

JANNA

Lưu hành nội bộ

BUDDHISM FOR BEGINNERS

HỎI ĐÁP CĂN BẢN TỔNG QUAN VỀ ĐẠO PHẬT



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- LIGHT OF THE WORLD -
(ÁNH SÁNG CỦA THẾ GIỚI)

BUDDHISM FOR BEGINNERS

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Question 01: WHAT IS BUDDHISM?

Answer: There are many religions in the world, and Buddhism is one of the major ones. Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha. It originated in India around the 5th-6th century BCE and later spread to many countries. Buddhism has a detailed, logical, and rich system of doctrine (dharma) based on the teachings of the Buddha. It also has a monastic community (sangha) responsible for preserving, and spreading the Buddha's teachings (dharma), and guiding Buddhists to practice according to those teachings. Additionally, Buddhism features its unique religious rituals.

Question 02: WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHISM?

Answer: Unlike many other religions that worship deities in the heavens and often pray to these deities for blessings in life and the promise of a heavenly afterlife, Buddhism focuses on enhancing human morality in the present life, helping individuals achieve an exceptionally clear and pure inner state of mind, known as Enlightenment. An Enlightened One can understand everything in the universe. Therefore, Buddhism also serves as a wonderful complement to other religions.

Question 03: DOES BUDDHISM HAVE PRAYERS?

Answer: Buddhism does have prayers and chanting, similar to other religions. The purpose of praying or chanting is to recall the teachings of the Buddha, to make promises to the Buddha about the good things we want to do and to ask for the Buddha's guidance in cultivating our inner morality. For example, if we want to love everyone, but find it difficult to do so, we pray to the Buddha to help us love everyone. Gradually, we might start feeling love for everyone, making those around us very happy.

Question 04: WHEN WE FACE DIFFICULTIES IN LIFE, CAN WE PRAY TO THE BUDDHA FOR HELP TO OVERCOME THEM?

Answer: In Buddhism, there is a large system of Divine Beings, including Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and deities, who are responsible for watching over and helping humans. Those who cultivate moral virtues, help others, show compassion, respect the venerable, and revere the Divine Beings will receive assistance and protection through prayers in the face of difficulties and accidents. These Divine Beings help us because they know that after we overcome difficulties, we will continue to live good lives, filled with love and assistance for others.

Question 05: DOES THAT MEAN THE BUDDHA ONLY HELPS THOSE WHO ARE MORAL, YET NOT EVERYONE UNCONDITIONALLY?

Answer: If divine assistance were unconditional, no one would bother to cultivate morality or live a virtuous life, since even malicious people would receive assistance just by praying. Everything must be fair; the universe holds absolute fairness, and deities must be even more just than humans. Those who live generously, and kindly, and help others deserve to be helped and rewarded. Those who live maliciously, selfishly, and harm others will suffer and be punished. This fairness is what the universe, Divine Beings, and human laws must follow to keep the world stable.

Question 06: WHAT IS THIS FAIRNESS CALLED?

Answer: Among humans, this fairness is called Justice. In the Heaven realm, it is called Divine Law. Throughout the universe, it is called the Truth. In Buddhism, it is known as the Law of Cause and Effect, or the Law of Karma.

Human justice is not absolute because it can be influenced by personal interests. The Divine Law in the Heaven realm is almost absolute because deities are more impartial, though they still have emotions. The Truth of the universe, also known as the Law of Cause and Effect or the Law of Karma, is absolutely fair. Anyone who wishes to cultivate morality should strive to understand this fair Law of Karma as thoroughly as possible.

Question 07: CAN YOU GIVE SOME EXAMPLES OF THE FAIRNESS OF THE LAW OF KARMA TO ILLUSTRATE IT MORE CLEARLY?

Answer: For example, if we give money to a malicious person, enabling them to commit more evil deeds, we incur negative karma. As a result, we may later face financial difficulties or experience misfortune. Conversely, if we give money to a poor person in need who is not malicious, we will gain positive karma. This merit (*) ensures that we will never fall into extreme financial hardship in the future. Additionally, if we give money to a virtuous person who frequently does good deeds and contributes positively to society, we will accumulate great merit. This significant merit will result in us having more money and experiencing many fortunate events in our lives.

() **merit** in Buddhism refers to the positive spiritual energy or karma accumulated through good deeds, moral conduct, generosity and spiritual practices. Merit brings about favorable conditions in this life and future lives, contributing to one's spiritual progress toward enlightenment.*

Question 08: CAN YOU GIVE MORE EXAMPLES?

Answer: For instance, if we see a damaged road and spend our time, effort, and money to repair it, making it safer and more convenient for people to travel, we gain positive karma. Thanks to this good karma, our future endeavours will go smoothly and easily, we will experience good fortune, avoid traffic accidents, and easily acquire vehicles.

Another example is if we notice poor students lacking books and sometimes going to school hungry. If we help by giving them money for books and providing food, enabling them to study well, we gain positive karma. Due to this merit, we will excel in our studies, enjoy a prosperous family life, and have a successful career.

If we frequently encourage people to love and help each other, we will not be lonely. We will always be surrounded by laughter and have many beloved people around us when we pass away. Conversely, if we often speak ill of others, causing suspicion and estrangement among people, we will eventually face the karma of loneliness, with no one wanting to be near us, and we may die alone without anyone knowing.

If we admire and respect good people, praise their virtues, and support them, we will naturally develop those good qualities by ourselves without much effort. Conversely, if we envy, criticize, and hinder good people, our minds will become corrupted by negative thoughts, making us prone to wrongdoing and condemned by society.

Question 09: THE MORE EXAMPLES I HEAR, THE MORE I UNDERSTAND THE LAW OF KARMA. COULD YOU PLEASE PROVIDE MORE EXAMPLES?

Answer: For instance, if we often think of ourselves as superior and look down on others, we will gradually find ourselves falling into a lower status, with poor character and social standing, and no one will like us. Conversely, if we think humbly of ourselves, consider ourselves ordinary or lowly, and show respect to everyone, we will gradually progress, becoming smarter, luckier, and more beloved by others. This is similar to what Jesus said in the Gospel: "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Another example is if we owe a debt that we cannot repay or receive a favor that we cannot return, we may become subordinates to our benefactors in the future, serving them to repay the debt or favor.

If we learn something valuable and share it with others instead of keeping it to ourselves, we will become extremely knowledgeable and intelligent, possibly even reaching the level of a genius.

If we often help build public facilities for many people to use, such as schools, hospitals, libraries, religious buildings, and retirement homes, we will be rewarded with a spacious and comfortable home in the future.

Question 10: THE MORE I HEAR ABOUT THE EXAMPLES OF KARMA, THE MORE I FIND IT FASCINATING AND LIMITLESS. ANYONE INTERESTED CAN EXPLORE AND REFLECT FURTHER. MAY I ASK, WHAT KARMA CAUSES A PERSON TO BE DISABLED?

Answer: A single outcome may stem from various causes, not necessarily just one. For instance, someone with a leg disability might have damaged public roads in a previous life, fought in wars and broken the legs of enemies, or hunted animals and broken their

legs to prevent them from escaping. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of such a karmic result; only Enlightened Beings can truly know.

For example, blindness might result from having harmed someone's eyes in the past, taken away public light sources, imprisoned someone in darkness for too long, or ignored the suffering of others to avoid helping them.

Similarly, someone who is mute may have once prohibited others from expressing their rightful desires, cut off someone's tongue, or been too cowardly to speak out in defense of what is right.

Question 11: HEARING ABOUT THE EXAMPLES OF KARMA, IT SEEMS LIKE THE LAW OF KARMA OPERATES OVER A VERY LONG TIME. A HUMAN LIFESPAN OF A HUNDRED YEARS SEEMS INSUFFICIENT. HOW CAN THIS BE REASONABLY EXPLAINED?

Answer: There was a time when Jesus spoke to the preceptor Nicodemus about the issue of reincarnation, which surprised Nicodemus, prompting him to ask how a person could be born again from their mother's womb after dying. Jesus confirmed the existence of reincarnation, explaining that what He saw and knew was very abstract, beyond the perception of ordinary humans, much like the invisible wind that comes and goes unseen. Later, missionaries found this concept difficult to understand and reinterpreted Jesus' notion of reincarnation as being reborn into faith in God for easier comprehension. However, initially, Jesus referred to reincarnation in the literal sense, as Nicodemus specifically asked about being born again from the mother's womb.

Indeed, a single human life is too short for the full operation of the Law of Karma. The fair and just Law of Karma requires multiple lifetimes to unfold, necessitating continuous rebirth. Some karma created in this life may take five lifetimes to manifest because the current life does not have enough necessary conditions for its fruition.

Question 12: ACCORDING TO CHRISTIANITY, PEOPLE GO TO HEAVEN OR HELL AFTER DEATH. SO IF REINCARNATION TRULY EXISTS, DOES THAT MEAN PEOPLE DO NOT GO TO HEAVEN OR HELL?

Answer: Heaven and Hell are two of the six realms that beings can go to after death.

The Buddha taught that there are six realms to which beings can be reborn after death: the realm of Heavens, the realm of Demi-Gods, the realm of Humans, the realm of Animals, the realm of Hungry Ghosts, and the realm of Hells.

In the Human and Animal realms, beings must be reborn by entering a mother's womb and starting anew as an embryo. In the other four realms (Heavens, Demi-Gods, Hungry Ghosts, and Hells), the soul transforms and moves to the new existence directly, a process known as spontaneous rebirth.

The realm of Heavens (Deva) is for those who lived very kindly and righteously, with a virtuous and saintly inner morality. In Heaven, Celestial Beings live in happiness, get what

they wish for, have long lifespans, and possess clear wisdom, with everything being transparent and just.

The realm of Demi-Gods (Asura) is for those who contributed greatly to life but still have inner anger, competitiveness, and jealousy. In this realm, Divine Beings enjoy many blessings and get what they want, but often experience depression due to frequent quarrels and conflicts.

The realm of Humans (Manusa) is for those with imperfect morality, sometimes good and sometimes bad, with unfinished past obligations and unfulfilled desires. In this realm, beings have vastly different fortunes, with some living in wealth and comfort while others endure hardship and poverty.

The realm of Animals (Tiryak) is for those who lived instinctually, doing whatever they liked without considering right or wrong. They may have been cruel, stubborn, greedy, aggressive, arrogant, dismissive of morality, disrespectful to people, and tend to criticize others.

The realm of Hungry Ghosts (Preta) is for those who lived selfishly, only caring for themselves, wasting food, and indulging in pleasures until their blessings were exhausted. In this realm, beings are constantly tormented by hunger and suffering.

The realm of Hell (Naraka) is for those who have been malicious and obstinate, causing suffering to others, refusing to heed the advice of others, and clinging to their own harmful beliefs. In Hell, beings undergo many painful punishments that seem to last forever, experiencing endless suffering without dying, as they are already dead.

Question 13: ACCORDING TO BUDDHISM, THERE ARE SIX REALMS. IT SEEMS MORE DETAILED AND SPECIFIC. DOES EACH REALM HAVE ANY FURTHER DISTINCTIONS?

Answer: Yes, each realm has countless subtle differences that cannot be fully described in a few words. The Buddhist view of the universe is vast, profound, accurate, and encompasses everything comprehensively.

For example, the Buddha taught that there are 25 different Heavens, varying in levels of merit, virtue, and meditation practice. The Hell realm also has many levels, depending on the sins and inner states of beings. The Human and Animal realms also have numerous variations that we are aware of.

Understanding these visible and invisible realms in this universe helps us comprehend the Law of Karma more deeply.

Question 14: WHAT IS THE LIFESPAN OF BEINGS IN THE DIFFERENT REALMS?

Answer: Let's first look at the Human realm, where the average human lifespan is about 75 years, though some live longer and some shorter. Illness, accidents, or suicide can

cause someone to die prematurely, even if their biological lifespan is not over. Lifespan is also influenced by karma.

For example, someone who contributes to life by planting trees, raising people and animals, healing, or saving lives will have their lifespan extended in this life and future lives. This person will live long and stay healthy in old age, rather than becoming frail.

Conversely, someone who destroys life, such as by deforesting, neglecting the hungry, killing beings, or damaging the Earth's environment, will have their lifespan shortened and may suffer from severe illnesses in their final days.

The lifespan of Celestial Beings varies according to their level in the heavens. In the lower heavens, the lifespan may be a few hundred years, while in the higher heavens, it can span millions of years.

Question 15: WHY DO CELESTIAL BEINGS IN HEAVENS HAVE A LIMITED LIFESPAN? CAN'T THEY STAY THERE FOREVER?

Answer: The Heaven realms are places where Beings enjoy the blissful rewards corresponding to the good karma they have accumulated in the past. However, no good karma can yield infinite results, no blissful reward is endless, so even Celestial Beings in the heavens have a limited lifespan. This is the fairness of the Law of Karma.

Question 16: WHAT ABOUT THE KING OF HEAVEN, THE RULER OF THE CELESTIAL REALM?

Answer: Each Heaven realm has a king who rules over it, known as the Lord of the Heaven. In the higher Heaven realms, the role of those Lords is less prominent because most Celestial Beings are already very enlightened, virtuous, and self-disciplined, requiring no supervision.

Most religions in the world believe in a single Lord of Heaven because they think there is only one Heaven realm. In reality, there are many Lords of Heaven, each ruling over a level of the Heaven realm.

Religions also often believe that the King of Heaven is the supreme One who created everything, including the heavens, earth, all beings, life itself, and the fate of every individual. Because they believe that there is only one omnipotent God who created everything, the only way is to pray to the Lord for blessings.

Some philosophical schools oppose this belief, arguing that if God created everything, then God also created suffering, war, disease, disasters, tsunamis, separation, grief and death. They find this illogical and believe that the only way is to create one's own destiny.

Buddhism views the Kings of Heaven differently. The Kings of Heaven are Celestial Beings with great merit and virtue, and a long lifespan, who rule over the Heaven realm and also oversee the Human realm. These Lords do not create everything but govern all, striving to guide humans and Celestial Beings toward the best possible path. This perspective is more reasonable and gentle.

Question 17: IF THE UNIVERSE WAS NOT CREATED BY GOD, THEN WHERE DID IT COME FROM? EVERYTHING MUST HAVE A BEGINNING, RIGHT?

Answer: In our limited perspective, within a small scope and short timeframe, we see that everything has a beginning and an end. Humans are born, grow up, age, and die. Trees grow tall and eventually wither and die. However, if we expand our view to the infinite, we realize that everything is merely transforming from one state to another. Nothing is truly created, and nothing truly disappears.

Water vapor condenses into clouds, which then precipitates as rain. Rainwater flows into rivers and streams, eventually reaching the sea, and then evaporates back into clouds.

A tree grows from a seed, becomes trunks, branches, leaves, flowers, and fruits, then withers, decays, and turns into nutrients in the soil to nourish other trees.

The entire universe operates in a similar way, with no true beginning or end. It merely changes from one state to another.

In this infinite transformation, the Law of Karma and the will of Divine Beings play significant roles. The universe changes primarily according to the karma of sentient beings, but there is also some intervention from Celestial Beings. This is why when we face difficulties due to past karma, sincere prayers with promises to do good deeds can lead Celestial Beings to intervene in our fate and help us overcome adversity.

For example, if we are suffering from a serious illness with no cure in sight, we might kneel and pray sincerely to the divine, asking for healing and promising to live virtuously and help others in the future. Surprisingly, our health may be improved for reasons unknown.

Question 18: SO, IF WE FOLLOW BUDDHA SHAKYAMUNI, WHICH HEAVEN REALM DO WE AIM TO REACH?

Answer: The goal of practicing Buddhism is Enlightenment and Liberation.

Enlightenment is the ultimate wisdom, understanding everything in the universe, comprehending the truth of the cosmos, knowing the workings of the Law of Karma, achieving perfect morality, possessing boundless compassion, and being free from any suffering. While sentient beings are ignorant, enlightenment is the end of ignorance. While sentient beings cling to the self (ego), enlightenment is the state of no-self (egolessness).

Liberation means no longer being subject to the cycle of birth and death (samsara) when one has attained the complete Nirvana of an Arahant (a fully Enlightened Being).

If Buddhist disciples have not yet achieved complete liberation, they will still be reborn in good realms, with little ignorance and suffering. They will continue their practice until they attain the Arahant state with the complete Nirvana.

Question 19: WHAT IS NIRVANA?

Answer: Nirvana is an absolute state where there is no more suffering, no more ignorance, no more attachment to the notion of self, no more rebirth, no more binding emotions, and no more disturbances of the mind. In other words, Nirvana is a state of absolute clarity, absolute wisdom, and absolute compassion. It involves a deep understanding of the Law of Karma, the past bad karma of sentient beings, and the cycle of rebirth for all.

Nirvana has no specific location because it is not bound by space or time, yet it encompasses all space and time within it.

Of course, Nirvana is not the same as the Heaven realm because it has no physical and visible form, but the Heaven realm is also not separate from Nirvana.

Nirvana is neither a point nor a realm, it is neither large nor small; all space is within it. Nirvana is neither a moment nor a long period of time, so it is neither fast nor slow, neither before nor after; neither past nor future, all time is within it.

Nirvana is the absolute tranquility that transcends any thought and language; only those who have attained it can truly know it. The more one tries to describe Nirvana, the more mistaken one becomes, as it only leads to futile imagination.

The Enlightened Ones focus on teaching us the path to Nirvana, never attempting to describe it. Nirvana is extremely abstract, so those with lesser wisdom cannot perceive it and therefore will not aspire to attain it. Only those with great wisdom, who have revered and served the enlightened Saints in many past lives, can sense the sublime nature of Nirvana and aspire to achieve Enlightenment.

Question 20: ACCORDING TO THE LAW OF KARMA, WHAT CAUSE MUST BE SOWN TO ATTAIN NIRVANA?

Answer: According to the Law of Karma, "honoring teachers enables one to become a teacher". Therefore, those who revere enlightened Saints will have the blessing to practice and attain the supreme enlightenment and transcendent Nirvana. However, the level of reverence determines the degree of Enlightenment achieved. Absolute reverence leads to complete enlightenment and full attainment of Nirvana, while partial reverence results in partial enlightenment.

Additionally, reverence must be expressed through concrete actions such as praising, supporting, and making material offerings to the Enlightened Ones to create a more complete karmic result.

Another meritorious action that helps achieve enlightenment is to assist others in their spiritual practice towards enlightenment. To achieve something, one must first help others achieve it, making one's own journey smoother. Generally, due to selfish tendencies, people only seek success for themselves and are unwilling to share good things with others, resulting in limited blessings (*). Be open to share the path to enlightenment with many people, our own practice will naturally become more favorable.

(*) **blissing** in Buddhism refers to the positive influence or favorable conditions that result from the accumulation of merit through good deeds, virtuous actions, and righteous speech. Blessing often manifests as well-being, wealth, success, good fortune, protection, or other favorable conditions in one's life. **Merit** and **blissing** are closely related but not identical. Merit is the cause, while blessings are often seen as the effect.

Question 21: CAN NON-BUDDHISTS PRACTICE AND ATTAIN NIRVANA?

Answer: Ordinary people often find ways and reasons to divide themselves based on religion, skin color, race, boundaries, and possessions. However, Enlightened Beings do not concern themselves with these distinctions. They only differentiate between those who are virtuous and those who lack virtue. If we are virtuous, no matter what religion we belong to, the Enlightened Beings will hold us in high regard.

The Enlightened Ones are pleased when a Buddhist reveres Jesus, and equally pleased when a Christian reveres the Buddha. Truth transcends all boundaries and is not hindered by labels.

If a Buddhist practices incorrectly, they will not achieve any results. Conversely, if a non-Buddhist practices correctly, they can still achieve enlightenment.

Question 22: WHAT IS THE RIGHT WAY TO PRACTICE, AND WHAT IS THE WRONG WAY?

Answer: The path of spiritual practice in Buddhism is an extensive, detailed, and meticulous system of doctrines. It begins with having the right understanding of everything, followed by a challenging practice that progresses from shallow to deep, from small to large, and from near to far, requiring practitioners to prepare themselves mentally to follow this path over many lifetimes.

If one rushes into practice without fully understanding the principles and the path, they are likely to practice incorrectly. The first step is to gain a precise understanding of the teachings (Dharma) and the path itself. To achieve the right and complete understanding, one must pray to meet a true and wise master (*) and find the most authentic materials of Dharma. Since we ourselves do not yet have the wisdom to discern who is a truly wise master or which texts are authentic; we must humbly pray for Divine Beings' guidance rather than arrogantly assume that we can judge which master is right or wrong, as all masters may sound convincing.

(*) **master** in Buddhism refers to a highly advanced practitioner who has attained deep insight, wisdom, and realization of the Dharma (Buddha's teachings) and is capable of guiding others on the path to enlightenment.

Question 23: WHAT IS THE RIGHT INITIAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE DHARMA?

Answer: The initial understanding of the Dharma must be thorough and profound, focusing on the Four Noble Truths. These truths are considered the declaration of Buddhism, which is great and profound, therefore, it can be very challenging to understand. Despite that difficulty, we must strive to comprehend it to begin our spiritual practice which spans many lifetimes.

The Four Noble Truths consist of the following:

- **The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha):** The truth about the inherent nature of suffering in all beings and life itself.
- **The Truth of the Cause of Suffering (Samudaya):** The truth about the origins of suffering and what causes suffering that pervades all aspects of life.
- **The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha):** The truth about Nirvana, the state of absolute Enlightenment and extraordinary liberation free from suffering and rebirth, which is the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.
- **The Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering (Magga):** The truth about the path to the transcendent Nirvana, which includes the Noble Eightfold Path.

After meditating in the immovable lotus position for 49 days and nights in the forest of Uruvela, the Buddha attained supreme enlightenment. He then sought out the group of five ascetics led by Kondanna who were residing at the Deer Park (Sarnath) near Benares, to guide them. There, he delivered his first sermon on the Four Noble Truths, marking the beginning of all Buddhist teachings and representing the fundamental Truth of the universe.

The Truths seen through the Buddha's enlightened wisdom are not easy to understand. However, if we wish to practice correctly, we must grasp these Four Noble Truths.

Question 24: WHAT IS THE TRUTH OF SUFFERING (DUKKHA)?

Answer: The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha) refers to the fact of suffering. The universe is governed by many laws and principles related to physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology, and other fields. However, when it comes to sentient beings, those with consciousness, all inevitably face the harsh fact that all beings suffer in one way or another.

We might feel that we are okay and not sense any suffering, much like an ant foraging for food, a fish swimming in the water, or a worm burrowing underground, all seemingly without suffering. This is because we have become accustomed to suffering, accepting it as part of life and enduring it to survive. However, those in the higher realm can see our suffering, just as we see insects and animals struggling to survive and feel compassion for them.

The Enlightened Ones, such as the Arahants who have achieved absolute liberation, see clearly that all beings struggle and suffer, constantly striving to live, just to eventually die, which seems ultimately meaningless. If someone has a virtuous heart and lives selflessly, serving and caring for others, even though their life is still suffering, it carries more meaning. Conversely, those who live selfishly only add to their suffering.

The Buddha summarized suffering into eight types:

- **The suffering of unfulfilled desires:** Beings continually seek but never fully attain their wishes.
- **The suffering of separation from loved ones:** We are parted from the people or things we love since nothing in this world stays together forever.
- **The suffering of encountering the unpleasant:** Annoying and hated things follow us persistently.
- **The suffering of birth:** Life itself is a difficult journey.
- **The suffering of ageing:** The decay and decline caused by ageing are challenging.
- **The suffering of illness:** Physical ailments cause numerous troubles that no one can avoid.
- **The suffering of death:** The end of life brings pain, loss, separation, and regret.
- **The suffering of mental disturbance:** Mental turmoil is extremely distressing.

Occasionally, we may experience success and good luck, making us feel happy. These fleeting joys are the good karmic results of our past virtuous deeds. But when the blessing runs out, suffering returns. Continuously doing good deeds can prevent suffering but does not eliminate its root cause. Only by practicing the path towards liberation as taught by the Buddha can we completely eradicate the root of suffering.

Our brains are inherently inclined toward sadness, but due to the merit we have, our brain cells secrete dopamine to mask this sadness. When they stop secreting dopamine, we will fall into inescapable sadness or depression.

Our body is naturally inclined to pain, as muscles and joints constantly exert pressure on each other, causing discomfort. Due to our merit, the body's cells secrete endorphins to mask the pain. Without merit, endorphins cease being produced, then the body becomes filled with pain.

The suffering of sentient beings is endless, reflecting the nature of life itself.

Question 25: WHAT IS THE TRUTH OF THE ORIGIN OF SUFFERING (SAMUDAYA)?

Answer: The Truth of the Origin of Suffering (Samudaya) refers to the causes of suffering. Why are we born into this world and endure so much hardship, conflict, separation, loss, grief and despair while joys seem fleeting and temporary?

The root cause of all suffering lies in our ignorance (avijjā), attachment to the self (ego), craving, anger, deceit, ambition, foolishness, misunderstandings, arrogance, and selfishness. It is because of our faults that we experience suffering.

The greatest fault is ignorance. Ignorance leads to ego-clinging and craving, trapping us in the endless cycles of birth and rebirth (samsara).

Ignorance is difficult to define because ignorance is a profound state of darkness and foolishness that ordinary beings cannot perceive. Only enlightened Arahants truly understand what ignorance is upon reaching enlightenment.

Suffering is created by two forces: psychological feelings and the pressure of karma.

Karma places us in difficult circumstances, and our minds suffer in those circumstances. For example, karma might cause us to have a car accident, leading to loss and disruption, and our minds suffer due to the accident. However, a person with a tranquil and detached mind may experience the same accident with physical pain but his mind remains free from distress and sorrow. The primary cause of suffering is the mind, but external circumstances can influence the mind.

When our minds are filled with ignorance, ego-clinging, and desire, we cannot control our emotions when facing difficult situations.

When our minds are still dominated by ignorance, ego-clinging, desire, and anger, we cannot stop creating negative karma, and its consequences will push us into miserable situations.

As long as our minds are filled with ignorance, ego-clinging, and desire, the cycle of rebirth continues, forcing us to endure endless suffering.

Ignorance is pervasive, but the unwholesome instincts also create a vast sea of karma that traps beings within it. Beings have harmed, stolen, bound, slandered, deceived, betrayed each other, disrespected the noble saints, idolized the unrighteous, wasted food and water, neglected those in need, looked down on the less fortunate, arrogantly considered themselves superior, and acted irresponsibly toward those around them... Countless karmic debts force beings to return and face their consequences to settle them fully.

There is even karma that causes beings to be reborn as insects or worms with little hope of regaining human form, making the path to enlightenment seem hopeless.

Occasionally, through learning moral teachings, beings create good karma, helping one another, and this merit offers them more choices in life, making their living more comfortable. However, as long as ignorance persists, negative karma is always lurking; just a slight misstep creates negative karma, leading to further suffering.

Ignorance and unwholesome instincts (fettors) are ever-present, while virtue requires cultivation, maintenance, and effort, yet is easily lost.

Suffering is difficult to eliminate because its causes - ignorance, ego attachment, and craving - are constantly present.

Question 26: WHAT IS THE TRUTH OF THE CESSATION OF SUFFERING (NIRODHA)?

Answer: The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha) refers to the state of being free from suffering, known as enlightenment and liberation, achieved through successful spiritual practice in line with the Buddha's teachings.

While many religions see reaching heaven after death as the ultimate goal for a faithful follower, Buddhism defines true spiritual success as achieving extraordinary inner enlightenment. After attaining enlightenment, one can freely choose where to be or choose not to exist in any place at all. There are four stages of enlightenment:

- **Arahant** (Arhat): The fourth and highest stage of enlightenment. An Arahant possesses the Threefold Knowledge and Six Supernormal Powers, achieving complete liberation from the universe, with boundless wisdom and enlightenment.
- **Anāgāmi** (Non-returner): The third stage of enlightenment. An Anāgāmi is no longer reborn into the human realm unless they choose to be. They possess great spiritual powers and wisdom, and often reside in the highest heaven of the Form Realm (Suddhāvāsa), continuing their practice until they attain Arahantship and enter Nirvana.
- **Sakadāgāmi** (Once-returner): The second stage of enlightenment. A Sakadāgāmi may be reborn in the human realm once more to complete their virtues and aspirations. They possess a very pure mind and some basic supernormal powers. After death, they are often reborn in the Tusita Heaven to learn from Maitreya Buddha, the future Buddha of Earth in the next hundreds of thousands of years.
- **Sotāpanna** (Stream-enterer): The first stage of enlightenment. A Sotāpanna may be reborn multiple times into the human realm to fulfil their virtuous aspirations for themselves and other beings. They have an unwavering commitment to morality and absolute reverence for the Buddha. However, they do not yet have enough supernatural wisdom to discern reality from illusion, so they still make mistakes and have karma to resolve. A Sotāpanna may be reborn in the Heavens of Desire Realm or multiple times in the human realm. They often engage in good deeds, resulting in good connections with beings and easily earning blessings.

The Threefold Knowledge of an Arahant includes:

- **Knowledge of Past Lives** (Pubbenivāsānussati-ñāṇa): The ability to see one's countless past lives in great detail and understand one's connections with innumerable other beings.
- **Knowledge of the Death and Rebirth of Beings** (Dibbacakkhu): The ability to see the rebirth of beings across countless lifetimes, observing their karmic actions and consequences according to the Law of Karma with clarity and detail.
- **Knowledge of the End of Mental Defilements** (Āsavakkhaya-ñāṇa): The ability to see the ultimate truth of the universe, understanding the Four Noble Truths and

the workings of everything and every realm, with the capacity to know anything they wish to know, yet primarily grasping the profound wisdom of the Dharma.

The Six Supernormal Powers of an Arahant consists of the Threefold Knowledge and add the following:

- **Supernatural Power** (Iddhi-vidhā): The ability to perform supernatural feats, such as flying, creating multiple bodies, manipulating the elements, and transforming environments.
- **Telepathy** (Cetopariya-ñāṇa): The ability to know the thoughts of other beings, even from a great distance.
- **Clairaudience** (Dibbasota): The ability to hear sounds of beings from all realms.

The realms of Heavens can also be considered as part of the Cessation of Suffering because they alleviate many sufferings experienced in the human and animal realms. However, true Cessation of Suffering in Buddhism is only achieved through attaining inner enlightenment.

Question 27: IS IT TRUE THAT THOSE WHO ATTAIN SAINTHOOD IN BUDDHISM POSSESS SUPERNATURAL POWERS AS DESCRIBED IN THEORY?

Answer: Buddhist scriptures document many instances of the Buddha and Arahants demonstrating extraordinary supernatural powers. For instance, there is a story of the venerable Gavampati using his supernatural power to stop a sudden flash flood from an overflowing river, causing the water to pile up high in the sky. This allowed the monks sleeping on the riverbank to escape to higher ground before Gavampati released the floodwaters to flow normally again.

In China, during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), there is a story of Zen master Deng Yinfeng. While passing by a battlefield where two armies were fighting fiercely, he flew up into the sky and gestured for them to stop, causing both armies to retreat and cease fighting.

In Vietnam, during the Ly Dynasty (1009-1225 CE), two Zen masters, Minh Tam and Bao Tanh, after delivering a sermon, ascended into the air, set themselves aflame, and entered Nirvana.

There are numerous stories of the supernatural powers of Saints in Buddhism, recorded extensively in Buddhist scriptures and historical texts worldwide.

Question 28: WHAT IS THE TRUTH OF THE PATH LEADING TO THE CESSATION OF SUFFERING (MAGGA)?

Answer: The Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering (Magga) refers to the way leading to the end of suffering and the attainment of transcendent Nirvana. It can be described as a method, an approach, or a roadmap. The Truth of the Path is a comprehensive system of practice in Buddhism, vast, perfect, thorough and detailed,

encompassing a long journey from basic to advanced stages. It includes the following eight components, known as the Noble Eightfold Path:

- **Right Comprehension:** Understanding Buddhist doctrines for practice correctly is crucial because misunderstanding or holding wrong views leads to erroneous practices, making practitioners stray from the Right path, resulting in wrongdoing and more suffering. However, people with misguided views on cultivation always insist that they are right, making it very difficult for them to change. There are two critical aspects of Right Comprehension in Buddhism: understanding the Law of Karma and the goal of enlightenment which is being free from the self (ego).
- **Right Consideration:** Based on Right Comprehension, one must think and reflect in alignment with the Dharma to transform the mind to become pure and virtuous, eliminating wrong thoughts and perfecting deep morality. The process of filtering out wrong thoughts is challenging and solitary, as no one else can see our mind to assist us. Thus, we must evaluate our own thoughts in solitude to make adjustments. Correct thinking also creates merit.
- **Right Speech:** With Right Comprehension and the ethics of Right Consideration, one should convey only positive and meaningful messages that help others progress in their practice. Our language and attitude must be cultured, ethical, and beneficial, forming virtuous karma and increasing blessings through speech.
- **Right Action:** These are actions that interact with and influence other sentient beings, the community, and the minds and lives of others. Practitioners must actively create positive impacts, helping beings to be happy, well-provided, knowledgeable, moral, and inspired towards enlightenment, thereby accumulating increasing merit that supports spiritual practice and meditation.
- **Right Livelihood:** This refers to earning a living through righteous means. Everyone needs a job to earn income for food, clothing, housing, and necessities. Monastics live by alms and offerings given by the faithful, a form of Right Livelihood. Laypeople work in various businesses or professions to make a living. The merit from Right Actions enables one to choose a righteous livelihood, avoiding harmful or unethical jobs. A Right Livelihood helps one earn more and more merit over time.
- **Right Endeavour:** This is the effort in meditation practice. Meditation is the final path to spiritual enlightenment, requiring control of the mind and cessation of wandering thoughts to reach the ultimate truth. However, concentrating the mind in meditation is extremely difficult, and most people fail. Right Endeavour refers to the stage where one practices a meditation method without attaining any immediate results, yet persists without giving up. The term '**Right**' also implies the correctness of meditation methods, as many unknowingly practice incorrect meditation methods. Practitioners should pray to find a true Zen master who can guide the correct meditation approach, to avoid wasting effort.

- **Right Mindfulness:** At this stage, meditation practice begins to yield results. Wandering thoughts no longer dominate, and the practitioners frequently experience mindfulness. This stage is not yet extraordinary, as the mind remains flawed and still prone to faults, but mindfulness serves as a guiding light. The term 'Right' in this stage indicates that practitioners must understand that, even with mindfulness, they remain flawed and must continue to practice diligently without becoming complacent or relaxed, which could lead to regression. Mindfulness can also give practitioners additional motivation to continue their spiritual practice.
- **Right Ecstasy:** At this stage, a conscious effort is no longer needed to focus the mind, as the mind naturally abides in tranquillity. There are four levels of Right Ecstasy: First Jhana, Second Jhana, Third Jhana, and Fourth Jhana. These indicate different depths of tranquillity. Though the mind is tranquil, depth varies, and not all tranquil states of mind are the same. In daily life, practitioners maintain mindfulness (Right Mindfulness) and enter deeper meditative states whenever they want. In the Third Jhana, one delves into the subconscious, understanding the autonomic nervous system's secret workings. In the Fourth Jhana, one perceives the universe's profound nature, far beyond scientific understanding.

The Noble Eightfold Path is an extensive system of practice requiring many lifetimes for a being to be able to attain liberation and enlightenment in Nirvana.

Question 29: CAN YOU EXPLAIN FURTHER WHY THE RIGHT COMPREHENSION, SPECIFICALLY UNDERSTANDING THE LAW OF KARMA, IS SO IMPORTANT?

Answer: Without a thorough understanding of the Law of Karma, we may hold onto wrong views, perceive things incorrectly, misinterpret everything, and act mistakenly, which diminishes our merit, causes us to accumulate negative karma, and ultimately closes off the path to spiritual enlightenment.

For example, if we see a practitioner living in solitude and diligently meditating, achieving spiritual results, we might conclude that solitude led to their success in practice. This view does not align with the Law of Karma and is therefore inaccurate. We must understand that the practitioner may have revered an enlightened Saint in the past or, despite living in solitude, consistently pays homage to the Buddha and maintains a vast compassion for all beings, combined with proper meditation practice to achieve such results.

Similarly, when we see someone born into a wealthy family and simply attribute their situation to luck without further reflection, we are missing the Law of Karma. To be born into a wealthy family, this person must have accumulated significant merit in past lives, allowing them to enjoy prosperity and comfort from birth in this life.

Conversely, when we see a poor person and assume they are lazy or unwilling to work, we are also ignoring the Law of Karma, pushing us to fall into the wrong views. Many hardworking people remain impoverished due to a lack of opportunities, assistance, or frequent misfortune. Poverty can result from various karmic causes, not just a single fixed cause. Poverty may result from stinginess, wastefulness, looking down on the poor, improper use of money, or giving to unworthy individuals...

Question 30: IS REVERING DEITIES AND PRAYING TO THEM CONSIDERED RIGHT COMPREHENSION?

Answer: Actually, most deities introduced by various religions are mythical characters without a historical basis. The characteristics of these deities depend on the understanding of those who introduce them. If the introducer has a profound understanding, they will describe the deity as sublime; if their understanding is shallow, the deity will be described in simpler terms.

The key factor determining whether praying to a deity aligns with the Right Comprehension is the fairness of that deity. If the deity rewards and punishes justly according to the Law of Karma, then praying to them is considered Right Comprehension. In contrast, if the deity does not adhere to fairness and instead favors those who lavish them with flattery and offerings, then praying to them becomes a misguided belief.

Question 31: IS IT A WRONG VIEW NOT TO BELIEVE IN THE SPIRITS OF THE DECEASED?

Answer: According to the Nikaya scriptures, the Buddha taught that not believing in the existence of the spiritual realm (transmigration) is considered a wrong view. We do not need to wait until death to understand this truth. By calmly reflecting, we can realize that death is not the end but a transition from one state to another. Before death, people live in their physical bodies; after death, they continue to exist as invisible spirits. This transition is a natural process.

However, because these spirits are invisible, we tend to forget them, inadvertently disrespecting them. We have to understand them with wisdom rather than just our physical senses, much like understanding electronic machinery requires knowledge and intelligence beyond what the eyes can see. Nowadays, many cameras with high sensitivity have captured images of spirits in various places, which reinforces the belief in their presence.

We should understand them to have the appropriate respect and offer them food to help alleviate their hunger, as many wandering spirits suffer from hunger for a long time, similar to the impoverished people in this physical world. They can still benefit from the food we offer.

Additionally, we can recite sacred sutras and prayers for them as a spiritual gift to these beings.

Question 32: SOME PRIESTS ADVOCATE EXORCISING GHOSTS WHEN HOMEOWNERS DISCOVER A SPIRIT IN THEIR HOUSE. IS THIS RIGHT OR WRONG?

Answer: Spirits, like humans, can be categorized based on their merit: some have great merit, while others have little. Spirits with more merit have proper places to reside, while those with less merit wander in hunger and coldness. The temperament of spirits also varies; some are gentle, while others may be more aggressive. When spirits show signs

of their presence, it does not necessarily mean they intend to harm. Sometimes, they might simply want to seek food from us or wish for prayers to help them escape suffering.

Unfortunately, many people misunderstand these signs and immediately call for exorcism to banish the spirits, which can offend and create animosity with them. Actually, we just need to offer them food and recite prayers or sutras, which can make them happy. Sometimes, they may even support us in our lives.

Question 33: HOW CAN WE KNOW IF OUR MERIT IS GREAT OR SMALL?

Answer: We carry a lot of negative karma from the past, which continues to influence us, while the positive karma we create in this life may not have yet matured into visible results, making it difficult to perceive our merit clearly. However, if we spend our lives doing good deeds, helping others, planting trees, digging wells, repairing roads, fixing neighbors' houses, building new homes for the community, helping children go to school, assisting the poor with medical care, paying taxes diligently, teaching others about the Law of Karma, encouraging moral development, and promoting love and compassion among people... we are likely to enjoy a peaceful and happy old age, which reflects some of our accumulated merit. After death, we may be reborn into a favorable realm, and if reborn as a human, we will have a noble status.

The concern is if we do too few good deeds in this life. If our blessing runs out before we die, we may face hardship and loneliness in old age and become a suffering spirit after death, taking a long time to be reborn into a lowly position.

Question 34: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CULTIVATE TOWARDS THE GOAL OF NON-SELF?

Answer: All sentient beings are influenced by the ego, which is the sense of self. This feeling of self is an illusion, but it governs human psychology. The larger the ego, the more a person becomes immoral, greedy, arrogant, aggressive, selfish, jealous, ambitious, and competitive.

Most wise masters advise people to diminish their egos to develop morality. The smaller the ego, the less unwholesome tendencies a person will have, making it easier to develop moral qualities such as humility, compassion, generosity, charity, tolerance, kindness, gentleness and patience.

However, only the Buddha taught complete non-self through the Noble Eightfold Path, with meditation as the core practice to overcome ego-attachment. Non-self means the absolute absence of the ego and the attachment to the self, leaving only a unified, boundless existence of all beings. This is the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.

If we stray from the goal of non-self, no matter how much we practice, we cannot achieve liberation, as the ego is the chain that binds us to the endless suffering in samsara. The ego is so subtle and deceptive that even when we reach deep meditative states, it can deceive us, leading to pride. Even when we live virtuously, frequently helping others, it can lead us to feel pride in our good qualities. Therefore, in daily life, one must be wise and intelligent to avoid being deceived by the ego's hidden and insidious nature.

Question 35: HOW ARE THE REALMS IN THE UNIVERSE DIVIDED?

Answer: The realms of existence are divided in several ways:

When categorized by composition, the Human Realm and the Animal Realm are considered realms of visible matter, while the realms of Heaven, Demi-God, Hungry Ghosts, and Hell are realms of invisible spirits.

If divided by merit, the Animal, Hungry Ghost and Hell realms are characterized by low merit and high sin, where beings experience significant suffering. The Human realm is a mixed realm, where beings have both sin and merit, experiencing both happiness and suffering, while the realms of Heavens and Demi-Gods are realms of high merit, where beings enjoy great happiness and blessings.

If divided by psychophysiological characteristics, the Desire Realm includes six heavenly realms (The Heaven of Delight in Creation (Nirmāṇarati), the Heaven of Joyous Emanations (Parinirmita-vasavartin), the Heaven of Contentment (Tuṣita), the Yama Heaven (Yāma), the Heaven of the Thirty-Three (Trāyastriṃśa), the Heaven of the Four Great Kings (Cāturmahārājika). It also includes the Human realm, the Animal realm, the realm of hungry ghosts, and the hell realm. A defining characteristic of beings in the Desire Realm is that they still possess sensual desires.

Above the Desire Realm are the realms of the Form Realm. Here, the Celestial Beings possess very large forms but no longer have sensual desires. The Form Realm consists of 18 levels, which are actually divided into four stages of meditative concentration, from the First Jhana to the Fourth Jhana. Those who achieve the First Jhana or higher in their practice will be reborn in the Form Realm after leaving the Human realm.

Higher than the Form Realm is the Formless Realm, which comprises four levels. In this realm, deities have transcended both sensual desires and physical form, existing as pure, intangible consciousness.

The Buddhist cosmology is vast and thorough, offering a comprehensive understanding of the universe that surpasses any other religious or philosophical perspective.

Question 36: HOW DOES REBIRTH BETWEEN DIFFERENT REALMS OCCUR?

Answer: Beings are reborn into realms that correspond to their karma.

For example, those with great merit are reborn into the Human realm or ascend to the Heaven realms. Those with many sins descend to the Animal realm, the realm of Hungry ghosts, or the Hell realm. Those who have merit but retain sensual desires are reborn in the Heavens of the Desire Realm. Those who have merit and have overcome sensual desires are reborn in the Form Realm.

Many Celestial Beings in the Desire Realm are reborn as humans when their lifespan ends. The lifespan in the Heaven realms is proportional to the level of the heaven, ranging from several hundred years to millions of years.

Question 37: ACCORDING TO THE LAW OF KARMA, WHAT CAN ONE DO TO QUICKLY GAIN GREAT MERIT?

Answer: The greatest merit comes from guiding, supporting, and helping sentient beings in their spiritual practice to achieve enlightenment. However, to become a master with enough virtue and wisdom to instruct others, one must already have accumulated substantial merit in the past, so it is not easy to quickly achieve such great merit.

A bit easier way is to explain the Law of Karma to others. Those who can teach correctly about Karma will gain significant merit. Still, to effectively teach the Law of Karma, one must have personal cultivation, credibility, a virtuous life to serve as an example and significant merit. Without prior merit, one's words may not be heeded and respected.

An even simpler way is to show reverence to the Buddha and the Enlightened Ones. This does not require interaction with others or any difficult conditions, just a sincere heart filled with reverence for the Buddha and the enlightened Saints. However, to develop such reverence, one must study and practice extensively, as it is not a simple task.

Question 38: HOW ABOUT PEOPLE FROM OTHER RELIGIONS WHO WORSHIP THEIR DEITIES? WHAT KIND OF MERIT DO THEY GAIN?

Answer: This depends on the nature of the deity in that religion. If the deity is an Enlightened One, then revering them can bring great merit. However, if the deity does not possess qualities of enlightenment, then worship may not result in as much merit as expected.

Many followers believe that their deities reside in the heavens and have the power to bestow blessings or punishment, so they sincerely pray to receive blessings and hope to be welcomed into heaven after death. Some devotees sincerely pray and experience positive outcomes, while others fervently pray but see no results, leading to doubt. This depends on individual merit; those with more merit may see their prayers answered, while those with less merit may not see any results.

Ultimately, the Law of Karma governs everything with its absolute fairness.

Question 39: WHEN SOMEONE FACES DIFFICULTIES AND PRAYS FOR HELP, IS THIS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LAW OF KARMA?

Answer: The Law of Karma is strict, yet it also allows for flexibility. For instance, if a person faces a bad karmic consequence, such as an accident, and prays to deities for protection, the deities can intervene: If the person in trouble has a sincere heart and has done good deeds, the deities may use their powers to help him overcome the danger, similar to how we may assist others in times of hardship. In this case, the person is essentially borrowing merit from the deities, which means that they must repay this merit from their own good deeds in the future instead of enjoying it as they usually would.

Conversely, if someone facing difficulties does not perform good deeds and merely waits for help, they may find that in times of trouble, no assistance is forthcoming and their prayers go unanswered.

Question 40: IN THE HIGHER REALMS, DO THE DEITIES OF DIFFERENT RELIGIONS KNOW EACH OTHER?

Answer: Most deities are created by human imagination, so followers often do not have a clear understanding of what these deities are truly like and simply believe what they have been told. Each religion has its own deities due to the differing perspectives of its religious leaders. If these leaders achieve enlightenment and can perceive the heavenly realms clearly, they will understand the deities as unified and harmonious, without division by religion.

In the human realm, we tend to distinguish between people of different religions, but in the higher realms, deities only differentiate between those who are virtuous and those who are not. The deities do not require human beings to know them accurately to offer assistance; instead, they decide to help based on people's morality and virtue.

Question 41: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN DIVINE INTERVENTION AND THOSE WHO RELY ENTIRELY ON THEIR OWN MERIT?

Answer: Those who place their faith in divine intervention often exhibit an endearing humility, but they may not always discern between good and evil, just believing that any sin can be forgiven by the divine. In some cultures, even crime bosses devoutly worship and pray daily, seeking forgiveness and grace from the divine.

On the other hand, those who believe in the Law of Karma thoroughly consider the consequences of their actions, avoiding harm to others out of fear that it would return to them. However, if they solely rely on the Law of Karma and disregard Divine Beings, they may fall into the trap of arrogance and pride.

Overall, it is best to have both: belief in the Law of Karma and a willingness to pray and connect with the Divine Beings with reverence.

Question 42: WHY DO PEOPLE CREATE DEITIES TO WORSHIP?

Answer: Humans are highly intelligent and capable of creating a wide range of things, from those that are beneath them to those that are greater than themselves. For example, a poor writer might create a wealthy character, vastly different from himself.

Throughout human history, there have been times when Saints appeared among people, leaving behind valuable teachings. Additionally, in real life, there have also been numerous occasions when humans have interacted with beings from the spiritual realms.

Combining these experiences, along with a genuine desire for humanity to have faith in higher powers, and to live more morally, some exceptionally intelligent and bold individuals have created deities to teach morality to people in the name of these deities.

Even within a single religion, people also create additional deities to enrich their belief system. For example, in Buddhism, there was originally only one Supreme Master,

Sakyamuni Buddha, but over time, other Buddhas were introduced, even though these Buddhas never appeared in this world.

The Divine above does not mind how humans create divine figures. If someone is moral, these Divine Beings will still bestow love, blessings, and protection upon them.

Question 43: HOW CAN WE CULTIVATE INNER MORALITY?

Answer: In the Noble Eightfold Path, the practice of Right Consideration is meant to cultivate inner morality.

Morality consists of the virtuous tendencies within us that drive us to bring happiness and goodness to others. These include qualities such as compassion, generosity, patience, humility, gentleness, self-restraint, selflessness, rejoicing in others' happiness, courage to help people in need, love for nature and all living beings, environmental consciousness, a sense of responsibility to the community, and diligence.

These moral inclinations are intangible and not expressed through language, but they guide our actions and speech when we need to handle situations.

To cultivate these moral tendencies, we must consciously and repeatedly instruct ourselves through self-talk, reminders, and even prayers, asking the divine to help us develop these virtues. Over time, these tendencies will solidify in our minds and become a sustainable moral mindset.

For example, if we find that we lack humility and tend to be silently prideful, we can remind ourselves that we are but dust and grass, so we must respect everyone and be polite. We can pray for divine assistance to help us develop humility. After a few months, we may find that we have truly become humble.

We can also find scriptures or teachings on morality and recite them daily at the altar. This practice will help us build lasting virtues.

Question 44: HOW SHOULD WE DEAL WITH UNWHOLESOME TENDENCIES THAT DEEPLY INGRAINED IN OUR MIND?

Answer: Some people have deeply ingrained unwholesome tendencies that are difficult to resolve, such as arrogance, disobedience to parents, selfishness, lust, or gambling addiction. Even when advised, they may not change because if they do not want to change, they cannot engage in Right Consideration to counsel themselves. Most of these individuals only regret their actions after facing severe karmic consequences, but then they tend to revert to their old ways.

These individuals may only change when they encounter an extraordinary Enlightened Being whom they deeply admire. Their admiration for this Saint gives them the merit to gradually recognize their faults and repent.

Alternatively, if they fall into despair and someone helps them generously, their gratitude may help them gradually see their mistakes (unless they are ungrateful, in which case there is no hope for them).

Hell is essentially a place for dealing with such stubborn individuals. Only after enduring prolonged suffering will their stubbornness begin to soften. We should not think of hell as a place of excessive cruelty designed to make sinners scream in pain. The harsh nature of hell is necessary to reform those who are so obstinate that other methods of transformation are ineffective. Only severe punishment can make them realize their faults.

Even now, if someone realizes they are stubborn, refuse to heed the advice, and enjoy causing harm to others, they should understand that hell awaits them.

Question 45: WHAT CAUSES GOOD AND BAD KARMA FROM SPEECH?

Answer: Language is a means of communication, allowing us to share our thoughts with others. In the Heaven realms, Celestial Beings rarely need to speak because they understand each other's minds directly. However, humans cannot perceive each other's thoughts and must rely on language, whether spoken, written, or expressed through symbols and gestures to communicate.

Language is used to influence the minds of others, and this is where karma comes into play.

If we convey the right views to others, we gain merit; if we impart wrong views, we incur sin. The story of Zen master Baizhang in China tells about a great master from the time of the past Buddha Kasyapa, who relied on his meditative concentration ability to claim that the Law of Karma does not affect those with high spiritual attainment like him. As a result, he was reborn as a fox for 500 lifetimes until he met Zen master Baizhang, who helped him correct his wrong views and be liberated from the life of the fox.

The Shakyamuni Buddha praised those who teach the Law of Karma to others, saying they will be reborn in the heavenly realms.

If we encourage people to love one another, we gain merit; if we encourage people to love only themselves, we incur sin.

If we impart useful knowledge to others, we gain merit; if we share trivial information that confuses others, we incur sin.

Preachers who accurately teach the true Dharma accumulate great merit, while those who misinterpret it incur great sin. If their teachings lead people to arrogance, it is sinful; if they promote humility and morality, it is commendable.

Writers, poets, and musicians who evoke noble emotions in people gain significant merit, while those who encourage paltry emotions incur sin.

Speech is a means that can impact others' hearts. If our words cause others pain or humiliation, we incur sin; if our words encourage others and help them grow, we gain merit.

Using words to deceive, commit fraud or manipulate others to take money transcends the mere karma of speech and becomes the karma of action, leading to negative karmic consequences.

In general, we should use language as a tool to uplift and enhance others' souls, which brings us merit.

Question 46: IF RIGHT SPEECH INVOLVES POSITIVE IMPACTS ON PEOPLE'S MINDS, WHAT DOES RIGHT ACTION ENTAIL?

Answer: Right Action involves positively impacting the lives of others.

Karma is created when we affect other people's lives. If we improve someone's life and bring them happiness, it is considered good karma; if we make their lives worse and cause them suffering, it is considered bad karma.

Right Speech transforms the mind, while Right Action transforms life itself, which essentially means helping others. We can help others at various levels, from basic to advanced, such as:

- Providing food, clothing, housing, clean water.
- Supplying medicine, elder care, transportation.
- Offering education, career, employment, and safety.
- Promoting morality, culture, and positive lifestyles.
- Creating opportunities for volunteer work.
- Encouraging spiritual practice towards enlightenment and offering the chance for spiritual practices.
- Helping propagate the true Dharma.

Looking at this ladder of Good Karma, we can see that it is not enough to improve others' lives; we must also encourage others to do good deeds and create their own positive karma.

Of course, we cannot fully help everyone from basic to advanced levels. We can only choose ways to help that align with our abilities, current circumstances, the person's needs, and their level of understanding.

Regardless of how we help, our ultimate goal should be to help people in their spiritual practice toward enlightenment. Every other level of help is merely the means to reach that goal.

Question 47: WHY IS THERE A VIEW IN BUDDHISM THAT LIBERATION MEANS DOING NOTHING, AND IS THIS CORRECT?

Answer: Doing nothing is not part of the Noble Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha. The Noble Eightfold Path includes Right Actions, not "no action".

The view that doing nothing leads to liberation stems from misunderstandings within Buddhism itself.

The first misunderstanding is that observing Buddhist precepts means merely refraining from doing wrong while forgetting the other essential aspect, which is actively doing good. Practitioners might mistakenly believe that not committing wrongdoings is sufficient for spiritual liberation. In reality, avoiding wrongdoing must be coupled with actively doing good, as taught by the Buddha in the Dhammapada.

Another misunderstanding arises from the Mahayana Prajnaparamita (Perfection of Wisdom) teachings. These texts, like the Diamond Sutra, instruct Bodhisattvas to perform countless virtuous deeds without keeping in mind those good deeds. However, many people misinterpret this as meaning they should do nothing at all.

Due to these fundamental misunderstandings, many Buddhist practitioners become passive and reluctant to do good deeds, resulting in a lack of blessings and weakening Buddhism's ability to thrive and spread its teachings as a whole.

Question 48: RIGHT LIVELIHOOD REFERS TO EARNING A LIVING IN AN ETHICAL WAY. HOW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND IT MORE THOROUGHLY?

Answer: Everyone needs to have a profession or occupation to support themselves and their family, pay taxes, and contribute to society. Young people depend on their families for support, while the elderly may rely on pensions or assistance from their children. People of working age generally must find an occupation to make a living, except for those who have accumulated great merit in the past and come from an exceptionally wealthy family, so they do not need to work.

The immediate purpose of a profession is to provide for oneself, while its broader purpose is to contribute to society. These two purposes are fair and balanced: contribution leads to benefits.

Those who deeply understand the Law of Karma always strive to contribute more than they receive to accumulate merit. In contrast, those who do not understand the Law of Karma tend to focus more on maximizing personal gain.

Some jobs offer high income but contribute little to society, while others contribute significantly but come with low pay.

There are professions in which the more one works, the more merit one gains; these are considered Right Livelihood. Conversely, there are jobs in which the more one works, the more sin one accumulates; these are considered Wrong Livelihood.

In both cases, we earn wages to make a living, but with the Right Livelihood, we provide practical and reasonable benefits that help others grow morality. With Wrong Livelihood, we may spread superstition, cause unrest, or harm. By evaluating how the jobs impact the lives and minds of others, we can understand what constitutes Right or Wrong Livelihood.

Question 49: HOW CAN WE KNOW WHICH MEDITATION METHOD IS CORRECT, GIVEN THAT THERE ARE SO MANY DIFFERENT TEACHINGS AROUND THE WORLD?

Answer: Meditation methods vary because of the different experiences of those who teach meditation to calm the mind.

In reality, the psychological makeup, brain structure, and past karma of each person differ, so each individual's ability to concentrate and enter a meditative state will also vary. Meditation teachers (*) often confidently share their methods based on personal experience.

Some people find it easy to calm their minds and can reduce distractions with minimal effort. So they may teach a simplistic meditation method that is not meticulous and beneficial for everyone.

Others may be taught unique methods by their teachers and, coupled with their own past karma, achieve success in meditation. They may then strongly assert that their method is the only correct one.

When exploring meditation extensively, we may be surprised by the numerous different approaches, leaving us uncertain about which one to choose. With significant past merit, we may succeed in meditation with any method we choose, then we will come to have absolute faith in that method and go on to teach it to others. In contrast, if we lack past merit, we may struggle in our meditative practice without achieving the desired results, making us feel confused and eventually we have to seek other meditation methods.

The key is to look beyond specific methods and seek the fundamental principles of meditation that can be applied to all levels of spiritual aptitude, psychological types, and brain structures, much like a standard education curriculum designed for all children.

Those who wish to learn meditation should pray to the Buddha to find a truly wise master who can guide them to the correct method so that their practice is fruitful and they can effectively teach others.

(*) **teacher** in Buddhism refers to someone who imparts knowledge of the Dharma, teaches meditation techniques, and provides guidance in practice. All **masters** are **teachers**, but not all teachers are considered masters. A master has achieved a higher level of spiritual realization and is revered for their deep understanding and ability to lead others to enlightenment.

Question 50: WHAT ARE THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF A STANDARD MEDITATION METHOD FOR EVERYONE?

Answer: The fundamental principles of a meditation method that can be applied to all individuals include the following:

- **Encouraging the accumulation of merit:** To enter deep ecstasy in meditation, one must have great merit. Because achieving a tranquil mind in meditation is akin to reaching the state of the heavenly realm, which requires substantial merit.

- **Reverence for the Buddha and Arahants:** This is the basic merit for meditation. According to the Law of Karma, honoring teachers allows one to become a teacher in the future; similarly, showing reverence to Enlightened Ones who have achieved the ultimate level of ecstasy in meditation enables one to attain higher meditative states.
- **Regularly repentance for past sins:** Practitioners should regularly pay homage to the Buddha to repent for past sins in daily life.
- **Cultivation of inner morality:** Practitioners must be thorough and determined in perfecting inner morality, identifying and correcting every fault, as a tranquil mind follows a virtuous heart.
- **Maintaining good health:** Meditation practice requires good health. Practitioners need to engage in physical exercises like Qigong, follow a balanced diet, work and rest appropriately, and get enough sleep.

When practicing meditation, the following basic methods should be observed:

- **Proper sitting posture:** Sit in the full lotus position in a quiet, cool, secluded place. Keep the body relaxed and still. Position the arms with elbows slightly away from the sides rather than pressed against the body. Keep the back straight but not tense. Initially, keep the eyes open, looking down at a spot in front of us with the head slightly bowed; once the mind is more mindful, it is ok to close the eyes. Keep the mouth gently closed, with the tongue touching the upper gums.
- **Cultivation of fundamental morality:** Develop intentions to revere the Buddha absolutely, love all beings boundlessly, and maintain utmost humility.
- **Praying for guidance:** Pray for the Buddha's guidance to achieve a deep meditative state towards ultimate selflessness.
- **Contemplating the body and mind:** Reflect that this body and mind are the result of deep-seated past sins.
- **Acknowledging distraction:** Begin to recognize when the mind is led by wandering thoughts. Do not try to forcefully eliminate these thoughts or concern ourselves with their content; simply be aware of their presence. When we realize that the mind is distracted, we have achieved an initial stage of mindfulness.
- **Maintaining mindfulness:** Focus our sensations on the chest and abdomen, as these areas help sustain mindfulness and prevent strong wandering thoughts from leading the mind astray. This is the second stage of mindfulness.
- **Contemplating impermanence:** Reflect on the body's impermanence – it will age, fall ill, and eventually die. This is the third step of awareness.
- **Regulating breathing:** Keep the breath slow, little, and gentle. With mindfulness, the breath becomes clear, but inner impulses may cause it to be rapid, deep and strong. So, carefully maintain slow, shallow, and gentle breathing to prevent these impulses from taking over. This is the fourth stage of mindfulness.

- **Mindfulness of the entire body:** Be mindful of the whole body, sensing down to the bottom of the abdomen, including the Dan Tian and Hui Yin acupoints. Awareness of the bottom of the abdomen can help heal some latent brain injuries and make the mind more tranquil. This is the fifth stage of mindfulness.
- **Recognizing deep-seated ignorance:** As mindfulness becomes sustained and the mind is less frequently led astray by wandering thoughts, constantly remind ourselves that ignorance and sins still reside deep within the mind. This is the sixth step of awareness.

Practitioners should repeat these six mindfulness stages to maintain awareness and prevent the mind from being led astray by wandering thoughts.

Additionally, contemplating the body and mind as an accumulation of karmic wrongdoings from countless past lives also helps maintain awareness, because it means that we are recognizing our state, acknowledging our karma, and understanding our nature, which aids in repentance and lightens our karmic burden.

As mindfulness strengthens, many more states of awareness will emerge, which we will discuss later.

Question 51: RIGHT ENDEAVOUR MEANS PRACTICING MEDITATION WITH THE CORRECT METHOD WITHOUT ACHIEVING RESULTS. HOW CAN THIS CONCEPT BE EXPLAINED FURTHER?

Answer: Even with the correct method, it is not easy for practitioners to achieve the desired results. This is like striking a rock with a hammer; we may hit it a hundred times without making any difference, but the 101st strike might suddenly break the rock. Practicing incorrectly can lead to psychological or neurological issues while practicing correctly does not guarantee immediate results. It requires sustained endeavor, often without any signs of progress. This persistent effort is called Right Endeavor.

In the Gospel, Jesus provided a metaphor that captures this idea: the bride on her wedding night must stay awake, not knowing when the groom will arrive. In ancient times, it might be considered blameworthy if the bride fell asleep before the groom arrived. Jesus used this custom to imply that enlightenment can come unexpectedly, so practitioners must continuously maintain their practice without interruption.

Success in meditation results from a combination of factors, including past merit, inner morality, accurate methods, and sustained effort over time.

Right Endeavor, as part of the Noble Eightfold Path, involves a prolonged period of effort with various challenges and struggles. When the mind is not yet calm, the body may become fatigued, the legs might ache and go numb, and sitting in meditation may be restless and frustrating. This is the time when strong willpower is essential. Those with weak willpower might feel discouraged and give up. Practitioners must cultivate a strong will – not tense, but gentle and firm enough to endure the discomfort and maintain long meditation sessions.

The strength of Right Endeavor is not outwardly expressed; it is not tense but incredibly gentle and determined.

Question 52: DURING THE STAGE OF RIGHT ENDEAVOR, WHEN THERE ARE NO RESULTS FROM MEDITATION YET, HOW SHOULD A PRACTITIONER HANDLE IT?

Answer: A practitioner typically needs to try various meditation methods rather than sticking to one method to achieve success. When we discuss the Four Foundations of Mindfulness later on, we will see that practitioners must gradually adjust their practice according to their increasingly deep levels of mindfulness.

When the mind lacks mindfulness, practitioners can easily be led astray by wandering thoughts, causing them to lose focus on their meditation practice. For instance, a practitioner might be focusing on his breath but when a thought arises, he would forget about the breath. Another might be contemplating the impermanence of the body but then gets distracted by thoughts and forgets the contemplation of impermanence...

Initially, a practitioner might have a bit of mindfulness, but it may not be strong enough to prevent subtle wandering thoughts from arising and diverting the mind.

We can outline the stages of practice as follows:

UNWHOLESOME MIND – MIXED WHOLESOME AND UNWHOLESOME MIND – PURELY WHOLESOME MIND – MINDFULNESS – DEEP MINDFULNESS (RIGHT MINDFULNESS) – ENTRY INTO FIRST JHANA

At the beginning, being aware that one is distracted by wandering thoughts is a form of mindfulness, but this mindfulness is still weak and not strong enough to prevent wandering thoughts from arising.

Mindfulness can be strengthened as merit increases and sins decrease, combined with the proper practice of contemplation. If mindfulness is weak, practitioners should step back and evaluate their merit and sin rather than hastily moving forward. We have different levels of self-assessment for our merit and sin, such as:

- This mind is heavily laden with karmic obstructions.
- This mind is filled with faults.
- This mind is still ordinary and harbours many faults.
- Deep within, this mind is still ignorant and sinful.

When we accurately recognize the true nature of the mind, our negative karma naturally diminishes, allowing the conditions for mindfulness to arise.

In general, practitioners need to make various adjustments (using correct techniques) during the stage of Right Endeavour to develop strong mindfulness, paving the way for deep meditation.

Question 53: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BE AWARE OF THE WHOLE BODY AND THE SENSATION OF THE WHOLE BODY DURING MEDITATION?

Answer: Being aware of the chest and abdomen during meditation offers several benefits:

- The skin covers a large area of the body, so when we focus our attention on the body, the entire surface of the skin is activated, creating a strong sense of mindfulness for the mind. In contrast, if we focus only on the head, the mindfulness generated is minimal and tends to weaken over time. The body generates mindfulness for the mind. This is a very special principle that the Buddha taught in the Nikaya scriptures: "Aware of the whole body, I breathe in; aware of the whole body, I breathe out."
- Interestingly, wandering thoughts originate from the lower parts of the body, not from the brain. This surprising discovery comes from experienced meditation practitioners. When we focus only on the head, we are unable to prevent the sudden rise of wandering thoughts from the lower body. However, when we anchor our awareness in the lower body, we can stop wandering thoughts at their source. This is a fascinating insight into meditation.
- Focusing attention on the lower body, especially deep down in the bottom of the abdomen, helps preserve the body's inner vital energy (Chân Âm). Typically, we tend to deplete this vital energy because we usually focus too much on the head from birth. Thoughts occur in the head, and the senses of sight and hearing are also concentrated there, gradually depleting this vital energy. During meditation, we should direct our attention to the lower body to restore this vital energy, which helps keep the mind awake, strengthens the internal organs, and significantly reduces distracting thoughts.

Question 54: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO THOROUGHLY CONTEMPLATE THE IMPERMANENCE OF THE BODY?

Answer: When we focus our attention on the body and become aware of it entirely, we gain increased mindfulness, which helps prevent distractions from wandering thoughts astray. However, as we direct our awareness to the body, an attachment to the body naturally arises, and we start to cherish the body more, which is a form of wrong view. Therefore, we must consciously contemplate that the body is impermanent, that it will age, fall ill, and eventually die. After death, the body will decay until nothing remains, not even the bones, which will also turn to dust.

By confronting the impermanence of the body, our attachment to it diminishes, as a result, our other desires also lessen. Attachment to the body is the foundation of ego-clinging; when our attachment to the body decreases, so does our attachment to the ego.

Contemplating the impermanence of the body not only reduces this attachment but also reinforces mindfulness. As we focus on the impermanence of the body, we simultaneously direct our attention to the lower body, further strengthening our mindfulness.

When we contemplate the impermanence of the body, we simultaneously maintain awareness of the body, which further strengthens mindfulness.

Later on, as mindfulness deepens and the mind becomes more tranquil, we will realize that the mind does not reside solely in the head; it encompasses the entire body.

Question 55: CAN YOU EXPLAIN THE BENEFITS OF FOCUSING ATTENTION ON THE BOTTOM OF ABDOMEN DURING MEDITATION?

Answer: According to the Buddha's teachings, practitioners should be aware of the entire body, but most of us tend to focus only on the chest and upper abdomen, rather than the bottom of the abdomen, which includes two important acupoints: the Dan Tian and the Hui Yin (you can refer to Google for their exact locations).

The Buddha mentioned in the Nikaya Suttas, "There is no part of the body where mindfulness is absent" Therefore, paying deep attention to the bottom of the abdomen is essential.

The Dan Tian acupoint helps increase the mind's mindfulness, but it may sometimes create illusions. The Hui Yin acupoint helps calm the mind, bringing it into deep concentration in meditation and eliminating illusions.

When we focus on the bottom of the abdomen, it means we are paying attention to an entire area that includes these two crucial acupoints. Additionally, focusing on the bottom of the abdomen can remind us of humility, keeping us aware that our merit, level of meditation, and spiritual aptitude are still very low and that we have much to learn.

Question 56: MANY MEDITATION PRACTICES EMPHASIZE FOCUSING ON THE BREATH, ENCOURAGING PRACTITIONERS TO CONCENTRATE ON THEIR BREATHING. WHY IS IT NOW RECOMMENDED TO BREATHE SLOWLY, LITTLE, AND GENTLY?

Answer: The breath reflects the intensity of mental activity. When the mind is active, the breath becomes fast, strong, and frequent; when the mind is calm, the breath becomes slow, little, and gentle. By observing the breath, we can gauge the level of mental activity.

Conversely, if we regulate our breath effectively, it will influence the mind in return:

- When we are aware of the breath, mindfulness is enhanced.
- When we breathe slowly, little, and gently, mental activity will also calm down.
- When we are mindful of the breath but breathe too much and forceful, distracting thoughts may then arise.

During meditation, there may be times when the breath becomes stronger even if there are no apparent distracting thoughts. This indicates that latent mental impulses are still active. If these impulses are not addressed, distracting thoughts may suddenly emerge and lead the mind astray. The way to manage these underlying impulses is by maintaining awareness of the breath while skillfully keeping it slow, little, and gentle.

Question 57: WHY SHOULD WE CONSTANTLY REMIND OURSELVES THAT DEEP WITHIN OUR MIND THERE IS STILL IGNORANCE AND SINS?

Answer: This reminder is meant for practitioners who have attained a relatively firm state of inner tranquility.

When the mind reaches a state of tranquility, subtle thoughts of arrogance may unexpectedly arise with great force, strong enough to potentially lead the practitioner to hell in the future, undoing all the progress made in meditation. The self-reminder varies according to the state of the practitioners' mind:

- If the mind is firmly well-settled, occasionally remind ourselves: "Deep within this mind, there is still ignorance and faults."
- If the mind still occasionally loses mindfulness, sometimes calm but other times distracted by arising thoughts that lead it astray, we should remind ourselves: "This mind is still ordinary, with many hidden faults."
- If the mind lacks mindfulness and is easily disturbed by wandering thoughts, we should remind ourselves: "This mind is filled with deep-seated faults and heavy karmic burdens."

These self-reminders function like passwords for different states of mind, helping to unlock the door to meditation, enhance mindfulness, eliminate arrogance, and ensure long-term progress on the spiritual path. In the practice of meditation towards enlightenment, humility is of utmost importance.

Wise practitioners will choose the "password" that best matches the condition of their state of mind, which helps reduce faults and allow mindfulness to emerge.

Question 58: MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT A RESTLESS MIND BELONGS TO AN ORDINARY PERSON, SO WHEN THE MIND IS CALM, IT MUST BE THE MIND OF AN ENLIGHTENED SAINT. IS THAT CORRECT?

Answer: Let's use the analogy of a house to understand this concept more clearly:

- A person living in a mansion might have their home sometimes dirty, sometimes clean, but it is still a mansion. Similarly, someone who has attained a high level of meditation might sometimes be disturbed and sometimes be calm, yet they remain within their achieved level of meditation.
- A person living in a simple thatched house might find it dirty at times and clean at others, but it is still just a simple thatched house. Likewise, an ordinary person, whether their mind is distracted or tranquil, remains an ordinary person, nothing more.
- A person living in a dilapidated shack may keep it clean and tidy, but it is still a rundown dwelling. Similarly, a mind burdened by deep-seated faults and negative past karma remains afflicted by those karmic obstacles, even if it occasionally experiences moments of stillness.

Understanding this analogy helps us remember that we are still ordinary beings with many hidden faults, even when our minds occasionally become tranquil. We must not secretly declare ourselves enlightened, as this could lead to future downfall.

Similarly, the state of mindfulness differs depending on each person's level of spiritual attainment. Sometimes, we experience mindfulness at an ordinary level that cannot be compared to the profound mindfulness of highly Enlightened Beings. The safest approach is to always see oneself as still humble, ordinary, sinful and burdened by heavy karma.

Question 59: ACCORDING TO THE MEDITATION PRACTICE SEQUENCE, AFTER A LONG PERIOD IN THE STAGE OF RIGHT ENDEAVOUR, MINDFULNESS EMERGES, AND THE PRACTITIONER ENTERS THE STAGE OF RIGHT MINDFULNESS, BUT IT IS NOT YET RIGHT ECSTASY. HOW CAN THIS BE EXPLAINED FURTHER?

Answer: Each stage of inner cultivation is an arduous process and not easy to accomplish.

For example, transforming an unwholesome mind into one mixed with good intentions is extremely challenging because those with malevolent tendencies are often reluctant to give them up. Therefore, helping these people transform their minds is incredibly difficult. And if they fail to change, they may end up in hell after death.

Similarly, for someone whose mind is a mix of good and bad intentions, how long does it take for them to achieve a purely wholesome mind with perfect morality?

A person whose mind is filled with distracting thoughts must practice the correct method during the stage of Right Endeavour to develop mindfulness that controls the mind's disturbances. Achieving this takes a lot of time and effort.

Even when mindfulness becomes more frequent, the mind may still fluctuate between calm and unrest. The practitioner must continue his practice until mindfulness becomes stronger and more consistent, enabling continuous control over the mind. Although this stage of Right Mindfulness is more relaxed and comfortable, it still requires diligent practice.

Even with deep mindfulness, it doesn't mean that one immediately enters the Right Ecstasy. The journey from having strong mindfulness, where the mind is still somewhat fluctuating, to achieving the Right Ecstasy is not a short one. This is why the Buddha considered Right Mindfulness to be a crucial component of the Noble Eightfold Path.

When the practitioner enters the First Jhana (the first level of Right Ecstasy), it is already an achievement. The mind naturally settles in meditation and the practitioner no longer needs to exert effort. From here, depending on the accumulated merit of the practitioner, the depth of concentration in meditation will gradually increase until it is fully perfected, as long as no actions are taken that might diminish merit along the way.

Question 60: CAN YOU PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF THE LIFE OF SAKIYA MUNI BUDDHA?

Answer:

GAUTAMA BUDDHA (SAKIYA MUNI)

Gautama Buddha, also known as Sakiya Muni, was born on the full moon day of April in 624 BCE when His mother, Queen Maya, was passing through the Lumbini Garden on her way from the capital Kapilavastu to Devadaha.

He was a prince named Siddhartha, the son of King Suddhodana, belonging to the Gotama clan, in the Kingdom of Sakiya.

From a young age, He displayed extraordinary wisdom and boundless compassion. He excelled in both literature and martial arts and had vast knowledge in various fields, philosophies and doctrines. However, He was deeply concerned with finding the ultimate enlightenment and liberation for all beings.

To keep Siddhartha tied to worldly life, His father, the king, arranged for Him to marry Princess Yasodhara (Baddhakaccānā) when He was 16 years old. However, at the age of 29, just after the birth of His son Rahula, Siddhartha secretly left the palace and renounced worldly life on the 8th day of the second lunar month.

For six years, He sought out teachers and practiced extreme asceticism, but he did not find success. He then chose the path of meditation. After 49 days and nights of sitting motionless under the Assatha (Bodhi) tree in Gaya, in the village of Uruvela, He attained Buddhahood, with the full achievement of the Threefold Knowledge. He was 35 years old at the time.

From then on, He travelled to many places to teach the profound path of enlightenment and liberation to both humans and Celestial Beings. Many kings, ministers, Brahmin priests, merchants, and even the lowest castes became His lay followers or monastic disciples. Many of his disciples also attained extraordinary enlightenment.

On the full moon day of the 12th lunar month in 544 BCE, at the age of 80, he entered Nirvana. After his cremation, many relics were left behind and enshrined in stupas, some of which still exist today.

His saintly disciples compiled his teachings into the Three Baskets of Scriptures (Tripitaka), preserving them for posterity.

Today, after much suffering, grief, wars, and violence, the United Nations has recognized Buddhism as a religion of peace and designated the Buddha's birthday as an international day of religions and culture. The United Nations officially celebrated the Buddha's birthday, known as Vesak, in a grand ceremony at its headquarters in the year 2000. Many prominent intellectuals around the world have also embraced Buddhism.

Question 61: IF SOMEONE FROM ANOTHER RELIGION NOW WANTS TO TAKE REFUGE AND BECOME A DISCIPLE OF BUDDHISM, IS THERE ANY OBSTACLE?

Answer: We can ask a similar question to followers of other religions: if a Buddhist wants to become a follower of your religion, would there be any obstacles? The answer would most likely be: "No, there is no obstacle." The same goes for Buddhism – there is no obstacle for someone from another religion to take refuge and become a follower of Buddhism.

Many people embrace two or even three religions in their lifetime, and they still live happily, just like how people today can have multiple nationalities and the world still gets along just fine.

Moreover, having multiple religions might even contribute to a more united world, as long as religious leaders and followers maintain a positive outlook.

For example, if Christians wish to take refuge in Buddhism, they will have the opportunity to learn new teachings. This is not because they reject the Christian teachings they previously followed. By learning from different sources of teachings, they can wisely select and integrate the most appropriate approach to cultivate themselves more profoundly.

Question 62: WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF TAKING REFUGE IN BUDDHISM?

Answer: To take refuge and become a follower of Buddhism, you would follow these steps:

- Choose a spiritual teacher (master) whom you trust and respect, someone who possesses the right qualities to guide you in the teachings of Buddhism over time.
- After expressing your sincere wish to take refuge in Buddhism, your master will set a time and place to conduct the refuge ceremony.
- During this ceremony, you will be guided to recite the Three Refuges: to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma (Buddha's teachings), and the Sangha (the community of the Buddha's enlightened disciples). This means committing your life to seek refuge in, learning from, following and practicing according to these Three Noble Jewels of the universe: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.
- You will also be given the Five Basic Precepts, which are the foundational ethical guidelines for lay disciples in Buddhism.
 - Do not kill or harm living beings (and instead, protect and nurture life).
 - Do not steal (and instead, be generous and help others),
 - Do not engage in sexual misconduct (and instead, be loyal and faithful in your relationships)

- Do not lie or speak harmful words (and instead, speak truthfully and share the Dharma with others)
- Do not use intoxicants (and instead, maintain a healthy body and mind).
- During the refuge ceremony, your master will provide some fundamental teachings to guide your practice.

From this moment on, you are officially a disciple of the Buddha, establishing a positive connection with the Buddha's Dharma for countless lifetimes to come.

Question 63: AFTER TAKING REFUGE IN THE THREE NOBLE JEWELS IN BUDDHISM, DO WE NEED TO INFORM THE LEADERS OF OUR PREVIOUS RELIGION?

Answer: If we feel that these leaders are open-minded and cheerful, we may consider informing them about our decision. This can help strengthen the bond between the two religions, showing that we are not abandoning our previous religion, but rather adding Buddhism to our spiritual journey to promote greater love and unity in the world.

However, if we sense that they might not be very pleased, it may be best to wait for a more appropriate time.

We have chosen to take refuge in the Three Noble Jewels because we realize that Buddhism offers profound and peaceful teachings in a world filled with conflict, hatred, and separation. We seek refuge in Buddhism because we have found in it a bright path that can lead us far into the truth.

We do not take refuge in the Three Noble Jewels to create further division, discrimination, or animosity. Instead, we hope that one day all religions can come together, find common ground, and lead humanity towards the path of love and happiness.

Question 64: WHAT SHOULD WE DO AFTER TAKING REFUGE IN THE THREE NOBLE JEWELS?

Answer: Except for those with extraordinary spiritual capacity who can practice on their own and still attain enlightenment, known in Buddhism as Pratyekabuddhas (Self-enlightened Ones), everyone else must practice with fellow practitioners and follow a master closely over the long term. This helps us avoid laziness, complacency, and potential mistakes that could lead to regression. Therefore, it's essential to join a Buddhist fellowship to stay connected and committed to our practice.

The master may already have an established Buddhist fellowship community for lay disciples, in which case we can simply join. If the master does not have that community, we might consider asking for permission to form a self-managed practice community with other practitioners, where we may encourage and support each other in diligent practice.

In the path to enlightenment, engaging in charitable activities and accumulating merit is extremely important. No one can progress spiritually if lacking merit. However, there are some meritorious deeds beyond our individual capacity that cannot be accomplished alone. So working with a group makes them more feasible. By participating in a fellowship community, we will have more opportunities to engage in meaningful charitable activities.

Question 65: AS A BUDDHIST, WHAT SHOULD WE STRIVE TO DO THROUGHOUT OUR LIFE?

Answer: As Buddhists, we need to focus on cultivating morality and performing virtuous deeds. We've outlined various levels of meritorious deeds from basic to advanced. The most basic level involves helping others with their essential needs, such as food and clothing; the most advanced level involves supporting others in their spiritual practice toward enlightenment. While basic acts are about assisting people's everyday lives, advanced acts focus on supporting their spiritual and mental well-being.

In addition, we should actively seek opportunities in our daily lives to share the Buddha's teachings with others, helping them to understand these teachings alongside the beliefs they already hold. Buddhist teachings can serve as a wonderful supplement to the doctrines of other religions.

We often hold the prejudice that the teachings of one religion will contradict those of another. However, we should now adopt a different perspective: the teachings of one religion can complement and complete the teachings of another.

In summary, as Buddhists, we should spend the rest of our lives using the Buddha's teachings to connect religions, heal divisions, mend what has been broken, and spread love in places where there is still envy and hatred.

Question 66: CAN YOU EXPLAIN THE MEANING OF COMPASSION IN BUDDHISM?

Answer: Society exists because people love and care for one another. Through love and compassion, people develop a sense of responsibility for one another, and this care helps to alleviate suffering in the world.

However, there's a paradox: because human love is often limited, we tend to favor those we love, forming exclusive groups that can easily lead to conflict with others in the community. Love is meant to eliminate hatred, but narrow-minded love can actually lead to division and enmity.

The Buddha taught about boundless compassion as a quality of an Enlightened Being. An Enlightened and Liberated One, who has transcended the ego, must possess a limitless love that extends to all beings, covering all places and reaching all forms of existence. For those who have not yet attained enlightenment, it is critical to practice directing their love towards all beings in this way. Each day, we should consciously cultivate love for all sentient beings and humbly pray for the Buddha's blessings to help extend this compassion to all beings. Over time, we will naturally find it easier to love others more deeply.

For lay practitioners, it may be challenging to extend compassion universally due to the heavy responsibilities of family life. The obligations of marriage, parenthood, legal duties, and the pressures of daily life create significant burdens. On the other hand, monastics may find it easier to practice and cultivate compassion.

Actually, love and compassion are luxuries that are not easy to achieve. We don't easily feel love for others unless they have done something significant for us. However, following the Buddha's teachings, we must strive to love all beings unconditionally. But it is not easy to cultivate compassion on our own, so we must pray to the Buddha earnestly to develop the compassion within us. Once we have compassion in our hearts, we will find it easier to practice meditation and achieve the state of mindfulness.

Question 67: HOW SHOULD A BUDDHIST BE CONSCIOUS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION?

Answer: In the past, the world did not yet raise the issue of environmental protection. However, thanks to scientific advancements, humanity has come to realize that survival on Earth depends on many crucial factors such as clean air, clean water, clean food, biodiversity, vast forests, and more. Unfortunately, these elements are being gradually destroyed by human activities, putting our living environment in a dangerous state. Today, due to the warnings of scientists, governments around the world have incorporated global ecological protection into their national and international policies.

In Buddhism, the awareness of preserving life has existed for a very long time. Buddhist monks are required to be careful not to harm trees; if they need to use any part of a tree, they must obtain proper permission. When drinking water, monks must filter out microorganisms (the Buddha recognized the existence of microorganisms more than 2,600 years ago). Additionally, all Buddhist disciples are taught to abstain from killing living beings.

Particularly, when we cultivate boundless compassion, we can extend our love to all beings, even down to individual leaves.

With an utmost sense of altruism, a love for all living beings, and the highest level of responsibility, a Buddhist disciple always strives to protect the environment for all beings. We always actively participate in efforts to clean and preserve the environment, making this planet a beautiful place where we can all live joyfully together.

Question 68: TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS, PEOPLE MUST PUT IN A LOT OF EFFORT, AND THAT DETERMINATION IS ALSO A SIGN OF INNER STRENGTH. MANY EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES ENCOURAGE THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONAL STRENGTH. DOES THIS CONTRADICT THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF SELFLESSNESS AND ALTRUISM?

Answer: Truth is never one-dimensional; it is always comprehensive.

According to Buddhism, to achieve success, one needs the merit accumulated in the past and the efforts in the present. Additionally, the support of Divine Beings may also play a role.

In the past, to accumulate merit, a person must have already put in a great deal of efforts. So, the current required efforts to achieve success are essentially a repetition of those

past efforts. We may notice that the required efforts of a person with past merit differ significantly from the efforts of someone without such merit.

A person who accumulated merit in the past now makes efforts with confidence, ease, and a strong intuition of success. On the other hand, a person lacking past merit makes efforts amidst confusion, uncertainty, fear, and is driven by tormenting greed. If we could see into the mind clearly, we would recognize the vast difference between these two types of efforts.

Efforts stemming from past merit do not cause stress; therefore, it does not inflate the ego. In contrast, the efforts of those lacking merit lead to tension; the more one struggles in confusion and anxiety, the more one's ego grows.

We should start with a life of altruism, striving to help others. Later, when the rewards of merit come, our efforts will be filled with confidence and ease, without the tension that leads to ego growth.

Question 69: WHAT IS BUDDHISM'S PERSPECTIVE ON WHETHER CHILDREN SHOULD OBEY THEIR PARENTS OR TRY TO BE STRONG AND INDEPENDENT?

Answer: When parents bring a child into the world, they naturally love and care for the child with great dedication. Since the child is still young and naive, parents feel a strong sense of ownership over their child. This sense of ownership motivates parents to take on the responsibility of caring for their children and ensuring they grow up safely. However, as the child grows, the situation gradually changes.

Although the child's genes come from its parents, and its life is sustained by its parents' care, the child's mind and soul are entirely their own.

As the child matures, it begins to look outward, gradually becoming less dependent on its parents' wishes, while parents may still continue to view the child as theirs and expect it to follow their will.

At this point, two educational approaches emerge. Some people advocates for allowing children to develop independence and self-expression so that they can quickly mature. Others insist that children must always obey and be respectful to their parents.

The approach that encourages children to develop independence is more common in Western cultures, where it is seen as aligning with values of democratic values, freedom, and human rights. On the other hand, the approach that emphasizes obedience and filial piety to parents is more common in Eastern cultures, where it is believed that parents' sacrifices are immense, like the sky and sea; thus, children must be grateful and dutiful to repay their parents.

From the perspective of selflessness and the Law of Karma, Buddhism suggests a balanced approach. First and foremost, children should honor and respect their parents as a fundamental moral principle. At the same time, parents should wisely balance

protecting their children with encouraging their growth and maturity, guiding them to become responsible and capable individuals who can contribute to society.

While this book does not delve deeply into child-rearing practices, it is critical that children are taught not to be stubborn or disrespectful to their parents and that parents wisely guide and nurture their children in a way that benefits them, the family, and society as a whole.

Question 70: IN BUDDHISM, COMPASSION ENCOMPASSES ALL BEINGS, EVEN PLANTS. HOWEVER, IN REALITY, THERE ARE VARIOUS LEVELS OF COMPASSION WE SHOULD PRACTICE, RANGING FROM SMALL TO LARGE. COULD YOU EXPLAIN THIS IN MORE DETAIL?

Answer: We have various levels of love that expand gradually:

- Loving only oneself
- Loving only one's immediate family
- Loving extended family and friends
- Loving colleagues and comrades
- Loving the surrounding community
- Loving one's country
- Loving humanity
- Loving all sentient beings

Looking at this ladder of love, we can see that someone who loves only themselves is extremely selfish and will likely lack a sense of responsibility toward their family, community, and society. It is right to cultivate oneself, but this self-cultivation should be aimed at developing the ability to contribute to the world, not at selfishly loving oneself.

Loving one's immediate family is considered a basic moral and legal obligation. Someone who cannot love their own family is severely lacking in basic morality.

As the scope of love widens, it reflects an increase in moral development and is highly commendable, as it shows a growing ability to care for others beyond one's immediate circle.

Question 71: DOES BUDDHISM OFFER ANY SOLUTIONS TO THE ISSUE OF GLOBAL POVERTY?

Answer: According to the Law of Karma, poverty can stem from various causes.

It might be because in a past life, one was stingy and unwilling to help those in need; or it could be the result of wasting resources such as money, food, or clothing. It may also stem from having destroyed the shelters of animals or having spoken contemptuously of the poor. It could also be due to having destroyed the infrastructures of villages during

wars. Overall, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of one's poverty. Only Enlightened Beings can see past lives to understand these causes.

When people are impoverished, the desperation of poverty can easily drive them to commit wrongdoings just to survive, thus compounding their negative karma, which is a truly pitiable situation.

Even if someone with a kind heart offers them food, clothing, or other necessities, their underlying karma of poverty remains. The relief is just temporary, and the suffering soon returns.

The only way to truly escape poverty is to make a strong effort to do good deeds and help others even while in a state of poverty. We cannot wait until we are well-off to start doing good deeds.

There's a short video that illustrates this idea: A homeless man buys two boxes of food and sits down to eat by the roadside. Another man approaches and asks for one of the boxes. The homeless man, thinking the other might be as hungry as he is, gives away his second box, accepting that he won't have enough to eat that day. Little does he know, that the second man is actually wealthy and decides to try testing people's kindness on that day. After sharing the meal with the homeless man, the wealthy man leaves an envelope for the homeless man and walks away. The homeless man initially is confused and assumes that the man who shared his meal is just another person in need. But when the homeless man opens the envelope, he's stunned to find a large sum of money, and he bursts into tears because it's been a long time since he's had such an amount.

We can infer that the homeless man's act of kindness – sharing his food even in hardship – reflects a generous heart. He had likely been kind many times in his life, which led to this chance encounter with someone who tested his kindness and rewarded him. The poverty he currently faces may have been caused by different karma.

Organizations that aim to help people overcome poverty should emphasize the importance of kindness, especially being kind even in difficult circumstances. Then, they should help find meaningful work for the poor, which will gradually lead them to better fortune. If they receive help in this way, their lives will be changed sustainably. Those who can remain kind even while still in poverty will likely see their circumstances improving more quickly.

We should also caution everyone, especially those in the food industry, that wastefully discarding leftover food is one of the causes of poverty. In Vietnamese culture, there is a deep respect for food, even a single grain of rice, which is almost seen as a religious practice.

Question 72: ACCORDING TO THE LAW OF KARMA, WHAT CAUSES WAR?

Answer: When a king of one country raises an army to attack another, several factors must come together:

- For some unknown reason, the king feels a strong urge to launch an attack and conquer the neighboring country, possibly to seize more territory. This desire is very powerful.
- The king has an army willing to follow his orders, even if it means risking their lives in battle.
- The king's ministers and advisors are in agreement, and no one dares to oppose his decision.

What invisible force brings these supporting conditions together – the king's desire, the obedient army, abundant resources, and the agreement of his ministers?

That force is karma. It has come to a time when the people of the country must endure the suffering of war, and thus, all the conditions for war align perfectly.

What kind of past karma leads to the outbreak of war?

It is often the karma of killing.

Living beings seek to sustain themselves by taking the lives of others, whether through hunting animals or consuming plants. Over a lifetime, people accumulate significant karma from killing. When this Karma ripens in a future life, war breaks out in a seemingly irrational and inexplicable way.

If we wish to have a peaceful world, everyone must find ways to minimize the Karma of killing. We should avoid excessively killing, even for food. Fortunately, scientists have successfully developed lab-grown meat, where cells are cultivated in laboratories to grow into edible, clean meat without the need for slaughter. In the future, humans (and perhaps even animals) will be able to consume meat without any killing involved, which marks the beginning of a truly peaceful world.

Question 73: IN RECENT YEARS, GLOBAL WARMING HAS BECOME A SIGNIFICANT THREAT TO LIFE ON EARTH. HOW DOES BUDDHISM VIEW THIS ISSUE?

Answer: Scientists have long warned that the use of fossil fuels, such as oil and coal, releases carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. This carbon dioxide traps the sun's heat, causing the temperature of the atmosphere on Earth to rise continuously. Today, everyone can clearly feel this intense heat everywhere. Even traditionally cold regions are starting to warm up, and many people have died from severe heatwaves.

Why do humans rely so heavily on fossil fuels like oil and coal?

It's because humans, with their intelligence, have created machines to perform work on their behalf (and now, AI can even think for them). These machines require fuel to operate. The current technology predominantly uses oil or coal to power machines, vehicles on land, airplanes in the sky, ships on the water, and thermal power plants. The combustion of these fossil fuels primarily produces carbon dioxide, which accumulates in the atmosphere, becoming increasingly dense and trapping more heat, though it is invisible to the naked eye.

This is the consequence of using the Earth's resources for human activities. Unfortunately, these activities involve unwholesome, frivolous, meaningless, self-indulgent, and selfish pursuits that far outweigh those that are beneficial and lead to enlightenment.

When this imbalance occurs, humans immediately face the consequences of rising planetary temperatures.

One might ask: "How can machines or the atmosphere distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome actions, or between actions that lead to enlightenment and those that lead to delusion?"

The answer is: "The Sun knows."

If humans use machines for virtuous activities that lead to enlightenment, the Sun will naturally adjust its intensity, burning less fiercely to keep the Earth from overheating. However, if humans continue to misuse machines for meaningless, selfish, or even harmful activities, the Sun will respond by burning even more intensely, further contributing to global warming.

Therefore, the Earth's resources should only be used for virtuous purposes and to support the path to enlightenment.

Question 74: MOST RELIGIONS FOCUS ON THE AFTERLIFE, FOLLOWERS HOPE TO ASCEND TO HIGHER REALMS AND DWELL WITH DEITIES AFTER DEATH. WHAT IS BUDDHISM'S VIEW ON THIS?

Answer: The Buddha taught about six realms of existence into which all beings can be reborn. So understanding these realms is essential for guiding one's spiritual practice appropriately. However, according to the Buddha's teachings, the existence of beings in none of these realms is permanent. Depending on the amount of merit or demerit accumulated, beings will reside in these realms for varying lengths of time.

If one wishes to be reborn in a higher, more blissful, and holy realm, three core practices must be cultivated:

- Accumulating a significant amount of good karma. Because just a little merit is not sufficient to elevate one from a lower realm to a higher one.
- Perfecting moral conduct to be virtuous, profound, and perfect, as superficial efforts cannot lead to significant progress.
- Achieving a deep and tranquil state of concentration in meditation, reaching specific and notable results.

Some religions absolutely believe in the power of prayers, trusting that constant supplication to Divine Beings will help one be taken to a higher realm after death. However, the Buddha once stated that prayers are not as powerful as the practice of morality and meditation. If one has already fulfilled the three core practices mentioned above, then prayers might act as the straw that broke the camel's back, ensuring rebirth in a Heaven realm.

Therefore, the efforts we make in this current life are what truly matter. We must focus on each moment in the present, dedicating ourselves to service, moral cultivation, and meditation practice, and let the Law of Cause and Effect work justly. If we are overly concerned with the afterlife and neglect our responsibilities in the present, then religion may inadvertently become irrelevant to society, which is not beneficial.

Question 75: IF WE BELIEVE THAT WEALTH AND POWER COME FROM HAVING DONE MANY GOOD DEEDS IN PAST LIVES, WHICH IMPLIES HAVING A GOOD HEART, THEN WHY ARE SO MANY WEALTHY AND POWERFUL PEOPLE ALSO RUTHLESS AND CRUEL?

Answer: Great merit comes from doing things that benefit many people. One might perform such good deeds because of their genuine virtues, but sometimes these deeds are done unintentionally without a strong moral basis.

For example, imagine you are an officer required to follow orders from a superior to build a bridge over a river, construct a road to a remote village, or establish a hospital in a densely populated area... These actions all generate significant blessing for the future. However, the mindset while carrying out these public works can vary greatly.

You might carry out these projects with a sincere desire to help others, or you might do them hoping to please your superiors and receive rewards. These two attitudes are vastly different.

If you do these things with a genuine love for others, in the next life, you will not only enjoy wealth and power but also possess strong moral qualities. Conversely, if the motivation is simply to please the superiors or gain rewards, in your next life, you may still enjoy wealth and prosperity, but your morality may not be as developed. Doing good deeds and cultivating moral virtues are distinct activities, even though they are interconnected.

Question 76: THE WORLD TODAY IS MORE STRESSFUL THAN IN THE PAST DUE TO TECHNOLOGY DRIVING PEOPLE TO WORK AT A FAST PACE. PEOPLE ARE CONSTANTLY SEEKING WAYS TO RELAX AND REDUCE THEIR ANXIETY. WHAT IS BUDDHISM'S PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN STRESS IN THIS MODERN ERA?

Answer: We experience stress for two main reasons: first, due to our desires, and second because our merit is insufficient to meet the demands of life.

Stress and anxiety caused by desire are fundamental aspects of psychology. One of the purposes of Buddhist practice is to address this. By eliminating personal desires, we can reduce stress and worry. Meditation plays a key role in this aspect.

Stress and anxiety caused by a lack of merit in relation to life's demands are linked to karmic retribution. Everyone is burdened by life's necessities, such as food, clothing, shelter, possessions, reputation, and relationships. However, if one has insufficient merit to fulfill these needs, one's mind will naturally fall into stress and worry. To avoid this, it is

important to diligently engage in good deeds, help others, and contribute to society rather than seeking personal pleasure and comfort, which may trap us in psychological stress and anxiety later on.

Question 77: THERE ARE HERMITS WHO PRACTICE IN SOLITUDE, AND ASCETICS WHO SUBJECT THEMSELVES TO A LIFE OF DEPRIVATION (AUSTERITY). WHAT VALUE DOES THIS HAVE FOR ENLIGHTENMENT?

Answer: Human life typically requires the support of companions to ease the burdens of life and a certain level of material comfort to reduce hardships. Therefore, solitude and material deprivation are generally seen as forms of suffering for people.

Some ascetics, after attaining certain spiritual abilities, demonstrate a greater capacity to endure hardships than ordinary people. They may challenge themselves by living in solitude and deprivation (austerity). However, solitude and deprivation are not the goals of spiritual practice. Because if spiritual practice led only to loneliness and deprivation, no one would want to pursue it. We may admire someone who can endure solitude and deprivation, but most of us would not choose to practice in such a way. Moreover, society does not encourage everyone to live that way because if everyone lived in deprivation, no one connected or cooperated with others, this would result in an impoverished society.

We should see living in solitude and deprivation as a temporary challenge to strengthen spiritual power at certain times, rather than as the ultimate aim of spiritual practice. The true purpose of spiritual practice is to attain enlightenment and to guide others, helping them to achieve enlightenment as well.

Question 78: WHAT IS BUDDHISM'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE CURRENT UNEMPLOYMENT ISSUE IN THE WORLD?

Answer: In the past, unemployment was less of an issue because the natural environment – rivers, forests, and fields – belonged to everyone. Anyone who puts in effort could find a means of living through natural resources. Today, however, society has become more organized, with strict regulations and systems, people must seek employment within a company or organization; it means they have to work for someone else. Small businesses unable to compete with larger companies are gradually being absorbed by larger ones. Over time, most people have become employees of some company, government institution, or large-scale agricultural operation, with very few individuals still running small-scale businesses.

When people can't find these opportunities, they face unemployment. They can no longer return to rural areas to fish, plant vegetables, or sell goods on the street. Without a job, they often end up without a home, without a family, and without a future - jobless, homeless, and futureless frequently go hand in hand.

In times of unemployment, people desperately wish for someone to hire them to do anything, just so they can earn enough money to buy food, which makes them feel

incredibly humbled. When we look at the homeless living on the streets and dying alone across the world, we can better understand their tragic situation.

One of the reasons that makes people struggle to find jobs is that as children, they avoided helping their parents with household chores, thinking such tasks were beneath them. The aversion to household work makes it difficult to find work later in life.

Another reason is being too picky, looking only for jobs that match one's personal interests, rather than trying to love and commit to the job they currently have, as long as it contributes positively to society.

Another cause could be never having helped others find employment. When seeing someone unemployed, they may feel indifferent and do nothing to assist.

Lastly, when people are employed, they often focus solely on earning a salary without considering that their productivity should exceed their pay to create a lasting relationship with their employer. When wages exceed productivity, the connection with the employer weakens, and one day, the employer may no longer need them. So we must work with high productivity to maintain a strong bond with our employer, making them naturally want to keep us employed for the long term.

Question 79: WHAT KARMA LEADS TO HOMELESSNESS?

Answer: Homelessness is a pressing issue in many developed countries. Despite their strength and prosperity, these nations still struggle with a large number of homeless people, which is a distressing sight.

The economic reason for homelessness is often due to the loss of a job, which makes it impossible for individuals to afford rent or mortgage payments, forcing them to live on the streets.

However, the karmic reasons behind homelessness are more complex. Instead of focusing on the specific Karma that leads to homelessness, let's consider the Karma that results in having a large and comfortable home, and then infer the opposite causes to understand what might lead to homelessness:

- Having helped others build a home.
- Contributing to the construction of public facilities such as schools, hospitals, religious institutions, or government offices.
- Not having burned down homes or destroyed villages during battles in past lives.
- Not being arrogant or prideful when living in a large, beautiful home.
- Offering shelter to those in need during difficult times.
- Not destroying animal nests, hives, or burrows.
- Supporting local funds to build homes for the poor.
- Being lenient and understanding when tenants cannot pay rent on time.
- Using one's home for wholesome activities that benefit the community.

These are examples of causes that help people avoid housing issues. By understanding these, we can deduce the opposite causes that might lead someone to suffer from homelessness. To reverse the karma of homelessness, one should seek opportunities to help others secure housing. By helping others have a place to live first, we will gradually overcome the karma of homelessness.

Question 80: MANY THINK THAT TO ATTAIN INNER PEACE, ONE MUST NOT BE CONCERNED WITH ANYTHING. DOES THIS LEAD TO IRRESPONSIBILITY?

Answer: This is a crucial point in the practice of meditation and the path to liberation.

When the mind becomes tranquil, a subtle wrong view can arise – that one no longer needs to be concerned with anything in the world. This is why many practitioners gradually lose their merit without realizing it.

Practitioners often go through a phase of meditative absorption where the mind becomes focused and passive. This is a stage that everyone must experience. However, many people get stuck in this passive state and become disconnected from society, no longer offering benefits to the world.

For this reason, when practitioners embark on the spiritual practice toward enlightenment and liberation, they must make great vows to help others, cultivate compassion, pledge to accumulate countless good deeds and maintain deep reverence for the Enlightened Ones. This strong foundation ensures that later when practitioners pass through the stage of passive tranquility in meditation, they will rise from this emptiness and return to the world to uphold the Dharma and bring happiness to all beings.

Unfortunately, some practitioners, when reaching this passive state, adopt the wrong view that nothing matters anymore. They mistakenly believe this to be a profound truth and then write books promoting the idea that "there is no need to do anything", causing many other people to misunderstand and gradually lose their merit as well.

Question 81: ACCORDING TO THE LAW OF KARMA, ANYONE WHO SOWS THE SEEDS OF KARMA WILL REAP A CORRESPONDING AND JUST CONSEQUENCE. SO, IS THE LAW OF KARMA ALWAYS RIGID, OR IS THERE SOME FLEXIBILITY?

Answer: If the Law of Karma were rigid and fixed, it would no longer truly be the Law of Karma, as each person would merely be the product of past Karma, with all circumstances predetermined – even their actions would be regulated like those of a machine.

For example, if person A kills person B, it could be seen as person B receiving the consequences of past karma. However, if A's actions were also driven by past karma, A's act of killing B would be similarly predetermined. In this case, the Law of Karma would become rigid, leaving no room for individuals to choose their actions and create new karma.

In reality, the Law of Karma operates more like **Fuzzy Logic**; it is highly flexible, yet still governed by principles. Understanding this requires subtle wisdom.

Returning to the example, person B is predestined to face harm, but the perpetrator doesn't necessarily have to be person A. B's death might instead result from other causes, such as a traffic accident, a branch of a tree falling accidentally, slipping down the stairs, or even being hit by a falling durian while sitting under a tree. Instead of dying, person B might suffer a severe injury, live in a vegetative state, or be confined to a wheelchair.

The occurrence of such an event is inevitable – this is a principle of the Law of Karma. However, the manner in which the event happens, and its intensity, can vary depending on B's new karma or A's state of mind. This is the flexibility of the Law of Karma.

It is precisely this flexibility that allows sentient beings to have the freedom to choose their new karma, making the future always uncertain and unpredictable.

Question 82: ACCORDING TO BUDDHISM, CAN HUMANS EVOLVE INTO HIGHER SPECIES?

Answer: Influenced by the evolution theory of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), we often believe in a process of evolution from simpler organisms to more complex ones, with humans being the pinnacle of this evolution as of today. However, according to the Law of Karma, the existence of a species is determined by the accumulated good karma of beings. However, the specific way in which a species manifests is still a subject that requires further study.

For some reason, when the living environment becomes favorable and the merit of sentient beings is sufficient, humans will emerge in a way that is also aligned with these factors.

Throughout various eras, many civilizations have risen and fallen; humanity may have even faced apocalyptic events and then been reestablished; yet, humans have been considered the most intelligent species because they **know how to use tools** better than any other species. Occasionally, geniuses, prodigies, or extraordinary individuals with exceptional abilities have appeared among humanity, but after some time, they disappear, and humanity returns to its usual state.

It seems that until now, humanity has not evolved any further, even though scientific, technological, and engineering achievements have advanced dramatically. Soon, robots can do everything for humans, and eventually, even live in place of humans.

It appears that humanity represents the final stage of species evolution, where the ordinary and the Enlightened coexist. To truly evolve into a highly Enlightened Being is not a matter of genetic mutation or technological advancement but rather a matter of meditation practice. Because the path to evolving into a Saintly Being is the journey of the mind, not the physical one. The more purified the mind becomes, the closer humans come to Sainthood.

Thus, the evolution of humanity is not driven by genetic changes or technological influence but by meditation practice. Humanity must embrace meditation to find the path to higher evolution.

Question 83: IN WHAT WAY DOES MERIT MANIFEST?

Answer: Good karma, blessing or merit, manifests in the following aspects:

- **Health:** Being healthy and free from illness is a sign of good karma. Some individuals even possess extraordinary physical strength, which is also a result of special merit.
- **Physical appearance:** A beautiful or attractive outward appearance is also a sign of merit. Good-looking people often easily gain the goodwill of others.
- **Intelligence:** The ability to perceive, create, and reason sharply is also a form of merit, helping one navigate and solve complex problems accurately in life.
- **Talent:** Talent refers to specialized skills in areas such as science, technology, music, literature, martial arts, public speaking, and more. Talent also helps one secure a good profession, income, and social standing.
- **Willpower:** A strong sense of determination is also a sign of merit, as those with less merit are often easily discouraged and give up.
- **Family background:** Being born into a wealthy family is a sign of good karma, providing a strong foundation for building a successful future.
- **Wealth:** Possessing material wealth is a clear indication of merit, as wealth and prosperity remain aspirations for many people.
- **Power:** The ability to influence others and have them follow one's will is the desire of capable and ambitious individuals, as well as those who aspire to make a difference. This seems to be the pinnacle of merit.
- **Morality:** Having strong moral qualities is also a type of merit, often resulting from having revered some Saintly Ones in the past, leading to greater self-control in the present.
- **Meditation:** The ability to easily calm the mind in meditation is a significant form of merit, as it is the path that leads to spiritual enlightenment.
- **Intuition:** The ability to sense or predict what others cannot perceive is a valuable merit, as it is highly beneficial and helpful in life, leading others to seek one's counsel, akin to a trusted advisor.
- **Luck:** There are things beyond our control, and sometimes, all we can rely on is luck. Luck is the chance or favorable conditions for success that we cannot actively create ourselves. This is also a manifestation of good karma.

These are the general aspects in which merit may manifest in one's life.

Question 84: WHEN PEOPLE HAVE A GOOD CONNECTION FROM THE PAST, THEY EASILY HAVE AFFECTION FOR EACH OTHER. WHAT IS THIS CONNECTION?

Answer: According to the Law of Karma, the feelings of love or dislike among people do not arise randomly; they stem from past karmic connections. If two people have positive karma with each other, having loved and helped one another in previous lives, they will naturally develop a positive affinity when they meet again. Conversely, if they share a negative karmic bond from the past, having harmed or wronged each other, then they may feel an inexplicable aversion towards one another upon meeting again.

For example, some pop stars are adored by many fans. While talent plays a role, it is the good karma they accumulated in past lives that is the main reason for their large fan base. Perhaps, they helped so many people in past lives, leading to widespread admiration in this life.

Similarly, popular restaurants or successful businesses thrive due to positive karmic connections with many beings from the past. The owner may have performed numerous good deeds in previous lives, such as building bridges or roads for people that benefited many people, thereby creating good karma that now brings them many customers.

Great leaders who can rally and guide entire nations often have deep-rooted connections with many beings from the past, built from significant acts of kindness and service they might have performed in their past lives, not just in their current lifetime.

Marriage is also a result of past karmic connections, not merely coincidences. Whether the relationship lasts long or short depends on the depth of past connections and how well the couple treats each other in this life.

Therefore, when someone shows affection toward us, we should not think it's just because we are attractive. Instead, we should recognize that we forged a positive connection with that person in previous lives. Understanding this helps us to appreciate and nurture that bond, guiding each other toward spiritual enlightenment.

Question 85: THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORY, ACROSS VARIOUS REGIONS, WE HAVE HEARD OF THE PHENOMENA LIKE SPIRIT POSSESSION, WHERE ONE SPIRIT OR ENTITY TAKING CONTROL OVER ANOTHER PERSON'S BODY. WHAT IS BUDDHISM'S PERSPECTIVE ON THIS?

Answer: In both the human and animal realms, beings possess a physical body paired with a soul that is tightly attached to it. This attachment between the soul and body is what gives rise to mental activities, most prominently seen in the brain's functions. Since scientists have not yet identified the soul, they attribute all mental activities to the brain. However, based on experiences from ancient times to the present, many individuals, spiritual researchers, and practitioners have acknowledged the occurrence of spirit possession, where a soul enters the body of a living person to directly communicate with

the human community. Such stories are documented extensively in various texts and records around the world.

There are several types of spirit possession:

- **Reincarnation according to karmic ties:** When the embryo starts forming, designated for a specific sentient being, the soul of that being enters the developing fetus according to its karmic conditions, falling into an unconscious state as the brain is not yet fully active, and waiting for a new life to begin at birth.
- **Possession of a recently deceased body:** A wandering soul may find the body of someone who has just died with the body still warm, and take over it. The soul then impersonates the recently deceased person to experience the human life it longed for. There are many cases of elderly individuals who, after a night, suddenly become healthier, with a change in personality and an insatiable appetite, which are signs of this type of possession.
- **Possession due to karmic debt:** A soul may find someone who owes it a karmic debt and possess their bodies, blending the two consciousnesses together which leads to what appears as "personality disorders." Sometimes, the possessing soul is strong enough to completely overpower the original consciousness, leaving the person unaware of what is happening. In other cases where the invading soul is not so strong, the original consciousness remains partially aware, leaving the person with fragmented memories after the possessing soul leaves.
- **Possession by a Deity:** A Deity might possess a person with whom He has a karmic connection to impart wisdom, guidance, or moral teachings directly to the human community. In Vietnamese folklore, many stories describe village guardian deities possessing individuals to communicate important messages to the villagers. This has led to the development of spiritual rituals where people seek out "divine possession" to receive guidance, often accompanied by music and theatrical elements.

If possession occurs with malicious intent, it can be resolved by seeking the assistance of virtuous spiritual practitioners. With their spiritual power and great compassion, they can expel the spirit from the body and guide the spirit to cultivate morality, so that it may soon be reborn into a better realm and follow the righteous path.

Question 86: DID THE BUDDHA HAVE MANY EXCELLENT DISCIPLES?

Answer: In the time when the Buddha was alive, many of His monk disciples attained the highest level of enlightenment, becoming Arahants. Some of these disciples were particularly outstanding in specific areas. The two foremost leaders of the Sangha were Venerable Sariputta, known for His supreme wisdom, and Venerable Maha Moggallana, renowned for His exceptional supernatural powers. Besides Them, there were many other extraordinary Arahant disciples. The Nikaya scriptures recorded numerous stories about these Arahants of that time.

For example, Venerable Ananda, who served as the Buddha's attendant, was known for His phenomenal memory. He accompanied the Buddha throughout His life, listening to the Buddha's teachings without forgetting a single word. After the Buddha's passing, Venerable Ananda played a crucial role in reciting and preserving the Buddha's teachings for future generations.

Venerable Rahula, discreetly employed various means to protect the Buddha's monastic community (Sangha) from the intense opposition and sabotage of non-Buddhists, a task that was far from simple.

Venerable Maha Kassapa set an example of a simple and austere life. He often entered deep absorption in meditation for seven days at a time. After the Buddha's passing, he became the spiritual leader of the Sangha.

Venerable Subhuti was known for His boundless compassion, showing a deep love for all creatures, even ferocious animals.

Venerable Kaccana was famous for His ability to engage in discussions and lead conversations, which could convert even the most skeptical listeners to understand the true Dharma.

Venerable Gavampati once halted a raging flood to protect the monks sleeping by the riverbank.

Venerable Pindola Bharadvaja once flew on a stone over the city of Rajagaha, an event was witnessed and amazed all people in the city.

At that time, with the Buddha's direct guidance, countless disciples attained enlightenment. Even many lay followers achieved various stages of Sainthood, up to the stage of Anagami (Non-returner, the third stage).

Question 87: WHY ARE THERE FEWER PEOPLE ATTAINING ENLIGHTENMENT IN LATER TIMES COMPARED TO WHEN THE BUDDHA WAS ALIVE?

Answer: Enlightenment is an exceedingly profound and lofty state, far beyond the reach of the ordinary human mind. The gap between the ordinary and the Enlightened is vast.

In the time of the Buddha, when someone achieved a certain spiritual result in meditation, the Buddha would confirm the exact stage of their attainment. Practitioners themselves could not accurately know the extent of their achievement because the experiences and states they encountered in meditation were entirely new and unfamiliar. With the Buddha's validation, monks were not misled and could continue their practice until they attained the highest level of Sainthood.

After the Buddha's passing, and as Arahants became fewer, many practitioners, when reaching a certain state of mindfulness in meditation, mistakenly believed they had attained a profound stage of enlightenment. They then declared and praised their own experiences, leading others to believe that these states were the pinnacle of spiritual achievement. This misunderstanding undervalued the enlightenment of the Arahants and

the Buddha, diminishing the merit of successive generations and making it more difficult for later generations to attain sainthood than in the Buddha's time.

Merit (good karma) remains a critical factor in attaining Sainthood. The loss of merit due to misunderstanding and arrogance has made it progressively harder for subsequent generations to achieve enlightenment.

Occasionally, there are still individuals achieving significant spiritual results in meditation, but such cases have become rarer over time. This trend is concerning because without enlightened individuals, Buddhism itself would struggle to survive, and false views may arise, leading the world into greater ignorance and darkness.

This is why we must try to retrieve the true Dharma from the Buddha's time to recover the right understanding of profound enlightenment, helping increase the number of practitioners who achieve true enlightenment. Only by doing so can we preserve the invaluable teachings that the Buddha brought to this world.

Question 88: HOW DID THE FORMATION OF DIFFERENT SECTS WITHIN BUDDHISM OCCUR?

Answer: About a hundred years after the Buddha's passing, Buddhism split into two main sects: the Mahāsāṃghika (Great Assembly) and the Theravāda (Teaching of the Elders). This division arose due to differences in the interpretation of the teachings. The Theravāda tradition has been preserved and is still practiced today in countries like Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, and parts of Vietnam.

The Mahāsāṃghika, on the other hand, gradually became more innovative, introducing bold reforms that eventually led to the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism (Maha means great; Yana means vehicle). Naturally, when it identifies itself as the "Great Vehicle" (Mahāyāna), the other sects are labelled as the "Lesser Vehicle" (Hīnayāna). Today, we often refer to the Mahāyāna tradition as "Developed Buddhism" and the Theravāda tradition as "Original Buddhism". Mahāyāna Buddhism is predominant in countries such as China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Tibet, and Mongolia.

It appears that Theravāda Buddhism has stably maintained its traditional practices from the Buddha's time. In contrast, Mahāyāna Buddhism has been extremely open and innovative, creating a great Buddhist sect with many legendary spiritual elements.

While Theravāda Buddhism has tried to preserve its original practices, there have been some deviations over time. For example, many pagodas in Theravāda countries have used a large number of talismans and mantras, which are seen as a form of derived spirituality while awaiting spiritual achievement from true enlightenment.

On the other hand, Mahāyāna Buddhism, with its more audacious approach, has introduced new Buddhas and different teachings, seemingly creating entirely new forms of Buddhism. However, Mahāyāna monks assert that these new Buddhas and teachings were also introduced by the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni.

Some of the notable schools within Mahāyāna Buddhism include:

- **Zen Buddhism** focuses on using methods or techniques to trigger enlightenment, sometimes in ways that don't align with traditional scriptures. Zen has a strong, systematic lineage that has spread across many countries.
- **Pure Land Buddhism** advocates reciting the name of Amitābha Buddha to be taken to His Pure Land after death.
- **Vajrayāna Buddhism** focuses on the use of mantras and rituals to quickly gain spiritual power.
- **Tiantai Buddhism** founded by the Chinese master Zhiyi, focuses on practicing meditation with unique techniques.

There are also many other smaller schools within Buddhism that have appeared and disappeared over time.

Question 89: IN THE THREE NOBLE JEWELS (TRIRATNA), THE SANGHA REFERS TO ENLIGHTENED MONKS AND NUNS. HOW CAN THERE BE MORE PRACTITIONERS WHO TRULY ACHIEVE ENLIGHTENMENT TODAY?

Answer: According to the traditional definition, the Three Noble Jewels consist of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

The Buddha is the Supremely Enlightened Master who founded the path.

The Dharma is the teachings and doctrines preached by the Buddha.

The Sangha refers to the community of saintly disciples, who have attained enlightenment.

When we take refuge in the Three Noble Jewels, we take refuge in the enlightened Sangha of all times, not just the Enlightened Beings of the present. However, if there are enlightened monks in our time, it greatly strengthens people's faith.

Occasionally, we may hear about monks who do not fully embody the qualities expected of them. In reality, to maintain the true qualities of a monastic, the following conditions are needed:

- A strong and sincere initial aspiration to pursue the spiritual path.
- Living in a disciplined environment with strict monastic rules, under the guidance of a wise master, and surrounded by fellow monastics who are also dedicated to the path.
- Studying the teachings that align with the true Dharma of the Buddha, as wrong views can lead to the deterioration of ethical conduct.
- Practicing diligently, with consistent efforts in both spiritual cultivation and service, allowing morality and merit (good karma) to grow gradually over time.
- Gradual progress in meditation, leading to deeper states of mindfulness.

- Development of wisdom over time.
- Having very strict self-control and self-regulation

If monastics can meet these conditions, people will feel confident in relying on them for guidance in their spiritual practice.

Question 90: CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THE CONCEPT OF ENLIGHTENMENT IN BUDDHISM?

Answer: The Buddha's definition of enlightenment is very profound. Even if one can enter a deep state of meditative absorption, this is only considered a meditative achievement but it is not regarded as true enlightenment or attaining a stage of sainthood. True enlightenment, or Sainthood, is achieved only when one eradicates the deep-seated invisible defilements, known as kilesas (mental fetters), within the deepest layers of the mind.

Kilesas are the natural instincts of sentient beings that influence all thoughts and behaviors. These include inclinations such as selfishness, arrogance, greed, anger, hatred, stubbornness, laziness, cowardice, blame-shifting, fear and at the deepest level of mental fetters, ignorance (avidya).

The Buddha identified four stages of enlightenment (or Sainthood):

- **Sotāpanna** (Stream-enterer): At this stage, one eliminates the first three defilements: selfishness, stubbornness, and indecisiveness (lack of firm principles). A Sotāpanna is highly ethical, reveres the Buddha absolutely, and possesses a strong sense of inner mindfulness but has not yet achieved deep meditative absorption (samadhi) or Supernatural powers (abhinna). A Sotapanna will still be reborn multiple times to continue practicing and accumulating more merit.
- **Sakadāgāmi** (Once-returner): At this stage, the defilements of greed and anger have been significantly weakened (though not entirely eradicated). The Sakadāgāmi's morality is profound; they begin to reach deep meditative mindfulness and may even attain the First jhāna (the first stage of deep meditative ecstasy). They have strong intuition and can foresee many things. A Sakadāgāmi will return to the human realm only once more to resolve their remaining karma before ascending to higher realms and ultimately attaining Nirvana.
- **Anāgāmi** (Non-returner): This stage marks the complete eradication of the core defilements of greed and hatred. However, five subtler defilements still remain, including attachment to the Form Realm (desire for rebirth in the Form Heavens), attachment to the Formless Realm (desire for rebirth in the Formless Heavens), complacency (contentment with their peaceful state of mind, leading to a lack of further effort), subtle pride (still seeing other beings as inferior), and ignorance (the root defilement). An Anāgāmi will no longer be reborn into the human realm (unless they choose to be) but will dwell in the higher realms of the Form or Formless Heavens, where they will attain Nirvana. An Anāgāmi often possesses great Supernatural powers.

- **Arahant** (Fully Enlightened One): At this final stage, all defilements are completely eradicated, including ignorance. An Arahant attains fully the Threefold Knowledge, the Six Supernatural Powers and supreme enlightenment, transcending all realms of existence and achieving ultimate liberation.

The concept of enlightenment in Buddhism is extremely profound and intricate, requiring significant spiritual practice to fully grasp its meaning.

Question 91: HOW CAN WE RECOGNIZE SOMEONE WHO HAS ATTAINED ENLIGHTENMENT SO THAT WE CAN SHOW THEM THE APPROPRIATE REVERENCE?

Answer: It is very difficult to know if someone has attained enlightenment because their outward appearance and behaviour often seem quite ordinary. Unless we have achieved a certain level of enlightenment, it's unlikely that we can recognize someone at the same level. For example, a person who has achieved the first stage of Sainthood, known as a Sotāpanna, may be especially hard to identify. Because they may exhibit virtuous and noble behavior but there is nothing outwardly extraordinary about them. Only after spending considerable time with them might we begin to notice their deep-rooted virtue and naturally revere them more.

People with great merit are often recognized easily because their blessings manifest in their appearance, wealth, power, or strength. Interestingly, an Enlightened Being might not always be someone with a lot of visible merit. Therefore, the safest approach is to respect everyone in this world where Saints and ordinary people coexist. This way, if we happen to encounter a Saint, we will avoid the risk of losing merit by treating them with indifference or disrespect.

Question 92: DOES A TRANQUIL MIND INDICATE THAT ONE HAS ATTAINED ENLIGHTENMENT?

Answer: There are various levels of calmness in the mind, and not all types of calmness are the same. It's similar to how a house can be clean or dirty, but there are many different types of houses, and not all clean houses are alike. A mansion may be clean or dirty; just as a simple thatched house may be clean or dirty; a dilapidated shack may also be clean or dirty.

A mansion, even when dirty, is still a mansion; likewise, the mind of a Saint, even when disturbed by worldly concerns, remains the mind of a saint.

A simple thatched house, even if clean, is still a humble dwelling; likewise, the mind of an ordinary person, even when achieving a certain level of tranquility through correct practice, remains the mind of an ordinary person, still harboring many hidden flaws.

A dilapidated shack, even when swept and tidied, is still a poor and miserable shelter. Similarly, the mind of someone burdened by heavy karmic debts, even if it attains some calmness, remains the mind of a person with heavy karma.

Understanding this, we should not become complacent or overestimate our spiritual achievements when we achieve a bit of calmness in our practice. The important thing is to assess and accurately recognize the "house" (or spiritual level) we are currently in. We should be content with where we are, continue our practice from that place, and not be deluded into thinking we have reached a higher spiritual state than we actually have, as such illusions can lead to a loss of merit.

The principle of the Law of Karma is that we should not try to escape difficult circumstances; instead, we should practice and do good deeds within those circumstances. By doing so, we gradually exhaust our negative karma and are "upgraded" to a better house, progressing to a higher level.

Here are the slogans for the three types of houses (three types of people):

- **For the mansion**, representing those who may have entered the path of sainthood, the slogan is: "Deep within, there is still ignorance and sin."
- **For the simple thatched house**, representing ordinary people, the slogan is: "Even if the mind is calm, it is still the mind of an ordinary person with many hidden flaws."
- **For the dilapidated shack**, representing those burdened with heavy karma, the slogan is: "This mind is a prison of evil and sin."

By correctly recognizing our own level and embracing the appropriate slogan (like our "password"), we can reduce our faults, lessen our karma, and create opportunities to rise to a higher level.

Question 93: COULD YOU PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF THE FOUR FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFULNESS?

Answer: The Buddha taught the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, which encompass four key practices: contemplation of the body, contemplation of feelings, contemplation of the mind, and contemplation of the Truths.

- **Contemplation of the body** involves maintaining awareness of the body in all activities, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. With the mind settled with mindfulness through prior practices, practitioners observe and recognize the characteristics of the body, such as its impermanence, impurity, and burdensome nature with many needs and desires.
- **Contemplation of feelings:** As mindfulness deepens, practitioners constantly perceive a pervasive sense of mindfulness throughout the body. This mindfulness is invisible yet clearly present, helping to understand that the mind is still ordinary, containing many hidden flaws and still influenced by subtle underlying sensations.
- **Contemplation of the mind:** With a very deep state of meditative ecstasy, practitioners clearly see themselves as the knowing aspect of consciousness and the source of all actions and realize that deep within the mind, ignorance and defilements still persist.

- **Contemplation of Truths:** At this stage, practitioners have attained liberation and enlightenment, where the sense of self dissolves, and they become one with the ultimate truth of the universe.

Before entering the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, practitioners must follow a preliminary path, which is **Mindfulness of Sin**. This involves recognizing oneself as a mass of deep-seated karmic burdens (as reflected in the slogans related to the three types of "houses"). Practitioners should focus more awareness on the bottom of the abdomen, and skillfully maintain a slow, minimal, and gentle breath. By practicing these techniques, mindfulness will naturally emerge, leading the way into the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

Question 94: WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE SEVEN FACTORS OF ENLIGHTENMENT?

Answer: The Seven Factors of Enlightenment (Satta Bojjhaṅgā) are seven qualities found in the mind of an Enlightened Being. These include:

1. **Investigation of Dhamma** (Dhamma Vicaya): The ability to clearly discern right from wrong without confusion.
2. **Energy** (Viriya): A strong and unwavering determination and effort.
3. **Joy** (Pīti): A deep and abiding sense of happiness and fulfillment.
4. **Tranquility** (Passaddhi): A calm and relaxed mind, free from tension and stress.
5. **Mindfulness** (Sati): Constant awareness and the ability to control the mind.
6. **Concentration** (Samādhi): The ability to enter deep states of meditative ecstasy easily.
7. **Equanimity** (Upekkhā): A state of non-attachment, where nothing in the world can disturb or cling to the mind.

The order of these factors may vary slightly between the two different Buddhist main traditions: Mahayana and Theravada.

Question 95: WHAT ARE THE TWELVE LINKS OF DEPENDENT ORIGINATION?

Answer: The Twelve Links of Dependent Origination describe the process of samsara (the cycle of birth and rebirth), combining psychological and karmic factors in the following order:

1. **Ignorance** (Avijjā): This is the fundamental delusion or lack of understanding inherent in all sentient beings. This ignorance is the root cause of the entire chain of dependent origination.
2. **Volitional Formations** (Saṅkhāra): These are the mental formations or activities driven by the ego. Ignorance leads to the rise of these formations, where the ego begins to assert itself

3. **Subconsciousness** (Viññāṇa): This refers to activities of the subconscious, also known as the vegetative nervous system. Due to the ego's emergence, the subconscious mind becomes active. This subconsciousness is the basis for the arising of mental and physical phenomena in an individual.
4. **Name-and-Form** (Nāma-Rūpa): This refers to the activities of the conscious mind and the physical body. The subconscious mind's subtle activities lead to the manifestation of conscious thought and physical existence. "Name" refers to the mental components, and "Form" refers to the physical body.
5. **Six Sense Bases** (Saḷāyatana): These are the six faculties or sense bases (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) that arise due to the existence of Name-and-Form. As the mind and body function, the six senses become the means through which beings perceive the world.
6. **Contact** (Phassa): This refers to the interaction between the six sense bases and their corresponding objects. Through the senses, beings come into contact with the external environment (sensory contact) – Without fully functioning senses, a being may seem disconnected from their surroundings.
7. **Feeling** (Vedanā): The sensations or feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral) that arise from contact with objects through the senses. Due to interaction with the world, beings experience a variety of joys and sorrows, influenced by life's complex circumstances.
8. **Craving** (Taṇhā): This is the emergence of desires and aversions that arise based on feelings. Driven by feelings of pleasure and sorrow, beings develop complex emotions, loving what brings joy and hating what causes suffering.
9. **Clinging** (Upādāna): This refers to the actions that create karma. Driven by attachments and aversions, beings engage in various actions that generate complex good and bad karma.
10. **Becoming** (Bhava): This is the formation of a future existence. The karma created through one's actions lays the groundwork for the conditions of future rebirths, essentially designing the blueprint for future lives.
11. **Birth** (Jāti): This is the actual rebirth into a new life. Once the blueprint is formed, rebirth inevitably follows, leading to a new existence.
12. **Ageing and Death** (Jarāmaraṇa): This encompasses the inevitable cycle of ageing, illness, death, and all the suffering that accompanies existence, such as sorrow, lamentation, pain, and despair. A being born into this world naturally experiences ageing, sickness, death, and all the associated suffering.

To eliminate ignorance and cease the cycle of rebirth, one must diligently practice the Noble Eightfold Path.

Question 96: WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR ORDINATION TO BECOME A MONASTIC IN BUDDHISM?

Answer: To become an ordained monk or nun in Buddhism, a layperson must meet the following requirements:

- The individual should have already studied Buddhist teachings, practiced diligently, and developed a strong commitment to the monastic life, to the extent that they no longer feel attached to worldly life. Their determination to ordain must be unwavering.
- The individual should seek and obtain the consent of their family – parents if unmarried, or spouse if married – before proceeding with ordination.
- The individual must select a master and a monastery where they intend to reside and practice for the rest of their life.
- The individual should approach the chosen monastery and formally request ordination. If accepted, they will likely be required to serve as a lay volunteer at the monastery for a period of time, during which their ethics and capabilities will be assessed. Necessary documents must be submitted to the monastery for reporting to local authorities.
- If the individual is found suitable, the monastery will conduct a solemn ordination ceremony, where the individual's head will be shaved, and they will don the monastic robes, formally leaving behind their lay status, marking the transition from layperson to monastic. The monastery will also submit the necessary documentation to the local government and religious organizations.
- After some time of practice, the study of the teachings, and learning the monastic rules and precepts, the master may allow the novice to take the novice vows (Śrāmaṇera), which include 10 precepts when the Buddhist council organizes an official ordination ceremony.
- After a period of monastic training, the master may allow the individual to take the novice vows (Samanera/Samaneri), which consist of ten precepts when a proper ordination event is organized by the religious community.
- If the candidate is a woman, she must undergo a period as a Sikkhamānā (probationary nun), taking the intermediate Sikkhamānā vows after completing the novice stage.
- A novice monk can continue to receive full ordination as a Bhikshu (with 250 precepts) when the master deems the individual qualified and permits them to participate in a formal ordination ceremony. A fully ordained nun (Bhikkhuni) observes 348 precepts.
- The newly ordained monk or nun are required to continue their studies in Buddhist doctrine as arranged by their master and the religious council.

- After 25 years as a Bhikkhu, one may be conferred the title of Thera (Senior Monk) or Therī (Senior Nun).
- After 40 years as a Bhikkhu, one may receive the title of Mahāthera (Great Senior Monk) or Mahātherī (Great Senior Nun).

Each Buddhist sect, council, or country may have variations in this process, including differences in monastic attires, specific rules and other practices. However, these are administrative steps, spiritual enlightenment is not bound by time, so it cannot be regulated by these milestones. For a disciple of the Buddha, the pursuit of enlightenment remains the ultimate goal.

Question 97: IN ANCIENT TIMES, SOCIETY WAS SIMPLE, WITH FEW MATERIAL POSSESSIONS AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVICES, SO MONKS HAD FEWER OPPORTUNITY TO INTERACT WITH THE WORLD. NOW, WITH THE CONVENIENCE OF PHONES, COMPUTERS, AND TRANSPORTATION, IT SEEMS THAT MONKS ARE MORE CONNECTED WITH THE SECULAR WORLD. DOES THIS MAKE IT HARDER TO MAINTAIN THEIR MORAL DISCIPLINE?

Answer: The modern era of technology indeed presents new challenges for monks, requiring them to cultivate greater determination in their practice. The key is to navigate technology wisely, using its advantages while avoiding its potential drawbacks that can diminish the image and integrity of the monastic life.

To maintain strict moral discipline, monks today need to engage in frequent and sincere repentance before the Buddha. The merit gained from this practice helps purify the mind and reinforce moral qualities, allowing wisdom to naturally develop, and enabling them to protect their spiritual life from the encroachment of worldly life.

In the past, it was easier to practice because worldly distractions were minimal. Today, however, the practice is more challenging due to the pervasive influence of secular life, making it necessary for monks to put in extra effort to prevent these influences from taking hold.

Meditation plays a crucial role in supporting moral discipline, but to achieve results, it must be practiced correctly with a humble mind. Humility is very crucial for spiritual practitioners, as arrogance can lead to immediate contamination by worldly influences. Some modern teachings may inadvertently foster pride in practitioners, which undermines their spiritual progress. Therefore, it is safest to prioritize teachings that help maintain humility in the mind, ensuring a solid and lasting path of practice.

Question 98: HOW CAN WE EFFECTIVELY EXPLAIN BUDDHIST TEACHINGS TO OTHERS?

Answer: To effectively explain Buddhist teachings to others, two key conditions are necessary: first, listeners must have a good karmic connection with us from past lives, making them receptive to what we say; second, we must have the ability to speak so well that people are naturally drawn to our words.

Sharing the Dharma with others is an important merit that everyone should strive to practice. When we make the effort to speak about Buddhist teachings to others, it ensures that in our future lives, we will quickly encounter the Buddha's teachings, have the opportunity to practice, develop wisdom, and experience good fortune.

It's essential to help others to build positive connections with them, so that in the future when we share the Dharma, they will be open and receptive to it. Additionally, supporting others in spreading the Dharma also helps us develop the ability to speak eloquently in the future, allowing us to persuade and inspire many people.

Compassion has various levels, but the highest level is the desire to share the Dharma with everyone we meet, helping them understand the Dharma and find a path to liberation from suffering.

If we come across a good Dharma book or hear a meaningful teaching, we should share it with others. Whenever we have the opportunity to talk with others, we should try to discuss the Dharma instead of engaging in trivial or idle conversations.

However, since we frequently speak about the Dharma, we must also maintain strict discipline in our own life. We should practice diligently and uphold moral integrity, which helps gain the respect and trust of others, making them more willing to listen to what we have to say. Because the principle is that those who teach something must excel in that area.

Question 99: WHAT CAN WE DO TO PRESERVE THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS?

Answer: Ever since the time of the Buddha, there have always been numerous attempts to destroy Buddhism. Throughout history, Buddhism has been eradicated in various places at different times. Malicious forces have always sought to extinguish the Dharma. The Buddha's disciples, who practice compassion and patience, have often refrained from resisting, which has unfortunately made it easier for these evil forces to attack the Dharma.

The enlightenment of the Buddha is an invaluable intangible heritage of humanity that must be preserved and protected for future generations.

However, to protect the Dharma and ensure its longevity, the Buddha's disciples must have great merit. Some people mistakenly believe that following the precepts simply means refraining from harmful actions and nothing more, forgetting that actively performing good deeds to generate merit is also critical. Others are influenced by wrong views that doing nothing is a sign of spiritual advancement, which leads to a decline in merit.

If everyone lacks merit, there will be no power and resources to defend the Dharma and ensure its long-lasting existence. Therefore, we must first accumulate merit to gain the strength needed to protect the Dharma. Once we have this foundation then can we study and develop strategies to counteract the efforts of those who seek to undermine Buddhism.

Question 100: EVERYONE BELIEVES THEIR OWN RELIGION IS THE BEST AND MOST CORRECT, WHILE OTHER RELIGIONS ARE WRONG. THIS MINDSET IS A SIGNIFICANT BARRIER TO HUMAN UNITY. WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT THIS?

Answer: In reality, there is only one ultimate truth, not many. One day, humanity will need to identify the most accurate and universal religion, likely through scientific exploration. If science continues to advance, it may eventually identify the religion that is most aligned with the truth. At that time, everyone will have to accept a common faith, a shared religion, and a unified spirituality for the entire planet.

Until that day comes, we must find ways to coexist peacefully. We should encourage religions to seek out commonalities to foster mutual respect and affection, rather than highlighting differences to fuel conflicts. For example, most religions believe in a Supreme Being or God, but they may use different names due to linguistic differences. This discrepancy has led to the mistaken belief that these are different deities, and consequently, to religious strife.

For now, religions must transcend the limitations of language to foster understanding, move beyond ritual differences to come closer together and embrace diversity as a basis for love and unity. Every religion teaches love and compassion, but it is illogical to exclude people of other faiths from this love. True compassion should extend to everyone, regardless of their religion.

Let us all bow down and pray for world peace, for humanity to love one another, and for everyone to find supreme enlightenment and liberation.

LIGHT OF THE WORLD

(ÁNH SÁNG CỦA THẾ GIỚI)

Vừa phải

Moderato

JANNA

9 Cùng nhau thế giới chung xây bình yên Giải thoát, chân lý như muôn bình minh
The world to - ge - ther seeks for peace and for en - ligh - ten - ment as well

18 Phật đã đến thắp ánh mặt trời huy hoàng Đạo thiêng đưa thế gian qua nỗi phiền
The sun-light that Bud-dha shines on us guides us to o - ver-come dark-ness

23 Loài người vượt qua cách chia u sầu Trải nguồn tình thương khắp nơi tình cầu
We trans - cend all se - pa - ra - tions We spread our love to all be - ings

30 Nguyện lòng tin sâu Nghiệp Nhân Quả Báo Hoà bình an vui, súng gươm buông rồi Vì
We be - lieve in the Kar - ma Law We lay down all wea - pons for peace Our

36 trọn con tim hiến dâng con người Một đường về Vô Ngã rất đẹp tươi
hands are meant to serve peo - ple No - self is our ut - most in - tent

41 NAM MÔ THÍCH CA MÂU NI ĐẮNG TỪ TÔN
NA - MO SA - KI - YA MU - NI BUD - DHA

46 Xin dâng Đức Như Lai tin yêu như biển sâu
We pay ab - so - lute ho - mage to the Lord

51 NAM MÔ THÍCH CA MÂU NI ĐẮNG ĐẠI HÙNG
NA - MO SA - KI - YA MU - NI BUD - DHA AH

Nguyện hạnh phúc bao la cho vạn loài muôn đời sau.
May all be - ings find hap - pi - ness e - ver - more.