

The Implications of the Buddha's Metaphysics For Social Well-being

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ABSTRACT

This article begins with looking at and addressing the main themes and principles of the Buddha's teachings in terms of ontology and cosmology in Western metaphysics. It is found that the Buddha always taught metaphysical principles in entirety through comprehensive approach and vision instead of viewing ontology and cosmology as separate entities. For Buddhism various metaphysical themes are connected closely as different aspects of one issue of human life or in regard to the world.

Some major topics in metaphysical discussions and teachings of the Buddha: impermanence, suffering, emptiness, selflessness and dependent origination, are visited. The formation of the twelve-chain cycle of birth and death as well as the ideal pure land in the Buddha's teachings is also interpreted. The relationship of these ideas to and the implications of Buddhist metaphysics for social wellbeing are unveiled.

Did the Buddha Teach About Metaphysics?

Did the Buddha teach or talk about metaphysics? The answer is definitely positive. Some scholars assert that the Buddha ignored or avoided and sidetracked metaphysical issues. This misunderstanding came from the story told in the *Sutra of the Arrow Simile* in which the Buddha was requested by an arrogant monk to answer his questions: Whether the world has a limit or not? Whether the world is permanent or not? Is life the same as or different from one's physical body? Do the Buddhas actually pass away or never pass away? This arrogant monk threatened that if the Buddha could not answer these questions and satisfy his curiosity he would not follow the Buddha as his disciple any longer. The Buddha thus gave a simile in order to correct this monk's thinking: when one was shot by an arrow, which action should be taken first? Will the injured keep asking these questions such as who made the arrow, from what materials the arrow was made, what size and color the arrow are, and insist he would not receive any treatment until he has gotten all these questions answered, or, will he just keep silent and be sent immediately to a doctor for treatment even without getting to know any of these matters?

The Buddha regarded the questions irrelevant to one's liberation not worth studying and wasting time. But this does not imply that there are no other metaphysical issues that are important. The truth is that when we talk about the basic and crucial principles of the world and human life which were discovered by the Buddha, they all fall in the category of metaphysics. These principles of the truth about the world and human life are vital and indispensable for self-cultivation and liberation just because they are the key to opening the mysteries of life and relieving human suffering. One's correct and complete understanding of these metaphysical principles paves the way for one to endeavor toward enlightenment and tranquility.

The Buddha himself before attaining complete enlightenment had dedicated himself to exploring these metaphysical issues for many years. What he grasped and discovered when he was fully enlightened were all fundamentally metaphysical principles regarding the world, the universe, and the nature of all beings and human life.

Metaphysical investigation is a process of analyzing and exploring any issue to the ultimate reality, or the first principle. This is a definition made from a broad point of view. From a technical and more specific point of view, metaphysics mainly covers two major areas in the family of philosophy: ontology and cosmology. Ontology indicates a study on the nature of reality, either of the universe and the world, or of the beings in the world. Cosmology indicates a study on basic rules or principles governing the formation, change and transformation of the universe, the world, and the beings in it. The issues usually covered in this study are the structure of the universe and the world, the process of change, and major dynamic mechanics in regard to the basic factors of the universe and its change. Metaphysics in Western philosophy is also called the first principle or first philosophy that, as some have said, always shines like the brightest pearl on the top of the crown of philosophy. Metaphysics brings people a feeling of mystery because the first principle is not easily understandable. It seems beyond people's imagination and common sense, but to those who have already been enlightened, the first principle is nothing more than common sense, which is so natural and clear, and is not alien at all.

At the moment the Buddha attained complete enlightenment, his simultaneous understanding of the first principles along with the secondary and lower levels of principles and their applications suddenly became so complete and clear to him. In his vision everything is so clearly visible and understandable. This kind of enlightening phenomenon is recorded in the *Sutra of Flower Ornament* as "Sea Images in *Samadhi*." (海印三昧) This is the highest of all, the Buddha's level in experiencing the gorgeous beauty of universes and their various beings when attaining the perfect and complete enlightenment. The Buddha summarized what he grasped and discovered in simple but comprehensive statements: the Four Noble Truths, the Four Criteria for Verifying the Truth, the Law of Cause and Effect, the Law of Dependent Origination, the Law of Causes and Conditions, and the Twelve Life Chain of Birth and Death. He also determined that these principles or laws would be applied in guiding and teaching all the sentient beings who are in pursuit of enlightenment.

To classify metaphysical study into the two areas of ontology and cosmology is good for making philosophical explanation and understanding easier. But it will be a mistake if one insists on saying that metaphysics should be always addressed in these two categories. No matter whether we classify it into two or three if some one else, for instance ethics, is added, the issues of the world and human life will remain in one body. That is, we cannot view them as separated parts belonging to separate entities. This categorizing can be attempted for the purpose of looking at human existence as a single body, though from three different angles. They all tell something about ourselves, the life we live, and the world in which we live.

The Buddha taught very often about these important metaphysical topics in many different places. But he always talked about them as they are parts of one body instead of separate categories. Let us look at this passage which is repeated in several

different places in *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經):

We must look at material things as impermanent. If we view them so we then hold a correct view. We must also view our feelings, perceptions, actions and consciousness as impermanent, because such a point of view is correct. Based on correct views, we can attain detachment, and thus our greedy attachment will be shed. Once greedy attachment is shed, a joy of relief will be achieved. The same result will be produced when we view our feelings, perceptions, actions and consciousness as suffering, emptiness, and selflessness.

Correctly viewing the nature of material things as impermanent will liberate us from attachment and suffering. This is also true when we look at the psychological and cognitive aspects of human life and view them as impermanent, according to the Buddha. The Buddha focused on impermanence, suffering, emptiness and selflessness when he taught the great ideas about human life. The discussion of impermanence falls in both fields of cosmology and ontology. Suffering is a feature of human life, and the discussion of it is in the field of ethics. Emptiness is the nature of all existent beings and also signifies the nature of human life, and thus falls in both fields of ontology and ethics. The discussion of selflessness is in the field of ontology as well as in epistemology, psychology, and consciousness.

Main Themes in Buddha's Metaphysics

Impermanence, suffering, emptiness and selflessness are the main themes the Buddha taught in regard to the phenomena of the world and human life, as it was recorded in *Samyutagama* (*Samyutta-nikaya*, 雜阿含經). These are the main topics that the Buddha had observed and conceptualized, and used as major teaching materials for his disciples and other audiences about the fundamental features of the existent situations relating to various sentient beings. The pivotal role played by these topics sometimes appear to be a variation of the Four-Mindfulness (四念處): viewing body as impure, viewing all feelings as panic, viewing the mind as impermanent, and viewing all beings as being without realities.

1. Impermanence

When Nagarjuna interpreted the concept of "ultimate emptiness (atyanta-sunyata, 畢竟空)," he said that the interior is empty (adhyatma-sunyata, 內空),² the external is empty (bahirdha-sunyata, 外空),³ both the interior and the external are empty (adhyatma-bahirdha-sunyata, 內外空),⁴ the vast space of the ten directions is empty (maha-sunyata, 大空), and the superior meaning is empty (paramartha-sunyata, 第一義空),⁵ then you cannot say there is any other thing that is real, even the law of dependent origination is not real.⁶ This signifies that all existent beings are not real, and impermanence is the first key term for people to understand in order to enter the gate of emptiness.

According to the Buddha, all physical things and mental activities, including our senses and perceptions, languages, conceptualized ideas, feelings, and consciousness are all impermanent. We must hold a correct view of all of these things in order to relieve ourselves from all kinds of bondages caused by incorrect perception, viewing and understanding.

The Buddha once used Ganges' water flow as a simile to explain this. He also described that all the existential beings are just like small water bubbles within a heavy rain, moving up and down. He again stated that all beings are like the mirage in a sunny noon when the sky is clear without cloud, and no rain, at the end of spring or the beginning of summer time, in an atmosphere everything appears so unreal. The Buddha said, "We shall look at physical things as they are the gathering of tiny bubbles, look at our feelings as the bubbles on water surface, our thinking as mirage in spring time, all beings as plantains, and consciousness as an illusion."⁷ If we can be wise enough in looking at the world, the truth then will be unconcealed to us. The truth is "the physical beings are impermanent, one's feeling, perception, conceptual thinking, willing and motivation of actions, as well as consciousness are all impermanent also. Correctly viewing all beings as impermanent and as without selflessness, one will achieve the tranquil nirvana."⁸

The Buddha further said that whether the beings mentioned above exist in the past, present, or future are all impermanent. The suffering, emptiness, and selflessness in the past, present and future are all impermanent also.⁹

2. Suffering

The Buddha stated that suffering is caused by one's ignorance of the natural law of impermanence. When things finally exist no longer and this situation surprises and even shocks one, the person feels nothing other than frustration and disappointment. Furthermore, if the person does not understand that his/her present life comes to existence based on innumerable previous lives, and will go on with innumerable lives in the future, and again is ignorant of the cause and effect connection in this respect, the person might think and conclude that human life is ridiculous by nature, as some existentialist philosophers did. The only way for the person to regain hope, confidence and freedom is to place more effort on self-awakening to correct his/her views of the world and beings in order to get rid of all kinds of distorted understanding and illusion. While impermanence causes suffering, suffering can also inspire and lead people to detachment.

3. Emptiness

In *Samyuktagama*, the Buddha spoke on impermanence, suffering, emptiness and selflessness, and took these four topics as the main themes of existential situations that human beings encounter. These four are closely connected, as mentioned, but if we prefer to choose only one string to thread them through, that will be "emptiness," which can most effectively express the nature of existence in a brief and condensed way.

Emptiness appears several times in *Samyuktagama*, but it is in *Maha-prajnaparamita-sutra* where the Buddha gave this concept much more detailed explanation. It is clear that this is not a new topic that the Buddha initiated during the time when he began to lecture on *Prajna* ideas. It is true that what the Buddha taught were always "perfect truth," that means they are ultimate, save no room for controversial argument, cannot be defeated in debates, are applicable to any circumstance, and never being contrary themselves, no matter where and when. The audience understood him differently because of the difference in individual situation, karma, disposition, understanding and degree of self-cultivation and purification.

When the Buddha taught he treated the audience fairly and equally. The concept of emptiness included in *Prajna* and *Agama* texts are both spoken by the Buddha himself, and together they emit and shine on sentient beings the light of the truth. Nagarjuna's *Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra* gave the best footnotes on emptiness to these texts.

4. Dependent Origination

The idea of impermanent and changing world leads us to realizing the nature of all beings: emptiness. But all these ideas derive from an assumption: dependent origination. The Buddha said: "Because one thing exists here, another thing exists there. Because one thing arises here, another thing will arise there."¹⁰ The Buddha also said: "If there is something here, there will be another thing there. If there is nothing here, there will be nothing there also. If something arises here, another thing will arise there. If the thing here disappears, the thing there will disappear also."¹¹

The Buddha said that the law of dependent origination is a natural law, created neither by him, nor by someone else. No matter whether the Buddha has been present in this world or not, the truth such as of this law has existed and will continue to exist. Because the Buddha got to know this law, he became enlightened. After his perfect awakening and enlightenment, the Buddha further adopted many effective ways to bring this truth to people in order to awaken them.¹² The Buddha said that when you get to know the law of dependent origination, you will know the truth of all beings, and when you know the truth of all beings, you will also know the law of dependent origination.¹³ This means that the law of dependent origination is one of the most important truths of the world.

Emptiness Revisited

1. Physical Beings

The Buddha used the concept of "emptiness" to assist people to be detached from their "greedy having or possession." This is not "nothingness," but rather the "middle way." Nagarjuna said that it is not correct either to say all are permanent or all are impermanent. But, why did the Buddha say that life is impermanence and suffering? As Nagarjuna said, it is because most of ordinary people are keen to be attached to pleasure and permanence than to suffering and impermanence. While some people do attach to impermanence and suffering, the Buddha also taught that impermanence and suffering are not real.¹⁴

Physical beings are empty because they are products of cause-and-condition combination. The products of high technology are made of physical and spiritual factors which are also dependently originated, therefore they are empty also. The emptiness of all these things falls in the category of "external emptiness." According to Nagarjuna, external emptiness relates the objects perceived by the six sense organs. They are empty because the one who perceives, the process of perceiving, and the perceived objects are not real.¹⁵ In terms of Buddhism, they are formed out of the four basic ingredients: earth, water, fire, and wind. A combination of these four basic elements is always subject to change. Therefore the material things are all temporal and not real.¹⁶ They are empty in this sense.

Furthermore, the four basic elements themselves are not real either. All physical beings are destined to change in a cyclic process of formation, duration, decay and disappearance. This repeatedly changing process of physical beings is one of the natural laws recognized by the Buddha in many of his discourses. Because it is always in change, it is not fixed. Because it is not fixed, it is empty. When the causes and conditions that once contributed to the formation now dissolve, the being perishes. This is so called "the emptiness of disintegration" (散空) among the eighteen kinds of emptiness.¹⁷

2. The Mind

The Buddha emphasized that it is extremely valuable for one to be born as human.¹⁸ When one is born as a human, the opportunity for receiving education to improve one's spiritual and mental capacity is also available. This presupposes that human mind and its mental functions are changeable.

The so-called mind is a combination of various functions. Its structure is not permanently fixed, nor its categorization and content. The four aggregates: the reception, perception, intentional actions, and the conscious activities, as taught by the Buddha, were set for the convenience of the audience's accessibility and understanding. Whenever mental activities arise, it requires a combination of causes and conditions, and every time the combination differs. One's mental activity also follows the law of dependent origination.

It is due to the mind that one can learn, improve and evolve, and on the other hand, it is because of the mind that one falls back and sinks in reincarnation. The mind also plays the role of motivating one to awaken and aspire for complete freedom. That is why Jue Ling Bodhisattva said in verse: "The mind is like a painter, who can draw various phenomena of the world. The five aggregates result from the mind, and nothing in the world is not made by it."¹⁹ In the *Sutra of Flower Ornament* the statement is also given: All beings are made by the mind.

But, according to Buddhism, the mind is not real either. In *Maha-prajnaparamita-sutra*, the emptiness of the mind is called the interior emptiness. The mind is a name around which various mental functions are gathered together. When all mental functions are taken off the mind, will a thing called mind still exist? While mental functions obviously undergo change, can the mind be the contrary?

Buddhist practitioners must view suffering, joy, and non-suffering and non-joy as impermanent. And in order to achieve this they must firstly liberate their mind from attaching to feelings and perceptions and therefore make their mind empty. Deeper investigation will make one feel the rhythm of mind as it is moving from one emotional reaction or idea to another, unceasingly. It is not difficult to find out that the mind is impermanent and in this sense, it is empty. One's actions depend on the mind, and the mind itself depends on causes and conditions. We must keep in mind that the mind is a temporary gathering of experiences and images. It is for the sake of the convenience of human living that a useful structure for organizing experiential materials for human perception, knowledge and judgment is made and a name, which we call mind, is attached to it. There is a distorted, discriminating portion of the mind deriving from the abuse of "the seventh consciousness" as it is called by some Buddhist scholars, which thinks that the temporary gathering is real and permanent

and is attached to the “mind” as “the self,” or “the ego,” and uses this selfness to discriminate oneself and the rest of sentient beings and the world. Because this discrimination is not pure it brings one suffering and more misunderstanding and distorted views of oneself and the world. It is from this incorrect view that greed, anger and ignorance result, and vice versa. These three poisons play the role as the direct causes of one’s suffering. The basic cause of all these poisons is selfness.²⁰

Nagarjuna concluded that there are no forms in interior beings, no forms in external beings and so forth. Therefore, he said, there is no “self nature” for all kinds of beings, and this is emptiness.²¹

3. The Ultimate Meaning

When one is detached from illusionary phenomena, he/she will enter the gate of first meaning or ultimate meaning (第一義, di-yi-yi). In *Maha-prajnaparamita-sutra*, this is called “the emptiness of the first meaning” (第一義空, di-yi-yi-kong), and the emptiness of the first meaning is nirvana, according to Nagarjuna’s *Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra*.²² This needs a further clarification.

First, we must know that the ultimate meaning and the conventional meaning are one but not two. In *Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra*, Nagarjuna addressed that no one being is a separate part from the first meaning, and the first meaning cannot be separated from the beings either. It is called the first meaning only because it can show that all beings are empty, and this is “the emptiness of the first meaning.”²³

In terms of Western philosophy, the emptiness of the first meaning means that the nature of the reality is empty. There is no other “reality” that exists in addition to the phenomenal beings. Buddhism is not a dualism, nor an analytical dichotomy. Any thinking based on dualism and dichotomy will deviate from the truth in terms of ultimate meaning.

4. Emptiness Itself Must Also Be Abandoned

Emptiness, as already stated, does not mean nothingness. It may be regarded as a condition of psychological detachment and abandonment. It also means freedom that provides opportunities for change, growth and improvement, and the possibility of becoming a Buddha.

While attaching to “having nothing” and “having something” are nonsensical statements and go from one extreme to the other, only the middle point of view is a correct view. This is why the Buddha taught about “the emptiness of emptiness” in *Maha-prajnaparamita-sutra*.²⁴ After arguing for the emptiness of all existential beings, it needs to further abandon the emptiness itself. When a patient has recovered from illness no more medication is needed. If the patient continues the medication that should not be taken, there will be a big problem. After using “emptiness” to break up one’s attachment to all beings in the world, there is no reason for one to attach to the “emptiness” itself and get new troubles of afflictions.²⁵ But abandoning the emptiness does not mean that there is nothing at all. Instead, we will hold the view of middle path that now begins to open every possibility for us.

How Individual Life Repeats: the Twelve-chain Cycle of Birth and Death (dvadacavgapratitya-samutpada)

The Buddha explained the repetitive arising of an individual life in terms of twelve-chain cycle of birth and death based on the law of dependent origination.

1. Ignorance (avidya, 無明) causes activities (karma, samskara, 行).
2. Activities (samskara) cause consciousness (vijñana, 識).
3. Consciousness causes mental and physical existence (nama-rupa, 名色).
4. Mental and physical existence causes the six places of contact (sad-ayatana, 六處).
5. The six places of contact cause contact (sparca, 觸).
6. Contact causes feeling (vedana, 受).
7. Feeling causes love (trṣṇa, 愛).
8. Love causes obtaining (upadana, 取).
9. Obtaining causes possession (bhava, 有).
10. Possession causes arising or birth (jati, 生).
11. Arising or birth causes old age and death (jara-marana, 老死).
12. Old age and death cause worries, sorrow, pain, afflictions and suffering.²⁶

The law of the twelve-chain cycle of birth and death is one of the truths the Buddha got to understand the very first moment when he achieved perfect enlightenment. He discovered that this cycle is the outcome of a long-term accumulation of suffering from one's past lives. He told the story that the Vipacyin (Vipassin 毘婆尸) Buddha in very far away past had also discovered this law when he attained enlightenment. The Buddhas could furthermore discover the law of dependent origination through the law of twelve-chain cycle.²⁷

Ignorance means that one knows nothing or only knows incorrectly the things that happened in the past or that will happen in the future; the interior causes and conditions or the external ones; the results one's actions will bring to him/herself; the triple gem; the four noble truths; the law of causation; the beings produced from a combination of causes and conditions; the good thing and the not good thing; the behavior guilty and not guilty; what should be learned and should not be learned; the superior and the inferior; the defiled and the pure; the arising of all beings, and the cognition of the six consciousnesses.²⁸ Sentient beings start their long journey of repetitive suffering due to this basic ignorance, and from it innumerable negative actions are generated.

Activities relate to body, word and mind.²⁹ One does not act properly because of ignorance. Negative actions bring negative results to others and to the person who did them.

One's actions, resulting from consciousness, will in return impact his/her own consciousness and imprint it with changes in content as well as probably its structure and articulation of components. These changes will then be stored as the seeds in one's *alaya vijñana*, the eighth consciousness, according to *Yacagara* school of Buddhist thought, and become a part of one's karma.

From one's consciousness physical and mental entities originate. The mental existence means the four non-physical aggregates:

1. Receiving and perceiving affective and cognitive information.
2. Feeling or reaction toward perceived information through the process of conceptualized cognition, thinking, appreciation and so forth, aiming at the perceived objects.
3. Intentional activities including motivations, intentions or other psychological reactions behind activities.
4. Consciousness comprising all kinds of mental activities, their integration and apperception, reflection, establishment and change of cognitive schema, unconsciousness, memory, imagination, calculation, discrimination, classification, reasoning and so forth.³⁰

By physical existence is indicated the part of sentient being which unites with the mental counterpart to form the living existence in the realms of desire and form. We may also generalize physical and mental existence to symbolize the two main components of all existential beings in the universe. As to sentient beings, the accumulated karma originated from ignorance determines one's type of life in the immediate next phase and even more phases to come in the future. This also has definite influence in the forming process of consciousness. It is based on the consciousness and the type of life that mental and physical parties of existential beings are formed.³¹

The physical and mental existence then begets the six places of contact: the six sense organs of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and consciousness.³² The living entity contacts the outside world through the six sense organs to receive the sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and thoughts. This kind of activities brings the person to a situation of seeking proper interaction with the environment.

Once the interaction with the environment starts, the sentient beings begin receiving various kinds of feeling. Three kinds of feeling may occur in every perceived subject: the joyful, painful, and the neutral.³³ Different feelings make people either to attach or to avoid and reject something.

The feeling of attachment brings about love. There are also three kinds of love: the love of desire, the love of form and the love of formlessness.³⁴ The love of desire is the love activated in personal desire and impulse. The love of form is the love toward physical materials. The love of formlessness is the love toward formless beings, such as abstract ideas, ideals and so forth.

When love becomes a strong yearning for getting hold of something, one falls in a psychological state of grasp. There are four kinds of grasp: grasp out of desire, grasp out of incorrect thinking and belief deviated from the middle path, and the grasp out of self-centricity which makes one believe he/she is always right.³⁵

Grasp further causes possession. There are three kinds of possession: the possession of desire, the possession of form and the possession of formlessness.³⁶

According to *Abhidharmamahavibhāṣa-castra*, the life drifts in the twelve chains cycle covering three periods of time: the past, present, and future. Ignorance and volitional activities occurred in the past; birth, aging and death will occur in the

future, while consciousness, mental and physical entities, six places of contact, contact, feeling, love, grasp, as well as possession all occur in the present time.³⁷

Master Yin Shun interpreted this cycle saying that contact is the beginning of feeling or sense experiences. Mental and physical existences come from consciousness, which enters mother's body when she is pregnant.³⁸ All the stages from consciousness to possession occur in the mother's womb. It is not until the stage of the birth that the baby is born. The birth also signifies the beginning of all kinds of suffering for the newborn individual. Should consciousness not enter the mother's body, no mental and physical entities would be possible. Should the consciousness enter the mother's body, but the mother is misconceived, the mental and physical entities would not grow either.³⁹

This cyclic process can also happen in a brief moment, according to *Abhidharmamahavibhāsa-sāstra*. One man killed another person out of greed. He did it because of ignorance that activated his consciousness and the corresponding activities. His mental and physical parts combined together and the contact and feeling followed. Greed is a kind of negative love and the entire action results from grasp and possession. The happening of his action is the birth that was followed by aging and death: the ending of the action.⁴⁰

In *Abhidharmamahavibhāsa-sāstra*, another example quoted from *Abhidharma-vijñāna-kāya-pada* (識身足論)⁴¹ in this respect is given. One person was attached to a beautiful object because of his ignorant greed. This interaction between the person and the object combines the consciousness and the five aggregates together in both mental and physical forms. It is through the six sense organs that contact and feeling are produced. The satisfactory feeling nurtures the negative love that grows to be a grasp and possession. When all gatherings arise, the birth occurs. The gatherings then mature and finally disappear and this process signifies the aging and death. Worry comes from inner anxiety, while sorrow comes from disappointment or the feeling of loss. Suffering is caused by the imbalanced reception of the five senses. Worry is caused by the imbalanced reception of the mind. Anxiety occurs when one is irritated.⁴²

For *Sravaka* practitioners who have already achieved the first fruit (stage) and above in their pursuit of *Arhathood*, the chain of birth and death will be eliminated in a foreseeable time. When people are congratulated by the arrival of this crucial moment, the cyclic chain of birth and death for them will be replaced by liberated existence because the chains of bondage are eliminated. These awakened ones are now freed from the cycle driven by the suffering of birth and death. The chain process of elimination is: when ignorance is eliminated, intentional activities are eliminated. And then consciousness, mental and physical beings, the six spots of contact, contact, feeling, love, grasp, possession, birth, the aging and death, and the accompanying worries, sorrows, suffering and anxiety are all eliminated, one after the other.⁴³

How the World is Founded

In contrast with individual life cycle caused by personal karmic power, the world is formed either by combined karmic power of a great assembly of sentient beings or by powerful vows and merits of Bodhisattvas or the Buddhas.

According to *The Sutra of Flower Ornament* (*Buddhavatamsaka-mahavaipulya-sutra*, 華嚴經), the world is limitless and comprises innumerable relatively smaller worlds. In the sutra it is said that the whole picture of the innumerable worlds can be depicted as including innumerable and varied oceans or circles of worlds. There are ten factors or causes and conditions that contribute to the forming of these worlds:

1. The *Tathagatas*' divine powers.
2. The natural laws.
3. The combination of karma made by sentient beings.
4. The various wisdoms achieved by various Bodhisattvas.
5. The positive deeds and roots of the goodness accumulated by sentient beings and Bodhisattvas together.
6. The Bodhisattvas' willing power to purify the lands.
7. The Bodhisattvas' vows to achieve the stage without withdrawal or regression.
8. The Bodhisattvas' prevailing pure freedom and easiness.
9. The powers flowing from all Buddhas' roots of the goodness and freedom resulting from their enlightenment.
10. Samantabhadra (Viśvabhadra, 普賢) Bodhisattva's vows and aspirations for freedom.⁴⁴

The natural law compels all the impure worlds to go through the four phases: formation, duration, decay, and disappearance. Due to the negative karma of sentient beings the worlds change for the worse. Due to the positive actions and self-cultivation of sentient beings the worlds change for the better. Due to the dedicated and intelligent Bodhisattvas the worlds change for purity. Due to the bodhi mind developed in numberless sentient beings the worlds become purer. Because of the Bodhisattvas traveling around the worlds, "the oceans of the worlds" become much more beautiful and magnificent. Because of the Bodhisattvas gathering together, "the oceans of the worlds" become incredibly beautiful. It is because all the Buddhas pass away in nirvana the worlds change from magnificent beauty to destruction. It is because all the Buddhas appear in the worlds they become vast, pure and beautiful. It is because the Buddhas' divine powers the worlds become universally pure.⁴⁵

Implications for Social Well-being

The principles of the world formation and change imply many things that we may reflect on and learn from. When one lives and works with a pure mind he/she benefits by being liberated from the karmic cycle. We learn that the world is formed by the combined karmic power of a great assembly of people, therefore, the more sentient beings live and work with pure mind, the better and purer the world in which they live will become. This is why it is said, "When the mind is pure, the land will be pure also."⁴⁶

We also learn that Bodhisattvas' vows and merits play a decisive role in guiding people and getting more people to work together in the effort of forming a positively progressive society. Therefore, more Bodhisattvas are always welcomed in order to speed the process of this positive progress. Two major features among many others of being a Bodhisattva are to awaken others alongside awakening him/herself.

To successfully educate more others becomes the most important job for aspiring to being a Bodhisattva. This should be made as the aim of education for all societies. One's liberation from the twelve-chain cycle can only make a pure individual. But collective people's liberation can bring the world purity and happiness.

The decline of a society or a nation is usually caused by ignorant and impure actions of the people in it. Therefore, it is said in the sutra that the minds and ideas of sentient beings are incredibly powerful and influential, because the actions caused and guided by their minds and ideas can create various circumstances for the oceans of the worlds. If these sentient beings are defiled, their lands will be defiled also. People's actions will always make the worlds different.⁴⁷ It is not only useless but also inappropriate to complain and blame others for the decline or defilement. It is I, a member of the society or the country, who should take the responsibility of improving this society or country. One's action, no matter positive or negative, will activate and cooperate with other peoples' similar actions, and when more similar actions are attracted to join one, the extremely powerful influence of the accumulated karma will become so evident that one can see it in every aspect of society or country. It will also influence one's personal life, one's family and as many as people around.

We have made it clear that pure or impure mind will bring about positive or negative actions. These actions then will cause positive or negative karma and, in that regard, the strength of power varies depending on how far and how much the karma accumulates. The purifying mind is evidently the vital factor for establishing a pure world or society.

By purifying the mind it is meant to clean up all negative aspects of thinking: ignorant decision making; being lazy, greedy and arrogant; being without compassion, stability and self-confidence; egocentrism; incorrect and incomplete understanding and so forth. Once the mind is purified, one's countenance will be the best proof as it will reflect kind of positive change very well. Besides, the person's personality, philosophy of life, features of language, health, living habits and style, as well as other outer appearances will accordingly mirror this improvement. This turning point of one's life will also facilitate opening wider horizon for one's spiritual and cosmological point of view. His/her relationship with others and interaction with the environment will appear better than before. This signifies a turning point for reconstructing and improving the society and social wellbeing.

In order to make the purifying process move faster and more efficiently, we need more people to get involved and do as Bodhisattva Way practitioners. One among the characteristics of a Bodhisattva Way practitioner is that he/she has already accumulated sufficient merits and virtues in guiding ordinary sentient beings of the worlds in the pursuit of a pure land. The Bodhisattvas have already gotten to know how to teach and mentor sentient beings in a most appropriate and efficient way. Besides, they have always had great willing power in their vows for assisting sentient beings. The willing power is always so incredibly great that when time moves, more and more people will be touched and turned to participate in the task of reconstructing their communities and worlds in order to make them better. This kind of affecting power will finally produce a very wide spreading influence in this desirable work of rebuilding the land in order to make it the most beautiful and purest.

The world or society without Bodhisattvas will be the one without hope. The world or society without the Buddha will be the one without the role model, the ideal or the goal. The Buddha is the embodiment and symbol of any individual existence in its perfection, both as the cause and the result. A world without the Buddha's teachings will move without direction.

**An Ideal Land of the Buddha:
the Flowering and Beautiful Oceans of the Worlds**

The Buddhas' appearance in this world not only demonstrates to sentient beings a role model but also provides them the opportunity to hear about the teachings in regard to the ideal pure land. It is through self-awakening based on hearing the truth and practicing the teachings that sentient beings' inner Buddha nature will be activated and thus will further develop toward its perfect fulfillment.

On the one hand, the Buddha land of purity is caused by the willing power and meritorious virtues of the Buddhas, while on the other hand, every sentient being has an inside pure land. Every single person's mind can be an inconceivably beautiful pure land, which is vast and limitless, comprising both very tiny things as well as mega structures. In the Buddha's eyes, the world is always pure and beautiful. When one uses his/her inner Buddha's eyes to see the world, the world will also appear pure and beautiful. Therefore, it is said that the Buddha's pure land and the karmic land are different and the same. The moment the Buddha attained perfect enlightenment he experienced a world as depicted in the chapter of "The Flower Bank World" in *the Sutra of Flower Ornament (Avatamsaka Sutra)*.

This Flower Bank World, according to Samantabhadra Bodhisattva (Universally Good Bodhisattva), "was adorned and purified by Vairocana Buddha as in the remote past he cultivated enlightening practices for as many eons as atoms in an ocean of worlds, in each eon associating with as many Buddhas as there are atoms in an ocean of worlds, in the presence of each Buddha purely practicing great vows as numerous as atoms in an ocean of worlds."⁴⁸ This most beautiful world is multi-leveled and adorned with limitless brightness, blessing and purity. This world is also boundlessly vast, filled with flowing springs of fragrance, decorated with innumerable jewels and pearls, made of diamonds and covered with clouds of light. It is webbed with beautiful precious stones of all varieties and jewel like lights, reflecting the ideal world where all the beings are interwoven and harmoniously interacted as in the net of Indra, and where the sounds of Buddhas' speeches emanate. Boundless enlightening beings are manifesting their meritorious, magic power to purify and adorn this world.⁴⁹

It looks like that the whole universe is a multi-faceted and multi-leveled one wherein innumerable layers of lands and seas of fragrance are contained, and each is in boundless vastness. Both unspeakably numerous Buddha lands as well as the lands of different degrees of defilement exist. There are so many worlds systems and seas of fragrance waters, and each consists of innumerable different worlds that the universe is extremely complicated and large as beyond our imagination.

In numberless Buddha lands the Dharma teachings are given by the Buddhas uninterruptedly in numberless eons so that ordinary sentient beings and enlightening beings will benefit continuously. The Buddhas' teachings are always so subtle and

wonderful that the audience rejoices and feels liberated as never experienced before.

One single world contains more than countable worlds. Innumerable worlds can be seen in one world, and the whole universe can also be seen in one single pore of the skin, according to the *Sutra of Flower Ornament*. This seems to tell us that in the universe all the worlds and all the beings exist in a relative, rather than an absolute, relationship. There are numberless Bodhisattvas in a world. The Buddhas appear even in a single tiny existential being. Every tiny thing also contains a vast world in it. The one and the many, the small and the large, merge and intermingle with each other, and still each remains its main characteristics. Every existence has a relationship with the other, and all the beings interact each with the other and each with the rest, comprising each other in mutual concern and mutual comprehension. This world "internet" as reflecting and intermingling in light and images spreads widely over all existential beings as a "Sea Image Samadhi" (sagaramudra-samadhi) or as an "imperial net," signifying that "everything manifests itself without any concealment due to the power of images of sea in Samadhi," or "the lands are shown just as the nets in imperial court that the formation and disappearance of all beings are manifested and unconcealed."⁵⁰

In order to establish such an adorned and purified world, it is required that more people learn Bodhisattva Way diligently as Samantabhadra Bodhisattva did, so that they can be allowed to become a part of and enjoy the worlds of Vairocana Buddha.

The Adorned and Purified Flower World is a model of the ideal world. It does not matter that this is a huge or a small world. A small family can become a purified and beautifully adorned world if one wishes and works to put correct effort to it. One's mind can also become a beautifully adorned and purified world if one determines to do so. More people do this way, better adorned and purified the society becomes. We may start from purifying ourselves, and then continue to enlarge personal impact on others and gather more effort together to make the larger community and society beautifully adorned and purified. This will be also the way Samantabhadra Bodhisattva did.

One of the implications the cosmology of Flower Ornament has given us is that we can make our world different. The difference is based on karma on the one hand, and depends on willing power and purifying effort of members of the world on the other hand. All the worlds share one thing in common: their members are interactive and mutually influential and no one can escape from this situation. This is also a world that can be changed and improved. The worlds are changeable and this rule is a natural law. But to change them for the better or the worse depends on causes and conditions which are always in our hands.

Conclusion

Summarized and conceptualized particular findings may make principles, while particular applications can also be derived from principles. Both inductive and deductive processes go along with human intuitive cognition and understanding.

As we have observed many particular social wellbeing cases, some basic principles can be formed based on our intuitive summarization and conceptualization of sensed and perceived materials. It is also possible and useful to infer from metaphysical principles of human life and the world some down-to-earth daily

applications.

The Buddha, the complete and perfect enlightened one, observed human situations, the circumstances of all sentient beings as well as the worlds to their widest and deepest extent that he could form perfect metaphysical principles. His insightful and comprehensive observation, investigation and understanding has brought us a great opportunity to learn to look at ourselves, at the worlds in which we live, and the relationships between human beings and the worlds in light of diligence, concentration, wisdom, compassion, tolerance and patience, that is as viewed from the Buddha's eyes.

From ontological point of view, the Buddha observed and realized that all existent beings are empty, that is, they are always in change, they are not static or fixed. Emptiness is not nihilism, nor a negation of the phenomenal world and the "Idea" world. Rather, emptiness implies the possibility and opportunity of changing oneself and the world for the better. Emptiness always provides a valuable space for improvement through educating oneself or others or both. The ultimate and perfect goodness for the one is Buddhahood, while the highest stage a society may achieve is pure land.

From cosmological point of view, we have learned from the Buddha's teachings that people can make a difference for their own destinies and for the community, the society or the world wherein they live as well. Ordinary people are born in this world out of their previous karma. But it is also true that there are some who are born because of their previous powerful positive vows, merits and volition. Every single person is a part of the society and the world. One's destiny is always closely associated with the accumulated karma of the circumstance. Both the effort to change oneself and change the entire society for the better will finally contribute to a win-win consequence.

It is based on the wise application of these metaphysical principles that we may more easily live a brighter daily life and carry on with the task of building a pure land right now in this world.

Notes

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- ¹ This passage is translated from the Chinese version of *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經) in text one: 當觀色無常，如是觀者，則為正觀。……如是觀受、想、行、識無常，如是觀者，則為正觀。正觀者，則生厭離，厭離者，喜貪盡，喜貪盡者，說心解脫。如觀無常，苦、空、非我亦復如是。
 - ² This means that all our senses organs and their functions are not real.
 - ³ This means that all the objects sensed and perceived by our sense organs are not real.
 - ⁴ This means that all our sense organs, their functions, and the objects sensed and perceived, as they are usually altogether called the twelve touching places, are not real.
 - ⁵ This means that while the phenomena of all existent beings are not real, nothing else is real even if it is called self-nature or reality.
 - ⁶ Nagarjuna, *The Treatise on Great Prajnaaramita*, volume 31. Nagarjuna in this volume tried to interpret these different kinds of "emptiness" as they appear in Pancavimsati-sahasrika-prajnaparamita, translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva (344-413 or 350-409), in volume 1, and in *Maha-prajnaparamita-sutra*, translated into Chinese by Xuan Zang (602?-664), in volumes 479 and 480.
 - ⁷ Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyuktagama*, volume 3, text 42 [Taisho Tripitaka, *Samyuktagama*, text 265], pp. 73-77.

- ⁸ Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyuktagama*, volume 2, text 39 [Taisho Tripitaka, *Samyuktagama*, text 262], p. 61.
- ⁹ Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyuktagama*, volume 1, texts 1 and 8, pp. 8-9.
- ¹⁰ *The Sutra of Dependent Origination*, translated by Xuan Zang, in *Agama*, Part II, Taisho Tripitaka, pp. 547-548. Also Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經), volume 13, text 336.
- ¹¹ Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Madhyamagama*, the chapter on the Mind, text “The Multi-realms.” (中阿含經, 心品, 多界經).
- ¹² Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經), volume 13, text 337 (Taisho, text 299). (The Chinese text reads like this: 緣起法者, 非我所作, 亦非餘人作。然彼如來出世及未出世, 法界常住, 彼如來自覺此法, 成等正覺, 為諸眾生分別演說, 開發顯示。所謂此有故彼有, 此起故彼起, 謂緣無明行, ……乃至純大苦聚集; 無明滅故行滅, ……乃至純大苦聚滅.)
- ¹³ Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Madhyamagama*, the chapter on Sariputra, text “The Elephant Trails Simile.” (中阿含經, 「舍利子品, 象跡喻經」。若見緣起便見法, 若見法便見緣起.)
- ¹⁴ Nagarjuna, *The Treatise on Great Prajnaparamita (Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra)*, volume 31.
- ¹⁵ Nagarjuna, *The Treatise on Great Prajnaparamita (Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra)*, volume 31. The original Chinese text is ”外空者, 外法, 外法空。外法者, 所謂外六入: 色聲香味觸法。色空者無我、無我所、無色法。聲香味觸法亦如是。”
- ¹⁶ Nagarjuna, *The Treatise on Great Prajnaparamita (Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra)*, volume 31.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ *The Sutra of the Merits of Medicine Buddha's Great Vows (Bhagavan-bhaisajyaguru-vaiduryaprabhasya purvapranidhana-visesa-vistara*, translated by Xuan Zang.
- ¹⁹ This is translated from the Chinese verse: 覺林菩薩偈: 心如工畫師, 能畫諸世間, 五蘊悉從生, 無法而不造。
- ²⁰ Nagarjuna, *The Treatise on Great Prajnaparamita (Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra)*, volume 31.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Nagarjuna, *The Treatise on Great Prajnaparamita (Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra)*, volume 31.
- ²⁴ *Mahaprajnaparamita-sutra*, translated by Xuan Zang, volumes 51, 403, 479 and 480.
- ²⁵ Nagarjuna, *The Treatise on Great Prajnaparamita (Mahaprajnaparamita-sastra)*, volume 31.
- ²⁶ Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經), volumes 13,14 and 15, texts 333, 334 and 368 (Taisho Tripitaka, texts 295, 296 and 369); *Madhyamagama*, the chapter on the Mind, text “The Multi-realms.” (中阿含經, 心品, 多界經) and the chapter on Long-life King, text “On the places of contact,” (長壽王品, 說處經) and so forth.
- ²⁷ Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經), volume 15, text 368 (Taisho Tripitaka, text 369).
- ²⁸ Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經), volume 13, text 336 (Taisho Tripitaka, text 298). The Chinese version reads as “彼云何無明? 若不知前際、不知後際、不知前後際, 不知於內、不知於外、不知內外, 不知業、不知報、不知業報, 不知佛、不知法、不知僧, 不知苦、不知集、不知滅、不知道, 不知因、不知因所起法, 不知善不善、有罪無罪、習不習, 若劣、若勝、染污、清淨, 分別緣起, 皆悉不知; 於六觸入處, 不如實覺知; 於彼彼不知、不見、無無間等、癡闇、無明、大冥, 是名無明。” Also *The Sutra of Dependent Origination*, translated by Xuan Zang, in Taisho Tripitaka, *Agama*, Part II, p. 547. The Chinese text reads as”於前際無知, 於後際無知, 於前後際無知。於內無知, 於外無知, 於內外無知。於業無知, 於異熟無知, 於業異熟無知。於佛無知, 於法無知, 於僧無知。於苦無知, 於集無知, 於滅無知, 於道無知。於因無知, 於果無知, 於因已生諸法無知。於善無知, 於不善無知。於有罪無知, 於無罪無知。於應修習無知, 於不應修習無知。於下劣無知, 於上妙無知。於黑無知, 於白無知。於有異分無知。於緣已生或六觸處, 如實通達無知。如是於彼彼處如實無知。無見無現觀, 愚癡無明黑暗, 是謂無明。”

- ²⁹ *The Sutra of Dependent Origination*, translated by Xuan Zang, in Taisho Tripitaka, Agama, Part II, p. 547. Also, Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經), volume 13, text 336 (Taisho Tripitaka, text 298).
- ³⁰ Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經), volume 13, text 336 (Taisho Tripitaka, text 298).
- ³¹ Huo Tao-hui, *Buddhism*, Book I, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982, p. 27. (霍韜晦, 佛學, 上冊, 香港: 中文大學出版社, 1982, 頁 27。)
- ³² *The Sutra of Dependent Origination*, translated by Xuan Zang, in Taisho Tripitaka, Agama, Part II, p. 547. Also, Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經), volume 13, text 336 (Taisho Tripitaka, text 298).
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ *Abhidharmamahavibhasa-castra*, translated by Xuan Zang, Volume 23rd.
- ³⁸ Master Yin Shun, *The Origin of Consciousness Only Philosophy*, Taipei: Correct Listening Publisher, 1970, pp. 15-23.
- ³⁹ *The Sutra on Great and Convenient Dependent Origination* (大緣方便經), in Fo Guang Tripitaka, Dirghagama (長阿含經).
- ⁴⁰ *Abhidharmamahavibhasa-castra*, translated by Xuan Zang, Volume 23.
- ⁴¹ *Abhidharma-vijbana-kaya-pada* (識身足論), written by Devacarman (印度提婆設摩, 意譯天寂, 賢寂), India and translated into Chinese by Xuan Zang.
- ⁴² *Abhidharmamahavibhasa-castra*, translated by Xuan Zang, Volume 23.
- ⁴³ Fo Guang Tripitaka, *Samyutagama* (雜阿含經), volume 13, texts 360-331 (Taisho Tripitaka, *Samyutagama*, volumes 12 and 14, texts 292-293 and 343).
- ⁴⁴ *The Sutra of Flower Ornament (Buddhavatamsaka-mahavaipulya-sutra, 大方廣佛華嚴經)*, translated by Ciksanda (652~710, 實叉難陀), volume 7, chapter 4 “The Formation of the Worlds.” The ten causes and conditions are expressed in Chinese as: 1. 如來的神力, 2. 自然的法則 (法應如是), 3. 一切眾生的行業, 4. 一切菩薩成一切智, 5. 一切眾生及諸菩薩同集善根, 6. 一切菩薩嚴淨國土的願力, 7. 一切菩薩成就不退行願, 8. 一切菩薩清淨勝解自在, 9. 一切如來善根所流, 以及諸佛成道時自在勢力, 10. 普賢菩薩自在願力。
- ⁴⁵ *The Sutra of Flower Ornament (Buddhavatamsaka-mahavaipulya-sutra, 大方廣佛華嚴經)*, translated by Ciksanda (652~710, 實叉難陀), volume 7, chapter 4 “The Formation of the Worlds.”
- ⁴⁶ *Vimalakirti-nirdeca* (維摩詰所說經), translated by Kumarajiva, chapter one.
- ⁴⁷ *The Sutra of Flower Ornament (Buddhavatamsaka-mahavaipulya-sutra, 大方廣佛華嚴經)*, translated by Buddhahdra (359~429, 佛跋陀羅), volume 6, chapter 8 “Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.” (普賢菩薩品)
- ⁴⁸ “The Flower Bank World,” in *The Flower Ornament Scripture—A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, translated by Thomas Cleary, Boston and London: Shambhala, 1993, p. 202.
- ⁴⁹ “The Flower Bank World,” in *The Flower Ornament Scripture—A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, translated by Thomas Cleary, Boston and London: Shambhala, 1993, pp. 202-253. Also *The Sutra of Flower Ornament (Buddhavatamsaka-mahavaipulya-sutra, 大方廣佛華嚴經)*, translated by Buddhahdra (359~429, 佛跋陀羅), volume 6, chapter 8 “.” (普賢菩薩品)
- ⁵⁰ *The Sutra of Flower Ornament (Buddhavatamsaka-mahavaipulya-sutra, 大方廣佛華嚴經)*, translated by Buddhahdra (359~429, 佛跋陀羅), volume 6, chapter 8 “Samantabhadra Bodhisattva.” (普賢菩薩品)