

# To Enlightenment-5

## Amitabha's 48 Great Vows

### Venerable Ding Hong

#### The Essence of Buddhism

At the Buddha's time, His disciples made education their primary mission. They did not engage in any Buddhist services such as sutra chanting and repenting rituals. These Buddhist services of sutra chanting and repenting rituals were invented by later generations for liberating ancestors and the deceased from evil realms. They used Buddhist theories to write some ritual protocols, just like *scripts* in our modern terminology.

Ritual protocols for Dharma ceremonies did not exist in Buddha's time. Of course, this practice has its necessity, but we must be clear that the essence of Buddhism is education. The form of its existence should regard teaching as mainstream.

Nonetheless, Buddhism has evolved into many different forms nowadays. We must recognize them so we will not deviate from our direction when learning Buddhism.

#### Other Forms in Buddhism Today

Generally speaking, Buddhism exists in six different forms nowadays. The Buddha's education is the original form of Buddhism, we must advocate and learn this original form of Buddhism seriously. What other forms of Buddhism have been derived?

Firstly, there is Religious Buddhism that consists of Buddhist services of sutra chanting and repenting rituals, engaging in ritual protocols of religious praying. This kind of Buddhism has no harm; as long as it upholds righteousness, it is still meaningful to society.

Gradually, it evolved to become Academic Buddhism which regards Buddhism as knowledge to study. They created courses in colleges, including Master's degrees and PhDs. They write papers and publish their works. This is research work. There are many such schools in Japan. Professors in many Buddhist universities do research work, regarding Buddhism as secular knowledge. They do not make "ending birth and death to achieve Buddhahood" their life goal. Consequently, they cannot eradicate their afflictions and cannot transcend the Three Realms of Desire, Form, and Formless (\*Skt.

traidhātuka). They cannot achieve Buddhahood and still remain mortals. This is not Buddha's hope.

What other forms of Buddhism do we have today?

One that has been derived recently is Enterprise Buddhism. These kinds of Buddhist organizations are very large, some of them are even international. They run charity work on a large scale.

There is also Tourist Buddhism. Particularly in Mainland China, they build temples everywhere. Why? To increase the local tourism income. This is Tourist Buddhism.

At last, there is Heretical Buddhism which is a complete deviation. They use the reputation of Buddhism to reap fame, prestige, gain, and offerings for their own benefit, deceiving devout men and women to achieve their evil purpose. This is heresy (\*cult).

So, there exist six forms of Buddhism nowadays. We must recognize clearly which one we want to learn. I have a very resolute standpoint, I am to learn Educational Buddhism. I do not want to engage in religious rituals, I do not know any of them. If you let me be a Host Monk in a ceremony, I would not know how to do it. I also do not want to engage in academic Buddhism. Originally I was engaging in this, teaching finance in a university and writing papers to publish new works; those things seem to not have much meaning to society, even no particular meaning to me at all.

I am to engage in Educational Buddhism—to learn and cultivate myself, to share my experience of learning, and to upgrade my spiritual level together with you. I hope that we all end the cycle of birth and death in this lifetime, all achieving Sukhāvātī rebirth. This is very meaningful work and I am also doing it with great joy.

## **The Three Eras of Buddhism**

Shakyamuni Buddha had predicted the development of Buddhism—its lifespan would last twelve thousand years. Generally speaking, the first thousand years is the True Dharma Era. The Buddha told practitioners to attain achievement by upholding precepts. As long as they were upholding the precepts, the practitioners would then attain dhyana and reveal wisdom.

For the second thousand years, the Semblance Dharma Era, Buddha told practitioners to attain achievement with dhyana. Because it would be difficult to rely on only upholding precepts, one must add dhyana into his practice, he would then be able to reveal the wisdom of prajna.

Later on, two thousand years after the Buddha's parinirvana, from the beginning of the third millennium to the end of the twelfth millennium, a total of ten thousand years, this duration belongs to the Degenerate Dharma Era. Practitioners have to rely on the Pure Land Method to attain achievement.

## **How Does the Pure Land Method Help Us Attain Achievement?**

The Pure Land Method is to let practitioners recite Amitabha and seek Sukhāvātī rebirth. Why? Because the indriya\* (\*Skt. spiritual capacity) of sentient beings in the Degenerate Dharma Era is inferior, which means our karma is heavier. Plus, there are many more external temptations, it is difficult to even uphold precepts, let alone to attain dhyana.

What can we do? Buddha told us that we must recite Amitabha and seek Sukhāvātī rebirth. Relying on the blessing of Buddha's power that is induced by our own power, we can then be born into Sukhāvātī. This is the method of relying on two powers, because it is very difficult to attain achievement by relying on only our own power in the Degenerate Dharma Era. We must rely on Buddha's power!

Within this ten thousand years of the Degenerate Dharma Era, the first thousand years have now passed, there are still nine thousand years before us, we all have to rely on the Pure Land Method to attain achievement.

We have now encountered *The Infinite Life Sutra*— the first sutra of Pure Land Buddhism! When we can really comprehend it clearly, we will then attain the assurance of rebirth. This is Buddha's expectation for us—to achieve Buddhahood in this lifetime.

We have just briefly introduced the first word of the title: Buddha! The main purpose is to give a clear idea of what Buddhism is about. Having a correct starting point means that our direction and future goal will then be very correct. If it is wrong in the very beginning, we will be wrong down the road. So, we must have a proper understanding in the beginning.

For our next class, we are going to formally learn the title and the content of Chapter Six. Thanks for watching! See you later.