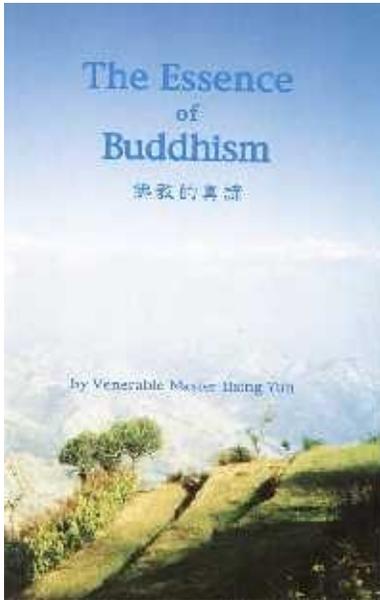


The Essence of Buddhism

by Hsing Yun



Fellow students,

I am very happy to have this opportunity to come and speak with you. Our topic today is "The Essence of Buddhism." Essence means truth; essence is the fundamental teachings. Sometimes we say that the doctrine of Three Dharma Seals (Three Characteristics of Existence) is the essence of Buddhism, or that the Conditioned Genesis is the essence of Buddhism. Other times we say that it is *sunyata* (emptiness) or the Four Noble Truths. What, then, *is* the essence of Buddhism? Actually, all of these concepts are the fundamental truths, or essence, of Buddhism.

After the Buddha was enlightened, his first discourse, given at Isipatana (modern Sarnath) near Varanasi (modern Benares), was on the Four Noble Truths. This is the famous "First Turning of the Dharma Wheel" in Buddhist history.

In Buddhism, those who attain enlightenment through listening to and learning about the Four Noble Truths and the Principle of Conditioned Genesis are called *sravakas*. Generally, people have the impression that *sravakas* are concerned only with self-enlightenment. Because *sravakas* emphasize and practice the Four Noble Truths, some people therefore have the misconception that the Four Noble Truths only pertain to self-enlightenment and are not worthy of a second glance. Actually, the Four Noble Truths is the fundamental truth of Buddhism. They were realized, experienced, and taught by the Buddha himself. According to the Buddha's teaching, the true nature of life and the universe is none other than the Four Noble Truths suffering, the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering. The Four Noble Truths form the foundation of Buddhism, from which all Buddhist

scriptures are derived. Even the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, a Mahayana scripture, has a special chapter devoted to the Four Noble Truths. Thus, all Buddhists should learn the fundamental teachings of the Four Noble Truths.

The word "Truths" in the Four Noble Truths carries with it the meaning of investigation of reality. The First Noble Truth is the Truth of Suffering, which is to see with wisdom that the threefold world is like a burning house, full of suffering and lacking in happiness. The Second Noble Truth is the Truth of the Arising of Suffering, which is to realize with wisdom that the afflictions of greed, hatred, and ignorance are the causes of birth, death, and suffering. The Third Noble Truth is the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, which is to attain Nirvana and realize the true nature through wisdom. The Fourth Noble Truth is the Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering, which is to find the way that will help us transcend the world of suffering to real happiness. The Truth of Suffering and the Truth of the Arising of Suffering speak of the cause and effect of the state of delusion in this worldly existence. The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering and the Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering speak of the cause and effect of the state of enlightenment in the transcendental existence. The Noble Eightfold Path is the cause, which when practiced, will lead to the effect, the cessation of suffering. In the next section, I will describe the components of the Four Noble Truths in their respective order.

I. The First Noble Truth: The Truth of Suffering

Personally, I have always believed that we should have a happy, optimistic, and positive outlook on life. We should not constantly talk about suffering, walk around with knitted eyebrows, and be consumed with depression and misery. Some people might wonder: If it is happiness that we should look for, then why does Buddhism dwell so much on suffering?

The purpose of talking about suffering in Buddhism is to make us realize that all kinds of suffering exist in this world. Once we know the real nature of suffering, we can take a step further and find a way to put an end to suffering. Thus, understanding the existence of suffering is only part of the process. Learning how to put an end to suffering so that we can attain liberation is the ultimate purpose of discoursing about suffering in Buddhism.

Some of you may ask, "Why does Buddhism say that life is full of suffering? I am not hungry for fame and wealth, nor am I hampered by love and emotions. My life is filled with happiness." According to Buddhist scriptures, there are many varieties of suffering. There are three forms of suffering, eight types of

suffering, one hundred and eight kinds of suffering, and even boundless and countless forms of suffering. All of these sufferings can be classified into either physical or mental suffering. Some people have little craving for material comforts; they are able to withstand the discomforts of extreme weather and accept the pain of impoverishment. Still others are able to rise above the bondage of emotions, handle the agony of being separated from loved ones, and tolerate the nuisance of dealing with people they do not like. No one, however, is free from the pain that occurs at the end of one's life when the five aggregates disintegrate. Therefore, it does not make a difference whether we discuss it or not, everyone will experience some kind of suffering during his or her lifetime. Now, if we can understand clearly the sources of suffering and find ways to overcome them, we then can free ourselves from the deep sea of suffering and enjoy the real happiness of life. What are the sources of suffering?

A. The Sources of Suffering

1. Disharmony between material things and oneself

The first cause of suffering is the disharmony between material things and oneself. For example, if we live in a small house with many people, we can feel cramped and our crowded living conditions become a source of suffering. If the height of the pillow we use is not suitable for us, we may not be able to get any sleep. That, in turn, can cause us to become restless and short-tempered. To a student, even the height of a desk or the brightness of a lamp can be a distraction and a source of discomfort. Therefore, dissatisfaction with material things in our everyday lives can give rise to suffering.

Not only can external material things be a source of suffering, the skin, hair, and nails of our bodies, if not taken care of properly, can also become filthy and be a source of distress. There is a Chinese proverb which says, "Our hair is like three thousand strands of trouble." Our lives are intimately related to material things.

2. Disharmony between people and oneself

The disharmony between people and oneself can be the greatest source of affliction. For example, we cannot always associate only with friends and loved ones; we are often required to interact also with those whom we dislike.

Due to differences in our views and in the ways in which we handle situations, conflicts arise and suffering ensues. Sometimes, even when we try to be judicious and careful not to offend others, we still feel insecure and tend to assume that others are criticizing us when we see them gather and whisper

behind our backs. If the relationship between people and oneself is not harmonious, our efficiency will be lessened. This disharmony is enough to make an otherwise ambitious person dejected, resulting in a loss of confidence and self-esteem. Thus, it is very important for us to establish harmonious relationships when we deal with others.

3. Disharmony between the body and oneself

Some people say, "Health is wealth." Even if we own all the treasures in the world and have unparalleled talents, we cannot do anything without a healthy body. The body's cycle of aging, sickness, and death is a natural phenomenon that no one can escape. A healthy person will become weak one day. A beautiful complexion will wither with age. Although we may flaunt our strength when we are young, our bodily organs will nonetheless start to deteriorate with the passing of time. Our eyesight will become worse and our movements will slow down. Even a minor cold can confine us to bed for several days. A minor toothache can make us toss and turn in our sleep. Due to the disharmony between the body and oneself, different kinds of suffering come one right after another.

4. Disharmony between the mind and oneself

The mind likes to take control and is like a king who rules over all his subjects. It is also like an untamed horse running wild, not readily controlled by us. When greed, hatred, and ignorance appear in our minds, though we try hard to keep them under control, they resurface time and time again. Our efforts seem so futile. This kind of disharmony between the mind and oneself is much harder to overcome than the disharmony of the body. When the body becomes ill, we can cure it with medicine, but when the mind is sick, even the best physician can be at a loss for what to do.

We often hear people complaining to others: "You are not listening to what I am saying!" Actually, the one who is not listening to us is not someone else, but our very own minds. We cannot stop our minds from daydreaming or creating headaches. In this sense, our own minds are our worst enemies. When we are constantly at odds with our minds, it is no wonder that suffering is with us all the time.

5. Disharmony between desire and oneself

As human beings, it is impossible for us to be completely without desires. Desires can be wholesome or unwholesome. Wholesome desires are those such as wanting to become a sage or a Buddha, to excel in one's career, to serve one's

community, or to benefit one's country and fellow human beings. On the other hand, coveting for material comforts, grasping for the power of position, or craving the pleasures of love affairs are unwholesome desires and can lead to one's downfall. Even wholesome desires, when not managed appropriately, can become overwhelming burdens, giving rise to numerous sufferings. How much more damaging are unwholesome desires! Thus, an important ingredient of success is knowing how to transcend one's material desires.

6. Disharmony between view and oneself

View refers to our way of thinking and our understanding of things. While a lack of material things is still tolerable, the isolation due to one's view and the solitude of the spirit is the most difficult for anyone to bear. Since ancient times, many seekers of truth have found themselves having to travel the path of truth alone. In fact, the Buddha almost considered entering into Nirvana immediately after his enlightenment out of the concern that living beings may not be able to understand the truth he had realized.

What typically can make us suffer are those seemingly correct but actually erroneous views and concepts. During the Buddha's time, some ascetics emphasized all kinds of self-mortification. Some stood upside down in the forest, some sat dangerously close to fires, some submerged themselves in water, some refused to eat, and some went about naked. They tried to use every type of method to torture their bodies so that they might gain liberation. Because of their erroneous views and false understanding, these ascetics inflicted physical pain on themselves unnecessarily. False views and understanding can cause us much suffering; they are the main stumbling blocks to our realization of the truth.

7. Disharmony between nature and oneself

According to history, our first human activities were struggles between nature and ourselves. Since ancient times, the amount of suffering brought upon us by nature has been incalculable. Natural disasters include hurricanes, earthquakes, fires, and floods. Too much rain has caused floods, completely covering the low-lying areas. Too little rain has caused droughts, cracking the soil and making it impossible to plant crops. The sufferings we experience because of the disharmony between nature and oneself are clear and direct.

The real root of suffering, whether caused by external factors such as material things and nature or by internal factors, such as the mind and views, can be traced to our attachment to *I* and *mine*. According to Buddhism, the source of all

suffering is the illusive *I*, which is but a combination of the five aggregates. The combining of five aggregates -form and consciousness, together with the three mental activities of feeling, perception, and mental formation constitutes life. The combination of these five factors exists only as long as the right conditions are present. No thing can exist unless the conditions for its existence are right. Ordinarily, people live as if the body, which is made up of the five aggregates, could exist eternally. They cling to the body as the real self, creating all kinds of cravings which in turn lead to endless suffering. If we can see through the illusion of the "self" and realize the wondrous truth of emptiness, then we can transcend all suffering. The *Heart Sutra* says, "[The Bodhisattva] realizes the emptiness of the five aggregates and overcome all suffering."

How can we realize the emptiness of the five aggregates and overcome all suffering? If we can realize the "selfless" nature of all things, i.e., all things do not have an independent, permanent "self," then we can realize the emptiness of the five aggregates. Once this is realized, suffering will be overcome. Let me illustrate what this means with the following example.

Soccer is a very popular sport in the western world. Spectators at soccer matches often number in the tens of thousands. Among the spectators at one of these matches was a man who was smoking while watching the game. He was very absorbed in the game and did not realize that his lit cigarette was so close to another man next to him that the cigarette burned a hole in his neighbour's clothing. "Ouch, that hurts!" the neighbour yelled. The smoker then realized what he had done, and he quickly apologized saying, "I am so sorry!" The person whose clothing was burned was also caught up in the excitement of the game and said, "It does not matter. I will buy another one later." How would you describe the neighbour's state of mind? He was so focused on the match that he was in a "selfless" state. At this particular moment, watching the match was all that mattered to him. Even having a hole burned in his clothes was not worth a fight. If it were not for being caught up in the game, such an incident would often develop into a big fight. But when they focused all their concentration into watching which side was winning or losing, the concept of "self" did not matter at all. Imagine, just a soccer match is enough to capture our attention so much so that we can forget the "self" and pay no heed to a burning pain. If we can always realize the emptiness of the five aggregates, we can definitely overcome all suffering.

The existence of suffering is an undeniable truth. Thus, Buddhism continues to emphasize this fact and goes one step further to find a way to overcome this

problem. Actually, all modern sciences, such as economics, medicine, and politics aim at improving our living standards and minimizing human suffering. But ordinary social welfare endeavours, such as helping the poor and needy through the provision of food and clothing, can only give momentary relief. It cannot eradicate the roots of suffering. Buddhism not only emphasizes the eradication of our present suffering; more importantly, it teaches us how to eradicate the roots of suffering and liberate us from the endless cycle of birth and death. Suffering in Buddhism is not pessimistic acceptance; it is something to be overcome and transcended positively.

B. The Way to Overcome Suffering

1. Strengthen our minds

Someone may say, "Since I don't believe in Buddhism, I am not free from the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death. However, even though you believe in Buddhism, you are still subject to the same suffering. What then is the use of believing in Buddhism?" This is true; believing in Buddhism cannot prevent birth, aging, sickness, and death. But when faced with suffering, we will have greater strength to overcome it. When we come face to face with death, we will be able to accept it more openly and gracefully.

Many of the great Arhats of Buddhism chose to live in the forest, by the water, or even in cemeteries, in order to realize their Buddha Nature. Many of the noble followers of Confucianism chose to leave the hustle and bustle of the cities to lead a simple, honest, and tranquil life without any worldly desires. Most people find such lifestyles difficult to accept, but these sages lived their simple lives happily and willingly. Why? This was because they had such high aspirations for themselves. They had strong confidence in their ideals, so they had the strength to endure the hardships and suffering that ordinary people cannot.

A proper understanding of religion will give us strength to overcome hardships willingly. Many people pray to all varieties of gods, asking for protection, money, wealth, health, and all the good things in life. This type of belief can only encourage greed. When these people cannot get what they want, they end up in despair. Some might even blame the gods for their suffering. This kind of religion, which is based on greed, cannot give people strength.

True Buddhists should not make unreasonable demands from the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. Instead, we should follow the way of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and be willing to dedicate ourselves for the benefit of all beings. If

we have this kind of religious and spiritual understanding, then we will have the great strength to overcome the afflictions caused by misfortune and difficulties. If we can accept with equanimity when others are either nice or hostile to us, if we can look at worldly matters, be they good or bad, the same way, then we can confront suffering with ease and calmness. Buddhism may speak of suffering in life, but I personally feel that life is full of happiness. Why? Although suffering exists in actuality, if we can use our strength to deal with it, then we can understand the real meaning of happiness. The fruit which ripens after diligent cultivation tastes particularly sweet. The cultivation of a correct and strong faith is an important key that helps us transcend suffering.

2. Eradicate the root of suffering

While the cultivation of a strong faith can help us transcend the pain of suffering, the eradication of the fundamental suffering of life and death, however, is the ultimate goal of us as practitioners. We should not be complacent just because we can deal with suffering through our willpower, mental adjustment, and thinking. Even when we have control over the minor afflictions of life (which are like branches and leaves of a tree), if we are not completely free from birth, aging, sickness and death, then the fundamental suffering (which is like the root of a tree) due to the impermanence of the five aggregates still exists. A Chinese proverb says, "To catch a pack of thieves, one should catch their leader first." Therefore, we must eradicate the root of suffering in order to attain eternal happiness.

The root of suffering is "self", self-attachment, self-love, and self-view. Because of "self," we seek nice things to satisfy our needs, a pursuit that gives way to greed. When our greed cannot be satisfied, aversion and hatred arises. When we cling to our deluded views without understanding the facts and truth, ignorance comes into being. Because of "self," the fetters of greed, hatred, and ignorance follow us like our shadows. How can we eradicate the root of suffering? If we can understand the truth of "selflessness," then the root of suffering can be eradicated. "Selflessness" does not mean that we have to destroy our life. Buddhism is not a morbid religion! Buddhism does not deny that life has value and meaning. "Selflessness" means to free oneself from self-attachment, self-love, and self-desire. It does not mean to destroy everything, or to give up everything. Even if we were to commit suicide, death would only occur to the illusive physical body, not to the clinging of "self." Actually, "selflessness" in Buddhism has the meaning of wisdom, Conditional Genesis, great compassion, and real emptiness. It is through letting go of the attachment to "self" and

erroneous views that we can ascertain the truth of the First Noble Truth. It is only when we can eradicate the small "self" that is associated with greed, hatred, and selfish desires that we can manifest our true, pure, and happy nature. The noble men and women who realize the true nature of "self" do not leave the multitude. They still drink tea, eat meals, deal with other people, and handle matters; they still live normal lives. The only difference is that they have a pure state of mind in their daily and spiritual lives. They have given up all kinds of obsessions and have realized the real nature of things. They are free from the suffering caused by impermanence and have experienced eternity.

The "self" that we cling to so dearly is just like an ephemera. Our life lasts only for a few decades; it is illusory and changes constantly. The real "self" transcends time, space, and relativity. It is free from afflictions and is pure. The key to freeing ourselves from suffering and attaining happiness is to expand the small "self" and realize eternal life. This is something that we need to attend to urgently.

II. The Second Noble Truth: The Truth of the Arising of Suffering

In our lives, we commit many types of unwholesome karma because of our ignorant urges and cravings. The retribution for this karma will give rise to the fruit of suffering. Thus, our suffering is caused by our own karma. Karma refers to the actions committed by our body, speech and mind. We will be subjected to the effects of whatever actions we have done. Karma does not disappear; it only accumulates. However, karma is not necessarily all bad. There is also good karma. Whether we taste the fruit of suffering or happiness depends on the karma we have sowed.

The Law of Cause and Effect is a special concept which is common among Indian philosophies. It is also a great teaching in the history of Buddhist philosophy. Karma can create a bright future for our life and give us hope. Perhaps someone may ask, "Did you not just say that karma is the cause of suffering? Now, why do you say it gives us light and hope? Is this not contradictory?" If you can truly understand the function and doctrine of karma, you will not have doubts about what I have just said.

The real meaning of karma is, "Everyone is responsible for his or her own actions." Throughout the history of philosophy, there has always been one inexplicable question that has confounded philosophers and ecclesiastics alike; that is, the origin of life and the universe. Various theories have been proposed to explain the origin of the universe and human life, such as the theory of natural

elements and the theory of evolution. The Christian religion maintains that the world was created by God. The Brahmanic religion of India holds the view that everything is evolved from Brahma. These religions, and others, attempt to explain the initial creation of the universe and life forms and to establish a law in which everything is controlled by a god. But Buddhism teaches us that man himself is in charge of his own fate, not someone else. Even God or Brahma cannot escape the Law of Cause and Effect. In Buddhism, karmic retribution is created by ourselves, not by deities. The happiness or suffering in one's life and the brightness or darkness of one's future is not bestowed by gods, but determined by the effort that we have made. Wholesome fruit is produced from the seeds of our wholesome deeds. Unwholesome fruit is produced from the seeds of our unwholesome deeds. No one can give us fortune or misfortune. We do our own good and bad deeds; no one else controls us. Thus, we can see that Buddhism has a great deal of respect for free will. It is a religion that believes in self-discipline, and that one will reap the results of one's own actions.

Mr. Shih Hu said, "Whatever harvest one wants, one must first plant accordingly." Karma is like a seed. We have to sow the kind of seed that will produce the type of fruit we would like to harvest. Similarly, our actions will determine our karmic effect. Karma means equal opportunity and is perfectly accurate. A person will not be exempt from karmic effect just because the person is rich or powerful. A common proverb says, "Everyone is equal under the law." Likewise, karmic effect is equally applied to everyone regardless of position, gender, status, or wealth. Everyone will receive his or her just desserts and reap his or her own karmic retribution. No one can take someone else's place, whether it be husband and wife, father and son, teacher and student, or friends. Our karmic retribution is a clear record of the results of our actions. Its accuracy is so perfect that even today's modern calculators and computers cannot compare with it. When everyone understands the concept of cause and effect, the morals of society will be improved, crime will decrease, and it will not be difficult to establish a happy and peaceful society. Therefore, the concept of cause and effect plays a very important role in cleansing the impurities of our minds and raising the morality of society.

Someone may ask, "You said that one will reap the fruit of one's action. One person I know has done many bad things in his life. He has not only gone unpunished but enjoys all kinds of honour and wealth. On the other hand, another person I know has done many good things, but all kinds of misfortune have befallen him. How does the Law of Cause and Effect work in these kinds of

situations?" Actually, this is the Law of Cause and Effect. Why? The Law of Cause and Effect is like planting seeds. Some plants will become lush and green in one year. Some will take several years to grow. Likewise, some karmic results will ripen in this life, some will ripen in the next life, and some will not ripen for many lifetimes to come. Karmic retribution may be immediate or delayed, but we cannot refute the real existence of karmic retribution. There is a proverb in Buddhism which says, "Good begets good, evil begets evil. All causes will give rise to results; it is just a matter of time." The Law of Cause and Effect is absolutely fair. It is only a matter of time. This is why we talk about the cause and effect of the past, present, and future lives.

Some of you who have received a modern education may retort by saying, "This is the 20th Century; our technology and civilization are highly developed. Why should we believe in superstitions like cause and effect?" Actually, the Law of Cause and Effect is the most scientific and civilized of all the natural laws. Every single minute of our lives is controlled by the wonderful Law of Cause and Effect. We cannot live apart from it. For example, when we are hungry, we eat. After we eat, we are not hungry anymore. When we are tired, we rest. After we rest, we will be full of energy. Every little part of our lives, even our mental activities of perception, emotion, and volition, play out according to the Law of Cause and Effect. Therefore, if we seek a happy life, we should sow good seeds. Then we will taste the sweetness of our own good fruit.

When the first experiment involving test-tube babies was successfully performed, the entire world was shocked. Although a test-tube baby is not conceived inside the mother, it still requires the father's sperm and the mother's ovum, together with the aid of science, in order to grow. A successful test-tube baby still requires all the right conditions to be present; thus this method of conception is totally consistent with the Law of Cause and Effect. A test tube baby is merely the result of an alternative type of reproductive method.

There is nothing in this world that can escape the Law of Cause and Effect. Once evil karma is done, a bad effect will surely follow. Although the arising of bad karma can bring us suffering, we will have brightness and hope once the retribution is over. It is just like a person who borrows money from everyone and thus is heavily in debt. After he repays all his debts, he will be free. It is just like a criminal who is freed after serving his prison term. A person who has committed many bad deeds can still have a beautiful future after he has borne the fruit of his karmic retribution.

The Dharma says, "All composite things are impermanent." Bad karma is also impermanent and empty, without an innate self-nature. If we stop creating bad karma and keep doing good karma, we will be free from suffering one day and we will attain happiness. Thus, the Law of Cause and Effect is neither pessimistic nor fatalistic; rather, it is optimistic and progressive. If we want to free ourselves from the depths of the sea of suffering, we must first eradicate the cause of suffering and then cease to generate any more bad karma for ourselves. Then a life of happiness will not be out of reach. Therefore, a full understanding of the original cause of suffering is absolutely necessary in order to attain happiness.

III. The Third Noble Truth: The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering

If someone asks you, "Why do you believe in Buddhism? What is the purpose of believing in Buddhism?" How would you answer? If you ask me, my answer may frighten you, because I believe in Buddhism for the sake of seeking "cessation."

When we mention "cessation," people will immediately think of annihilation, extermination, or emptiness and will become frightened. In the history of Buddhism, there have been many cases in which the meaning of the Buddha's teaching was misinterpreted due to incorrect translations. These mistakes became obstacles to the spreading of Buddhism. For example, the "cessation" mentioned in the Four Noble Truths does not take on the literal meaning of annihilation and extermination. The real meaning of "cessation" is to rid oneself of the affliction of delusion and discrimination so that one's true nature suchness is revealed. Thus, cessation in this case is not pessimistic nor destructive, but positive, creative, and constructive.

"Cessation" means the ideal state of complete eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion. The quiet, cool state of Nirvana will appear only when the fire of sensual desire is extinguished. The doctrines of prajna and sunyata are similar to "cessation." They suggest that we should eliminate our ignorance, greed, and craving in order to uncover our prajna. When we talk about sunyata, some people may react by saying, "Buddhism talks about emptiness. I take that it means heaven and earth are empty; people and the self do not exist. So, emptiness pulls people down into an elusive and aimless world of nothingness. This 'emptiness' sounds horrible to me."

Actually, the doctrine of sunyata in Buddhism does *not* mean non-existence or nihilism. There is infinite existence contained within emptiness. There would be no existence without emptiness. Ordinarily, our concept of *bhava* (existence) is illusory and fictitious, whereas the concept of sunyata in Buddhism means true existence and wondrous reality. Why does emptiness become non-empty and cessation become non-extinguished? I will use an example to illustrate this.

If we want to organize a lecture, the first question we need to consider is "Where should we hold the lecture?" If there is no space, it is not possible for us to organize the lecture. Whenever we want to organize something, we have to consider five factors: people, subject, time, place, and object. Place means space. Space has a very intimate relationship with our lives. For example, your pocket can hold things if it has space. You can put money in your purse if it is empty. Your nose, ears, mouth, stomach, intestines and pores are empty; therefore, you can breathe, absorb nutrients, metabolize, and maintain your life. If all these spaces were blocked, people would not be able to survive. Because there is emptiness, there is existence. If there is no empty space, we cannot construct buildings. This is what is meant by "real emptiness will give rise to wondrous reality." Thus "cessation" and "emptiness" do not mean nothingness. The cessation of illusion and the elimination of the unreal are the prerequisites for the manifestation of true, wondrous existence.

Sun Tzu, the great Confucian scholar, suggested that one needs to go through three stages to cultivate the mind. They are humility, single-mindedness, and stillness. Humility means that one should maintain an appropriate "space" within oneself and not be stubborn or condescending. If one has space within, new knowledge can be easily absorbed and the suggestions of others are readily accepted. Progress will surely follow.

It says in the sutras, "If one wishes to know about the Buddha's state of mind, one should expand one's mind like empty space." We have all seen space, but who can clearly describe its form and shape? Is space rectangular in shape, square, or circular? Space is everywhere. The space that fills a cup will take on a cup-like shape. The space of a rectangular box is rectangular in shape. Since space does not have any definite, fixed form, it can take on any form. Emptiness transcends the relativity of existence and non-existence. If we can expand our mind like space to infinity, we will understand the Buddha's state of mind.

Attaining Buddhahood means the realization of the true nature of prajna and sunyata, and the truth of Nirvana and cessation. Cessation means the extinction

of birth and death and the severing of the cycle of rebirth. The cycles of rebirth are the reason for our suffering which we must endure through long nights of anguish. Therefore, only by eradicating the cycles of rebirth which we are caught in because of our desires will we attain the ultimate and eternal happiness of no birth and no death. Hence, if we wish to be free of the pain of suffering, we must solve the problem at its roots, that is, to extinguish all of our mundane desires.

When you hear that Buddhism advocates that people should eliminate all mundane desires, you may fear that once you believe in Buddhism you are no longer free to marry, have children, make money, have a high position, or enjoy worldly pleasures. All these worries are unnecessary. Buddhism is a religion that seeks happiness. It does not denounce normal living; what it rejects is overindulgence in material enjoyment. In fact, when one believes in Buddhism, one can still marry, do business, and live a normal life. In Buddhist literature, there was a layman named Vimalakirti who was married and very well-to-do. Yet he did not become a slave of material desire. In the sutra, he is described thus, "Although leading a secular household life, he had no attachment to the threefold world; although married, he always practiced pure living."

Some people say that Buddhism abhors affection. In reality, Buddhism puts a great deal of emphasis on affection; what Buddhism rejects are selfish affection and desire. One should elevate selfish affection into compassion and transform selfish desire into wisdom. The affection advocated by Buddhism is dedication, not possession. It promotes the compassion of giving, not wanting. The love advocated by Buddhism is love of all beings, not just one specific being. The Bodhisattva's compassionate act of helping all beings is the manifestation of this selfless affection in its highest form. Affection that embodies compassion and wisdom will not go awry. Some people seek out love all their lives. Although love may bring about a kind of happiness, it can also be a source of suffering. When we read the newspaper, we see that crimes of murder occur every day. When we examine the underlying causes of these crimes, we often see that relationships and money are usually the main culprits. Love without wisdom and compassion is a very dangerous trap.

Perhaps you believe that the happiness of life is nothing other than the possession of love and money. Buddhism advocates that people should eliminate selfish affection and greed for money. Then what kind of happiness can one attain by believing in Buddhism? Actually, Buddhism does not admonish money itself; nor does it advocate that "money is a poisonous snake." Being poor is not a sin; nor is being rich loathsome. In fact, according to the Mahayana

Bodhisattva path, as long as wealth does not make one greedy, and as long as position can benefit the spreading of Buddhism, the more wealth or the higher position one attains, the better it is. Wealth and position can be very useful in promoting Buddhism. Wealth is neither good nor bad; the key lies in the way that it is used.

Ordinarily, people have the misconception that, according to Buddhism, one is supposed to renounce "having." This is simply not true. Buddhism indeed places emphasis on "having"; however, the object and the method of "having" are different from that of the worldly sense. In Buddhism, one strives to "have" happiness for all beings, not just for the benefit of oneself. The method for accomplishing such goal is through the mind of non-attachment, that is, to have [everything] by not possessing [anything]. I often say that we should consider "not possessing" as "having" and emptiness as existence, and that existence and "having" are founded on emptiness and "not possessing" respectively. After all, without emptiness, there is no existence; "having" occurs only when there is "not possessing." "Possessing" is limited, measurable, and computable; whereas, "not possessing" is limitless, immeasurable, and boundless. There are two kinds of worlds in our lives. The one in front of our eyes is a narrow "world of possessing." Because they are ignorant, sentient beings fight for the sake of their possessions. They do not know that when they turn around, they will find that there is another larger and wider world behind them. This other world is the "world of not possessing" and will be realized only if one's selfish desires and emotions are eradicated. In this world of "not possessing," birth and death are eradicated, desires are extinguished, and all relativity, differences, and illusions no longer exist. It is a completely liberated and carefree state. This is the state that all Buddhists should strive to attain.

When can this state of liberation be attained? Does one have to wait until one's physical body is dead and life is no more? No. This state was attained by the Buddha as he sat on his Diamond Throne underneath the Bodhi tree. If we work diligently, with much effort, we can attain this state just as the Buddha did.

What is the state of an enlightened being? In the eyes of most people, an enlightened person often behaves very strangely. For example, in the records of Ch'an Buddhism, the enlightened Ch'an masters had different ways of expressing themselves when they were enlightened to the Way. Some disciples laughed madly, and others struck their masters; the masters did not mind such behaviour, they actually approved of it. This kind of behaviour was completely

unacceptable to ordinary people. However, to an enlightened being, expressions such as these denote Ch'an itself.

IV. The Fourth Noble Truth: The Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

What is the Path? It is very comprehensive. The Four Infinite Buddha States of Mind, the Four Universal Vows, the Three Pure Studies, the Five Precepts, the Ten Wholesome Acts, the Seven Factors of Bodhi (enlightenment), the Noble Eightfold Path, the Thirty-Seven Requisites of Enlightenment, and the Six Paramitas are all considered as the Path. Due to a lack of time, we are only going to discuss the Noble Eightfold Path today.

The Noble Eightfold Path refers to the eight correct steps that will lead to the cessation of suffering. These steps are right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The Noble Eightfold Path appears to be very simple, but to understand it thoroughly is not so simple. Let us take a look at each of the elements in the Noble Eightfold Path.

A. Right Understanding

Right understanding is what enables one to maintain his or her faith in the truth when faced with inequalities or difficulties. Worldly knowledge can be both good and bad. Sometimes it is not reliable and can mislead us. Let us take a look at the Chinese character for ignorance (*ch'ih*). It is made up of two characters: *chih*, which means knowledge and *ping*, which means ailment. Thus, when knowledge becomes corrupted, it turns into ignorance. Some people are extremely clever, but when they do bad things, it is doubly wicked! For example, Hitler and Emperor Ch'in Shih are two very well-known historical figures who were clever, yet diabolic. Thus, a person's profound knowledge is not necessarily in direct proportion to his morality. Knowledge is like a sharp knife. If not used properly, it can hurt others. Therefore, it is very important for us to know how to transform knowledge into wisdom and right understanding.

Transforming knowledge into wisdom and right understanding is not easy. The principle is the same as taking photographs. The focus, distance, and shutter speed must be adjusted accordingly before one can take a clear and beautiful picture. Similarly, one can see the real nature of life and the universe as it really is only if one has the right understanding. If one lacks the right understanding when observing this world, serious mistakes will be made. It is like peering at

flowers through a heavy fog or like blind people feeling an elephant.

The teachings and methods of practicing Buddhism are many and varied to suit the various needs of people. All individuals should cultivate their practice according to their own capacities. As an example, all living beings should cultivate the right understanding. Those aspiring to the sravaka and pratyekabuddha paths need to understand the Concept of Conditioned Genesis. Those practicing the Mahayana Bodhisattva path need to comprehend the wisdom of sunyata. Then finally, Buddhas are the enlightened ones who have realized prajna. This sequence of practicing the right understanding, Conditioned Genesis, sunyata and prajna is similar to the gradual progression a student makes in his or her education from primary school, middle school, and high school to university undergraduate and graduate school. When we are at the primary stage of studying Buddhism, we should develop the right knowledge and the right understanding. When we are at the secondary level, we should observe the truth of Conditioned Genesis. At the advanced level we should contemplate the wisdom of sunyata, and at the final stage we should cultivate prajna. These are the progressive stages of cultivation. The stages that we arrive at depend on our own effort. Regardless of which level we are at, we all must begin with the right understanding. Thus, the right understanding is very important and is the first step we should take when studying Buddhism.

B. Right Thought

Right thought is right volition, decision, and contemplation. It means not having thoughts of greed, hatred, and ignorance. These three poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance are our main obstacles on the road to enlightenment. They continually occupy our minds and contaminate our pure nature. It is not easy to be rid of these three poisons. We have to exert effort constantly to maintain the right thinking needed to overcome these three poisons and enter the path of Buddhahood.

C. Right Speech

Using right speech means that we should not lie, slander others, use harsh language, or utter frivolous speech. A common proverb says, "Disease enters through our mouths; disaster springs forth from our mouths." Our mouth is a very sharp weapon. If we say something inappropriate, we not only will hurt others but will also hurt ourselves. Thus, it is very important that we choose our words carefully.

D. Right Action

Right action means that we should not kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, or take intoxicants of any kind. Besides abstaining from doing evil deeds, we also need to actively perform good deeds.

E. Right Livelihood

Right livelihood refers to the proper way of making a living, abstaining from unethical occupations such as operating gambling houses, selling alcoholic beverages or instruments that can kill, and operating slaughterhouses. Also, part of right livelihood is having well-disciplined living habits such as getting an adequate amount of sleep, food, exercise, rest, and work. Right livelihood not only promotes efficiency and good health, it also enables us to have a happy family life and a stable society.

F. Right Effort

There are four right efforts: 1) prevent evils that have not arisen from germinating; 2) eradicate all arisen evils; 3) nurture the good that has not come into being; and 4) maintain and multiply the good that has arisen.

G. Right Mindfulness

To have right mindfulness is to keep one's attention, awareness, and mind focused on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: 1) the body is impure; 2) sensations will always result in suffering; 3) the mind is impermanent; 4) all dharmas do not have a substantial self.

If we always remember impermanence, suffering, and selflessness, we will not be greedy for the trifling advantages of this world. We will strive for the Truth diligently.

H. Right Concentration

Right concentration refers to the four stages of *dhyana* (meditative concentration). What it really means is that we should concentrate our volition and thoughts through meditation.

If we can fully master the eight elements of this Noble Eightfold Path, we will reach the summit of Buddhahood with ease.

So far in this talk, we have learned about the Four Noble Truths, which can be compared to the process of curing disease. What causes a person to be sick is the

Second Noble Truth—the arising of suffering. After determining the root of the illness, we prescribe different methods for curing the disease, which is the Fourth Noble Truth—the path that leads to the eradication of suffering. When the correct prescription is applied, thus curing the disease, it is the Third Noble Truth—the cessation of suffering. We must cure our physical illness with medicinal prescriptions, whereas the sickness of our minds must be cured with the prescription of Buddhism. When we look at the Four Noble Truths through the principles for curing disease, we can see that they are completely in accordance with science, illustrating that Buddhism is very logical indeed.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha started teaching what he had realized. The first time he taught the Dharma, he turned the Wheel of Dharma three times. The first turning was instructive; he taught about the content and definitions of the Four Noble Truths. He said, "This is suffering, which has the character of oppression; this is the arising of suffering, which has the character of accumulating; this is the cessation of suffering, which has the character of realization; this is the path, which has the character of practicability."

The second turning of the wheel was "encouraging." The Buddha persuaded his students to practice the Four Noble Truths, to eradicate afflictions and attain enlightenment. He told them, "This is suffering, which you should understand; this is the arising of suffering, to which you should put an end; this is the cessation of suffering, which you should realize; this is the path, which you should practice."

The third turning was "evidential." The Buddha told his students that he himself had realized the Four Noble Truths. He encouraged all beings to put forth effort and strive to realize the Four Noble Truths just as he had done himself. The Buddha told them, "This is suffering, which I have already understood; this is the arising of suffering, which I have already eradicated; this is the cessation of suffering, which I have already realized; this is the path, which I have already practiced." From the emphasis the Buddha put on the Four Noble Truths, we know they must be very important.

The Four Noble Truths are the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. They have been practiced for over two thousand years. Their content is profound indeed; however, it is not possible for us to talk about their profundity in such a short period of time. Today I was able to give you only a brief introduction and plant the seed for your future investigation of Buddhism. Thank You!