

Understanding Buddhism



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Buddhism, *Fojiao* in Mandarin Chinese, signifies Buddhist education. Buddhism is a perfect teaching of the utmost virtuousness taught by the Buddha for the benefit of all beings in the Nine Dharma Realms. The course content illustrates the true reality of life and the universe. Life refers to oneself. The universe represents our living environment.

Buddha Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, was born in Northern India three thousand years ago. According to the historical record of China, the Buddha was born in the twenty-fourth year (the year of *Jiayin*) of Emperor Zhao of the Zhou dynasty and passed away in the fifty-third year (the year of *Renshen*) of Emperor Mu of the Zhou dynasty, which spanned seventy-nine years. Since achieving enlightenment and becoming a Buddha at the age of thirty, Buddha Shakyamuni had taught continuously for his entire life without a single break. In the Buddhist sutras, it is often said, “The Buddha taught for forty-nine years and more than three hundred times.” By more than three hundred times, it means the Buddha had given more than three hundred classes during his forty-nine years of teaching. The courses embrace the teachings of morality, virtue, the law of cause and effect, philosophy, and science. His explanation of these five subjects was very comprehensive.

If expressed using today’s vocabulary, Buddha Shakyamuni’s role was as a multicultural and social educator. He was a volunteer who engaged in multicultural and social education. He didn’t charge any fees. He was enthusiastic in his profession. He set a good example for offspring through his thoughts and behaviors. His practice was truly commendable since it conformed with the saying “Learning to be a teacher; acting as a role model.”

The name Shakyamuni (Shi Jia Mou Ni) represents a profound meaning of the Buddha-dharma. It is the purpose of Buddha’s teaching. What does Buddhism teach? The name Shi Jia Mou Ni is the transliterated word of the classical language of India, Sanskrit. Shi Jia stands for loving-kindness. The Buddha was benevolent because he understood that the entire universe, all beings and himself are one entity. Loving-kindness is what today’s world lacks. Human beings are deluded and cannot realize the truth that everything is one entity in the universe. If one even does not love himself, how could we expect him to love others? Therefore, the Buddha taught us to be compassionate to all beings. Mou Ni is the way to treat oneself. Mou Ni stands for

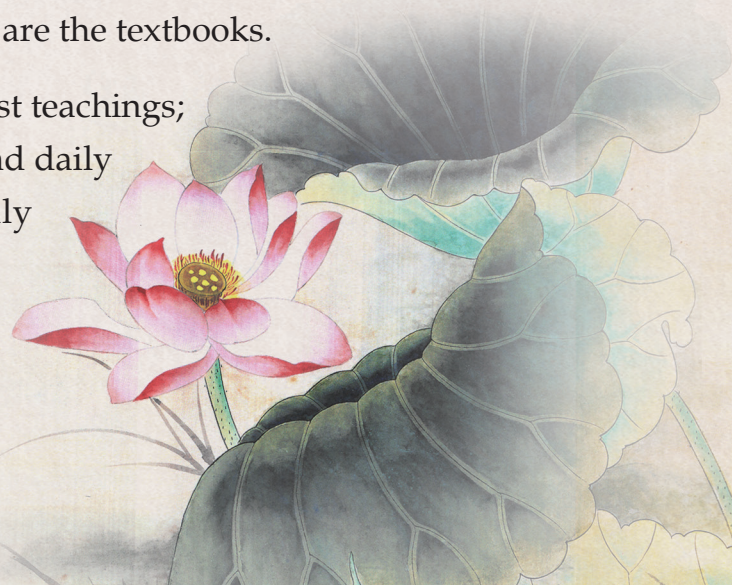
stillness. It represents purity, impartiality, and enlightenment. To summarize, Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings are to help us become pure and impartial, enlightened, and compassionate to all beings. This is the essential purpose of Buddhist education.

The word Buddha means an awakened person. A person who has utmost perfect wisdom, good fortune and virtue is known as a Buddha. All beings are originally replete with the aforementioned characteristics. It is stated in the Perfect Enlightenment Sutra: "All beings are originally Buddha." It is said in the Avatamsaka Sutra: "Every being possesses the wisdom and virtuous character of the Buddha." In other words, all beings are a Buddha. There is no difference. But we now have lost our wisdom. How did we lose it? In this sentence the Buddha told us, "These qualities are unattainable due to people's wandering thoughts and attachments."

A Buddha is a degree in Buddhist education. It is like ordinary schools where there are three degrees. The highest one is PhD degree, followed by a Master's degree and Bachelor's degree. There are also three degrees in Buddhist education. The highest one is the Buddha, followed by Bodhisattva and Arhat. Whether it is a Buddha, Bodhisattva or Arhat, they are all humans, not immortals. Buddha Shakyamuni is a teacher, our Original Teacher, which shows that he founded Buddhist education. We call ourselves disciples, i.e. students. Therefore, the relationship between the Buddha and ourselves is one of teacher and student. Both Bodhisattvas and Arhats are students of the Buddha, but they have already obtained degrees. They are saints. Whilst we are human beings who have not yet obtained degrees and are considered lowerclassmen, Bodhisattvas and Arhats are considered upperclassmen in relationship to ourselves.

In our everyday life, a monk or nun is called a He-shang, which is the transliteration of the Sanskrit word meaning a direct mentor who provides teaching and acts as our personal guide. It is similar to supervisors found in universities. We share a close relationship with this individual. Others who do not directly teach are called Dharma masters or Fashi. Buddhist sutras are the textbooks.

Buddhist monasteries are places for Buddhist teachings; they are schools. In ancient times, monasteries had daily eight-hour classes as well as eight hours of daily practice. The Abbot, or Head Monk or He-shang, is equivalent to the principal of a modern school; *Shou Zuo* is equivalent to the Dean of Studies;



Wei Nuo is equivalent to the Assistant Dean of Studies and is responsible for discipline and morality; and *Jian Yuan* is equivalent to the Dean of General Affairs. The Chinese Buddhist monastery system was trying to standardize the teachings. Buddhist monasteries are Buddhist universities. In India, Buddha Shakyamuni implemented private schools using the *Si-shu* [usually run by a family, a church, or a teacher] teaching method, similar to Confucius. Confucius had three thousand students, of which seventy-two became sages. During Buddha Shakyamuni's lifetime, he had three thousand students; among them, according to sutra records, one thousand two hundred fifty five were those who consistently followed the Buddha's teachings. For those who periodically practiced, they were not less than this number. Therefore, we can conclude that Buddha Shakyamuni taught his entire life. Buddhism has nothing to do with religion. Buddhist ceremonies had not been created during the Buddha's lifetime; they were created afterwards by his descendants.

At present, there are six different forms of Buddhism.

Firstly, is the aforementioned traditional Buddhism: Buddhist education, which Buddha Shakyamuni originally founded. Other forms have more or less deteriorated.

Secondly, is religious Buddhism: All we see in Buddhist monasteries today is the making of offerings, performing rituals, and the accumulation of some fortune and virtues. This form of Buddhism is indeed a religion.

Thirdly, is philosophical or academic Buddhism: It is often found as a course in universities where Buddhism is considered a study of philosophy. But [people don't understand that] if it is not practiced in everyday life, one would not become a Buddha or Bodhisattva.

Fourthly, is enterprise Buddhism: Buddhism is managed as a business. There are even international chains of Buddhist monasteries.

Fifthly, is tourist Buddhism: Ancient temples are used for sightseeing and attracting tourists.

Finally, is cult Buddhism: They hold high the banner of Buddhism, deceive Buddhist followers, and seek personal gain. This is such a shame.

At present, there are the six above mentioned forms of Buddhism. We should clearly understand the differences so our choice can truly benefit us.

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