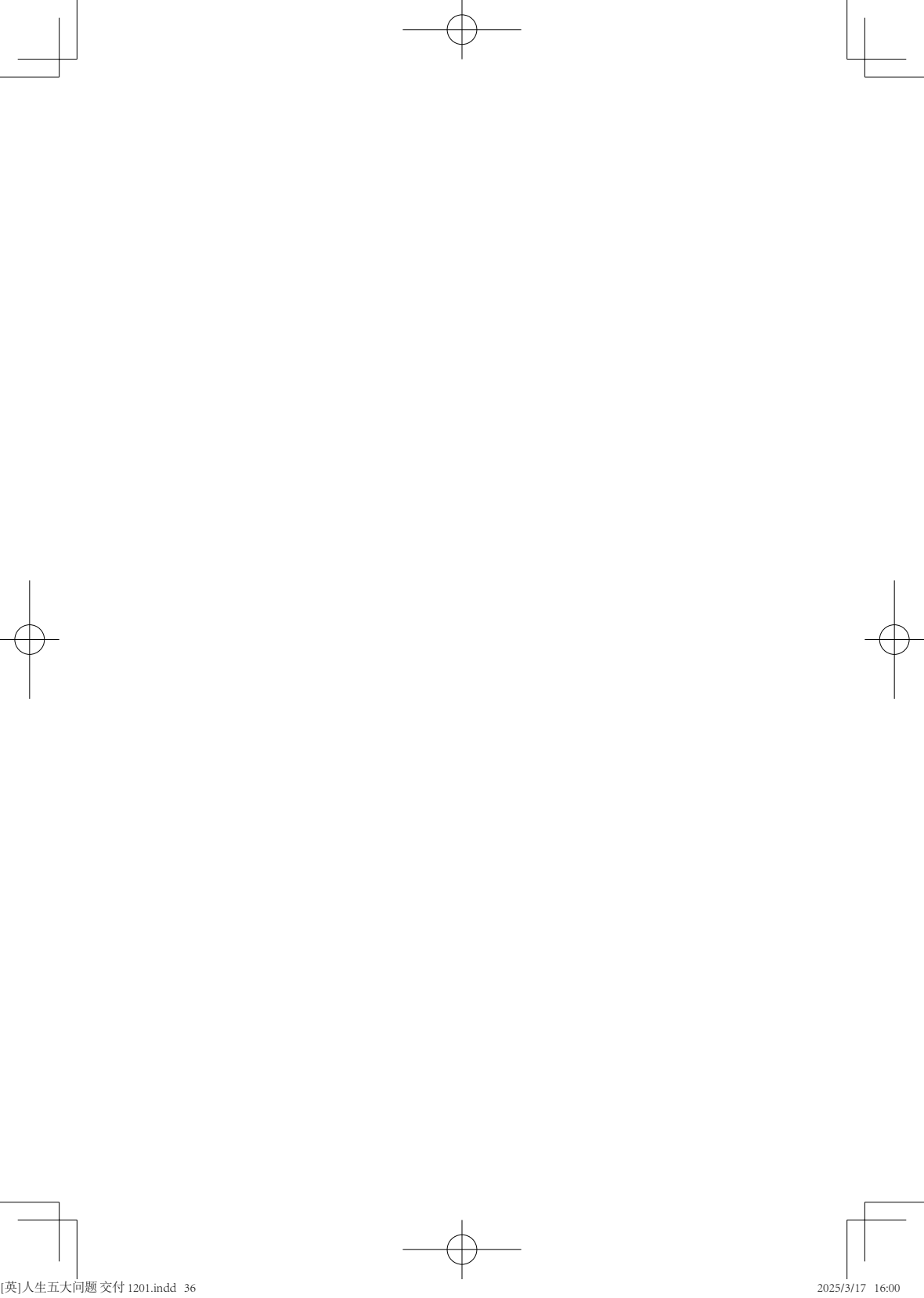




THE FIVE MAJOR QUESTIONS OF LIFE

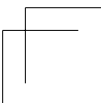
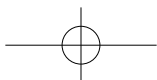
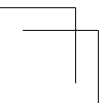
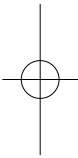
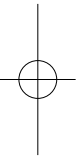
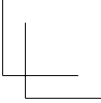
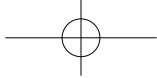
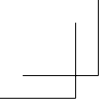
Master Jiqun

Translated by MPI Translation Center



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In this world, everyone encounters various problems. In fact, life is an ongoing process of creating and solving them. Once one problem is resolved, new ones emerge, forming an endless cycle without respite.

Real-world problems are generally solvable with effort. However, when we continue to contemplate life and delve into the depths of our minds, we inevitably face common existential questions: What is happiness? Who am I? Where do we come from, and where do we go after death? What is destiny? What is the purpose of living?

These are humanity's eternal perplexities; without answers, our mind cannot truly find peace. For thousands of years, people have never ceased exploring and seeking, but the answers often come from thought, conjecture, and inference, based on limited personal experiences, rather than from realizing life's truth. Today, I would like to discuss these issues from the perspective of Buddhism.

I

WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

First, we must address the issue of survival, ensuring that our basic needs for food and clothing are met. This pertains to material needs and is relatively straightforward. Beyond this, we want to further attain happiness. This is what everyone cares about and strives for. So, what exactly is happiness? Is it determined by material or by the spirit? If happiness were solely dependent on material possessions, it should be quantifiable. We could create a happiness index based on specific criteria, such as how much money we have or the conditions we meet. But what is the reality?

When most people live in scarcity, they often pin their hopes on improving their material conditions, which fuels their drive to earn money. However, once their initial goals are achieved, they may find that the anticipated happiness doesn't arrive as expected, offering only temporary satisfaction. This suggests that true happiness might not be attainable through material improvement alone.

So, what exactly is happiness? My definition is that happiness is simply an unstable feeling. While this feeling is certainly influenced by material, it is even more closely tied to our mindset and how we define our own needs. This is the crux of the issue. If we lack a healthy mindset or our material desires are endless, happiness will always remain an unattainable illusion. Thus, happiness is not purely material; it is also shaped by our mindset.

To explore happiness in life, we must first clearly understand the relationship between suffering and happiness.

From a Buddhist perspective, life is suffering. Many people fail to understand this definition and thus conclude that Buddhism must be pessimistic. This is because, in our feelings, life is not purely suffering; instead, it is a mixture of both suffering and happiness, joy and sorrow. So, why did the Buddha make such a conclusion?

In fact, Buddhism categorizes human feelings into five types: suffering, pleasure, sorrow, joy, and equanimity. Among them, suffering and pleasure are more related to the physical level, while sorrow and joy are more related to the spiritual level. Although rationality tells us that suffering, pleasure, sorrow, and joy are inevitable aspects of life, who does not instinctively seek pleasure and avoid suffering? In reality, this is the instinct shared by all sentient beings. Humanity's 5,000 years of civilization have also aimed to help us alleviate suffering and attain happiness. But what are the results? We now enjoy an abundance that our ancestors could never have imagined, but has suffering been eliminated? Have afflictions disappeared?

It becomes evident that when Buddhism states that life is suffering, it is not referring to the phenomenon itself but rather making an essential judgment through the phenomenon—suffering is the essence of life, while happiness is merely a temporary relief from suffering. In reality, no form of happiness is inherent. By “inherent,” we mean that this happiness remains constant, no matter when or how long it is enjoyed. Can we find such absolute, unchanging happiness?

In fact, every kind of happiness has a corresponding form of suffering. When we are tormented by hunger and thirst, eating becomes happiness; when we are overwhelmed by the pain of longing, reuniting with loved ones becomes a source of joy; when we cannot sleep at night, falling asleep becomes happiness. Without the preconditions of hunger, thirst, or insomnia, would eating and sleeping become happiness? When we have to eat without feeling hungry or sleep without being tired, the same activities immediately turn into suffering. Only when we experience the suffering of hunger and insomnia do we feel happiness

from their relief. From this perspective, the extent of suffering determines the amount of joy that comes from its relief.

In modern society, material abundance offers us more ways to alleviate suffering than those available to our ancestors. In the past, when people parted, they were often separated by vast distances with little hope of communication, causing their longing to grow day by day. Once reunited, the resulting joy was extremely intense, often described in ancient poetry and literature. But now, when we miss someone, we can simply make a phone call. If hearing their voice isn't enough, we can connect through video chat. Alternatively, we can buy a plane ticket and meet in person quickly. Even if separated by oceans, it is no longer an insurmountable barrier. Yet because it is so easy to alleviate, the suffering caused by longing has become very shallow and limited. Consequently, the joy derived from relief is also shallow and limited.

Because we do not understand the truth of life, we

experience numerous afflictions. Yet, people often fail to see this and believe that changing the world is an effective way to alleviate suffering. This mistaken view leads us to continuously create more afflictions even as we improve material conditions. We can even say that the speed at which we create problems far exceeds the progress we make in improving the world. As a result, although people today enjoy a high level of civilization, they live more exhausting and stressful lives than those in the past. The reason is simple: too many desires and too many afflictions. This is the fundamental source of life's suffering. Only by eliminating our harmful desires and afflictions can we address the root of suffering and achieve a life of liberation and ease.

Other religions often place their hope for happiness in heaven or external salvation. In reality, changing the environment is just a passive measure that does not address the root cause. If the quality of life does not change, the resulting happiness will only be temporary. Because life's delusion persists, it will continuously generate

afflictions and perpetuate the cycle of rebirth. Buddhism teaches that only by realizing the true nature of life can one fundamentally transform delusion into enlightenment and transcend suffering.

Furthermore, Buddhism places particular emphasis on individual effort, which is one of the key distinctions between Buddhism and other religions. Other religions primarily stress external power, offering salvation through faith alone. In contrast, in Buddhist practice, while we do rely on the blessings of buddhas and bodhisattvas, the primary effort must come from within ourselves.

Of course, relying solely on ourselves is not enough; we also need wisdom and methods, following the principle of “relying on oneself as a refuge, and relying on the Dharma as a refuge.” Otherwise, we may often stray onto a misguided path of self-righteousness. Here, the Dharma refers to the path of practice taught by the Buddha, which can be summarized as the Threefold Training (Precepts, Meditation, and Wisdom) and the Noble Eightfold Path

(Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration). Buddhism regards the Triple Gem of “Buddha, Dharma, Sangha” as the objects of refuge. Among them, the Buddha serves as a model of how we can improve our lives, the Dharma is the method of understanding the truth of life, and the Sangha are the teachers who guide us in applying these methods. By taking refuge in the Triple Gem and following the teachings, one can ultimately attain liberation, be free from suffering, and achieve happiness.

II

WHO AM I?

Life holds many unsolved mysteries. Throughout history, people have persistently asked: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? These are humanity's eternal perplexities and the ultimate questions that no one can escape. Because what we care about and focus on the most is this "self." Our entire lives are centered on the self. But have we ever pondered what truly represents the self? Is it merely this physical body? Is it just this five-aggregate body that can speak, move, cry, and laugh?

People fear death because they take this body as the self, believing that the decay of the body means the perishing

of the self. In reality, the physical body is just a transient phase in the ongoing process of life. This constantly changing form cannot represent the true self. Philosophically, the self represents the eternal and indivisible essence of life. However, the body is composed of numerous elements, constantly undergoing metabolization, development, and change. In today's advanced medical age, many body parts can be replaced, reassembled, or even substituted with artificial components. In such a scenario, where can we find an independent, unchanging self? Understanding this principle can lessen our attachment to the body and reduce our fear of death.

Besides the body, the existence of the self is also reflected in two aspects: views and mindset. We live in the same world, but we also live in our own worlds, immersed in our own emotions. Often, we are swayed by these emotions—joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure—and unable to control ourselves freely. Why are we dominated by them? It is because we mistake these emotions for the self—“I like,” “I hate”—and therefore, we start to care, become

attached, and continuously invest our mental energy into them, reinforcing these emotions. Ultimately, we surrender our sovereignty, allowing certain emotions to influence us for extended periods. Some people spend their entire lives chasing after love, while others are driven by hatred throughout their lives. In fact, many of these emotions are like malignant tumors within, originating from unhealthy life developments. Although they grow within us, they are not truly a part of the self. By wisely observing them and seeing that these emotions are mere fleeting images in our mind, we can avoid being trapped by them and becoming puppets manipulated by our emotions.

This requires us to examine ourselves and see clearly the harm that self-attachment brings to our lives. In fact, all afflictions arise from self-attachment. Anything labeled with the self becomes potentially harmful; it can make us love, hate, obsess, and lose the balance of our mind. Once we remove the label of the self, changes in those things will no longer affect us. In this world, many dramatic events occur every day, but only a tiny fraction truly affects us.

Often, we merely sigh and quickly forget. Why? It's simply because we haven't closely connected ourselves with those events and developed a sense of self-attachment towards them.

Furthermore, self-attachment is the root of all disputes and conflicts in the world. It is why we clash with others and find it difficult to achieve harmony. A person with a strong sense of self, consistently placing “me” at the center, is bound to have disharmonious relationships. Conversely, those who diminish their sense of self and always consider others' needs not only gain widespread popularity but also find inner peace, happiness, and freedom. They are free from the fear of losing self-interest or damaging self-esteem. By distancing themselves from the insidious self that lurks everywhere, they also distance themselves from the afflictions that are inseparable from it.

From the perspective of Buddhism, self is the greatest misconception sentient beings hold, a wrong construct

arising from our lack of understanding of the true nature of life. Neither the body nor emotions possess an eternal, unchanging essence and, therefore, cannot represent the so-called self. This is why Buddhism introduces the concept of “no-self (*anatta*).” This teaching is the Buddha’s most significant contribution to sentient beings. Many people may find this no-self perplexing or even frightening: if there is no self, then what is this being that can speak and act? Where will it go? In truth, no-self denies the illusion imposed upon the self, not the phenomena themselves.

In Chan Buddhism, there is a *huatou* (the critical phrase): “What is your original face before a single thought arises?” Every day, we are immersed in an endless stream of thoughts and continuous mental activity. What is the state of life before these thoughts arise? Going further back, what was the state of “I” before coming into this world? This is another important *huatou* in Chan Buddhism: “What was your original face before you were born?” The practice of Chan is precisely this kind of

pursuit, sweeping away the delusions that obscure the mind layer by layer and dismantling existing false assumptions step by step.

Understanding yourself—this is the fundamental problem addressed by Buddhism and also the classic maxim of Western philosophy. Only by thoroughly comprehending the truth of life can we grasp the helm of our journey and become true masters of our lives. Otherwise, we remain slaves to our physical body or emotions, tirelessly toiling for its food and clothing and exhausting our lives for its happiness and aversion. Even more tragically, many people not only labor in vain but also create negative karma, leading to continued suffering and downfall in the future.

III

WHERE DOES LIFE COME FROM, AND WHERE WILL DEATH LEAD?

In the vast universe, Earth is constantly in motion. As the saying goes, “Sitting on the Earth, we travel forty thousand kilometers a day.” So, for us who reside on Earth, where do we come from, and where are we going? Can we live with peace of mind if we can’t find the answer? Of course, many people may not think about this question, either because they are too busy or because they use various methods to distract themselves from this unsolvable mystery. But whether we think about it or not, it’s a reality everyone must eventually face.

In the long course of history, our lifespan is so short; in the vast space, our existence is so tiny. From a materialistic perspective, we find it hard to see the ultimate meaning of life. No matter how much glory we achieve or how much effort we invest, in the end, everything tends toward destruction and turns to dust. But we don't have to be pessimistic. Buddhism tells us that beyond the finite aspect, life also has an infinite aspect. Life is small, yet infinite; fleeting, yet eternal; fragile, yet robust. If we can thoroughly understand the nature of the mind, we will realize that each finite moment is infinite. By understanding this, we can find the ultimate meaning of life.

Exploring the birth and death of sentient beings inevitably involves the cycle of samsara. For most people, life begins with the first cry at birth. However, from the perspective of samsara, this life is just one chapter in the long scroll of existence, merely a relative beginning. Before it lies an infinite past; after it, an endless future. Yet, modern people often find this view difficult to accept. But if we observe life comprehensively, we will see that certain phenomena,

which are difficult to explain scientifically, become clear when viewed through the lens of samsara.

For example, do we believe in a karmic connection between people? In this world, we encounter many individuals. With some, we feel an instant familiarity as if we've known them before; with others, despite seeing them every day, they remain strangers. And then, there are those we inexplicably dislike. What is the reason for this? Many would say it's a karmic connection. But few take the next step to ponder: where does the karmic connection come from? Why do we have different karmic connections with different people? If we believe in samsara, the karmic connection becomes less puzzling. This is because our relationships with others do not begin in this lifetime; they carry many imprints from previous lifetimes. Some were our close friends or family in past lifetimes, while others were our adversaries and enemies. When we meet again in this lifetime, these imprints resurface, driving us to continue the love, hatred, and grudges from the past.

For another example, everyone has different talents and areas of study that they find easy to grasp. We often see that equal study effort does not always yield equal results; the outcomes can be vastly different. Is this because destiny is unfair, or is destiny playing tricks? Neither. It is simply because the starting points in life are different. Those with a higher starting point can easily get ahead with a bit of effort, while those with a lower starting point must work harder to catch up like the “early bird catches the worm.” But what exactly is talent? It is commonly believed to be inherited from parents, but many people’s talents have nothing to do with their parents. From a Buddhist perspective, life has two systems: the material system, which our parents give us, and the spiritual system, which stems from the accumulation of our past lives and continues to influence our future lives, becoming the starting point for the next cycle.

The above two perspectives can help us understand the samsara of life. However, we must also realize that samsara is not only a phenomenon of life; its root lies in our mind.

Buddhism believes that sentient beings continuously cycle through the six realms of existence: heavenly beings, human beings, asuras, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. These six forms of life also represent different states of our mind.

For example, hungry ghosts represent the extreme result of greed. An insatiably greedy person exhibits an intense craving and is never satisfied. When this mental state is infinitely amplified, the manifestation of life that follows is that of a hungry ghost. The animal realm represents a state of ignorance where life is driven purely by basic instincts. If we seek nothing beyond food and procreation, how is such a life any different from that of animals busy with foraging and reproduction? Asuras symbolize aversion and narrow-mindedness. Their obsession with conflict is both a manifestation and an exaggeration of aversion. When this mindset becomes fixed, life becomes like an asura.

It is evident that the state of one's life is also an extension

of specific thoughts, gradually developed over time. In society, people in different professions often exhibit different behaviors: scholars have a scholarly demeanor, and business people have a commercial flair. These differences manifest their different mental activities, extending from inner thoughts to outer behaviors. Samsara is also a result of our mind, not something imposed on us by others. Similarly, the qualities of buddhas and bodhisattvas are not achieved without effort. Their boundless wisdom and compassion are gradually cultivated, developed and fulfilled throughout their life journey.

Where does the future of life lie? Where is our final destination? The answer lies in our current mindsets; it depends on what we are doing and thinking right now. The current state of our life is the result of the accumulation from past lifetimes. The development of future life will come from the accumulation in this lifetime. Therefore, Buddhism greatly emphasizes present efforts, as they serve as the key link between the past and the future, and the focal point for changing our destiny.

If we don't understand where life comes from, life is rootless; if we don't know where death leads, life is aimless. Those who cannot find their roots and destination will naturally lack a sense of security, which is a common psychological issue in modern times. How can we find security? Many try to solve this by accumulating wealth or buying insurance. However, in today's world of frequent disasters and constant upheaval, how fragile and vulnerable these safeguards truly are! Let us bring our outward-seeking mind back to the present, for true security lies not elsewhere but in our current state of mind. By mastering the present, we can control the future and steer the course of our lives. When we have the ability to manage all of these aspects, what is there to feel insecure or fearful about?

IV

WHAT IS DESTINY?

Do people have a destiny? And who decides everything? Many other religions believe that an external deity or a specific mysterious force determines destiny. However, Buddhism believes that destiny is the natural law of life development, and the power that determines this law resides still within ourselves. In other words, destiny reflects the cause and effect of life development, with different mindsets as the cause and the resulting outcomes as the effect. The type of actions we take determines the direction of our destiny. These actions encompass the three types of karmas: physical (body), verbal (speech), and mental (mind). Physical karma is what we do, verbal

karma is what we say, and mental karma is what we think.

Buddhism also believes that the causality arising from actions, words, and thoughts extends across the three periods of lifetimes: past, present, and future. However, modern people find this difficult to accept or resonate with deeply. Therefore, now I primarily advocate for the causality of the mind and the present moment.

We may temporarily set aside the causality of the three lifetimes, but we cannot ignore the causality of the mind and the present moment. When we perform good deeds or even just generate a single kind thought, the resulting happiness may not manifest immediately, but the inner joy it brings can be felt right away. Everything we have done or thought leaves an imprint in our mind and forms a strength. This strength is precisely the cause that impacts the future direction of our life, because our thoughts form habits, then gradually solidify into attitudes, and ultimately lead to different personalities and characters.

Everyone has many different thoughts active in their mind, some positive and others negative. The difference lies in their strengths. If we allow them to develop unchecked, we are most likely controlled by self-attachment and dominated by its negative forces. Everyone cares most about themselves, because self-attachment is our instinct—an instinct we protect without even thinking. The purpose of spiritual practice is to help us correct our course, shifting from passivity to proactivity, selectively strengthening positive mindsets, and gradually weakening or eliminating negative ones.

Where do habits come from? They arise simply from repeatedly doing or thinking about something until it becomes natural. For example, we grow accustomed to seeing the same people, performing the same tasks, and eating the same type of foods day after day. Once these habits are established, they gradually shape a particular life pattern, forming our character. In essence, character is the accumulation of habits that evolve into our personality and, ultimately, the quality of our life. Upon closer

observation, it becomes clear that many aspects of our current character are closely tied to our daily habits.

These habits and character determine the different directions of our destiny. Therefore, destiny is not a gift from the heavens, nor does it occur at random. It is set by ourselves and shaped by our actions. Buddhism refers to this factor that determines destiny as “karma.” Karma can be seen as the programming of our life. Creating causes of hell is like writing a program that leads to hellish experiences. Planting wholesome causes for human and heavenly realms is like writing a program for entering their respective paths. By writing different programs, we enter different worlds and life trajectories. Therefore, to change our destiny, we must start by reprogramming our mindsets. If we can transform our mindsets and habits, we can reshape our destiny. Conversely, if we are unable to alter our character and habits, then changing our destiny is merely empty talk.

Our mind has two characteristics: the ability to choose

and the ability to create. This is what makes humans the most intelligent beings. A table cannot make choices, a house cannot make choices, and even animals only have relatively weak abilities to choose. Humans, however, possess rationality and abstract thinking, which enable us not only to make choices and judgments but also to create based on those decisions. It is precisely because of these two characteristics that humanity has created thousands of years of civilization. While transforming the world, human destiny has also evolved. From this perspective, the mind is the master of destiny.

However, in many cases, once certain behaviors become habits, the mind unconsciously falls into automatic patterns and becomes controlled by them. Changing these habits is not easy, even if we want to. This is where spiritual practice comes in, and it indeed presents a real challenge, as habits are formed over time and hold deeply ingrained power. This power is like gravity, anchoring us to the Earth, making it difficult to transcend and break free from our unenlightened state.

A professor once said he wanted to study Buddhism, but the initial reason was to quit smoking. He had been smoking for thirty years, and nicotine had a strong hold on him. However, he was diagnosed with lung abnormalities, and the doctor warned him that continuing to smoke would quickly lead to severe consequences. Although he cherished his life, he was exhausted by the daily struggle with nicotine's temptation, and he hoped to find a solution through studying Buddhism.

This reason may seem absurd, but it shows that once a habit is formed, it exerts firm control over our body and mind, making it difficult to change without firm resolution. Besides determination, we also need to understand the laws of life development. Only by following these laws can we effectively plan for the future and change our destiny.

V

WHY DO WE LIVE?

Why do we live? What is the value of living? These are important questions that no one can avoid.

In everything we do, we have some sort of reason. We eat because we are hungry; we sleep because we are tired; we seek companionship because we feel lonely. But isn't it even more necessary to have a reason for living? For most people, finding a reason seems easy, such as living for their children, families, or careers. Any reason can suffice for them because they don't contemplate much about life. However, upon deeper reflection, we find it hard to be satisfied with these answers and the superficial values.

Thus, thoughtful individuals often struggle to find a reason for living, as the reasons generally accepted by society do not hold up to scrutiny. What may be important to some is insignificant to others; what seems vital at one stage of life may hold no value at another. Clearly, these are not the ultimate answers we seek. This is why many artists or philosophers can become so distressed that they see no way out. For those who prioritize spiritual fulfillment, it is difficult to live comfortably without finding a convincing reason.

At a deeper level, the life values that most people pursue cannot withstand the scrutiny of death. No matter how great their career or wealth is, they are as fragile and fleeting as bubbles in the face of death. When our careers end, what do they leave behind for our lives? Looking back at history, even those who were emperors and held great power eventually turned to dust and vanished. Therefore, everything external is transient. When these become memories, the impact they have on our lives is what we should genuinely value.

Mencius said, “Everyone can become Yao or Shun (Yao and Shun were legendary sage-kings in ancient China, renowned for their wisdom, virtue, and benevolent rule. They are often cited as examples of ideal rulers in Chinese culture.)” Buddhism believes that every being possesses latent noble qualities similar to those of buddhas and bodhisattvas, which is the Buddha nature inherent in all sentient beings. Our mind indeed generates various afflictions, but it also holds the ability to eliminate them. If we do not develop this ability, samsara will be endless, as ignorance is the perpetual motion machine that creates suffering, causing us to drift aimlessly in the sea of suffering and lose our way.

The meaning of life lies in understanding and developing our latent noble qualities. Only by doing so can we upgrade the version of our life and provide ultimate and enduring help to all beings. This is precisely what Buddhism refers to as enlightening oneself while enlightening others, benefiting oneself while benefiting others.

Buddhism teaches that life consists of delusion, karma, and suffering. Veiled by our ignorance, we fail to see the true nature of life. Unaware of what happiness is, we mistakenly take suffering as joy and stray from true happiness. Lacking an understanding of who we are, we cling to a false sense of self, which leads to endless troubles. Not knowing where we come from or where we go after death, and lacking insight into destiny, we struggle to make the right plans for the future that nurture the healthy development of life. Without understanding the purpose of life, we may become fixated on immediate trivial gains while neglecting the ultimate value of life, or we lose the motivation to live due to the inability to find the right reason. Thus, exploring and resolving these eternal questions holds great significance for achieving true happiness in life.