



A DISCUSSION ON ISSUES REGARDING CONTEMPORARY BELIEFS

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What does faith mean in our lives? Is it life's ultimate reliance or a dispensable embellishment? What exactly can faith offer us? A beacon of light illuminating our path forward, or a comforting balm for our spirits in times of setback? In an age of lacking faith, people either falter in their life's journey due to the lack of it, or accept whatever comes their way being hungry for faith, or even get lost in the search for spiritual support. What can fill the vacuum created by the absence of faith? How should we address our need for faith? What are the principles to follow in the quest for faith? In other words, does the quest for faith necessarily lead to a religious belief? Hopefully, the following discussion resonates with your contemplation.

Contents

I	Faith and Life.....	49
II	Right Belief, Superstitious Belief, and Deviant Belief.....	57
III	Faith, Rationality, and Science.....	67
IV	Religion and Social Progress.....	76
V	Analyzing Religious Phenomena.....	83

I

FAITH AND LIFE

Yuanzhai: Does everyone need religious belief?

Jiqun: It's a bit extreme to claim that everyone needs to believe in a religion. There are plenty of people who have no religious faith or awareness of its effect on life. Especially in modern Chinese society, many people lack a realistic understanding of religion. As a consequence, people's needs for faith are either strangled in the cradle or converted into other needs. People who are struggling to make ends meet or indulging in sensual pleasures may have never thought of anything other than mundane issues. Naturally, they find faith dispensable.

Faith concerns significant aspects of life, such as where we were before birth, where we will be after death, understanding ourselves and the value of life, caring for our spiritual needs, and freedom from afflictions. These are eternal questions of human beings, and will never cease to exist because of our neglect. In fact, every thinking person can encounter these questions. Once we have such questions but are not supported by a religious faith, we may be bothered by confusion.

Juezhao: It seems fair to say that most people have the need for religious faith. When we are in particular moments of our lives, especially when facing impending death, even those who claim to be atheists will often exclaim, “If only I had a religious belief!”

I believe that as long as the world is imperfect with all kinds of suffering and defects, religion will serve its purpose and value.

Juezhao: There is also an opinion that having faith is

always better than not having one. Is it correct?

Jiqun: Having a healthy religious belief is undoubtedly better than having no religious belief. Because faith can help us find life's ultimate refuge, purify our minds, establish moral standards, and guide us onto the path of seeking truth as pursued by ancient sages.

Yuanzhai: We often hear people say, "I don't believe in anything." Do they really mean it? What are the dangers of this statement?

Jiqun: This statement is fundamentally flawed. Do they believe that food can satisfy their hunger? Do they believe that the sun brings light? It is impossible to survive in this world if one believes in nothing. People say that to express that they do not have any religious belief, but have made this claim extreme. Atheists do exist, but being an atheist doesn't mean they believe in absolutely nothing.

Due to long-term alienation from religions, many people around us do not have any religious beliefs. However, lacking fundamental beliefs in life often results in an extreme expansion of selfish desire. Utilitarianism has grown fast and wide in China in recent years, breeding a money-worshipping culture, and one of the most important reasons behind this is the lack of faith.

Religion is the foundation of morality. Throughout the ages, numerous cultures have relied on religion to build their moral standards. The Chinese slogan “Serving the People Wholeheartedly” has been going around for many decades, which perfectly matches the spirit of the Bodhisattva path. But human nature can be selfish. Without recognizing the significance of “serving the people,” individuals will find it challenging to consciously embrace this principle and even more challenging to live up to it in the long term, thus lacking enduring vitality.

Wendao: Some people think that “being a good person” is enough, “Why is there a need for religious belief?” They

believe that some religious people aren't necessarily kinder than they are.

Jiquan: The idea of “being a good person” is very vague. Every individual has reasons to see themselves as a “good person.” But what standards are they based upon? And the supposed “good person” also differs in extent. Those we often consider as good people are conscientious and loving. But from the perspective of Buddhism, the standards for being a good person include: complying with the Five Precepts and the Ten Wholesomeness in one's life, which defines the Vehicle of Human and Devas; eradicating greed, hatred, and ignorance, which is the standard of the Path of Liberation; being capable of enlightening and benefiting both oneself and others, which sets the Bodhisattva path; and finally, the Buddha, who has obtained the merit of severing afflictions (being devoid of greed, hatred, and ignorance in life), the merit of compassion (having infinite compassion for all living beings), and the merit of wisdom (possessing all knowledge), is considered the epitome of a good person. Religious faith

not only defines the standards of being right, wrong, good, and evil for us, but also, more importantly, guides us onto the path of moral development, and helps us become good people with depth and purity.

Undoubtedly, some people have religious faith but are dishonorable. The question is, do they discipline themselves with the moral standards of their beliefs? Besides, each individual has their starting point. Some ingrained habits are not to be changed overnight. But as long as people consistently strive to be good, changes will happen, big or small. When we evaluate a person, we should do it both comparatively and historically.

Juezhao: Religious faith teaches us to be not only good and kind but also wise. This is a point particularly emphasized in Buddhism, which calls for the cultivation of both blessings and wisdom, integrating compassion with wisdom. They are inseparable.

Juezhao: Many people believe that religion is just for

finding a spirit lodge after death. Taking refuge in Buddhism at a young age would inevitably conflict with their life and career pursuits, so they might as well consider this matter until old age.

Jiqun: People usually have many ambitions and pursuits in their youth. When they are fully engaged with these ambitions, they are probably unaware of the significance of a religious belief. Only after they have seen much in their lives would they deeply understand the illusory nature of worldly matters. Especially when they become old and their days are numbered, fame, social status, family, and career no longer seem essential compared with imminent death. That's the primary reason why people in their later years need spiritual support more than ever, and why the elderly group accounts for the majority of religious believers. People are thus convinced that religion serves only as comforts for the old, while not necessary in youth.

Buddhism contains both mundane and supramundane

aspects, so it is not pessimism or reclusion. Buddhism concerns not only the significant issues of life and death, but also the improvement of one's current life. In the *Sigalovada Sutta*, the Buddha has made very specific instructions on how to handle family relationships and treat wealth, etc. If we can practice according to his teachings at a young age, we will be able to avoid many detours. On the contrary, if we spend our lives busily fulfilling desires, no matter what the results are, we will inevitably get caught in many bad habits, and find it difficult to change these habits at an older age. Besides, religious practices are better to be performed at a younger age when we are physically strong. Most great masters in history began practicing in their early years – the Buddha attained awakening at the age of thirty-five. For any form of education, is it better to begin in one's youth or to wait until one's later years?

II

RIGHT BELIEF, SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEF, AND DEVIANT BELIEF

Wendao: When speaking about religious faith, people often associate it with superstitions (*mi xin*). What is superstition?

Jiqun: *Mi* refers to a state of being ignorant and confused, unable to discern clearly; *xin* refers to trusting and following. So *mi xin*, or superstition, is blind belief and worship out of ignorance. In other words, any belief that cannot guide people to enlightenment, wisdom, and truth can be called a superstitious belief.

If the object of the belief is ignorant or confused in itself, then the faith built on top of it is naturally so. People usually assume that superstitions only exist among religious beliefs. In fact, we are often manipulated by superstitions in our lives without noticing it. There are numerous examples, such as those who crave money and blindly worship it, those who lust after beauty and are deluded by it, those who love operas and are obsessed with them, and those who fancy sports fervently follow them. There are people superstitious about numbers: in China, the Cantonese favor the number “eight,” while a lot of Westerners view Friday the thirteenth as a taboo. Some people are superstitious about names, believing that an auspicious name will bring them fortune. These are all superstitious beliefs – acts out of delusion.

If we become extremely obsessed with something, it can also lead to superstitious acts. For example, as part of traditional Chinese culture, practices like fortune-telling and physiognomy are not entirely nonsense. It is because our fate does follow a regular pattern, as the Buddha

Dharma states, “a cause evokes a corresponding effect.” Yet, the dependent co-arising of life is too sophisticated to fathom, as it contains many variables that can be altered. If we blindly trust fortune-telling and physiognomy, thinking that our destiny will be exactly as told, we will be seriously mistaken.

Juezhao: Besides, many people associate religion with superstition. How should we understand religion?

Jiqun: The opinion that equals religion with superstition reflects people’s ignorance about religion. Religion did not – as some people assumed – arise from innocence about the world or certain coincidences, nor is it destined to complete its historical mission at a predetermined time. Throughout human history – from the primitive age to today’s information era, religion has already permeated every culture and every aspect of our daily lives. It has become an indispensable component of human civilization. Despite the variance of polytheism, duotheism, monotheism, and nontheism, low levels

or high levels, religion has always been the core of our spiritual life.

It is undeniable that some religious acts have been adulterated with superstitions. Therefore, we must understand the difference between right belief, eclectic belief, superstitious belief, and deviant belief.

Wendao: How to understand the advocacy of “Elevate Science, Eliminate Superstition”?

Jiqun: Can we truly eliminate superstitions by elevating science? In fact, in regions where science prevails, superstitious beliefs can still be found among individuals who are well-equipped with scientific knowledge. Human cognitive ability is limited. Although science can give us knowledge about the world, it cannot help us understand our own life and our spiritual world.

We think we are earnest believers in science, but do we truly understand science? Do we understand the scientific

spirit? We regard science as truth, but science is still under development. We revere the power of science, but science can be a double-edged sword, the effect of which depends on its possessor and user.

Truth and the right belief are the best tools to help us dispel ignorance and attain enlightenment. This involves two questions. First, is what we aim to eliminate superstition? Second, is truth the weapon we use to eliminate it? If not, we are likely replacing one blind faith with another, or even blocking ourselves from recognizing the truth.

Wendao: Are there blind faith or superstitious beliefs among Buddhists? How does Buddhism break superstitions?

Jiqun: There are indeed superstitious beliefs among Buddhists. Every day, we can find tens of thousands of believers, men and women, bowing and burning incense in famous temples – most of their beliefs are deluded. In

their minds, Buddhas and bodhisattvas are the guardians of humanity, and one can easily receive blessings by praying and worshipping them.

Buddhism recognizes delusion as the result of living beings' ignorance. Apart from the awakened sages, who among the ordinary beings is not deluded? Only that we are deluded in different degrees. It is the lack of wisdom that leaves us drenched in attachment and our lives full of confusion. That is why Buddhism stresses the importance of wisdom. We need to establish the right views by studying the Buddha's teachings, and pursuing the path of liberation by reflecting in accordance with the Dharma. The liberation that Buddha Dharma teaches includes Mind-Liberation and Wisdom-Liberation. On the one hand, it frees our mind from afflictions, and on the other hand, it lifts our cognition out of confusion. When we detach ourselves from afflictions and confusion, we will no longer be swayed by delusions.

Wendao: The outlawing Falun Gong has also made

people fear religion. Thus, is there any correlation between cults and religion? What are their differences?

Jiqun: What is a cult? In general, cult leaders are extremely self-conceited and thus see themselves as world saviors. Some of them create cults out of their selfish desires. They usually deceive the public with specious arguments, attract followers with supernatural powers, or even mislead the public with alarmist talks, such as preaching that the world is coming to an end, to make people cling to their sects out of fear. In short, what they do is by no means compassionate salvation for the world.

We should be aware that cults and religion do have some correlations because cults often derive from certain established religions. For example, Falun Gong misappropriates Buddhist terms, and many Western cults latch onto Christianity and Catholicism. What cults preach – the doomsday, the ascension to heaven, and the preacher’s self-deification – often depend on established religions to increase the credibility of their heresies. Inevitably, they

would rework the content to fit their needs. Even though cults appear to urge people to do good deeds, it is often distorted into something else – a mere demagogic trick. Cults are a malignant tumor on religion.

Juezhao: What harm will joining the cults bring?

Jiqun: This question can be better explained with actual events. The website “Grand View of World’s Cults” referenced an article from *Global Times*:

“On November 18, 1978, a total of 914 disciples of the People’s Temple, an American Cult, committed mass suicide by drinking cyanide-laced Flavor Aid in Guyana. Senator Leo Ryan and accompanying members who were sent to investigate were also killed.

“On April 19, 1993, the Branch Davidians held a 51-day stand-off against federal agents in Mount Carmel, Texas, USA. Leader David Koresh and over 80 followers died, many in a fire, following the destruction of Mount Carmel.

“Between 1994 and 1995, the Solar Temple caused several mass suicides in Switzerland, Canada, and France.

“On March 20, 1995, the Aleph carried out the shocking Tokyo subway sarin attack that killed 12 people and injured 5,500 more.

“On March 26, 1997, 39 disciples of the Heaven’s Gate committed suicide in California, USA, including their religious leader.

“On March 17, 2000, the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, a Ugandan cult, masterminded the burning of over 530 disciples in a building in the Kanungu district of southwest Uganda. Authorities later discovered that many more people belonging to the same cult had died and been secretly buried, amounting to one thousand people.”

Wendao: How do we avoid joining cults?

Jiqun: When we come into contact with a religion, we must not blindly follow it in the first place. We must carefully observe and consider several questions: does the preacher possess great loving-kindness and compassion to better the world and have noble morals worthy to be relied on? Does the doctrine speak the truth and help us improve our character to eventually reach liberation? When choosing a religion to follow, we must not haste to achieve certain results, or else we will be easily misled. Cults often exploit the weakness of human nature to seduce followers and manipulate them. Before we take refuge in a religion, we also need to see if it has stood the test of time. Facts prove that established religions like Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam benefit both society and individuals.

III

FAITH, RATIONALITY, AND SCIENCE

Juezhao: We often see some Buddhists being very pious but not knowing much about the Doctrines, while some other Buddhists know a lot about the teachings but are not as devout. How does this phenomenon come about?

Jiqun: The impact of faith corresponds to a person's spiritual needs. People with a strong need for religion often have enough earnestness to practice it vigorously. Once our practice gives us first-hand spiritual experiences, our faith will become stronger. However, faith in Buddhism must be based on rationality. Without such a foundation or any first-hand experience from practices,

one will find it difficult to adhere to the faith even with great resolve and motivation at the beginning.

Whether we can benefit from the Doctrines depends on our resolve or motivation to learn Buddhism. If we only study Buddhism as an academic subject, instead of associating it with ourselves or applying the Buddha Dharma in our lives, we cannot truly benefit. Without practice, we will find it hard to develop pious faith, no matter how great the teachings are.

Yunhai: While some believe that faith must be established on “rationality,” others claim that followers must first “believe it unconditionally.” How should we view the difference?

Jiqun: Religion inevitably revolves around faith. Christianity has teachings like “justification by faith,” and “salvation through faith,” which exhibit the absolute role of faith. This is the typical “unconditional belief.” Religious experience often goes beyond rationality,

and many religions even reject rationality.

But in Buddhism, humans are the “most intelligent of all” precisely because of our ability of rational thinking. Buddhism advocates rationality, so how does it view the function of faith? The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* tells us, “In the ocean of Buddha Dharma, faith gives us the strength to set sail, but wisdom is the key to cross the ocean.” One must have faith to access the vast Buddhist wisdom, but one needs to rely on wisdom (rationality) to reap the benefits of Buddhism. In the four steps of Buddhist practices – believing, understanding, practicing, and realizing, “believing” is the threshold for entry into Buddhism, which is then supported by “understanding” and “practicing” to ultimately reach the goal of “realizing.” It is only by having faith in Buddhism that we can understand Buddha’s Dharma and further be able to practice along with it. On the other hand, deep understanding and personal experience in Buddhist practice can further strengthen our faith.

As for the correlation between faith and rationality, Venerable Master Yin Shun summarized it as “Buddhism relies on the Right View to build the Right Belief.” Without the Right View as the foundation, our beliefs may easily become deluded or even deviant. There is another saying in Buddhism, “Faith without wisdom breeds ignorance, while wisdom (or reason) without faith leads to arrogance,” which dialectically points out the relationship between faith and rationality.

Buddhism values rationality dearly. Of course, here it refers to the correct and healthy one. The Noble Eightfold Path is the guideline for Buddhist practices, in which the Right View and the Right Intention are priorities. The right understanding and right thinking are necessary guarantees in Buddhist practices. It is with the guidance of rationality that we can establish the practice of Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

Yunhai: We often see talks between Buddhists and

scientists on the internet. Some Buddhists often categorize scientists in their speeches as “holders of the deviated views,” listed among the “Eight Difficulties.” This induced vehemence from scientists, who repeatedly noted that the Buddhists who attacked science actually knew nothing about it.

Jiqun: Scientific research is one of many ways for humans to understand the world; it is not inherently a “right view” nor a “deviated view.” What is important is whether the “view” that guides scientific research is correct. Buddhists’ denunciation of scientists is mainly related to their obsession with materialism. As to scientific research itself, as long as scientists explore the unknown world with the spirit of seeking the truth in an objective way, rather than clinging to materialism as the foundation to begin with, the two sides should have a lot in common. We can discover the truth via many routes, including science. On the other hand, denying everything about science is an act of ruining good roots. It’s best to guide people with deviated views in a benevolent manner.

Such a phenomenon reminds me of another extreme situation. For a long time, many people have been equating science as truth and religion as superstition, and trying to replace religion with science. Both opinions are biased. Science and religion are two different fields that deal with different aspects of our lives. Science helps us understand the material world and improve our living conditions, while religion establishes moral standards and explains the origin of life and the destination of death. They can not replace one another. That is why many renowned scientists, such as Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein, also had religious beliefs.

Juezhao: Can people still conduct academic research objectively after becoming religious?

Jiqun: Many researchers on religion claim to be atheistic. We often hear scholars claim that even though they are not against students having religious beliefs, they do not want their students to involve anything religious in their research. It seems to suggest that once people become

religious, their academic research will no longer be objective. This opinion must have to do with historical periods when religious authority suppressed rationality.

However, Buddhist faith and rationality do not conflict with each other. From the perspective of Buddha Dharma, rationality is the foundation for humans to access truth and become liberated. We must also realize, though, that rationality is often based on personal experience, knowledge, and preference, which makes it difficult to surpass its limitations. Thus, there is no consensus on many academic questions – the criteria for one situation may not be the criteria for another.

In my opinion, when researching Buddhism, objective understanding is only possible when it is founded on faith. How can we form a comprehensive understanding without truly engaging in Buddhism? For a long time, people have been researching Buddhism under the guidance of other philosophies. It's hard to imagine their objectivity. Besides, there is only a limited message of Buddha

Dharma that can be delivered through knowledge in books. Without personal practice, it is nearly impossible for us to understand Buddhism truthfully, objectively, and deeply.

The *Yogacarabhumi-Sastra* once revealed the four levels of apprehension of reality: reality as formulated by mundane cognition, reality as formulated by accurate reasoning, reality as formulated by the cognition purified of the afflictive hindrances, and reality as formulated by the cognition purified of the cognitive hindrances. Academic studies can only achieve the reality as formulated by accurate reasoning, while the attainment of sages includes the reality as formulated by the cognition purified of the afflictive hindrances and the reality as formulated by the cognition purified of the cognitive hindrances, which is the level non-religious persons could never achieve.

Yunhai: Many religions and science are alike, for they carry certain fundamental metaphysical hypotheses that could be neither verified nor falsified. If we use one

fundamental hypothesis to explain another fundamental hypothesis, they are likely to conflict with each other. This is a major taboo of scientific research. But Buddhism never has these metaphysical hypotheses as its premise. Its fundamental principle is “seeing as it is.” So, believing in Buddhism will not hinder people from conducting scientific research.

IV

RELIGION AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

Yunhai: Some scholars believe that Buddhism's non-competitiveness is the main reason that China could not enter the world's top ranks in the last half-century. Other Buddhist countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka are all underdeveloped countries, especially Cambodia – the birthplace of Indo-chinese culture. In the modern world, people encourage competition and worship the survival of the strongest. To revitalize the Chinese nation, some believe that meek and soft ideologies such as Buddhism should be ruled out from the major ideologies in Chinese history.

Yuanzhai: This opinion is untenable. The core philosophy of the Chinese nation is structured by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. They have made significant contributions to many of China's glorious periods in history. They should also be able to play their parts in the highly civilized modern era. It is proven that many Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, along with tens of millions of overseas Chinese who are influenced by these traditional ideologies, have helped to create prosperity for the world. On the contrary, China's decline in modern times could be the result of our contempt for our excellent traditional culture, and blindly following Western ideas, especially advocating Social Darwinism, which even the Western world no longer approves. Some people accept evolutionism and regard it as the sole criterion against everything. While applicable to animals, Social Darwinism, which is derived from evolutionism, has caused much bloodshed in modern society. So, in today's world where civilization prevails, which better fits people's ideal, the law of the jungle that encourages ruthless competition, or the non-violent

spirit that Buddhism stands for?

Jiqun: Buddhism cannot be the sole factor that influences society, so attributing Buddhism to a country's rise and fall is biased. Take China for example, even though Buddhism has harmoniously blended with Chinese traditional culture, Confucianism is what the governance relied on. Besides, economic advancement cannot be the only criterion for the healthiness of social development.

Some people perceive Buddhism as pessimistic because of its emphasis on non-violence. But is there a need for more violence in the modern world? We have already witnessed too many conflicts. People fight against each other, against everything above and below. What happens then? What do we rely on to comfort our souls when these fights bleed us dry?

Western countries are undoubtedly more powerful in respect to economic development, but social problems have nevertheless persisted. A healthy society should balance

its economic and cultural development while maintaining high moral standards. The impact of Buddhism in contemporary society is shaped by the value of its teachings. If Buddhism can provide us with food of wisdom, and bring peace and stability to the world, then it is exactly what today's society needs.

Wendao: The thing is, peace today is maintained with force of arms. Why was China constantly under invasion in the past hundreds of years? It was because we lagged behind economically – weakness leads to humiliation.

Jiqun: The nuclear weapons human beings possess are powerful enough to destroy the Earth dozens of times. Is developing atomic weapons to put each other in check the only possible way to prevent war? How can we make sure these nuclear weapons are safely kept? In fact, one more weapon in the world means one more uncertainty and one more trigger of war. Hence, weapons, however advanced they are, only fill the world with danger instead of peace and stability. The “9.11” attacks should

be sufficient as an alert to us. America boasts a powerful economy and superior weapons, yet none of those could prevent such a disaster. Just as Venerable Master Thich Nhat Hanh said, “World peace comes from people’s inner peace.”

Wendao: Will the Buddhist concepts of “negation,” “emptiness,” and “no” lead us to seclusion from society? If everyone embraced these ideas, would social progress fall into stagnation?

Jiqun: People today enjoy talking about advancement and progress. In our imagination, progress is always better than backwardness. But the progress we speak of is usually confined to the economy and technology. Amidst such thinking, we gradually lose pure folkways, traditional virtues, and leisure mentality. Is it worth pursuing progress at the cost of these values? Our happiness, after all, is more about a positive mind and a healthy body.

Unlike what people have assumed, “negation,” “emptiness,”

and “no” in the Buddhist sutras do not mean having nothing at all. “Emptiness” in Buddhism aims to negate our false cognition and obsession, which are the sources of our afflictions. Once we understand that all that exists is conditioned, with its essence lacking a self-nature, and is but an illusion of causes and conditions, we will no longer be hurt by any changes in life and thus live more at ease.

Juezhao: Can a sound legal system and good social regulations replace religions?

Jiqun: The rise of Humanism in the West denied Medieval theocracy and claimed that a good social system could solve all problems. Though efforts in the past few hundred years have gradually improved the social systems in the West, problems never ceased to arise. This is because a sound legal system can crack down on crimes but fail to eliminate their roots. Good social regulations can reduce the factors that lead to crimes but can’t eradicate criminal motives. Clearly, social issues ultimately are down to every individual. How can there be social

stability when we have no inner peace and our actions are devoid of morality?

V

ANALYZING RELIGIOUS PHENOMENA

Yuanzhai: As we previously mentioned, praying and incense burning are often considered to be superstitious. Can these actions lead us to true religious beliefs?

Jiqun: Faith is a lifelong dependence that has a lasting influence. Thus, it is necessary to perform certain rituals to affirm the belief, like Christianity's baptism and Buddhism's conversion ceremony. One cannot be considered a true Christian or Buddhist without going through these processes.

To Buddhists, the importance of conversion is in the

moment when you pledge to take refuge in the Three Jewels:

Take Refuge in the Buddha for my entire life,

Take Refuge in the Dharma for my entire life,

Take Refuge in the Sangha for my entire life.

This is the pledge to take when choosing the Buddhist belief as our faith, which determines whether or not we are eligible to become Buddhists. Of course, one must follow relevant disciplines like the Five Precepts to become a qualified Buddhist. This is the threshold to differentiate Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

As to those who are not converted or ordained but only seek to burn incense or bow before the Buddha, strictly speaking, their visits to temples have nothing to do with religious belief, their worship is merely out of vague religious needs. They may adhere to folk religions and worship Buddhist monasteries, Taoist temples, or shrines without distinction. They may pray solely for material gains,

thinking, “It’s better to believe it, lest it is true.” Nevertheless, reverently praying to the Buddha can bring inner peace and sow the seeds of virtuous roots and blessings. Familiarizing yourself with the Three Jewels will make you more likely to be exposed to authentic Buddhist beliefs.

Juezhao: Some people only turn to religion for consolation when they encounter a setback in their careers or relationships. How should we view such a motive?

Jiqun: Everyone has their reason to seek religious belief. It’s only the starting point. What is important is to bring about the right belief from there. In Buddhism, it is not an encouraged motivation to merely seek emotional consolation or inner sustenance because of frustration, for it can neither induce a healthy belief nor help us explore the truth.

It is undeniable that suffering and setbacks can cultivate religious faith. Because life is fraught with suffering, we

develop the desire to escape from suffering and attain happiness. Life is fragile, and it was precisely the Buddha's sensitivity to the pain of birth, aging, illness, and death in the world that motivated him to seek the Path. Therefore, religious belief serves not as an escape from reality but as a catalyst for enhancing life and pursuing truth.

Yuanzhai: Can a person have multiple religious beliefs at the same time?

Jiqun: This is often because none of the beliefs are solid enough. If we do, it will naturally be more pure. Many religions are highly exclusive. Though Buddhism is relatively inclusive, it still demands one's undivided commitment. For instance, we can own several houses but can only sleep in one. If we spend the night wandering about, we can never rest well. The purpose of a religious belief is to help us find our true refuge, which should be the one and only.

Juezhao: There is an opinion that most Buddhist believers are not very well educated. What does this suggest?

Yuanzhai: The education we have received has always been critical of religion, leading many intellectuals to see Buddhism as a superstition. Thus, of course, they find it difficult to believe in it. Relatively, those less educated are less affected by these ideologies. But in Western countries, Buddhists are usually well-educated, which means that insufficient education among Chinese Buddhists is merely a local phenomenon rather than Buddhism's problem.

Yunhai: Before the May Fourth Movement, Confucianism was China's mainstream culture, which disapproved of Buddhism, causing educated groups to frown upon Buddhism, whereas the uneducated were less affected by such a mindset. Over time, this contributed to the misconception that only the people from the "lower class" believe in Buddhism.

In Southeast Asian countries like Thailand, Myanmar, etc., the introduction of Buddhism was in sync with their cultural progression. Therefore, naturally, the ethics of Human and Devas based on Buddhism became these cultures' mainstream opinions. In Myanmar and Thailand, Buddhism is almost a nationwide belief. Everyone, regardless of their educational background, takes their faith in Buddhism as honorable. It is similar to the case in Tibet. Most cultural elites throughout Tibetan history were monks. However, it is different in the Han cultural circle as its historical ideologies conflict with Buddhist teachings.

Jiqun: The phenomenon of a large proportion of comparatively undereducated Buddhists is an atypical occurrence at a particular time and is the result of people's alienation from and ignorance of Buddhism. There were abundant social elites who were also Buddhists in history and all lands. Buddhism is established on broad philosophical structures and rigorous speculative logic. Without profound learning and cultivation, it won't be easy to

enter the Buddhist Temple of thought.

Juezhao: Today, a large proportion of Buddhists are females rather than males. What does this suggest?

Yunhai: Women are often more empathetic and show stronger perseverance when facing adversities, so they are more ready to believe in Buddhism. But due to toxic feudal and autocratic customs such as the “Three Principles and Five Virtues,” Chinese women under such old-fashioned influence had many mental defects, such as rejecting rational thinking, strong mental dependency, and weakness of will, etc. Women who aspire to practice Buddhism should be alert to these possible imperfections. Otherwise, they may fall into traps of believing without understanding or practicing, or even be subject to superstitions. Studying Buddhism requires more than believing; practicing according to the teachings is more important.

Jiqun: Overall, there are indeed more women than men

who practice Buddhism. Generally speaking, women are emotionally sophisticated and subtle and can, thus, easily feel life's suffering. Besides, women have a higher inclination to seek dependence, while men are relatively self-reliant and, thus, likely to be self-righteous. Another reason is that men tend to be career-minded, and when they give themselves up to their work, they have no time to consider life's ultimate questions. Comparatively, women may have more time and opportunity to get in contact with Buddhism.

Yuanzhai: There is a saying that teases some disciples for “enshrining the Buddha in front of their face during the first year to study Buddhism while sending the Buddha back to the West Pure Land in the year three.” Why does people's faith grow weak? As Buddhists, how can we strengthen our faith?

Juezhao: There are too many temptations in today's world. If a Buddhist has never experienced joy in receiving the Dharma and has never reaped real benefits

in practicing Buddhism, their faith will undoubtedly waver. Also, a false or impure motivation is another major factor. Buddhism aims to ultimately eradicate our suffering. The truth is, our understanding of suffering is often superficial. Learning about it from books is far from enough. We must reflect on our own lives and contemplate both our suffering and that of others to truly understand it. Suffering and obstacles can catalyze our faith and breed our determination to practice the Path.

Jiqun: Buddhist faith must be founded on renunciation and bodhicitta, which are the insurance to safeguard our faith. Many people believe in Buddhism, but have never given rise to renunciation or bodhicitta, or gradually left them behind after the beginning vows. Why does this happen? The activities of our mind need to be nurtured by various causes. Buddhist practitioners in the past emphasized the contemplation of impermanence and impurity of the human body to strengthen their determination to renunciation. Our mind falls into the mundane course when we are overwhelmed by mundane circumstances

and desires. Similarly, bodhicitta also needs to be reinforced through repeated meditations and practices. However, there is not enough emphasis on these two aspects in Chinese Buddhism.

Buddhist faith must also be established on understanding the doctrines. Many people's faith deteriorates mainly because they are hasty to begin with, lacking sufficient investigation of the Buddha's teachings. In other words, the teachings never took root in their way of thinking. How do we strengthen our faith? We may turn to rational understanding, strive for genuine realization, or cultivate a connection and resonance with Buddhas and bodhisattvas. If there is no devoted interest, true realization, or spiritual response, then it is no surprise that their faith will slowly become hollow and weak, and ultimately fade away. Though they may not declare their abandonment, they will eventually be caught in a "habitual numbness" and even turn to the pursuit of worldly fame and gains.

Therefore, Buddhist right belief must be established on

the Right View. What differentiates Buddha Dharma from non-Buddhist teachings is the Right View. But we must not stop at thinking and understanding; personal practice is also essential. With the guidance of the Right View, complemented by the mind of renunciation and bodhicitta, our faith can be continuously strengthened and consolidated, and develop to greater depths and heights.