

Nirvana

Preface

Buddhism has long been infiltrated by erroneous, non-Buddhist views consisting of eternalism and nihilism. To help the four assemblies of Buddhist disciples truly realize nirvana and revive Buddhism, the most pressing task today is to teach these disciples to relinquish such erroneous views so that they would not fall into the concept of permanent existence of the five aggregates (*skandhas*) and the eighteen elements (*dhātu*) and would obtain the wisdom required to later attain the Three-Vehicle Bodhi. Toward this end, it is crucial to elucidate the various meanings of nirvana so that the four assemblies of Buddhist disciples can acquire a correct understanding of it by listening to the teachings on it that are in accord with reality, attain true wisdom after contemplating such teachings, and abandon the erroneous teachings on it. Based on this, the Buddhist disciples' cause of practice and the true realization of the Three-Vehicle Bodhi will be conceivable. This was my initial reason for writing this book.

Second, the unwise do not understand nirvana and fall seriously short of the complete and correct knowledge about liberation, not to mention realizing it. Even Taiwan's most popular and renowned Buddhist master, who was given the reverential title "Venerable Teacher,"¹ proclaimed in writing that nirvana is incomprehensible and indescribable. If this were true, how could the less resourceful and less learned practitioners acquire a correct understanding of nirvana? The cause of realizing nirvana is obliterated when the teachings on it become extinct.

To ensure the enduring presence of Buddha Sakyamuni's True Dharma in this Dharma-ending age, it is imperative to publish this book and provide the four assemblies of Buddhist disciples with the correct views regarding the True Dharma and nirvana. This will release sentient beings from the suffering of cyclical transmigration and bring immense benefits to both human and celestial beings.

I used the word "unwise" to refer to unenlightened Buddhist practitioners rather than to the ordinary people in the secular world. Sadly, though, in this age of degeneracy, many Buddhist practitioners can be said to be unwise. Therefore, having taken refuge in the Buddha Dharma, the more resourceful and learned Buddhist disciples who have become enlightened bodhisattvas with the proper realization of nirvana should teach others how to root out ignorance from themselves and bring

¹ In Chinese: Daoshi, 導師

forth the wisdom necessary for the realization of the inherent nirvana of the Great Vehicle in their present lives. As for the less learned Buddhist disciples, they should seek to eliminate their self-view and attain the first fruition of the Hearer Vehicle so that they can transcend the three unwholesome destinies of rebirth for immeasurable lives to come, and eventually liberate themselves from the streams of transmigration. Helping all Buddhists achieve these goals was my second reason for writing this book.

Even after acquiring the right views, can all Buddhist disciples apply these to their cultivation and realize nirvana accordingly? The answer still depends on one's determination to become liberated from suffering and one's understanding of the ways to achieve this liberation. Furthermore, determination and understanding must be followed by actual cultivation for one to realize nirvana. Some practitioners have scattered and restless minds and severe dispositional hindrances. They have never cultivated the five approaches to mental absorption and therefore have no power of meditative concentration, which they need to be able to subdue their dispositional hindrances. As a result, even if they practice the principles enunciated in this book diligently, at best, they can acquire only "dry wisdom," without gaining the actual benefits of realizing nirvana. They will not be able to truly realize nirvana, enjoy the benefits of liberation, or attain the first fruition of the Path to Liberation. To protect them from unknowingly committing the grievous sin of false speech and falling into the three evil paths, I devoted a section of this book to the importance of meditative concentration (*samādhi*).

As sentient beings are all deeply mired in afflictions consisting of self-view, self-attachment, and attachment to what belongs to the self, thus we cannot attain the first fruition of the Path to Liberation and realize nirvana using wisdom alone. Specifically stated in the sutras, afflictions must be "first loosened with *samādhi*, then extracted by wisdom." In other words, unwise and slothful practitioners stand no chance of realizing nirvana. I quote the following passage from volume 1 of the *Shorter Chinese Saṃyuktāgama* to prove my point:

At the time, the World-Honored One spoke the following verses: "The nirvana that I teach is not to be attained by those who are unwise and indolent. Just as only a worthy hero can mount a thoroughbred horse, so is one who is determined to cut off the fetter of desires, eradicate all afflictions, eliminate the four forms of grasping, and achieve thorough quiescence the only one who can defeat the army of Māra and abide in the last body in the three realms.

The Buddha's exhortation is quite clear: One must first build up the power of meditative concentration through actual practice, thereby using it to eliminate both

the fetters of false views and one's attachment to the three realms. Then and only then can one realize the first fruition of the Path to Liberation and, ultimately, the remainderless nirvana of the Two Vehicles. The knowledge gained from listening to and reflecting on the True Dharma is not tantamount to the personal realization of it. This book stresses that one has realized the nirvana set forth in the Three Vehicles only if one already has the meritorious ability to align with the properties of such nirvana. The practitioners who already have this ability are those who have tamed their minds and developed the power of meditative concentration, which will allow them to attain nirvana by utilizing the wisdom they have obtained through their realization of the Three-Vehicle Bodhi.

The following can be found in Vol. 1 of *Subtle Praises to the Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra*²:

Sentient beings, hindered by afflictions and fetters, respectfully accept deviant teachings, slander the *Mahāyāna* and interpret the doctrines of emptiness and existence taught in the sutras literally. Due to their erroneous understanding of the printed words, they develop aversions and attachments. If they wish to understand the essence of the teachings, they must follow worthy [beneficial] spiritual friends. Because many confused teachers give erroneous teachings, or discouraged by the extensive and abstruse wording of the sutras, people lose interest in them. Although fond of shorter sutras, they cannot understand them. They take the ultimate and conventional truth to refer to the existence or non-existence of the dharmas of the mind and sense objects (*viṣaya*); these then give rise to conceptualizations that they either cling to or deny.³

The situation described in the above commentary was already common during the period of the semblance Dharma. Unsurprisingly, it is even more prevalent now, in the Dharma-ending age.

The people described in the above passage are all intelligent, with excellent mundane knowledge. However, as they have not acquired the qualities of a bodhisattva, they do not yet belong to the lineage of a bodhisattva. This explains why many eminent Dharma masters nowadays misinterpret and develop erroneous expositions about sutras that are said to teach the doctrine of emptiness or existence. For instance, they identify the sutras on the training of higher wisdom in the Mind-Only School, in which the Buddha expounds the dharma of emptiness, as sutras related

² In Chinese: *Bore boluomi xinjing youzan*, 般若波羅蜜多心經幽贊

³ Kuei-chi, *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heart Sutra*, translated by Dan Lusthaus in collaboration with Shih Heng-Ching. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2001

to existence. They then engage in zealous debates on whether the mind exists and whether the external states are non-existent, or vice versa. To this day, they have not reached a definitive conclusion regarding this matter. As such, people have consistently misunderstood the Middle-Way property of nirvana and have fiercely debated whether it is emptiness or something else that is truly existent. As a result, they lack a proper understanding of the subject and fail to realize nirvana. Consequently, people continue to misconstrue it and misguide countless people with their erroneous speculations.

The Buddha explained the correct meaning of and principle regarding the realization of nirvana in the Path to Buddhahood only to people with the disposition of a bodhisattva, not to the hearers (*śrāvaka*) and never to those who refuse to practice the six *pāramitās* to develop the qualities of a bodhisattva. The last 30 years in the current Dharma-ending age have seen many “Dharma masters” equating cultivation toward arhatship with cultivation toward Buddhahood and substituting the Path to Buddhahood with the Path to Liberation. Deceived by the reputation of these prominent Dharma masters, credulous learners unquestionably accept their teachings and mistake the Path to Liberation for the Path to Buddhahood. Worse, the knowledge and practices related to the Path to Liberation that these “Dharma masters” have been preaching are also far from correct, thus leading their disciples even farther away from the Path to Buddhahood. These phony teachers, rather than their disciples and students, are to blame for this.

From another perspective, however, the aforementioned misguided Buddhist learners are not free from fault either. First, they were drawn to such phony “masters” out of their blind faith in the carefully engineered popularity and organizational image of the Buddhist groups they belong to, and in the monastic statuses of their Buddhist “masters.” Second, their lack of discernment also reflects the fact that they failed to cultivate extensive virtuous merits over the past eons and had not been acquainted with virtuous and knowledgeable mentors. Master Kuiji reproached Buddhist learners of this sort with the following words mentioned earlier:

Sentient beings, hindered by afflictions and fetters, respectfully accept deviant teachings, slander the *Mahāyāna*, and interpret the doctrines of emptiness and existence taught in the sutras literally. Due to their erroneous understanding of the printed words, they develop aversions and attachments. If they wish to understand the essence of the teachings, they would follow worthy [beneficial] spiritual friends. Because many confused teachers give erroneous teachings, or discouraged by the extensive and abstruse wording of the sutras, people lose interest in them.

Master Kuiji observed that people are often bound by emotional attachment. They “respectfully accept deviant teachings” imparted by phony teachers and even follow them and “slander the *Mahāyāna*,” all the while believing that they are dedicated to its propagation. They defame the emptiness sutras expounding the training of the higher wisdom of Mind-Only, which only bodhisattvas on or above the First Ground are able to cultivate, by calling them apocryphal works that proclaim the substantial existence of all dharmas. As for the sutras that delineate the existence of a truly existent and permanent Dharma, the matrix of all phenomena, such as the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, they proclaim that all dharmas are empty. As some erroneously insist on existence and others on emptiness, they refute and assail each other’s positions, thus causing a recurring controversy over “emptiness versus existence.” Such a debate has never occurred among the noble persons of the Two Vehicles or the *Mahāyāna* bodhisattvas since the ancient times.

Some practitioners are aware of the aforementioned issue to some extent and refuse to follow the unenlightened “Dharma masters” on both sides of the controversy. Instead, they turn to the Pure Land School to seek rebirth in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. They refuse to read the sutras on their own or review any works and expositions of virtuous and knowledgeable mentors who hold different views but are drawn to the superficial qualities of their teachers, especially to their fame and monastic statuses. The longer they practice, the farther away they stray from the realization of nirvana. Alas! Their lifelong studies and practices are fruitless and in vain.

Some wiser practitioners will recognize that many Dharma masters literally and erroneously interpret the sutras. Therefore, they may decide to study sutras and expositions on their own. Although they are “fond of shorter sutras, they cannot understand them,” and almost certainly, they will “take the ultimate and conventional truth to refer to the existence or non-existence of the dharmas of the mind and sense objects (*viṣaya*).”

Master Kuiji had already documented the aforementioned precedents in ancient China. To the present day, the situation has deteriorated into an almost hopeless state. Delivering sentient beings in the Dharma-ending age is a daunting challenge. Even among the small number of people wise enough to believe in the True Dharma, only a handful will put it into practice. Fully aware of such challenge, however, a bodhisattva shall still tirelessly strive to teach and guide sentient beings life after life, out of compassion for them. This was my third reason for writing this book.

To avoid wasting the precious time of practitioners, unless absolutely necessary, the teachings on nirvana that had been covered in my other books were no longer included here. This book focuses primarily on the principles of realizing nirvana rather

than on the methods of realizing it because the actual practices for its realization are interspersed with my other writings. Also, the following Two-Vehicle teachings were not included in this book: the four foundations of mindfulness; the seven enlightenment factors; the observation practices enabling one to ascertain that the five aggregates are impermanent, subject to sufferings, and empty of a real entity; the six kinds of mindfulness; the five contemplation practices of mental absorption; and the observation of all sense fields, etc. This book delves directly into the right views of nirvana to steer practitioners away from erroneous views and guide them back to the True Dharma. Practitioners who wish to learn about the practice methods should engage in the correct sequence of actual cultivation illustrated in the books *The Correct Meanings of the Āgamas*, *The True Meaning of the Vijnana-Aggregate*, *The Secret Meanings of the Heart Sutra*, *Stages in Cultivating the Buddha-Mindfulness Samādhi*, *Chan: Before and After Enlightenment*, and *Commentaries on the Chan Gong'an Collection: The Correct Eye of the Chan School*. Alternatively, the readers who seek to realize nirvana can also read my future publications and reflect on their content, and carefully observe the related dharmas accordingly. For all beginners, the key is to develop a basic level of meditative concentration. One should either attain a solid level of access concentration by practicing meditation in stillness or develop in-motion concentration through the method of signless Buddha-mindfulness.

In addition to the actual methods of realizing nirvana, the following subjects are not discussed in this book: (1) the realization of the inherently pure nirvana; (2) the activation of *prajñā* ; and (3) the cultivation and realization of the knowledge-of-the-aspects-of-paths. This book discusses only the correct way of attaining the nirvana realized by the noble persons of the Three Vehicles and the contents of *Mahāyāna* enlightenment that are intimately related to the realization of the inherently pure nirvana in modern Buddhism. It aims to steer the four assemblies of Buddhist disciples toward the right course in their cultivation by providing them with the right views regarding the realization of nirvana. The actual methods of realizing nirvana are mentioned minimally as the book's goal is not to enable such disciples to attain nirvana right after reading the book. One must actually cultivate nirvana; fully possessing the right view about it cannot be regarded as the personal realization of it. I have actually explained the practice methods for realizing the nirvanas of the Three Vehicles in my other books. All practitioners who seek to realize nirvana must first build up their meditative concentration skills before extensively reading my publications and embarking on their cultivation. Among the various ways to cultivate meditative concentration, signless Buddha-mindfulness is the fastest and most effective. It enables practitioners to maintain their concentration while in physical motion. This kind of in-motion concentration resonates with the in-motion observation practice

essential for the cultivation of the Three Vehicles.

Furthermore, people who seek to realize the Two-Vehicle nirvana should ask themselves if they have fully learned and practiced the supportive dharmas required for its realization. Some people may not be inclined to take up the cultivation of pure practices and may still submit to all kinds of sensual desires. They may not have developed the disposition of either a hearer or a bodhisattva and may therefore be committed to neither. Thus, they may not be able to believe in and understand the correct teachings about nirvana and may only be willing to regard the five aggregates or mental consciousness as real and permanent. Even if such people have decent concentration skills and have read this book, they still cannot realize nirvana. They might be disturbed by the teachings set forth in this book, but they are likely to slander them and fall into the three unwholesome destinies after death due to their unwholesome speech karma. In fact, the necessity to practice supportive dharmas applies not only to Two-Vehicle practitioners but even more to Great-Vehicle learners. In this Dharma-ending age, I urge the four assemblies of Buddhist disciples to take heed of this issue. As stated in Vol. 47 of the *Samyukta Āgama*:

At the time, the Lord said to all bhikkhus, “If a bhikkhu does not hold reverence, does not focus his mind, shows no discretion, nor follows those elder, middle, and lower bhikkhus who constantly cultivate pure practices, but wishes to develop magnificent deportment to the fullest extent, there is no way his wish will be fulfilled! If he is unequipped with magnificent deportment but wishes to learn the Dharma satisfactorily, there is no way his wish will be fulfilled! If he does not cultivate the Dharma satisfactorily but wishes to perfectly fulfill the precept body, *samādhī* body, *prajñā* body, liberation body, and liberation insight body to their fullest extent, there is no way his wish will be fulfilled! If he does not have sufficient liberation insight but wishes to realize the remainderless nirvana, there is no way his wish will be fulfilled!”

The “magnificent deportment” mentioned in the above excerpt refers to the “supportive dharmas.” These supportive dharmas pertain to adherence to the five precepts and the bodhisattva precepts and to the assiduous cultivation of the ten virtuous deeds. Additionally, a practitioner should select a virtuous and knowledgeable mentor to learn about the supportive dharmas mentioned in the following passage: “The principles of giving, of precept observance, and of attaining rebirth in the heavenly realms, the defiled nature of all desires, the taints of the upper realms, and the renunciation of the three realms are paramount.”⁴ Then, a

⁴ Dirgha Agama (Long Agama) Vol. 1

practitioner should realize the access concentration or the first concentration (*dhyāna*). It is futile for practitioners who do not learn and cultivate these supportive dharmas to seek the realization of the Three-Vehicle nirvana!

A practitioner who seeks to fulfill the “magnificent deportment” required for the realization of the inherently pure nirvana in the Great Vehicle should also practice in the bodhisattva’s way and devote himself to the liberation of sentient beings by cultivating the six perfections. This will help him develop the essential qualities and enter the rank of the bodhisattva. Those who do not cultivate these supportive dharmas to satisfy the “magnificent deportment” to its fullest cannot possibly realize the nirvana of the Hearer Vehicle or the Bodhisattva Path.

The principles of giving, precept observance, and attaining rebirth in the heavenly realms are the three fundamental supportive dharmas taught by Buddha Sakyamuni. Practitioners who are doubtful of these three principles will not believe that giving will generate adorable karmic fruition, that precept adherence will help them attain liberation, and that the cultivation of the ten virtuous deeds and of the various levels of meditative absorption (*dhyānas*) will enable them to be reborn in the heavenly realms. Therefore, they cannot understand the various states of the three realms and cannot obtain the wisdom needed to transcend them. In short, these people have no faith in karmic cause and effect. Lacking true faith in the retribution of giving and of the observance of the precepts, they will certainly not believe in the various existential states of the three realms. As the root and power of faith are absent in them, they will be reborn in the desire or form realm as a result of their cultivation, or they may be reborn in the formless realm and mistake the existential state there for nirvana. In other words, they will not be able to transcend cyclic existence within the three realms. Worse, they will inevitably descend into the lower destinies after committing the misdeed of grievous deception by claiming that they have attained nirvana.

Before learning the Dharma of liberation, practitioners should be aware of and practice the last set of supporting dharmas, as mentioned in the following passage: “The defiled nature of all desires, the taints of the upper realms, and the renunciation of the three realms are paramount.” All practitioners who seek to realize the nirvana of the Three-Vehicle Bodhi should heed this order of cultivation. Painstakingly reiterated in this preface, this cultivation sequence may sound like a platitude and may appear difficult to follow. However, when sentient beings in the past approached the World-Honored One, He always adhered to this sequence of teaching and explained that it was a customary rule followed by all Buddhas, as evidenced by the following passage that is repeated throughout the *Āgamas*:

At the time, Brahman picked a small seat in front of the Buddha. The World-

Honored One preached for Brahman and taught the following with illustrative examples to benefit all: “The principles of giving, precept observance, and rebirth in the heavenly realms; the defiled nature of all desires; the taints of the upper realms; and the renunciation of the three realms are paramount.” The sermon was completed with purity. At the time, the World-Honored One knew that Brahman’s mind was already pliant, pure, undefiled, and able to accept the teachings of the Way. Thus, following the customary practice of all Buddhas, the World-Honored One preached the noble truths of suffering, of the origination of suffering, of the cessation of suffering, and of the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

I sincerely wish that the four assemblies of Buddhist disciples could comprehend the cultivation sequence laid down by Buddha Sakyamuni and practice the supportive dharmas in earnest. By doing so, they will set their quest for nirvana on a sound and promising footing. Before writing this book, I observed some unsettling trends in Buddhism and therefore wrote this preface to express my heartfelt concerns regarding them.

Respectfully
Buddha’s Son,
Xiao Pingshi
Early Fall, 2012
At the Bamboo-Laurel Mountain Residence

