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What is the Buddhadharma?

The Buddhadharma, as the term itself suggests, is the Dharma, or teachings, taught by the Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha taught the Dharma for forty-nine years to help us liberate ourselves from suffering and attain happiness, not as a form of intellectual knowledge to be researched. Buddhadharma is of practical value.

The Buddhadharma, as the term itself suggests, is the Dharma, or teachings, taught by the Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha taught the Dharma in this world for forty-nine years, and his teachings were not intended as a philosophy/field of knowledge to be researched, but as guidance for us to cease suffering and attain happiness. Therefore, the Buddhadharma is of practical value.

The Essential Teachings of the Buddha—Recognizing Suffering and Ending Suffering

The essential teachings of the Buddha boil down to recognizing suffering and freeing oneself from suffering. In other words, we need to realize that suffering is a fact in life, and make the cessation of suffering the goal of life.

Once I asked the audience in a public talk, "Are there any couples who have been married for more than ten years and have never quarreled?" Then, I saw a man, a legislator, raise his hand. This man and his wife were both Buddhists, and they treated each other as fellow practitioners. That's why they had never quarreled.

It seems difficult for married couples not to quarrel, but actually, it's not. Just think about this: when your spouse picks a quarrel with you, you already feel quite upset; if you fight back, you will only aggravate the situation, making the anguish more intense. Doing so, you don't just experience suffering alone, but will also inflict suffering on others. So both parties torment each other. Why on earth is this necessary?

This rationale is easy to comprehend, but difficult

to put into practice. Even Buddhists may often be unable to withstand the test when encountering trying situations. Some people may say, "Since he has caused me so much pain, I want him to have a taste of it himself. Otherwise, where is karmic retribution?"

How can one view karmic law, or the law of cause and effect, in this way? In fact, karma runs through past, present and future lives. Present suffering is a result of past karma, and undergoing suffering amounts to atoning for past karma. If you are unwilling to repay your karmic debt, and make things worse by retaliating instead, then the vicious circle of vengeance will just go on and on without end. Those who truly understand the law of karma will be able to recognize suffering, accept suffering, and at the same time stop creating the various causes of suffering. Therefore, if a married couple are giving each other a hard time or trying to get even with each other, they lack not only compassion, but also wisdom.

Methods for Ending Suffering

1. Right Understanding and Right View

The Buddhadharmā points out that the reality of life is suffering so that we can free ourselves from all suffering. How can this be achieved?

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism—suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering—is the path by which ordinary people can transform themselves into sages. The truth of suffering explains the essence of life; the truth of the path to cessation details methods of spiritual cultivation. The path to cessation has eight components, collectively known as the eightfold noble path: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. If one has perfected the eightfold noble path, one will realize the liberated state which transcends all suffering. Right view is extremely important. It entails understanding and believing in the law of karma throughout past, present and future lives. With the right understanding and right view, one will realize that all the suffering he experiences in this life results from the karma he created in innumerable past

kalpas, or eons, since beginningless time. People often exclaim, "I have never harmed anyone in my whole life. Why am I being hurt like this?" We need to realize that our present karmic results are derived from the karmic causes we created in previous lives.

Since beginningless time, we have been wandering in samsara, the cycle of birth and death, and have in countless lives created both positive and negative karmic ties with other beings. Positive karmic ties bring us rewards, whereas negative karmic ties bring us retribution. Therefore, we shouldn't look at the fruition of past karma only in terms of our current lifetime. Many people see evil go unpunished in the current life, so they think that the karmic law doesn't exist. In fact, even if one who creates evil karma doesn't receive karmic retribution in the current life, he will not be able to escape from the law of cause and effect in future lives.

2. Refrain from Unwholesome Deeds; Accept Karmic Retribution with Equanimity

How can we cease suffering and attain happiness? First of all, we should stop creating the causes of suffering. That means abstaining from performing unwholesome deeds. We should also accept our karmic

retributions with equanimity, while at the same time seeking to save others from suffering. Even when others are causing us to suffer, we should not take it to heart. Instead, we should put ourselves in their shoes and seek to benefit them. This is the spirit of a bodhisattva. If we can follow the bodhisattva path, we will not feel we are being wronged even amid suffering and injustice.

One of my lay disciples was sold away by his parents when he was barely three days old. In his fifties, after his foster parents had passed away, he still had to take up the burden of looking after his biological parents, who were aged and frail. While others felt that this was unfair to him, he simply said to me, "Shifu, I am really blessed. Other people only have two parents. I have four."

Thinking this way, his mind was calm and happy. On the other hand, he would have felt great pain if he had complained bitterly: "My biological parents were cruel, selling me away when I was barely three days old. How on earth can they expect me to look after them because they are old? This just isn't fair!"

Cases where children make more sacrifices than their parents are rare. Most of the time, it's the other way around. Is this fair, or not? We shouldn't cling to

ideas of unfairness or injustice. As long as we are able to keep a calm mind, our life will be happier.

In modern societies, everyone talks about fairness and justice, but are they really achievable? With certain things, seeking to be mutually complementary might be the natural course to follow, rather than seeking to be fair. So I think the true meaning of fairness lies in everyone's fulfilling their own duties and playing their own part, each from their respective position in society.

Especially if one has acquired the right understanding and right view of Buddhism, then, based on the law of karma, he will realize that each individual's situation is unique in terms of blessings, causes, conditions, and intelligence. Holding this view, we will no longer care if things are fair or not. This way, our minds will be at peace and free of vexations, and we won't be prone to view other people as enemies.

Application of the Buddhadharmā

The Buddhadharmā is beneficial in that it helps us to: 1) deal with our daily life situations, 2) eradicate our vexations, 3) and ultimately attain Buddhahood.

In light of these three levels, we should realize that in practicing Buddhism, we shouldn't aim too high or seek immediate success while ignoring fundamentals. Instead, we should act in a down-to-earth, conscientious manner, starting from the basics in our daily lives. Regardless of which level we are in, we should rely on our own effort, rather than merely depending on the support and blessings of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

To be sure, support and blessings from external sources are possible. It is just that one cannot rely on them all the time. As a Chinese saying goes, "Those who help themselves will receive help from others, and thus receive help from Heaven." One who never cultivates any ability will be trapped in a sad plight when external support is exhausted. For example, if you have nothing to eat for today, someone might give you a piece of bread as temporary relief. But what about the next meal? Suppose you are given another

piece for the next meal. But what about tomorrow? Even if someone can give you a slice of bread every day, what if one day he has to travel afar, or can no longer sustain himself? In that case, you will no longer be able to rely on his support. Many people earnestly believe in an almighty deity who will grant them everlasting blessings. However, in spite of such a belief, things may just turn out to be otherwise.

Nevertheless, we must be reminded that even though the Buddhadharma teaches us the importance of self-reliance, trying to reject help from others and rely solely on one's own effort is also an incorrect attitude, as one will become obstinate and self-righteous. After all, we need others' guidance in applying the Dharma, and must have faith in the compassionate support and protection of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Dharma-protecting deities.

How Should Lay Practitioners Engage in Spiritual Practice?

A lay practitioner once said to me, "Shifu, I really envy those Dharma brothers who do not bear the burden of families. They can devote themselves wholeheartedly to spiritual practice, and they seem to have reached a high level of spiritual cultivation."

His underlying message was simple: "Every family has a difficult sutra to recite," as the Chinese saying goes, which means that every family has its own problems to deal with. It's just that I wasn't quite sure whether he meant the problems with his in-laws, his wife, or his children. Anyway, where there is a family, there will be problems. So how can we make it easier for lay people to handle such problems? Actually, among the numerous sutras, there is one called the Paying Homage to the Six Directions Sutra, which deals specifically with the principles for how lay practitioners should perform their roles and engage in spiritual practice.

1. Study the Paying Homage to the Six Directions Sutra

The full name of the Paying Homage to the Six

Directions Sutra is Singalaka Paying Homage to the Six Directions Sutra. This sutra gives advice on how to manage a household and engage in spiritual practice. What is meant by the "six directions?" According to that sutra, parents are represented by the east, teachers the south, spouses the west, friends and relatives the north, servants and employees the nadir, monastics, ascetics, brahmins and accomplished practitioners, the zenith. The six directions actually cover all aspects of our social network. The sutra clearly outlines the part that each individual needs to play, such as the responsibilities of parents towards children, and children towards parents, as well as the obligations of students and teachers, and employers and employees, among others.

As to how a married couple should treat each other, this sutra outlines five principles for the husband. A husband should treat his wife with courtesy and respect, provide her with food and clothing, give her adornments and jewelry, authorize her to perform home duties, and remain faithful to her.

Similarly, a wife should treat her husband according to five principles. She should greet her husband when he comes home, prepare food and do housework when he is out, remain faithful to him, follow his advice, and

attend to his needs. Even though these principles may not be completely applicable in modern societies due to differences in time and space, the underlying principle of mutual respect and trust should still be valued.

This sutra covers a lot of practical advice in its text. It's a pity that it is not widely known. It is all right if you don't have access to this sutra, though. Practical guides on how to practice Buddhism as a lay Buddhist can be found in three books published by Dharma Drum Mountain: "Handbook of a Buddhist Family," "Buddhist Marriage and Family," and "How to Practice as a Lay Buddhist."

2. Wholesome Lifestyle

A lay practitioner should have a wholesome lifestyle, abstaining from intemperate eating and other self-indulgent habits such as visiting prostitutes, gambling, excessive drinking, and drug abuse.

3. Association with Spiritual Friends

If one associates with nothing but hedonistic, fair-weather friends, it will be difficult to maintain a healthy and normal lifestyle. Confucianism advocates friendship with the just, the considerate, and the learned. That means we should associate

with those who are righteous, straightforward and free from scheming or calculating, those who are empathetic, tolerant, and forgiving, or those who are knowledgeable and cultivated. Be reminded, however, that straightforward people give others appropriate help instead of speaking bluntly, which tends to stir up trouble.

There is a Buddhist term: spiritual friend. Shakyamuni Buddha encourages us to associate with spiritual friends and keep away from unwholesome friends. This is similar to what Confucius says, "Associate with exemplary people and keep away from petty people." How do we identify spiritual friends? They benefit us in a positive way and give us honest advice. As for ourselves, though we might not yet qualify as a spiritual friend to others, we should learn to be one.

4. Stress Responsibilities over Rights

People often complain about others-about their wife's bad temper, the husband's infidelity, the in-law's inconsideration, about the children being rebellious and disrespectful, and so forth. But actually, who is in the wrong? In my opinion, whoever complains is in the wrong. The thing is, if we treat every family

member as a bodhisattva and try our best to fulfill our responsibilities towards them, we will at least have a clear conscience. So why complain at all?

Family disharmony, or even crises, usually result from the erroneous attitudes of the people involved. They either treat their family members as enemies, or dominate them as properties.

A pair of lovers once visited me and said, "Shifu, we're getting married." I said, "Congratulations!" They said, "If we have any quarrels in the future, we'll need Shifu to be our judge." I said, "Please don't ask for trouble. You're not married yet, and already you're expecting to have quarrels!" On hearing what I said, the man said to his fiancée, "Did you hear that? From now on, you have to listen to me, and should not quarrel with me." His fiancée retorted, "No! It's you who must listen to me, and shouldn't argue with me, so we won't have to bother Shifu!" In actual fact, they had started quarrelling even before they were married.

This is the customary way of the world. It is, indeed, very difficult for couples not to quarrel. The *Paying Homage to the Six Directions Sutra* and the three books mentioned above tell us how to fulfill our duties and obligations as parents, children, and family members. If everyone can perform their respective

parts properly by fulfilling their responsibilities, there will be fewer complaints against one another.

5. Kindness and Compassion Have No Enemies; Wisdom Engenders No Vexations

Two lay practitioners, our supporters, were laid off because their companies were not doing well. I asked one of them, "What happened to your job?" He replied calmly, "Please don't worry, Shifu." Actually I was concerned, not worried, as he looked quite unruffled. If it had been another person, he would probably have been grumbling.

To many, the misfortune of the second person was a greater injustice. For several months prior to his being laid off, his employer had been making him work overtime every day. Since he was the head of a department, he didn't get a penny for all his overtime work. Everyone supposed that he would soon get promoted, but instead, he lost his job upon completing the project at hand. When faced with this kind of situation, most people will be fuming with indignation. He, however, didn't mind at all because he felt that he had learned and grown a lot from that job. Nevertheless, many people still kept voicing their indignation, criticizing the boss for being outrageous.

After a few months, I asked him, "How's your job search going?" He replied, "I've found a job, Shifu." I said, "You found a job so quickly because you stayed calm and unruffled."

When faced with this kind of reality, anger won't solve the problem. So why get angry at all? Instead, one should accept the situation, face it with courage, and try to improve it. We can see this as a good example of applying the Dharma in our daily lives.

The English translation in this booklet is based on a speech Venerable Master Sheng Yen delivered in New Jersey on May 13, 1995. A Chinese transcript of the original speech appeared in his book *A Peaceful World*.