



# THE WORLD OF BUDDHISM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PSYCHOLOGY

Master Jiqun

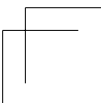
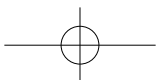
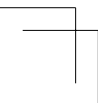
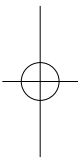
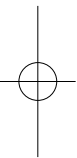
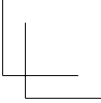
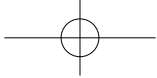
Translated by MPI Translation Center

**Lectured at the Institute  
for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Religion,  
Beijing Normal University, 2013**

---

## Contents

<b>I</b>	<b>The Principle of Buddhist Psychotherapy .....</b>	<b>50</b>
1.	The Four Noble Truths .....	52
2.	Sravakayana and Bodhisattvayana .....	59
3.	Causes, Conditions, and Causality .....	61
4.	The Buddha's Major Discoveries .....	65
<b>II</b>	<b>Buddhism's Understanding of the Mind .....</b>	<b>68</b>
1.	Consciousness and Subconsciousness .....	69
2.	The Psychology of Afflictions and Liberation .....	75
3.	True Mind .....	84
<b>III</b>	<b>Buddhist Solutions to Psychological Problems .....</b>	<b>88</b>
1.	Taking Refuge .....	89
2.	Cultivating Aspiration .....	91
3.	Practicing Precepts and Repentance .....	94
4.	Generosity, Patience, and Right View .....	96
<b>IV</b>	<b>Final Remarks .....</b>	<b>99</b>



I am delighted to be here at Beijing Normal University, a prestigious institution in the field of psychology. Today, I want to discuss a topic that I find very meaningful: “The World of Buddhism from the Perspective of Psychology.” Buddhism has long been regarded as the study of the mind, and is deeply valued in China as a guide for self-cultivation. As Buddhism’s core focus is on the mind, it addresses a variety of psychological phenomena and aims to purify and improve the mind. In this light, practicing Buddhism is essentially about cultivating the mind.

Buddhism offers a wealth of theories on mind cultivation. It encompasses three major traditions: Theravada Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism. Within the Chinese tradition alone, there are eight major schools, each with its own unique practices. Each school provides a complete system of theory and practice for understanding and improving the mind, representing a distinct approach to Buddhist psychology. These schools are integral to traditional Chinese culture and have greatly contributed to the mental well-being of the people.

Mr. Liang Qichao once said, “Buddhism is the psychology of the East.” Compared to Western psychology, which has developed in the past two hundred years, Buddhism has a rich history spanning over 2,500 years. Over this long period, generations of Buddhist disciples have followed the Buddha’s teachings to overcome afflictions, cultivate their minds, and attain enlightenment. In modern times, this ancient wisdom—rich in practical experience—has begun to influence Western psychology significantly. Psychologists like Carl Jung had incorporated Buddhist

principles into their theoretical work and clinical practices to varying degrees. Among these principles, mindfulness has the greatest impact.

Thus, understanding Buddhist principles not only helps to gain insights into Eastern psychology but also enhances our understanding of Western psychology. Next, I will elaborate on three points.

# I

## THE PRINCIPLE OF BUDDHIST PSYCHOTHERAPY

Buddhism is both an educational system and a form of psychological study. It analyzes psychological phenomena—explaining what a healthy mind is, identifying the symptoms of inner illness, and providing specific treatment methods.

In sutras, the Buddha is often likened to a doctor, and sentient beings to patients. He is called the “Great King of Medicine” because he can accurately diagnose the symptoms, understand the properties of the medicine, prescribe the right treatment, and ensure that his patients



take it willingly and happily. But why are sentient beings considered patients? Does this imply that we are all sick? It's important to note that this illness is not of the body but of the mind. In Buddhism, this illness is defined as greed, aversion, and ignorance. This concept differs from Western psychology, which focuses on mental conditions that deviate from the norm and cause various obstacles. Yet, an ordinary person's greed, aversion, and ignorance do not fall into the scope of psychological treatment.

In Buddhism, as long as we are not free from the three poisons of greed, aversion, and ignorance, we are not truly healthy but rather patients trapped in the cycle of samsara. The Buddha himself was such a patient, but through practice, he ultimately eradicated his afflictions, realized his true nature, and became enlightened, fully understanding the truth of life. He also discovered the Dharma to eliminate greed, aversion, and ignorance.

Therefore, Dharma is a method to treat inner illnesses, and Buddhist practice is the healing process.

## 1. The Four Noble Truths

Buddhism offers many methods for addressing psychological problems, with the sutras containing a total of 84,000 teachings. With such a multitude of teachings, how can one engage and navigate the vast sea of Dharma? Is there a fundamental guideline for understanding the profound Buddhist teachings?

After attaining enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha distilled Buddhist practice into the Four Noble Truths—Suffering, Cause of Suffering, Cessation of Suffering, and the Path—which are based on his own practice experiences, the problems of existence, and their solutions. To illustrate these truths, he used the doctors' treatment process at the time. First, diagnose the illness accurately, then identify its root cause. Next, assess the expected outcome of the treatment and understand what a healthy state looks like. Finally, provide an effective treatment plan. This is also the basic principle of Buddhist psychotherapy.

The Four Noble Truths cover the two-fold causality: the causality of samsara and the causality of liberation.

Samsara and liberation are the core concerns of Indian culture. Indians generally believe that life is an endless cycle of samsara, filled with afflictions and suffering, lacking freedom and peace. Thus, the ultimate goal of Indian philosophy and religion is to understand samsara and bring it to an end. Indians refer to this as liberation, which means the cessation of the cycle of life filled with delusion and afflictions.

Buddhism, as a whole, addresses this issue through two main aspects. First, Suffering and the Cause of Suffering in the Four Noble Truths provide a correct understanding of samsara. Second, the Cessation of Suffering and the Path guide us toward liberation from samsara.

Suffering explains the pains of life, while the Cause of Suffering elaborates on their causes. Only by facing reality and identifying the root cause can we ultimately

relieve suffering. This is similar to treating a disease: we must first understand its symptoms and causes and then apply the correct treatment. If the treatment does not target the root cause, no matter how much medicine is taken or how long the treatment lasts, it will not help and may even worsen the condition.

Buddhism says life is suffering, which has led some people to misunderstand Buddhism as pessimistic. I once posted on Weibo: “The true nature of life is free and joyful. It is only due to delusion that life is filled with afflictions and suffering. This is why Buddhism says life is suffering. Once delusions and afflictions cease, life will return to its original purity, freedom, and happiness.” Here, suffering refers to the state of an ordinary being. No matter how much superficial and temporary happiness there is, the essence of this deluded life is always suffering. Why is this? Because true happiness remains, no matter when or how long we enjoy it. Can we find such happiness in this world? What we call happiness is merely a temporary balance when a certain need is met. However, if we have

no needs to begin with, or if what we obtain exceeds our capacity to handle, the balance is broken—and happiness turns into suffering. In fact, balance is temporary, while imbalance is long-lasting.

In Buddhism, another way to describe delusion is ignorance. It is like heavy smog, obscuring the truth of life and the world. Because we can't see clearly, we form incorrect judgments about ourselves and the world. Furthermore, we become attached to these misconceptions, continuously generating afflictions and suffering. In this sense, life's delusion is an endless source of suffering. Therefore, Buddhism believes that a life rooted in ignorance and delusion is inherently filled with suffering. This is the causality of samsara.

To resolve suffering, we must not only find its root cause but also know the state of health after recovery. In the Four Noble Truths, the Cessation of Suffering refers to the state after eliminating delusion and afflictions, known as nirvana in Buddhism. This is the deep,

ultimate, and pervasive tranquility that follows the cessation of a restless mind. Moreover, this tranquility continuously radiates joy. So, how do we eliminate suffering? The Path provides the method.

So, the two-fold causality in the Four Noble Truths starts by presenting the result and then tracing back to the cause. First, we see the reality of suffering and recognize that a life rooted in delusion is filled with suffering. Next, we realize that suffering stems from the deluded and afflicted nature of life. Third, we understand that a healthy life is awakened, free, and joyful, known as nirvana. Finally, we learn how to attain nirvana.

Although Buddhism has many schools, their understanding of suffering and its causes is fundamentally consistent. Among the different methods to address suffering, the core is centered around the Noble Eightfold Path: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. They are further

grouped into three categories: morality (sila), concentration (samadhi), and wisdom (prajna).

First, wisdom includes Right View, which means objectively seeing the world as it is. Buddhism teaches that correct understanding leads to wisdom, while incorrect understanding causes afflictions. Essentially, all afflictions arise from incorrect understanding, and only through cultivating wisdom can we establish the right view to eliminate afflictions and attain truth. Therefore, the right view is foundational in all Buddhist sects. For instance, the concepts of dependent origination, impermanence, and the Buddha-nature of all beings represent their right views. Guided by these right views, we can approach practice from various angles and achieve enlightenment.

Second, morality consists of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. These principles refer to proper speech, ethical behavior, and rightful occupation, helping us establish a healthy lifestyle. Why are people's minds so chaotic today? Why is our environment deteriorating?

These issues are closely tied to our current way of life. Buddhism teaches that a simple, healthy lifestyle is the foundation for developing a positive mindset and fostering a harmonious ecological environment.

Third, concentration includes Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. After establishing the right views, we must internalize them through meditation. In life, many people study religion or philosophy, amassing extensive knowledge and speaking eloquently, yet their character remains unchanged. Why? Because they haven't internalized these teachings or taken them as a starting point to address life's problems, nor have they made the effort to practice and verify them in their lives. No matter how much knowledge they acquire, it only adds a layer of cultural embellishment, yet their mindset and character stay the same, with no real improvement. Therefore, the key to transforming Right View into inner strength lies in meditation.

In summary, all Buddhist practices are grounded in the



Threefold Training of Morality, Concentration, and Wisdom. This core is actualized through the Noble Eightfold Path, which helps resolve inner delusion and afflictions. In Buddhism, the complete cessation of these afflictions is known as nirvana, representing the end of samsara.

## 2. Sravakayana and Bodhisattvayana

Buddhist practice includes Sravakayana and Bodhisattvayana. Sravakayana seeks individual liberation by renouncing worldly life. It focuses on refraining from negative forces through teachings on impermanence, suffering, and emptiness. When viewed alone, it may give the impression that Buddhism is pessimistic, but it reveals the reality of the world. We expect everything related to us to be eternal, yet all things are in constant flux. We yearn for worldly pleasures, but they are, in essence, forms of suffering. We believe that everything is solid and permanent, but in reality, nothing in this world exists inherently independent or unchanging. Everything

is merely a combination of conditions, an illusion shaped by causes, conditions, and causality.

However, the Bodhisattvayana focuses not only on overcoming negative forces but also on manifesting positive qualities. It recognizes two dimensions of life: one, a life of suffering born of ignorance and delusion; the other, a life of happiness through inner awakening. It speaks of the magnificence of the Pure Land, the boundless compassion of bodhisattvas, and the aspiration to benefit all sentient beings for countless future lifetimes. Its broad-mindedness and compassion make our lives hopeful and encouraging. This illustrates the difference in practice between the Sravakayana and the Bodhisattvayana.

Additionally, the Sravakayana regards nirvana as the final destination. Once one eliminates the delusion and afflictions of life, “What has been done is complete; there will be no return to the cycle of birth and death.” However, Bodhisattvayana practitioners not only aim to liberate

themselves from samsara and attain enlightenment, but also strive to help all beings achieve enlightenment.

This is why the Sravakayana and the Bodhisattvayana are also called the Lesser Vehicle and the Greater Vehicle respectively. “Vehicle” here symbolizes a means of transport: some vehicles carry only a single person, while others can bear countless beings from the shore of samsara to the shore of enlightenment.

### 3. Causes, Conditions, and Causality

The Buddhist approach to treating psychological ailments is rooted in the principle of “causes, conditions, and causality,” which is also how Buddhism explains the world. This wisdom is not derived from logical deduction or meditative contemplation but was directly realized by the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, revealing the true nature of all phenomena. In the *Agama Sutra*, the Buddha says: “With causes and conditions, the world arises; without them, it ceases.” This means that every

phenomenon arises from specific causes and conditions, as taught in the gatha: “As is the cause, so is the effect.” The Buddha further elucidated the following teachings: “As this exists, that arises; as this is born, that is born; as this does not exist, that does not exist; as this ceases, that ceases.” In other words, if specific causes and conditions arise, a corresponding result follows. If the causes and conditions disappear, the result also vanishes. Similarly, for psychological issues, we must identify the root cause in order to effectively and precisely resolve them.

We should apply this principle to life’s issues as well. For instance, in addressing suffering, humanity has been striving for five thousand years to escape pain and seek happiness. In Buddhist terms, this means to be free from suffering and attain joy. This pursuit is a common goal across all civilizations, including science, technology, literature, art, philosophy, and religion. Over the past century, material civilization has advanced rapidly, providing us with living conditions that were once unimaginable. Yet, modern individuals have not found relief

from suffering. Instead, they often experience increased exhaustion and afflictions. This exhaustion arises from having too many desires, leading to endless comparisons and insatiable greed, while afflictions stem from excessive attachment, leading to constant fear of gain and loss, and overwhelming pressure. It is clear that merely improving the external environment cannot fundamentally resolve these issues. No matter how much effort is made, such actions only address the symptoms rather than the root causes.

Apart from excessive desires, erroneous views are another source of suffering. Buddhism regards rationality as a double-edged sword: while “knowledge” can be “the gateway to wondrous wisdom,” it can also become “the root of all misfortunes.” Throughout history, intense hatred, bloody massacres, and brutal wars have often resulted from erroneous views. This illustrates that erroneous views not only bring suffering to individuals but can also lead to great disasters for humanity, even catastrophic destruction.

In spiritual practice, without the guidance of the right view, the methods employed cannot be effective. In traditional Indian religions, asceticism and meditation are highly revered. Buddhist sutras document numerous instances of non-Buddhist ascetics engaging in severe physical self-torment. This practice persists today; for example, an ascetic has kept his arm raised for 37 years without lowering it. They believe that such practices prevent desires from arising and purify the body and mind, thereby escaping the cycle of samsara. Additionally, they place great importance on meditation, believing that through deep concentration, desires can be subdued and worldly existence transcended.

The Buddha also experimented with these methods in his time, enduring six years of asceticism and reaching the pinnacle of meditation attainable then. Ultimately, he realized that these methods were like pressing grass with a stone. When people become exhausted from ascetic practices or experience the bliss of deep meditation, their desires may lie dormant for a time. But they are not

truly resolved or eradicated; they are like withered weeds that, given the right conditions, will “grow again with the spring wind.”

Therefore, merely suppressing external symptoms does not provide a thorough solution. The Buddha taught us to explore the true causes of suffering, find targeted treatments, and apply the appropriate remedies. This is the core Buddhist approach to addressing psychological problems. The concept seems very simple, as if everyone knows it. However, without a profound understanding of life, it is difficult to identify the real causes. One merely addresses superficial symptoms—like treating the head for a headache or the foot for a foot ache. As a result, one is always treating yet still suffering, never achieving true healing.

#### **4. The Buddha's Major Discoveries**

Upon attaining enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha realized that every being has the potential for

awakening and the capacity for self-liberation, and can fully achieve self-healing in their life. Life is inherently pure, joyful, and free, but it is veiled by ignorance, giving rise to delusions, and afflictions. I think this discovery is more significant than any scientific finding because it brings hope to life.

From the perspective of psychotherapy, this realization serves as a tranquilizer, helping us understand that no matter how many problems, afflictions, or suffering we currently face, a bright future is always possible as long as we are willing to change. This is because our true nature is fundamentally pure, not defiled; complete, not flawed; and free, not dependent.

The core of the Bodhisattva path is to guide us in developing the innate potential for enlightenment within. In his final teaching, the Buddha says in the *Lotus Sutra*, “The buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, appear in this world solely for one great cause.” This mission is to guide all sentient beings to realize the Buddha’s wisdom. In



other words, it is to lead them to unlock, discover, and fully attain the wisdom of the Buddha. This is because this wisdom lies within each of us as an inherent treasure. Therefore, the practice involves cultivating and applying this wisdom to achieve self-healing.

From a Buddhist perspective, true health comes from completely eliminating delusions and afflictions while fully awakening our potential for enlightenment. This potential embodies the great wisdom and compassion shared by all buddhas throughout time. When these qualities are fully manifested, we become like buddhas and bodhisattvas. In this sense, we are our own best healers.

## II

### BUDDHISM'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE MIND

Buddhism offers exceptionally rich teachings on the mind and its cultivation. The entire *Tripitaka* and the Twelve Divisions of the Buddhist Canon center on the mind. It is divided into two main aspects: the deluded mind and the true mind. The deluded mind represents our current mental state, shaped by delusion and giving rise to various mental phenomena, like shifting clouds. Yet behind these clouds lies a clear, untainted, and unchanging sky. These two aspects of the mind offer different entry points for spiritual practice.

## 1. Consciousness and Subconsciousness

The Agama and Yogacara sutras and treatises primarily focus on the deluded mind. The Yogacara school, in particular, provides a detailed analysis, categorizing mental activities into the Eight Consciousnesses and Fifty-One Mental Factors.

The Eight Consciousnesses include the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind consciousnesses, as well as the seventh, Manas consciousness, and the eighth, Alaya consciousness. The first six operate within conscious awareness, with the sixth being the most active and expansive, and the easiest to recognize. The seventh and eighth, however, belong to the subconscious realm.

The seventh Manas consciousness can be understood in psychological terms as latent self-consciousness. Why do people instinctively center everything on the self? How does this self-consciousness arise? Buddhism explains that it is because the seventh Manas consciousness grasps

the eighth Alaya consciousness, mistaking it for the “self.”

The Alaya consciousness is the vessel of life, akin to an infinitely vast storehouse. Throughout the endless cycle of life, every action—whether of body, speech, or mind—leaves an imprint within this consciousness, forming mental forces called seeds. When an action is repeated, the corresponding mental force becomes stronger. Yogacara school describes this process as: “seeds give rise to manifestations, and manifestations reinforce seeds.” Over time, these mental forces can dominate one’s inner world. For example, indulging in greed will cause it to intensify, just as habitual anger will make it grow stronger. Conversely, consistently cultivating compassion will allow it to flourish. In the end, what you choose to nurture will determine who you become.

Buddhism teaches that life is ever-flowing, stretching from the endless past into the infinite future. During this process, it is the mental forces stored in the Alaya consciousness that drive life forward. Therefore, the

Alaya consciousness is continuous yet not unchanging; it carries imprints accumulated from life experiences, thereby shaping the direction of future lives.

At the same time, the seeds stored in the Alaya consciousness serve as the foundation for mental activities. Our various preferences—such as being skilled in some things and not others, or liking certain people while disliking others—are due to the corresponding seeds planted in our minds. When you feel an immediate sense of aversion upon seeing someone, it is these seeds at work, producing dislike and rejection. If these seeds were not active, seeing would simply be an act of seeing, without triggering further mental reactions.

The Alaya consciousness is the carrier of samsara, permeating the entire process of life's continuity without pause, never ceasing even for a moment, whereas the first six consciousnesses cease at times. For example, although the mind consciousness operates over a broad range, it does not function during deep sleep, unconsciousness,

or in meditative states, such as *asamjna-samapatti*<sup>1</sup> and *nirodha-samapatti*<sup>2</sup>. However, when the mind consciousness ceases to function, one does not die because the Alaya consciousness continues to sustain the body.

The Alaya consciousness differs from a soul, which is considered eternal and unchanging. The Alaya consciousness itself is continually evolving, as is the physical body it sustains. This is why spiritual practice holds its value. If life were fixed and unchangeable, what would be the point of practice? It is precisely because life can be transformed that we must engage in spiritual practice

---

1. *Asamjna-samapatti* means non-conceptual concentration, or concentration of no thought. This state of concentration is the cause of being born into no-thought heaven—wherein all mental actions and functions of the first site consciousness are stopped.

2. *Nirodha-samapatti* means concentration of total cessation. It is an extremely deep state of meditative concentration where both sensory and conceptualizing mental functions are completely extinguished. When this concentration is attained, the consciousness is also extinguished, which enables the practitioner to be reborn into the highest heaven. This concentration has the power to extinguish mental functions in the first six consciousnesses, as well as the afflicted *manas*, the seventh consciousness.

to change our negative qualities, turn defilements into purity, and transform consciousness into wisdom.

Although the Alaya consciousness flows in a similar and continuous stream, it is neither truly eternal nor does it fully cease. However the Manas consciousness perceives it as eternal and unchanging, further grasping it as the “self.” This gives rise to an innate sense of self, which is the root of all problems. All human afflictions stem from this self-attachment, which is why Buddhism advocates the practice of “no-self.”

Many people fear the concept of “no-self,” mistakenly believing that it means they no longer exist. This often leads to questions like, “If there is no self, who is practicing, and who attains Buddhahood?” In truth, the Buddhist teaching of “no-self” does not deny our existence; rather, it corrects our misunderstandings and attachments to the phenomena of life.

What do we mean by the “self”? It could be an attachment

to our identity, status, the body, or career. In reality, these are only temporarily connected to us. Yet, once we identify them as “self,” we develop strong dependencies and attachments, fearing that we will lose them.

Clinging to identity as the “self,” we fear its change; clinging to status as the “self,” we fear its loss; clinging to the body as the “self,” we dread its aging and illness; clinging to career as the “self,” we worry over its success and failure. When they change in ways we don’t expect, we may feel sorrow and even lose the anchor of our life. This clearly shows that our dependency on and attachment to external things are the root causes of suffering. It is for this reason that the Buddhist teaching of “no-self” aims to negate this wrong perception of the “false self” and help us discover our true self—our original nature.

It is clear that, compared to consciousness, subconsciousness plays a far more important role in our lives. As Western psychologist Freud also said, consciousness is merely the small tip of the iceberg, while the



subconsciousness is the vast presence beneath the surface.

## 2. The Psychology of Afflictions and Liberation

Psychology consists of various branches, such as educational psychology and clinical psychology, each focusing on specific aspects of the mind. In terms of its function, Buddhism can be seen as a psychology of liberation. This is because understanding the deluded mind is just a means—the goal is to help us recognize the mental elements that make up samsara and the mental factors essential for moving from samsara to liberation.

Buddhism classifies mental states into three main areas. The first includes ordinary mental states, often discussed in general psychology. For example, within the five aggregates—form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—there are three types of ordinary mental states. “Sensation,” which refers to feelings, includes five types: pain, pleasure, sorrow, joy, and equanimity.

Among them, pain and pleasure are primarily physical, while sorrow and joy are more mental. Equanimity refers to a state where there is neither pain nor pleasure, neither sorrow nor joy. “Perception” involves thinking and belongs to rational cognition. “Mental formations” refer to volition—the readiness to act after reasoning. Additionally, the Yogacara school mentions Five Omnipresent Mental Factors—Attention, Contact, Sensation, Perception, and Volition—which are universal mental activities present in all times, places, and actions.

The second is unwholesome mental states, which Buddhism calls afflictions—forces that disturb the tranquility of the mind. Although the mind is naturally pure, free, and joyful, when afflictions invade, its peace is lost. For example, when emotions such as hatred, greed, or jealousy arise, the mind becomes turbulent, and we may even lose rationality and act impulsively.

There are many types of afflictions. According to the Yogacara school, the primary afflictions include six

fundamental ones: greed, aversion, ignorance, arrogance, doubt, and wrong views.

These fundamental afflictions are accompanied by twenty secondary afflictions, which are grouped into three categories:

- (a) Ten minor afflictions: anger, resentment, concealment, vexation, jealousy, stinginess, deceit, flattery, harm, pride;
- (b) Two medium afflictions: shamelessness, lack of remorse;
- (c) Eight major afflictions: restlessness, drowsiness, lack of faith, laziness, heedlessness, forgetfulness, distraction, incorrect awareness.

Among the fundamental afflictions, greed, aversion, and ignorance are the most prominent, referred to by Buddhism as the “Three Poisons.” Ignorance refers to

delusion, which obscures our understanding and prevents us from seeing the true nature of life and the root cause of samsara. Because we cannot see clearly, we fall into misguided thinking and lose sight of our true selves—mistaking external things as part of ourselves, and becoming further attached to them. This attachment fuels greed, making us believe that these things will be ours forever. However, we must realize that the world is in constant flux, and nothing is permanent. This impermanence is a natural law of the universe. If we accept and align with it, we can remain at ease no matter what arises. But once greed takes hold, it gives rise to anxiety and fear.

Modern people often feel insecure—why is that? Is our survival more precarious than in the past? Clearly not. The main reasons are twofold: first, the vast flow of information makes us more aware of life's impermanence; second, we are unwilling to lose what we already have. In truth, the more we cling to and possess, the greater our fear of loss. Attachment breeds resistance and conflict whenever what we cherish is threatened. This aversion

carries immense destructive power, as the sutra says: “The moment anger arises, a million obstacles unfold.”

In short, all mental illnesses are linked to greed, aversion, and ignorance. Their root lies in ignorance, which is manifested as greed and aversion. Of course, from a psychological perspective, not all greed and aversion lead to mental illness. As long as they remain moderate, do not create psychological barriers, or distort a person’s character, they are actually considered normal. This marks a key distinction between Buddhism and psychology.

The third is a wholesome state of mind, aligned with liberation, such as morality, concentration, and wisdom. Among these, wisdom is fundamental—it is the correct understanding of life and the world. Embodying this understanding and firmly believing in it is what Buddhism calls the right view, the foundation of right mindfulness. In recent years, Western psychology has placed great emphasis on mindfulness, integrating it into psychotherapy, education, healthcare, and other fields.

Psychology often focuses on the technical aspects of mindfulness, such as how to focus the mind or practice it. Of course, meditation itself is a technique for training the mind, but this practice cannot be divorced from Right View. According to the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Mindfulness must be rooted in Right View and supported by a healthy lifestyle. Without this foundation, mindfulness becomes an isolated technique; even if practiced, its benefits remain limited, unable to fulfill its true potential. Therefore, in the psychology of liberation, the practice of mindfulness must be based on Right View.

Different Buddhist traditions have different interpretations of Right View, and accordingly, the meaning of Right Mindfulness also differs. Typically, it is understood in terms of the moral quality of thoughts: craving the five desires and being attached to the six sense objects are considered unwholesome, whereas contemplating the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha is regarded as wholesome. In Theravada Buddhism, however, Right Mindfulness

refers to the mind's ability to observe and be aware of thoughts as they arise, transcending the concept of good and evil. In Chan Buddhism, the highest level of Right Mindfulness is the realization of emptiness—abiding in emptiness amid arising thoughts. Ultimately, spiritual practice is about discerning which thoughts to nourish. With different insights, the depth of Right Mindfulness practice also varies.

After Right Mindfulness comes concentration—choosing a mental state, dwelling in it, and repeatedly returning to it until it becomes the most stable, habitual state of the mind. In concentration practice, one must eliminate two hindrances: restlessness and dullness. Modern people are generally restless, constantly talking, doing, or seeking distractions, never finding peace. Even when the body is still, the mind is often filled with scattered thoughts—this is a direct manifestation of restlessness. Dullness, on the other hand, refers to a state of mental fog, a lack of clarity, and an inability to focus. People today are mostly caught in one of these two states.

This requires practicing meditation to focus the mind on a single object, such as the breath or a buddha's name, allowing distracting thoughts to lose their footing and cease to arise naturally. Just as murky water clears when it settles, the light of the mind naturally emerges, leading to a clear and direct awareness. Only with the power of observing can we cultivate a mind free from greed, aversion, and ignorance. In contrast, when trapped in greed, aversion, and ignorance, we are often unconsciously controlled, driven, and swayed, struggling without even realizing it.

“The nature of the mind is originally pure, only stained by external dust of afflictions.” The essence of the mind is clear and luminous; the impurities we display are merely the shadows cast by greed, aversion, and ignorance. It is crucial to understand that greed, aversion, and ignorance are not the state of the true mind but merely the dust of afflictions that cling to it. We should neither take this lightly nor panic; rather, through constant practice, we can clear away these impurities, bringing an end to



afflictions. As the Chan Master Shenxiu said, “Diligently brush and wipe at all times, allowing no dust to settle.” When the mind is free from afflictions and defilements, it naturally enters a state of purity and tranquility—radiant with positive energy and filled with joy, and illuminated by the clarity of emptiness.

In addition to the three states mentioned above, there is another state called “equanimity”—a balanced and impartial state that reflects the true nature of the mind. However, once we become attached to the external world, we create various dependencies that give rise to our needs. When these needs are met, the balance we achieve is only temporary. For example, power-seekers find balance upon attaining it, just as wealth-seekers find balance when they acquire it. Yet, power and wealth are impermanent and can be lost at any moment. Relying on external conditions for balance, therefore, is difficult to sustain. More often than not, we find ourselves in a state of imbalance. Buddhism teaches that when we free ourselves from external dependencies and eliminate inner restlessness,

the mind is naturally balanced and self-sufficient, just as the boundless sky needs neither support nor balance.

### 3. True Mind

We just discussed the eight consciousnesses and mental factors above, based on the deluded mind. However, traditional Chinese Buddhism places greater emphasis on the True Mind system as described in classical texts. As early as the Wei-Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties period, the *Nirvana Sutra* was translated into Chinese, introducing the core idea that all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature and can attain Buddhahood. This approach, rooted in the True Mind, offers a different entry point from that of the deluded mind system. Since then, this teaching has remained central to Chinese Buddhism and continues to shape the tradition to this day.

Additionally, the *Surangama Sutra* and the *Lankavatara Sutra* also teach that every life contains boundless treasures. Yet these treasures remain hidden because

we become lost, controlled by greed, aversion, and ignorance. It is like a wealthy child who was abducted at a young age and taken far from home. Not knowing his true identity and the vast wealth he possesses, he is left to wander and beg to survive. Once he finds his way home, he regains everything that was always his. These treasures inherently belong to us—they need neither to be sought externally nor created.

Chan Buddhism, based on this profound insight, opened the Dharma gate of Sudden Enlightenment for practice. It teaches: “The nature of bodhi is inherently pure; by simply using this mind, one can directly attain Buddhahood.” Every sentient being possesses an innate awakened nature that only needs to be realized. This approach, grounded in inherent awakened nature, offers a swift path to Buddhahood, as expressed in the gatha: “Directly point to the true mind, see one’s nature, and become a buddha.”

This innate awakened nature is often described in

sutras, where it is likened to the sky. The sky is infinite, so is the awakened nature; the sky is formless, so is the awakened nature; the sky can contain everything, so can the awakened nature. However, the mind differs from the sky: the sky is insentient and lacks consciousness, while the mind is sentient, possessing awareness and the function of clear, discerning knowing.

Though the mind can perceive everything, it must not cling, otherwise, it will be like a leaf blocking the eyes, reducing the infinite to the finite. Buddhist practitioners are familiar with the phrase “do not cling,” yet it is easier said than done. Greed arises from desire, and the deluded mind is marked by greed—only the degree varies. The stronger the clinging, the greater the greed; the weaker the clinging, the lesser the greed. So, how can we eliminate greed? On one hand, we must cultivate correct views and good habits in daily life, neither neglecting nor indulging in greed. On the other hand, we must realize the true nature of our mind, so that we can uproot greed, attain insight into emptiness, and

THE WORLD OF BUDDHISM  
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PSYCHOLOGY

truly follow the teaching of the *Diamond Sutra*: “Give  
rise to a mind free from attachment.”

# III

## BUDDHIST SOLUTIONS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

All practices in Buddhism aim to help us address psychological issues. The goal is twofold: first, to completely eliminate inner greed, aversion, and ignorance; second, to fully develop the wholesome qualities of life—great wisdom and great compassion. The sutras state that the Buddha possesses three virtues and two benefits. The three virtues are cessation, wisdom, and compassion. The virtue of cessation refers to the complete eradication of afflictions, which is the merit of nirvana. The virtue of wisdom is the full realization of great insight, manifesting both fundamental and acquired wisdom. The virtue

of compassion is the arising of boundless compassion for all sentient beings. The two benefits are self-benefit and benefiting others—not only liberating oneself from birth and death and escaping samsara, but also helping all beings attain the same benefits.

How can we achieve this goal? Here, we will briefly introduce several common Buddhist practices used in psychological therapy.

### 1. Taking Refuge

Taking refuge refers to taking refuge in the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. This includes both the external Three Jewels, represented by Buddha statues, Buddhist texts, and the monastic community, as well as the internal Three Jewels, which are the inherent nature within oneself.

Taking refuge in the external Three Jewels means looking to the Buddha as a model of a healthy personality. In

Buddhism, psychological health is not defined by what we consider a “normal person.” Instead, it follows the standard set by the buddhas and bodhisattvas, who have completely eradicated greed, aversion, and ignorance while attaining the inner qualities of compassion and wisdom.

Second, cultivate complete trust in the Dharma, as this is the psychological therapy Buddha provided. Third, seek guidance from a virtuous teacher, and put the teachings into practice to complete the healing process. If we do not realize the harm caused by greed, aversion, and ignorance, do not aspire to the qualities achieved by the Buddha, or do not believe that the Dharma can solve problems, then the Dharma will have no effect. From a psychological perspective, these understandings are essential prerequisites for therapy.

Additionally, we must take refuge in the inner Three Jewels, trusting that we inherently possess their essence and the nature of awakening. The purpose of practice is simply to master the methods for solving problems.



The *Records of Pointing at the Moon* from Chan Buddhism teaches that sutras are like fingers pointing at the moon; they are not the moon itself. The true moon resides in everyone's heart, and through these fingers, we are guided to understand our inner Buddha-nature and cultivate our inherent potential for awakening.

Therefore, the ultimate purpose of taking refuge in the external Three Jewels is to help us recognize the inner Three Jewels. If we focus only on the external Three Jewels without realizing the inner ones, our faith remains superficial and does not align with what Buddhism advocates. From a psychological perspective, this is about achieving self-healing and self-liberation in life.

## 2. Cultivating Aspiration

Cultivating aspiration means developing a mental state that reflects one's choice of life goals. People often ask, "Why practice Buddhism? Isn't being a good person enough?" But in this vast world of countless beings, what

defines a good person? Throughout history, sages like Laozi, Confucius, and Socrates have set moral examples, and even today, many individuals embody high ethical standards. These figures are all worth learning from, yet their wisdom and virtue vary in depth. Therefore, we must choose a goal and thoughtfully plan the course of our lives.

We practice Buddhism because we believe that the Buddha's qualities are the most complete and ultimate. But, how can we cultivate these qualities? It begins with cultivating aspiration. Whether or not we practice Buddhism, we generate aspirations every day—sometimes of greed, aversion, and jealousy, and other times of compassion and altruism. Our lives are shaped by these mental states, and without wisdom, we blindly follow our feelings. Such lives are passive, numb, and without a clear future, ultimately controlled by greed, aversion, and ignorance. In fact, this is the reality for most people.

People possess both a demonic nature and a Buddha

nature. Nurturing the demonic nature leads one to become a demon, while cultivating the Buddha-nature leads one to enlightenment. The purpose of practice is to recognize which mental states have already surfaced and which remain latent. Guided by the teachings, we can then make conscious choices—restraining negative mindsets while fostering positive ones—allowing us to improve our inner qualities, one lifetime after another.

The aspiration advocated in Buddhism primarily consists of the mind of renunciation and the mind of bodhicitta. The mind of renunciation is the determination to free oneself from greed, aversion, and ignorance, as well as from the five desires and six sense objects. Bodhicitta perfects the mind of renunciation by extending it from oneself to all sentient beings, with the wish for all to be free from suffering and to attain liberation. In psychological therapy, cultivating aspiration means generating the will to overcome illness and restore health, as this motivation is essential for further treatment.

### 3. Practicing Precepts and Repentance

When it comes to precepts, people often think of restrictive rules that seem to clash with the modern value of individuality and freedom. In fact, the Buddha established the precepts not to impose restrictions, but to help us develop a psychological self-protection mechanism.

Our current life is built upon greed, aversion, and ignorance. When these forces spiral out of control, they can lead to various criminal behaviors. For example, crimes may arise from greed for sex, money, or power, while anger may lead to actions such as murder, arson, theft, or robbery. In short, the root cause of all crimes are greed, aversion, and ignorance. However, observing the precepts helps establish a preventive mechanism to contain greed, aversion, and ignorance within limits, gradually reducing them to maintain a healthy personality.

Repentance, on the other hand, is a remedy after doing evil deeds. As the saying goes, “to err is human.” For

ordinary people, doing evil deeds is inevitable, but the key is to recognize them in time. Just as dirty clothes need washing, when our hearts are tainted, we must cleanse them through repentance. In Buddhism, repentance consists of two parts: confession and remorse. Confession involves admitting one's evil deeds in front of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, wise teachers or fellow practitioners, while remorse involves making a vow not to repeat the same evil deeds. Through confession, we can cleanse the negative mental states caused by our evil deeds, release the burden, and awaken inner positive energy. Therefore, repentance acts as a cleanser for one's character and a detoxifier for the mind, preventing harmful influences from accumulating and helping to maintain mental health. Many people suffer from psychological illnesses because they do not know how to repent after doing evil deeds. As mental knots grow heavier and bad habits deepen, they eventually become so entrenched that illness arises.

#### 4. Generosity, Patience, and Right View

The practice of the Bodhisattva path mainly includes the Six Perfections: generosity, morality, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. These are all effective methods of psychological therapy. Here, we will briefly introduce three of them.

Generosity is a way to let go of attachment through giving. A generous person, whether practicing material giving, Dharma giving, or the gift of fearlessness, reduces their attachment with each act of giving. As attachment lessens, afflictions naturally decrease as well. When we help others with an altruistic mind, our compassion grows, thereby activating a positive inner mindset.

Patience involves eliminating anger through acceptance. Some people think that patience means forcefully suppressing their emotions without reacting. However, this is not the patience advocated in Buddhism; it is merely suppression, which is harmful to both physical and mental

health. The patience taught in Buddhism involves using wisdom to observe and understand adversity when it arises—understanding and accepting it, rather than reacting with instinctive resistance. Most people live according to their own feelings, and when their interests are threatened, they react with anger. From a Buddhist perspective, when someone harms you, they are themselves a victim of afflictions, controlled by their inner ignorance and unable to help themselves. If we respond with anger, we align ourselves with their afflictions, which is both foolish and unwise. Therefore, Buddhism teaches us to rationally accept everything and handle it with wisdom, rather than passively avoiding it.

Prajna is the Right View, the core of the Six Perfections. The first five perfections are not exclusive to Buddhism but are common to worldly practices. Only when guided by the wisdom of prajna do they become nourishment for the Buddhist path. Therefore, in practice, Right View is the most important; all actions must be based on correct understanding. Psychology also employs cognitive therapy,

as many psychological issues arise from extreme or pathological thoughts. Our beliefs shape our attitudes, and our attitudes, in turn, determine our destiny. To improve the quality of life, we must start by changing our understanding and learn to view the world through the Right View, including the principle of dependent origination. With this insight, we realize that everything is a conditional illusion, arising and ceasing due to conditions, thereby reducing our attachment to the world. Moreover, through meditation, we apply this insight into our mindsets, cultivate the inner wisdom of emptiness, and fundamentally resolve life's challenges.



# IV

## FINAL REMARKS

Both Buddhism and psychology focus on the “mind” and aim to resolve psychological issues. The difference is that psychology focuses on addressing abnormal psychological problems, whereas Buddhism teaches that as long as greed, aversion, and ignorance exist, there remains a hidden risk of psychological illness, making one a carrier of afflictions. Therefore, Buddhist practice not only seeks to resolve the problems caused by greed, aversion, and ignorance, but also aims to eliminate these afflictions themselves, and cultivate the positive qualities within one’s life. Only through this can one attain true, complete, and flawless health.