

Buddhadharma in Daily Life

What is Buddhadharma?

Literally, Buddhadharma is the spoken discourse of the Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha taught the Dharma for forty-nine years. The teaching of the Dharma is not intended merely for the purposes of academic research, but rather as a teaching to help us liberate ourselves from suffering and attain happiness. Buddhadharma has practical value.

The Basic Philosophy of Buddhadharma — Understanding Suffering and Liberation from Suffering

The basic philosophy of Buddhadharma is about understanding suffering and liberating oneself from suffering. Understanding suffering is understanding the reality of life; liberation from suffering is the purpose of life.

Once I asked the audience in a public talk, “Are there any couples who are married for more than ten years but have never quarreled?” A member of the legislative council raised his hand. This couple had taken refuge in the Three Jewels and treated each other as fellow-practitioners of the Path. Thus they had never quarreled.

For couples not to engage in quarrels may seem difficult, but in fact it is very easy. Just think of this: when the other party is seeking a quarrel, you already feel uncomfortable; if you answer back, it is like adding fuel to fire, making the suffering more intense. More than experiencing suffering alone, you also inflict sufferings on others. Both parties torment each other – is this necessary?

Such a rationale is easy to comprehend but difficult to achieve. When such situations arise even some Buddhists may not be able to deal with them. Some people may say, “Since he caused me so much suffering, I want to let him have a taste of it too, otherwise, there is no such thing as the law of cause and effect.”

Is this the karmic law of cause and effect? Karma permeates the past, present and future lives. The present suffering is a result of the past, experiencing suffering is equivalent to exhausting previous karmic effect. If you are not willing to accept this, and would instead avenge yourself with even more vigour by taking an eye for an eye, then the vicious cycle of vengeance will be endless. Those who truly understand the karmic law of cause and effect will be able to understand and accept suffering, and at the same time not create any causes of future suffering. Therefore couples that are vengeful and cause each other hard times not only lack compassion but also wisdom.

Path of Liberation from Suffering

1) Right View

Buddhadharma points out the reality of suffering with the objective of enabling us to liberate ourselves from suffering. How can this be done?

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhadharma - Suffering (duḥkha), Origin of Suffering (samudaya), Cessation of Suffering (nirodha) and Path to Cessation (marga) – is the path whereby mortals transform into sages. The Truth of Suffering is the philosophy of life, and the Truth of the Path to Cessation is the philosophy of cultivation. The Path to Cessation consists of eight categories and is known as the Noble Eightfold Path; Right View (samyagdr̥ṣṭi), Right Aspiration (samyaksaūkalpa), Right Speech (samyagvāc), Right Action (samyakkarmānta), Right Livelihood (samyagājāva), Right Mindfulness (samyaksmṛti), Right Concentration (samyaksamādhi) and Right Effort (samyagvyāyāma). If one accomplishes the Noble Eightfold Path, one will attain the stage of liberation.

Right View is very important as it entails understanding and believing in the karmic law of cause and effect of past, present and future lives. After having the right understanding and view, one will believe that those sufferings encountered in this life are the results of karmic actions performed in innumerable past kalpas (aeons). Very often people exclaim, “I have never harmed anyone in this life; why am I being hurt?” One needs to realize that the present karmic effect is the result of past karmic causes.

Since time without beginning, in the cyclic existence of samsara (birth and death), throughout countless lives, we have created positive and negative karmic affinities with others; positive karmic affinities reap positive results, whereas negative karmic affinities cause negative results. Therefore, karmic effect should not be seen as confined only to this lifetime. Many people, not having experienced the karmic effects of their present actions, think that the karmic law of cause and effect does not exist. In reality, one might not experience the effects of those negative actions during the same lifetime; there is no escape, however, from the karmic law of cause and effect in future lives.

2) Refrain from Unwholesome Actions, Accept Karmic Results As They Are

How can we be liberated from suffering and attain happiness? The first step is to cease creating negative causes by not performing unwholesome actions, followed by accepting karmic results as they are. One should help to liberate others despite experiencing the suffering that is one’s own karma. Even though others are causing us to suffer, we should not be agitated, but rather be empathetic and try to benefit them. This is the spirit of the Bodhisattva. If one is able to cultivate the Bodhisattva path, one can experience suffering and injustice without regarding it as unfair.

I have a lay disciple who was sold by his parents when he was three days old. At the age of fifty, after taking care of his foster parents till they passed away, he has to now shoulder the burden of caring for his biological parents. Other people felt that this

was unjust, but he simply said to me, “Shifu, I am really blessed; other people only have two parents, I have four.”

Thinking this way, his mind is calm and happy. On the other hand, were he to complain—“My biological parents aren’t human! They sold me when I was three days old, and now they want me to look after them because of old age. This is unfair!” – this would then be a great cause of suffering.

Such cases where children make more sacrifices than their parents are rare. In most cases it is the other way round. Can this be considered as fair? There is no such thing as unfair or unjust. As long as one is able to deal with circumstances in a calm manner, life will be happier.

Nowadays, everyone talks about fairness and justice in society, but is it really achievable? For example, why is it that only women can conceive? With certain issues there is no fairness. The true meaning of fairness is that people fulfill their duties and roles well.

Especially after acquiring the right understanding and view of Buddhadharmā from the perspective of cause and effect, one will realize that each individual’s situation is unique in terms of blessings, causes, conditions and wisdom. With such a view, the mind will be at peace, without vexation and seeing less enmity.

The Application of Buddhadharmā

The application of Buddhadharmā can be divided into three stages:

- Interactions in daily life
- Liberation from vexations
- Complete attainment of Buddhahood

Looking at these three stages, we should realize that our goals must be realistic. We have to start earnestly to work on our own daily lives. Regardless of which stage we are in, we should be self-reliant and not merely depend upon the blessings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Empowerment from external sources is, though not impossible, unreliable. There is a Chinese saying, “Self-help is better than help from others, and help from others is better than help from heaven.” If one has no ability, then when external support is exhausted, one will drop into the pitfall of hardship. For example, if you had no food today others might relieve you temporarily by giving you a slice of bread, but what about the next meal? Assuming they give you another slice for the next meal, what about tomorrow? Even though someone could give you a slice of bread everyday, what if he went on a trip one day or could no longer sustain himself? Many people are willing to believe in the power of an almighty God, from whom they could receive everlasting grace. However, this is merely a belief, not necessarily a reality.

We must also take note that even though Buddhadharmā teaches us the importance of self-reliance, rejecting help from others and relying solely on one's own effort is also incorrect, as one will become stubborn and unyielding. One needs guidance from others in the application of Buddhadharmā as well as faith in the blessings of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Dharma Protectors.

How Should Lay Practitioners Cultivate?

Once a lay practitioner told me, “Shifu, I really envy those Dharma brothers that do not have the burden of families. They can concentrate on their cultivation and they seem to have good accomplishment.”

His underlying message is simple: every family has its own problems, which is similar to a sutra that is too difficult to recite. It is either related to the problems with in-laws, or spouse and children. Where there is a family, there are problems. So how can we recite such a difficult sutra in an easier manner? Actually, from the vast collections of sutras, there is a sutra called “Paying Homage to the Six Directions” which teaches lay practitioners how to perform their roles and cultivate.

1) Lay Practitioners Should Know the *Paying Homage to the Six Directions Sutra*

The full name of the Paying Homage to the Six Directions Sutra is “Sujata Paying Homage to the Six Directions Sutra”. This Sutra gives directions on how to manage a family and cultivate. What is the meaning of the Six Directions? The Sutra states that parents are the east, teachers the south, spouses the west, friends and relatives the north, servants and employees the nadir, recluses, Brahmins, monks and nuns the zenith. The six directions actually cover all aspects of our social network. In the Sutra, all the duties and responsibilities that each individual needs to fulfill are outlined very clearly. How parents should fulfill their responsibilities towards their children, how children should behave towards parents, the duties to be fulfilled in relationships between students and teachers, and employers and employees are all covered by the Sutra.

As to the daily lives of married couples the Sutra outlines five points for both husband and wife. The husband should treat his wife with courtesy and respect, give her choice of food and clothing, adornment and jewelry, as well as give her authority on home duties.

Similarly, the wife should treat her husband in five ways. She should attend to his needs, perform her duties well, use gentle words, be respectful and follow the advice of the husband. Even though the Sutra may not be completely applicable in current societies due to differences in time and space, the principle of mutual respect and trust should still be valued.

The content of this sutra is very rich but is not widely known. Even though you might not have read this sutra, the three publications by Dharma Drum Mountain, “Handbook of a Buddhist Family”, “Buddhist Marriage and Family” and “How to Practice as a Lay Person” are practical guides.

2) Normal Lifestyle

A lay practitioner should have a normal lifestyle, not indulging in excessive food consumption, prostitution, gambling, alcohol or drug abuse.

3) Association with Wholesome Companions

If one associates with friends who only drink and eat, it will be difficult to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Confucianism advocates friends who are righteous, understanding and knowledgeable. We should associate with friends that have righteous personalities, so that we do not worry about their scheming against us. Friends who are understanding are accommodating and forgiving. Learned friends possess extensive and in-depth knowledge.

In Buddhism there is a term called “wholesome companion”. Shakyamuni Buddha encourages us to associate with wholesome companions and disassociate with unwholesome companions. This is similar to what Confucius says, “Associate with gentlemen and keep away from villains”. How do we identify wholesome companions? Friends that benefit us in a positive way and those who are critical about our deeds are wholesome companions. As for ourselves, we might not possess all the qualities of a wholesome companion yet, but we should strive to be one.

4) Fulfill Responsibilities Rather Than Demanding Rights

Often people complain about one another - about the fidelity of wives, the honesty of husbands, the consideration of mother in laws, the respectfulness of daughters-in-law and the filial piety of children - but in reality who is at fault? I think those who complain are at fault. Actually if we treat every member of the family as a bodhisattva and try our best to fulfill our responsibilities towards them, at least we have a clear conscience and have no need to complain.

Family disputes and crises usually arise as a result of the mental attitude of the person involved. He either treats the family members as enemies or manages them as properties.

A pair of lovers once visited me and said, “Shifu, we are getting married”. I said, “Congratulations!” They said, “If we quarrel in future, we will need Shifu to be the judge”. I said, “Please do not look for trouble, you’re not married yet and already you’re preparing for quarrels”. Upon hearing what I said, the man said to the woman, “Did you hear that? In the future you have to listen to me, do not quarrel with me”. On the other hand the woman replied, “No! You must listen to me, do not argue with me. This way,

we do not have to bother Shifu!” In actual fact, they had started quarrelling even before they were married.

This is the human world and it is very difficult for couples not to have quarrels. The “Paying Homage to the Six Directions Sutra” and the three books mentioned earlier tell us how to fulfill our duties and obligations as parents and children. If everyone can perform their respective roles properly by fulfilling their responsibilities, there will be fewer complaints against one another.

5) Compassion Has No Enemy, Wisdom Does Not Create Vexation

There are two Dharma Drum Mountain lay practitioners who were laid off because their company was not doing well. I asked one of them “What happened to your job?” He replied calmly, “Shifu, please don’t worry.” Actually I was concerned but not worried. If it had been another person, he would probably have been complaining.

The mishap of the second person appeared unjust to many. Several months prior to his being laid off, his employer demanded that he work overtime relentlessly. Since he was the head of the department, he was not paid for all the overtime work. Everyone thought he was about to be promoted, but instead he was let go after all the work was completed. Usually when faced with such a situation, people are furious and fuming with anger. He, however, was not angry at all because he felt that this was a good learning and growing experience. On the other hand, there were many people who voiced their objections, claiming that the boss was unreasonable.

After a few months, I asked him, “Have you found a job yet?” He replied, “Yes, Shifu, I’ve found a job.” I said, “You were able to find a job so quickly because you were not devastated by the incident.”

When faced with situations like these, simply being angry does not solve the problem, therefore there is no need to be angry. Instead one should accept the situation, face it with courage and try to improve it. This is a good example of applying Buddhadharma in our daily lives.

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