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Everyone can be a Buddha

Several groups of practitioners from China, the USA, and Taiwan are here to visit us. Although they have not been here long, only a week or two, they have seen our conditions for learning and practice. Not everything has been satisfactory, for doing everything perfectly is very difficult.

During the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, there were numerous diverse religious groups as well as differences of opinions within the Sangha itself; hence, their Buddhist community was also imperfect. The Buddha said it was actually all a great performance, that they were all manifestations of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Some played negative roles, like Devadatta, while others played positive roles; but those who are unawakened do not realize this. From this example, we can see how Buddhas guide sentient beings with both positive and negative examples.

The Buddha taught in this way, as did the saints from various religions. As Confucius often said: "In every group of three people, there is teacher we can learn from." When we include ourselves in a group of three, there would be one person who is more virtuous and one who is less virtuous. We emulate the former and observe the latter to see if we have the same faults. If so, we quickly correct them. In this way, we learn from both examples.

The same applies to situations, whether they are good or bad, both can help us to learn. Likewise, we make use of favorable or unfavorable conditions and relationships with others to help us achieve attainment in our practice of virtue. Confucius said that a benevolent person has no enemies. This is even truer in Buddhism.

We are listening to people from various religions. For example, last night at the Singapore Buddhist Lodge, we attended the lecture given by a Sikh Elder, Mr. Harbans Singh. Are there any real differences between the Sikh or other religious teachings and the educational teachings of Confucius or Buddha Shakyamuni? Problems exist today because we do not listen to one another - we envy one another, we surmise and jump to the wrong conclusions. These lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and even wars among ethnic and religious groups. What were the causes? People did not communicate. If we frequently visit one another and exchanges ideas, there will be mutual understanding. (As Mr. Singh elaborated on Sikh beliefs, we also explained that we view Buddhism as an education rather than a religion.) If everyone communicated like this, our problems would cease.

Last night, practitioners asked Mr. Singh some very good questions. One person asked what was a Sikh's highest goal in cultivation. Mr. Singh wisely replied that the highest goal is to become one with God. Buddhists do

not speak of God but of perfect enlightenment, to become one with one's mind and True Nature. What Buddhist practitioners call mind and True Nature, religious followers call God. The words are different, but the meaning is the same.

Mr. Singh explained that God created everything. Buddhism does not mention God in this context. Rather, we believe, as explained in the *Flower Adornment Sutra*: "Everything arises from the mind and changes according to our perceptions." We speak in terms of mind and consciousness; others speak about God. When others ask us the ultimate goal of our practice, we explain that it is to become Buddhas, for our bodies and minds to combine with all sentient beings throughout the universe to become one entity. We are all speaking of the same thing.

Religions say that the saints from all religions, who we call the founders of religions, are messengers or embodiments of God. This is correct. The God they speak of is what we call the True Nature. We want to be logical, mindful, and free of prejudices in our communication with all religious groups.

We know that all sentient beings in the universe share a common life entity that Buddhists call the Dharma-body: "All Buddhas from all space and time share one Dharma-body." Thus, among religions, there are no contradictions or conflicts but peaceful coexistence and equality. When our minds reach the equal and non-discriminatory state, we become Buddhas and we no longer have wandering discriminatory thoughts or attachments. When such thoughts and attachments are present, the mind is not in the state of equality.

To explain further, all the saints in this world and beyond are manifestations of God. But what about us mortal beings? We are also embodiments of God! To use religious terms, everything created by God is his manifestation. In Buddhist terms, everything in the universe is the manifestation of the Dharma-body, which is the mind and consciousness. Nothing exists outside the mind-consciousness.

With a profound understanding of this principle, we reach the state of seeing our True Nature, which also means having no obstruction in understanding all phenomena of the universe. We then reach the state of not encountering any hindrances at all, as auspicious peace and harmony pervade the universe.

Originally, human beings of all diverse nationalities, races, and religions, and other sentient beings coexisted peacefully, for all are part of the same family; like parents, children and siblings who have respect and non-discriminatory unconditional love for one another. To love all beings is to love ourselves. Thus, in Buddhism it is said: "Unconditional compassion for all others, as we are all one entity." Who really understands this truth? Buddha Shakyamuni understood, Dharma-body Bodhisattvas understood, and as we learn about the founders of religions, these saints understood.

In Buddhism, we learn ten guiding principles for relating to others and circumstances. These are the Four All-embracing Methods and the Six Paramitas. How do husbands and wives get along? By practicing the Four All-embracing Methods and the Six Paramitas. In this way, spouses and families would live together harmoniously, society and nations would be stable and prosperous, and the world would be peaceful. Why are we unable to practice the Four All-embracing Methods and the Six Paramitas? Because, we lack the right

learning and cultivation. We cannot blame ourselves for we did not receive such an education.

In the past, Confucius, Buddha Shakyamuni, great sages, and virtuous people dedicated their lives to teaching people and enabling them to understand the true reality of life and the universe. The Four All-embracing Methods and the Six Paramitas are actually virtuous qualities of our True Nature, what the True Nature is supposed to be; they are natural qualities and not the opinions of Buddha Shakyamuni. We are at fault if we cannot practice these principles with understanding, for we are going against the True Nature.

We have lost touch with our consciences, the intuitive ability to know right from wrong. We originally had this ability in our True Nature. Thus, by nature we are the same as Buddhas. In religious terms, we are the same as God. However, we are now different because we have lost our True Nature.

Why do we have so many adversaries and where do they come from? They come from misunderstandings. Once we thoroughly understand the true reality, we will no longer have adversaries for they cannot exist when the mind returns to its originally sincere, pure, non-differentiating, awakened and compassionate state.

Even if someone physically hurt us, like King Kali's dismemberment of the Buddha in one of his former lifetimes, would we as enlightened or awakened people harbor any hatred? No! An awakened, understanding person would know that the other party had misunderstood and would therefore be very caring. Ill intentions and bad behavior arise from a lack of understanding.

Both the ancient Chinese and the saints taught us to have "open communication." In managing the country, a government that understands and governs well will be supported by the people. How can a family be united? By having open and honest communication, and by not hiding anything, a family is assured of prospering. So, we need to understand this major principle of open communication.

Misunderstanding results from a lack of interaction and communication. Discord between spouses is also the result of the lack of communication and of having secrets. Wives and husbands lie to one another and eventually the family is torn apart. A family in which the siblings are suspicious, envious, and distrustful of each other will decline.

Last night, Mr. Singh told us two stories about honesty. In one story, a thief was asked who he was. He honestly replied: "I'm a thief." The guard did not believe a real thief would say this and allowed him to enter the palace. The thief gathered many valuable items, but before he left, he remembered that a saint had told him that it was wrong to steal. He realized what he was doing was wrong, put down the belongings and left empty handed.

Buddhism and Confucianism both speak of sincerity. We read in Confucianism of the sincere and honest mind. We read in Buddhism that sincerity means the true mind. The essential nature of the Bodhi mind is utmost sincerity. What is the true mind? It is the presence of sincerity and the absence of deceit. It is to be honest even after making a mistake. This is how we will reach enlightenment and become Buddhas. However, we will not accomplish our goals if not only do we not admit our mistakes but even try to conceal the truth.

Even with good cultivation, we will remain mired in reincarnation that we alone have created. With utmost sincerity, reincarnation will disappear; with an illusory mind, reincarnation will manifest. We learn from the sutras that reincarnation is an illusory realm formed by wandering discriminatory thoughts and attachments. We have failed to transcend this illusory state in countless lifetimes throughout infinite eons because we have not severed our wandering discriminatory thoughts and attachments.

Fortunately today, we have encountered Buddhism and the teachings of saints from many religions. After carefully absorbing what we have heard, our problem lies in whether we can practice the teachings. By following them, we would transcend to a higher level in this lifetime or as we have learned from many religions, we would become a saint, not to become God, but to become one with God, to possess the virtues and conduct of saints.

Consider our chaotic and unstable world. Yesterday, I had lunch with Mr. Huang, the director of the London Buddhist Library, and his wife before they left Singapore. He told me that London has become extremely unsafe. Children kill their parents, and students kill their teachers and classmates. Similar worrisome occurrences are taking place in the United States as well. There are frequent strikes in the transportation and communication industries disrupting people's lives. Moral concepts are in a steep decline in western societies and there is an urgent need for the education of morality and ethics.

Mr. Huang has edited a series of textbooks that are used in government-run schools. He will send a copy of the textbooks to us. This first series is for elementary schools. He wants to continue with another series for secondary schools and a third one for universities. Moral education is urgently needed. The British government and the Prince of Wales welcomed the introduction of these textbooks and actively support this project.

When I asked him if there was an inter-faith organization in Europe, he replied that they have one that is similar to the Singapore Inter-Religious Organization. I asked if it was possible to communicate with them in the hope that these organizations might begin a dialogue. We could invite them to visit Singapore or the nine major religious groups in Singapore could visit them. The purpose of the lunch with Mr. Huang yesterday was primarily to discuss this idea.

It is hoped that all the religious leaders can communicate and meet often to find ways to save this world from disasters, eliminate racial prejudices and conflicts, and abolish religious misunderstanding and wars. This is the way to nurture a stable and prosperous society, and to bring true peace to the world. This work is urgently needed now.

Somebody asked, since there is only one God, why are there so many religions? Many others have also asked this very good question. We can better understand this by looking at history and geography. Modern technology has advanced greatly from its inception approximately one hundred years ago when aviation did not even exist. It took a few months for people to travel by steamship from China to America and more than twenty days from Shanghai to Singapore.

Two hundred years ago, it took three or four months to sail from China to America and without favorable winds the trip could last six months. Because transportation and communication were inconvenient and slow, people had limited contact with one another. The ancient Chinese said that if someone visited the provincial capital, they were considered to have seen the world. That was because people were completely isolated from one another throughout their entire lives and most never even left their town. Written communication primarily relied on asking friends or relatives to pass on a letter until it reached its recipient. This whole process could easily take weeks.

Before the Chinese War of Resistance against the Japanese invasion, I lived in Anhui, China and my father worked in Fujian Province. We had mail delivery, but it usually took two and sometimes even three weeks for a letter to be delivered. An improvement over times past, but it was still very slow. In the same amount of time, God can manifest in many forms to teach different races. I believe that this adaptation among various races with different cultures and historical backgrounds resulted in different religions.

Likewise, Buddha Shakyamuni taught sentient beings according to individual needs and circumstances. Buddhas do not have a fixed way of teaching and neither does God. They match their teaching to the being's needs.

We read of the thirty-two manifestations of Great Compassion Bodhisattva in the "Universal Door Chapter" from the *Lotus Sutra*. To those who can be liberated through the manifestation of a Buddha, they will appear and teach as a Buddha. Similarly, to those who can be liberated as Christians, they will appear and teach as Jesus. And for those who can be liberated as Sikhs, they will appear and teach as a Sikh. The form he or she appears in will be the same as that of the group.

During our last visit to Malaysia, we visited a Burmese temple and saw twenty-some statues of Buddha Shakyamuni. Each had different features. The first statue we saw had Indian features. The features of the second Buddha were Nepalese. We also saw statues with Chinese, Japanese, and Korean features. This illustrates that wherever Buddha Shakyamuni manifested, he assumed the same features as the local people and adapted to local conditions, so they would feel comfortable with him. Thus, he had no fixed form.

The teaching given to any particular group must be adapted to their capacity while according with the true reality. In religion, the true reality at its highest level is to be one with God. We are now witnessing this as we listen to lecturers from the different religions. The truths and principles are the same; just the words and presentations are different.

Beginners and those with lower abilities and understanding are taught how to change from bad to good. Those with higher abilities and understanding are taught how to change from being deluded to becoming awakened. The ultimate goal is to help all beings change from being ordinary beings to becoming sages. These three main guiding principles in Buddhism are present in all religions.

Previously, people were not aware of this because they did not associate with one another. In their conceit and

arrogance, each thought that their religion was the best and that all other teachings were improper and inferior. Now that we are communicating, we realize that all are equal. All is one, not two. Hence, we not only come together, we are like sisters and brothers who have a shared mission.

We cannot continue to think only in terms of a small geographical area. In the past, religious teachers would spend their entire lives within this narrow scope, but no longer. Today, we must think globally. If we think only in terms of my district, my religion or my group, we will not survive. Such narrow-minded and selfish thinking leads to misunderstandings, conflicts, wars, and ultimately a Third World War - nuclear war. Our world would be destroyed.

We have to expand our thinking. In our lectures, we have encouraged practitioners to care about our world. Is this enough? No! Now we hear of the possibility of interplanetary wars. We need to expand our hearts and minds further, to think not only of our planet Earth but also of the infinite planets throughout the universe. Mahayana Buddhism teaches us that our minds can encompass the universe. Only in this way, can our problems be truly solved. If practitioners cannot think this altruistically and do not have this mind capacity, how can we become Buddhas? This mind capacity is the Bodhi mind, the true mind. Originally, our minds were this all-encompassing.

Where do all the sentient beings in the universe come from? They manifest from our True Nature. Thus, it is said in Buddhism: "Nothing exists outside the mind. The mind is not excluded from anything." Once our capacity of mind is extended, higher spiritual realms will materialize, and all resentment and hatred will dissolve.

Some practitioners have asked me how to cultivate the Paramita of Patience. Upon reaching this higher spiritual state in practice, the Paramita of Patience is non-existent because there is no attachment to the form of patience. With the severing of wandering discriminatory thoughts and attachments, all greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, right and wrong are non-existent. In this state, we reach the realm of inconceivable liberation described in the *Flower Adornment Sutra*, that of absolute ultimate liberation. It is the highest enjoyment in life. It is the life and enjoyment of a Dharma-body Bodhisattva. What is Dharma-body? It is the state in which we unite our bodies and minds with those of all the beings throughout the universe. In that state, we are the Dharma-body for we change from ordinary beings into sages and our every thought will no longer be just of this earth but of all sentient beings in the universe.

The Buddha taught us in the *Infinite Life Sutra* to "dwell in the wisdom of true reality." Only when we attain the aforementioned state will we dwell in true wisdom. In this state, our benefit is "to receive the teaching and uncover the true reality."

This is also the ultimate enjoyment in human life that Mr. Dong-Mei Fang, a Professor of philosophy, spoke of. Benefiting others is to "bring all sentient beings true benefits." In other words, lovingkindness that is the sincere, non-discriminatory, unselfish great caring for all sentient beings. All sentient beings include plants, animals, as well as inanimate objects, and can be expanded to include all natural phenomena. This happens because everything arises from the gathering of affinities and conditions.

The term “sentient being” has vast meanings. With sincere, pure, non-discriminatory, and compassionate love, we give true benefits to all. We learn that the *Infinite Life Sutra* is a good sutra, hard to encounter in infinite eons. It tells us of the “three truths.” If we can carefully study and contemplate its essence and principles, and compare these with the philosophies and conduct of the saints and sages, we will realize that such philosophies and conduct are the same as the teachings in the *Infinite Life Sutra*. Although the words and practice may differ, careful observation shows that the principles are the same. This is why in Buddhism; we say that the saints of all religions are manifestations of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Once we realize this, it will become easy for us to accomplish the highest level of Mahayana Buddhist practice. The first of the Ten Great Vows of Universal Worthy Bodhisattva is “To equally respect all beings and things.” We respect all sentient beings the same way we respect the Buddhas.

Last night, Mr. Singh said that whenever they visit any other religious place or group, including Buddhists, they show their respect. When we walk into their temples, are we to do likewise? Certainly. I have visited Sikh temples and paid my respects as they do, by prostrating. Their followers respected me for doing so. Why? When I respect them, they in turn will respect me. It is illogical to expect otherwise.

Christians call Jesus the “messenger of God.” We respect their Bible. Some of them may call us disbelievers only because they do not know or understand us. As we communicate and they read about Buddhism, they will understand us better. How can we help them? First, we need to respect them and take the initiative. This is why every Sunday our Singapore Buddhist Lodge invites representatives from religious groups to teach us about their beliefs.

Their response to our taking the initiative has been very good. In less than a year, a Hindu group has invited us to lecture. Islamic organizations have not only invited us to lecture but have held a forum with us. Our contacts with the Catholics are even more frequent and our venerables have given lectures for them. They have now invited me to lecture on the Rosary. I will not lecture on Buddhist sutras but on their sacred texts. The Rosary is a prayer; a requirement for them like our morning and evening ceremonies are for us. I have accepted their invitation to lecture on the Rosary.

Gradually we will meet with every religion. First, we extend an invitation to them and in return, they invite us. Our sole hope is that every religion will open its church, mosque, and temple doors and welcome all the other religions to give teachings. This is an inevitable evolution of the twenty-first century. Our world is no longer comprised of small self-contained societies or locally restricted areas. Keeping to ourselves is wrong and is no longer an option.

The Buddha explained in the *Lotus Sutra*, that in the Dharma Ending Age we would need to propagate Mahayana Buddhism. He knew that in our time, society would be democratic and liberal. While Theravada Buddhism is more conservative and was suitable for earlier times, Mahayana Buddhism is better suited to our times.

In this progressively liberal age, even some countries that have had a monarchistic form of government are turning to democratic constitutional governments. This is their only option in the face of modern political and social changes. This trend goes well with the propagation of Mahayana Buddhism. We wish to introduce its principles and practice to every religion in the world. I sincerely respect their sacred texts as I respect Mahayana sutras.

Judaism upholds the Old Testament. Christianity upholds the New Testament. Catholicism regards the Old and the New Testaments as equally important. These three religions share a very close relationship. In their worship of one God, a few differences abound. In Judaism, God is worshipped as supreme to Mother Mary and Jesus. In Catholicism, Mother Mary and Jesus are equally supreme as are God and Jesus in Christianity. The three religions differ primarily in this aspect. Thus, this is like one family being divided into three parts. These three primary religions are like brothers with the other religions and Buddhism branching out from them like cousins and the whole being one big family.

Buddhism does not talk of brothers or cousins but of one common life entity. As the Buddha said: "All sentient beings by nature can become Buddhas." Buddhism provides us with a perfect and complete explanation. It does not discriminate, but says that no one is inferior to another and that it regards all equally. It is stated in the *Infinite Life Sutra*: "All will become Buddhas." We need to work especially hard to seek the profound meanings within these two phrases and achieve the state of mind of a Buddha. Only in this way, can we truly become one entity with all Buddhas throughout all space and time.

Web link to the article: http://www.amtb.cn/e-bud/everyone_canbuddha.html

Boston Amita Buddhism Society new website: <http://www.amtb-ma.org/>

Group Buddha Recitation Every Saturday and Sunday

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