

To Enlightenment-4

Amitabha's 48 Great Vows

Venerable Ding Hong

Let us take a look at the title of Xia Lian Ju's compilation—*The Buddha Speaks the Mahayana, Infinite Life, Adornment, Purity, Impartiality, and Enlightenment Sutra*. This title combines the titles of the version from the Han Dynasty, the earliest version among five original translations, and the version from the Song Dynasty, the latest. We can break down this sutra's title into nine small parts to study.

What Is “Buddha”?

First of all, there is the word “Buddha” in the title. This refers to Shakyamuni Buddha. Three thousand years ago in the northern part of India—what is now Nepal—He was born as a prince of a royal family in the nation of Kapilavastu, the son of King Śuddhodana. At the age of nineteen He saw the suffering of birth, aging, illness, and death in this world. He thus renounced His worldly home to cultivate, hoping to end the cycle of samsara and to never experience sufferings for himself and all beings. At first He visited and learned from all the famous teachers of His time. Due to His intelligence, he learned very quickly and had finally learned all of the knowledge and skills those gurus had to offer. Yet, His questions still had not been resolved.

He had seen the six paths of reincarnation during His deep meditation. In Sanskrit, deep meditation is called *dhyana*. Dhyana was widely practiced by all religions at that time, they all saw the six paths of samsara. But,

How did the six paths start?

Why are there six paths?

How do we transcend the six paths?

What worlds are there beyond the six paths?

None of the gurus could answer these questions.

At that time, Shakyamuni Buddha decided to explore on His own. He went to the Ganges River, and under a bodhi tree he entered deep meditation. In Sanskrit, deep meditation is called samadhi. He entered the samadhi of the ninth level, which means He had broken through the worldly dhyana on form-realms and formlessness-realms. He could see the origin of the universe, avidya. Avidya is the Sanskrit word for nescience.

Finally, He was enlightened while gazing at the stars one night. He was thirty years old when enlightened. He had become a Buddha!

All Beings Are Innately Buddhas

After becoming a Buddha, He came to a complete realization that “all beings are indeed innately buddhas.” He uttered,

*What a wonder! What a wonder!
All beings have the same wisdom, virtues,
and laksana as Tathagata
but they could not prove and attain them
due to mere delusion and attachment.*

Lakṣana is a Sanskrit word. It refers to distinctive marks or characteristics of the external appearance of a person or an object. Tathagata is one of the ten epithets of Buddha.

According to this Buddha’s statement, each sentient being, you, he, and I are all innately buddhas. But, why are we not Buddhas now? Now we are mortals who are suffering from birth, death, as well as endless afflictions and disasters. What is the reason? The reason is that we have delusion, discrimination, and attachment. Once we let go of delusion, discrimination, and attachment, we will instantly prove and attain a realm that is equal to Tathagata’s. Because that is what we innately have! In other words, the wisdom, virtue, capability, and graceful laksana of Tathagata are not obtained extrinsically, they are what we intrinsically possess within our self-nature.

Buddhism Is Not a Religion But an Education, Why?

Shakyamuni Buddha had seen this, He thus began to edify all beings. The purpose of His edification is to help all beings let go of their delusion, discrimination, and attachment so that every sentient being can prove and attain the same realm as His.

He preached for forty nine years, offering more than three hundred Dharma assemblies and speaking on all aspects in order to let us prove and attain our own self-nature to become a Buddha ourselves. As such, Buddhism is not a religion, it is an education. If we summarize the career of Shakyamuni Buddha for His life, what career did He have after enlightenment?

From the age of thirty after his enlightenment until He went to nirvana at seventy nine, what He did was educational work in multicultural societies. His edification was the same as that of Confucius, equally provided to all. He did not discriminate on the basis of religion, ethnic group, or social status. People of all different professions, male, female, old, or young, He would teach them all as long as they were willing to learn. He was a volunteer educator in multicultural societies. He did so voluntarily, not collecting tuition.

Buddha's disciples were also volunteers. As we can see, the Buddhist edification, from Shakyamuni Buddha's time to the end of the Qing Dynasty of China (1911), always appeared as an education. It is not a religion! How can we tell?

The Difference between Religion and Education

Religion is about the relationship between God and sentient beings. In religion, we are the children of God, God is our heavenly father. This is the relationship between father and son. In education, it is about the relationship between teacher and students. We call Shakyamuni Buddha “the Fundamental Teacher,” and we call ourselves “the Triratna disciples.” Triratna is a Sanskrit word, it means Three Jewels, comprising the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Disciple means student. So, what is the relationship between the Buddha and us? It is the relationship between teacher and student. Teacher-Student Relationships only exist in education.

Furthermore, what did Buddha teach us to be? To become a Buddha! Teaching us to be equal to Him! He told us that everyone *can* be a Buddha and *should* become a Buddha! This is the way that all teachers teach their students: you should have achievements like your teacher or even surpass your teacher's achievements. This is the expectation that teachers have for their students.

However, this is not the case in religion. There is only one God in religion, it is impossible to teach everyone to become a God. How startling would that be? So, religion is different from education. From this perspective, Buddhism is not a religion. It is an education, the education that everyone should receive. This is the ultimate and consummate education that Shakyamuni Buddha offered to all sentient beings of the nine dharma-realms—the nine states of existence of hell, ghost, animal, human, asura, deva, sravaka, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva.

Monastic School System in Chinese Buddhism

Buddhism spread to China during the Han Dynasty, over two thousand years ago. In every dynasty there were patriarchs and great virtuous laities expounding Dharma and sutras, and each monastery was a school for teaching Dharma and Buddhist scriptures. They all offered classes of voluntary teaching. This kind of temple is characteristic of Chinese Buddhism. It originated during the Tang Dynasty (618 to 907)—“Master Ma Zu founded monastic institutes and Master Bai Zhang set the regulations for practicing purity.”

This characteristic not only turned Buddha’s teaching into a large-scale, organized education but offered additional proof to us: Buddhism is an education, not a religion. Compared to the college education we have today, Buddhist monasteries also consist of four major deans. First of all, there is the Abbot Monk. Monk means *ācārya*, which is a Sanskrit word, referring to a teacher or mentor in Buddhist terminology. An Abbot Monk is in charge of the edification in his region, this is like the Principal of a school. In addition, there is the First Monk who is specifically responsible for the work of academic affairs, the Monastery Chief who covers general affairs, and the Rector who is in charge of disciplinary affairs. These different divisions of labor are similar to the deans in a school. That is why we say that Buddhism is originally an education. But, what about today?

Do you know how many forms of Buddhism exist today? Let’s find out later, see you soon.