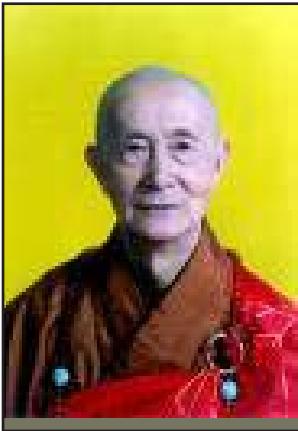


T R A N S L A T I O N S
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Nirvana

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Original translation from
Three Essentials of Buddhist Practice
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The concept of nirvana is rarely described in print. But here Master Yin Shun, one of the great dharma masters of the 20th century, shows us how important it is to understand nirvana in the context of our practice.



The root of our vexation comes from our egoism (ignorance about no-self).

Nirvana is the most profound and most difficult concept in the Buddhadharma.

“Nirvana” is a word in Sanskrit meaning negation and dissipation. The ancient Chinese translation of “extinction” or “extinction and ferrying” indicates that something has been dissipated, eliminated but transcended as well. It also includes the meaning of blissfulness --freedom, peace and comfort. This kind of blissfulness is certainly different from happiness in general. Venerable Xuan-Zhuang of the Tang Dynasty translated it as “perfect extinction”. “Perfect” refers to the attainment of all meritorious virtues and “extinction” refers to the dissipation of all evil elements, which in turn leads to the ideal realm of equality, freedom and peaceful joy.

The basic conviction in Buddhism is that all conscious sentient beings live and die; from time immemorial death follows birth and birth follows death. This goes on continuously without end, just like the sun rising from the east and setting in the west day after day. This continuous cycle of life and death creates an issue for us. Shouldn’t we strive for permanent peace? If death brought an end to suffering, it would be all right; but this is not the case. After the death of this life, rebirth ensues and we suffer life after life continuously without end. This is a big issue indeed.

A yearning arises in this process of continuous death and rebirth. We yearn for permanent freedom and peace.

Buddhism pays great attention to this issue. What is the Buddhist resolution? We start with acknowledging life to be full of suffering and then move to an understanding of its cause and practices to cause its cessation. The essence of life is filled with painful fac-

tors of impermanence. This is why the process of continuous life and rebirth is filled with pain and joy, tears and laughter. This thing called "self"—the blending of body and mind in the continuing cycle of death and rebirth—is the cause of vexation. Buddhism goes on to consider concepts such as the love for the "self" and egoism to be the root cause of vexations in the cycle of death and rebirth.

In short, the self is nothing but the integrated activity of the body and mind. The conception and birth of a life is only the starting point of the integrated activity of a body and mind. At death, the old blending of body and mind disintegrates and a new blending of body and mind with new integrated activity ensues. The continuous death and rebirth of each life is the integrated activity of each body and mind.

From cradle to grave, sentient beings have spoken and done innumerable things. All those spoken words and physical activities are motivated by the good or evil thoughts of the mind, leaving behind evil or good energy called karma. Karma stays firmly in our body and mind, deeply affecting and controlling us.

Since the results of death and rebirth come from karma, people might think that by eradicating karma, freedom from death and rebirth will be attained. However, the influence of karma may only be reduced but not eliminated, nor is it necessary to do so. The Buddha said, "Karma comes from ignorance." If we can remove our ignorance, we will be free from the cycle of death and rebirth. What is ignorance? Ignorance is another name for vexation—impure and incorrect elements in our minds.

The root of our vexation comes from our egoism (ignorance about no-self). Most of us do good or bad deeds to benefit ourselves; this is why vexations come from doing good deeds as well as bad deeds. When activities, good or bad, are motivated by our ego, there are vexations. "I" is the root cause for the cycle of death and rebirth.

As we get old and die, the blending of our body and mind is disassembled. But because of the desire of the ego (self-view and self-love), it triggers the good and bad karmas to form a new blending of mind and body, a new individual. Birth

and death and rebirth—this cycle goes on forever. Without this converging force of egoism, we would be liberated from this phenomenon of endless transmigration, we would reach nirvana.

Thus, death and rebirth are determined by karma; karma is determined by vexations; and the root cause of vexation comes from egoism. The issue of death and rebirth will never be resolved until egoism is eradicated.

Liberating ourselves from the cycle of death and rebirth will enable us to attain nirvana, a state of non-death. This is the characteristic of nirvana. Buddhist practitioners who practice meditation and cultivate wisdom may gradually eliminate all vexations to reach the state of non-birth and non-death in this life. This is called nirvana.

Today's Buddhist followers seldom aim at attaining nirvana in this present life. But the original intention of Buddhism was always to place importance on the attainment of nirvana in this present life.



If we can achieve the state of non-self, vexations will be eradicated, nirvana will be attained, karma will not arise and the chain in the cycle of death and rebirth will be broken. We must understand that while karma cause does bring about resulting effect, it still requires the supplementary conditions of vexations. If we terminate the supplementary condition of vexation, our karma will lack the energy to bear any fruit. Hence, the cessation of karma does not mean that there is no more karma, but that karma has come to pass, leaving no more retribution. Once vexation is terminated, the seed of karma will wither, also terminating cause and effect in the cycle of death and rebirth forever.

To answer the questions raised by his disciples who wanted a description of nirvana, the Buddha gave them a parable. Holding a burning torch in his hand, he waved it. The fire was extinguished. The Buddha then asked, "Where did the fire go?" It was impossible to describe the fire or to tell its whereabouts. The cessation of life and death and the realization of nirvana are just like the fire.

In short, the self is nothing but the integrated activity of the body and mind.



The original intention of Buddhism was to place importance on the attainment of nirvana in this present life.

We may say that somebody has entered the state of nirvana; but we may not say that he is still an individual entity. We may say that the waters from the Yellow and Yangzi Rivers flow into the sea; but we may not expect to separate the water of Yellow River from the water of Yangzi River once they have blended in the sea. In nirvana, all things are integrated into one absolute equanimity. The scripture says, “the extinguished is immeasurable.” Nirvana (extinction) cannot be measured in amount, number, time, weight, space, etc. In the sea of equanimity nothing is distinguishable.

Once entering nirvana, where one came from and where one has gone are no longer traceable. This means that the person is nowhere and everywhere. This is why it is so difficult to comprehend the state of nirvana, for we must not try to comprehend it through “I” or any concept related to “I.” If we cannot shake off “I,” we will never grasp nirvana. After attaining nirvana, the body and mind are vanished and extinguished. The meanings of vanish, extinguish and tranquil are similar.

In nirvana, there is no difference between you and “I.” After entering nirvana, eternity is indeed eternity because everything is perfect and so does not increase, decrease or change.

After the attainment of enlightenment, pure meritorious virtues will arise. The impure mind, though suppressed, still possesses the potential to flare up periodically. The battle to overcome impurities and vexations continues until we have eradicated all the impure seeds in us. Only then will we achieve pure liberation, which is also the attainment of ultimate nirvana.

As we transform our impure mind into pure mind, not only will we eliminate all impurities, we will also achieve immeasurable meritorious virtues of purity and boundless supreme power. Nirvana, according to Mahayana Buddhism, is therefore neither empty nor useless.

CONCLUSIONS

What we consider to be the great problem of life and death results from our attachment to the self.

In order to end the cycle of life and death, we must let go of self. Only then will we attain the ultimate nirvana.

The difference between saints and the rest of us lies in the concept of self and non-self. Saints have discarded the self, the rest of us have not.

Once we enter nirvana, everything is eternal, peaceful, free and pure; there is no restraint, no conflict, no persecution, no suffering as all these arise from our attachment to our self.

In nirvana, suffering is gone. There is only tranquility and equality.

Nirvana is beyond explanation and imagination.

Only through the profound wisdom of no-self and the practice of the Buddhadharma can we attain enlightenment and realize eternal equality and liberation.

Master Yin Shun Brief Biography

Venerable Yin Shun (1904-2005) is considered the greatest Chinese Buddhist intellectual of the 20th century. As a student of Master Tai Xu, the reformer monk of the 1930s who shifted Chinese Buddhism from an insular monastic practice to a worldwide and worldly humanistic practice, he adopted and disseminated the new Chinese humanistic Buddhism. Briefly, humanistic Buddhism promotes the integration of people's spiritual practice into all aspects of their daily lives.

Buddhist monastics such as Venerable Masters Sheng Yen and Hsing Yun were deeply influenced by Master Yin Shun's teachings. As part of the reform, humanistic Buddhism developed a less sectarian view of Buddhist practice and included all of the Buddha's teachings from the time of Gautama Buddha to the present, though shying away from secret and esoteric practices which seemed to fall outside the realm of an equanimous practice. The goal of humanistic Buddhism is the bodhisattva way, which means to be an energetic, enlightened, and endearing person who strives to help all sentient beings reach liberation.

Unfortunately, the great difficulty in translating Yinshun Fashi's writings has made him all but unknown outside of the Chinese speaking Buddhist community, even though he wrote more than 50 books. Part of problem is the spherical nature of his writing style, part of the problem is that he wrote in classical Buddhist Chinese and modern Chinese simultaneously, and part of the problem is that the depth of Buddhist practice needed to understand his writings and translate them seems to eliminate all but Buddhist scholar-monks from this task.

Venerable Yin Shun's only book in translation is The Way To Buddhahood; it is considered a masterpiece of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism.

