you overcome such obsessions. First, sincerely put all your mind in mindfulness of the recitation of the Buddhas' names as well as enthusiastically put your heart of respectfulness in taking refuge in the Triple Jewels. Let your mind-stream concentrate wholeheartedly on the union with the Triple Jewels, a Buddha, or a Bodhisattva with your deeply esteemed respect in every single breath and rhythm of your heart. Practicing in such a way, you are creating for yourself a special energy of awareness and compassion connected from your *self-power* to *other powers* of the Holy Ones. This pure energy will sweep away all obsessions and fears of loneliness and bring back to you a source of noble blissfulness for living. Second, you should speculate that you alone have come to this world and you will alone will leave this world; during this trip, no one will go with you except your own karmic force, which you created. Thus, you should try in all ways to cultivate merit by doing good deeds whenever possible as they create a true shelter for a better rebirth. In addition, instead of sitting still in melancholy and lamentation, you should contemplate the non-self, practice to live in purity, and enjoy the taste of inner tranquility—the original source of pure mind without pleasure or sadness. For a Buddhist, respectfulness of and sincerity for the Triple Jewels are always the noble refuge for cultivating the blissfulness of the inner mind, especially during the moments of death and rebirth.

95. How should we encourage our younger children to practice the Dharma?

You cannot push your younger children to follow what you are practicing or what you want them to be. Young people do not like dogmatic lessons or doing what they do not understand or believe in; in particular, they do not like the style of “practicing hurriedly so that it will not be too late” that older people promote. Contrastingly, the youth will willingly do whatever they think is beneficial to them in the most practical sense. Therefore, in order to encourage younger people to practice the Dharma, you should first be a real *ideal model* for them. If you are always in the mode of peace and calm whenever facing storms of suffering and skillfully use your wisdom in all situations effectively, younger people will imitate you immediately, without needing a call or invitation from you. In contrast, if you are full of hatred, ill will, attachment, dissatisfaction, displeasure, and false views, but you call your children follow your way, they will definitely not listen to you or may even resist you and your lifestyle. Thus, to stimulate the youth to practice spirituality, you should first be a strong shelter for them, a source of peace for them, and an actual inspiration for them.

96. How can we live in harmony with a person who follows other religions in the same family?

This is very simple. Consider the object of worship and respect for others to be a Bodhisattva embodied in various forms to save suitable persons—as the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara does, for example. Moreover, express your deep respect to the Holy Ones in other religions as the spiritual

masters or ethical teachers. Thinking and acting in such a way, you will have no difficulty living with persons who follow other religions in the same family. However, if living in environments of multiple religions and multiple cultures, such as North America or Europe, you should also study other religions and cultures so that you are able to have useful and mutual understandings and sympathies among these religions and cultures. In the academic circle of the West, scholars often say to one another that “*if you know only one religion, you know none.*”

97. How should we live in harmony with a person of divergent views?

If you want others to accept your views, you must first listen to the view of others, whether you like such views or not. If you are a true practitioner, all views are—whether right or wrong (according to your view)—able to help you experience the “polyhedral” in the complexity of life as well as enrich your own wisdom. Essentially, living in the circumstances of diverse thoughts, you should patiently develop your compassion and use your wisdom skillfully in order to bring about the peace and harmony for yourself and for other persons who live around you as well. However, if you use your view to press other views, then conflicts would immediately happen; this is absolutely not a smart choice. Try to avoid this extreme by all means for the sake of peace.

98. How can we live in harmony with a person who embraces the wrong views?

First, you should seriously examine your own view and make sure that your view is really true before judging the views of others. After clearly ensuring that you have an appropriate view, you should take your practical

effects in your practices as the answer for both (i.e., yourself and the other) without the need to engage in argument or debate. Any argument based on self-attachment will be useless and may cause more suffering for both the self and the other. Peace, purity, compassion, and wisdom in your life have the ability to transform others without requiring intellectual reasoning. You should keep in mind that your own energy of purity always has the power to protect you and others.

99. How can one live peacefully with or alongside a person who is gossipy and stubborn?

This is an interesting question. Everywhere in life, you will encounter persons whom you like and persons who make you suffer. If you have to live with a person whose temper is gossipy and stubborn, you need not talk, but rather listen with all your heart of peace and tolerance. In particular, try not to respond against that person or involve any resistance. Just meditate on and practice the way of the lotus leaf: water drops on it and rolls off it lightly and peacefully. In this case, try to train yourself by listening with non-reaction; in other words, willingly listen to all sorts of *melodies* as if you are listening to a music CD with various songs with different vocal pitches—peaceful or noisy, happy or sad, soprano or basso. By practicing listening with a non-resistant mind over a long time, you will make your mind calm like the surface of the earth, which can accept any kind of feet and be trampled peacefully and freely.

100. What should one do in order to make the inner life peaceful?

The reality of life is that it always includes difficulties—whether revealed or hidden—that make us dissatisfied, sorrowful, and anxious. Thus,

maintaining a balance in life is really necessary for the inner mind that you have to practice every day. Just ask yourself a simple question: You take a shower every day, but how many times have you taken your mental shower this week, month, or year? In fact, we do not often control our minds; rather, the individual mind controls each of us and constantly pulls us in every direction—even when we eat and sleep. Indeed, we are not the rulers, but the slaves to our own minds. For example, we never use the mind as an electrical switch that we can turn on or off whenever we want; instead, only our minds can turn us on and off freely and disorderly. In addition, it is the mind full of worry, sorrow, hope, and fear that consecutively circulates and whirls through all the peace. For this reason, we need to practice living in mindfulness and awareness in every breath and every footstep so that we may control the mind and protect our own inner peace. Through mindfulness, we can rule and take control of the mind as well as cleanse all the wildness from the mental state, such as illusions and imaginations. You may begin to practice mindfulness in the easiest, most simple way: follow your breathing in and out or bring awareness to every single breath. Try to maintain the awareness of breathing in and out as long as possible. In addition, you need to spend at least fifteen minutes to half an hour or up to one hour each day taking care of your mind by contemplating how your mind has been and how it is in the present moments. During the time of such mindfulness, you should decide to renounce all thoughts of greed, hatred, and ill will or their manifestations through the body, mouth, and mind; at the same time, you should try to develop compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. You may take the full use of your rest time or the time before going to bed to practice mindfulness (see questions 54–56).

101. How should a Buddhist practice when facing suffering?

To lessen suffering by all means is a sincere desire of humans. However, the approach to dealing with suffering, as the Buddha taught us, is not to run away from it; rather, we should find the cause of suffering so as to transform it. In reality, to reduce suffering, the first thing you need to do is to embrace suffering as a valuable experience in life. In order to have the ability to this, you should spend time meditating on the reality of suffering as well as its deep roots instead of sitting still with lamentation or trying to run away from it. Any sort of suffering will definitely bring to us precious experiences that are also necessary for nurturing vigorous energy and noble will of human beings. Without suffering to fulfill the base for happiness, your happiness will become as slight as dew and smog. In addition, noble virtues exist in suffering, which may help us foster our true wisdom of life. For instance, when facing sickness and grief, we can deeply perceive the meaning of impermanence, from which we can reduce our self-pride and self-attachment; when encountering an accident, death, or disaster, our minds of hatred and revengefulness will gradually cool down. Therefore, to transform suffering, you should not run away from it or dispel it, but embrace it as a conditional part of life. However, the most important thing in lessening suffering is identifying the cause. If you cannot recognize the real causes of suffering, you will be unable to transform it effectively. The Buddha taught that suffering is a noble truth; when you are able to see *the truth* of suffering, peace and happiness will immediately arise. Thus, mindfulness on suffering or the causes of suffering is not only a solution for its transformation, but also a way to heal such suffering.



