

What is the Truth in Buddhism?

What is the truth in Buddhism? In a nutshell, it is the Path to Liberation in the Two-Vehicle Bodhi and the Way to Buddhahood in the Great Bodhi both taught by the Buddha.

What is the Path to Liberation in the Two-Vehicle Bodhi about? The Path to Liberation is about subduing and ultimately liberating oneself from afflictions. That naturally leads to another question: “What are afflictions?” Everything in the mundane world is the product of greed and desire. Are all those unpleasant, disagreeable circumstances afflictions then? Yes, those are afflictions. Yet, these afflictions for a regular person are only the very low-level, shallow, and mundane vexations and afflictions. In fact, the afflictions mentioned in the Path to Liberation in the Two-Vehicle refer to the fundamental causes of afflictions.

According to what the Buddha taught in the Path to Liberation in the Two-Vehicle, the true fundamental causes of afflictions is not just our persistent pursuit of the five desires (wealth, sex, food, fame, and sleep) in the mundane world, but our mistaken view of ourselves, i.e., self-view (the view that the whole or combinations of our physical body, feeling, perception, volition or mental consciousness represent a true and permanent self) and our firm attachment to ourselves, i.e., self-attachment. Both the self-view and self-attachment are the root causes of afflictions. Why do self-view or self-

attachment cause all the afflictions in the mundane world? What is self-view? What is self-attachment? How can self-view and self-attachment be eliminated? The answers and underlying principles to these questions are all explained very clearly in the sutras taught by the Buddha. Therefore, while learning the Path to Liberation, we are actually studying the ways to completely and fundamentally resolve the afflictions. To completely resolve afflictions, one must first understand the content and meaning of self-view and self-attachment.

Some people have the demeanor to be very optimistic, carefree and easy going about everything in the mundane world. However, can such mental state really help liberate oneself from transmigration, or help one escape from the three realms of existence? The crucial answer lies in how much of the self-view and self-attachment are still left in this optimistic, carefree and easy going demeanor and appearance. If self-view and self-attachment have already been completely eliminated, then one can certainly liberate oneself from the suffering of the births-and-deaths in samsara (cyclic births-and-deaths). However, if self-view and self-attachment have not yet been completely eradicated or are stilled strongly ingrained, can a person still display an optimistic, carefree and jaunty disposition? The answer is affirmative. It is easy to put on an optimistic as well as jaunty demeanor when one has not encountered any averse situation. However, when real challenges arise, self-view and self-attachment will inevitably crop up and quietly surface with no exception. Hence, the so-called liberation and serene as well as tranquil states in the Lao-Zhuang Daoism are incapable of truly liberating one from afflictions, let alone releasing one from the three realms.

The following are guidelines to help determine and verify whether a teaching is consistent with the Path to Liberation in the Two-Vehicle taught by the Buddha.

The first criterion is that any discussion on the principle of the Four Noble Truths must be based on the eradication of self-view and self-attachment as its core. Please notice that the four noble truths have to be based on the eradication of one's self-view and self-attachment as their core. Why is such unusual emphasis necessary? Because even though the content of the four noble truths of suffering, origination, cessation, and path can be explicated in many different ways, there will be bias and departure from the real principle of the noble truths if the explication does not involve self-view and self-attachment and their eradication. The reason that this is repeatedly emphasized is because there are some venerable masters who have neglected the importance of the eradication of self-view and self-attachment while expounding the four noble truths. Therefore, the first criterion is the necessity to include the elimination of self-view and self-attachment as the core in the teaching of the four noble truths.

The second criterion is the Three Dharma-Seals—all formations are characterized by impermanence, all existing things are characterized by the lack of a self, and nirvana is characterized by uncompounded quiescence. Please note that they are: “all formations are characterized by impermanence” not just “impermanence” and “all existing things are characterized by the lack of a self” not just “the lack of a self”. However, since the principles that all formations are characterized by impermanence, all existing things are characterized by the lack of a self, and nirvana is characterized by

uncompounded quiescence are too profound and expansive, we are not able to fully explain them in this single article. Nevertheless, since they are referred to collectively as the Three Dharma-Seals, each of them must have its own unique meaning and content; collectively, they form the complete authentication criteria of the Path to Liberation in the Two-Vehicle, leaving out any one of the three will render the criterion incomplete.

Some people might elucidate the Three Dharma-Seals as follows: “In the world, nothing is everlasting; therefore, it is impermanent. This includes ourselves; we cannot exist eternally. Since the “self” is not eternal, it is not real either.” Such explanation is completely contrary to the principle described by “all formations are characterized by impermanence” and “all existing things are lack of a self” because the principle of these two goes back to the core of eliminating self-view and self-attachment—the whole principle is consistent with the elimination of self-view and self-attachment mentioned before.

The last one of the Three Dharma-Seals is “Nirvana is characterized by uncompounded quiescence.” In order to really understand the meaning of nirvana, one must first understand its principle. Many people have misunderstood the principle of nirvana. They think that as long as they have witnessed or experienced the principle about the impermanence of arising and ceasing in nature, they have entered and realized the path of neither arising nor ceasing, which is “nirvana is characterized by uncompounded quiescence”. However, such understanding is not really the principle of nirvana. It can at most only be termed as the philosophy of Lao-Zhuang (or the philosophy of Lao-tze and Chuang-tze-Daoism). “Nirvana is characterized by uncompounded quiescence” is absolutely not as superficial as

just “witnessing” or “experiencing” the impermanent phenomena of arising and ceasing.

To summarize the part about the Path to Liberation, the readers are reminded again that when judging and verifying the authenticity of a teaching using the criterion of the Three Dharma-Seals, attention needs to be directed to the fact that each of the Dharma-Seals of “all formations are characterized by impermanence, all existing things are characterized by the lack of a self, and nirvana is characterized by uncompounded quiescence” has its own independent content and meaning; none of them can be replaced or removed. These three Dharma-Seals must be taken collectively to form a complete Path to Liberation.

In the truth taught by the Buddha, there is a much more important and broader aspect named the Path to Buddhahood in the Great Bodhi in addition to the Path to Liberation. “Bodhi” can be described as being “neither arising nor ceasing, neither tainted nor pure, neither increasing nor decreasing” as in the *Heart Sutra*; it is the pure and original mind that every sentient being possesses. The primordial properties of this original mind are that it is neither arising nor ceasing, neither tainted nor pure, and neither increasing nor decreasing. The primordial state of this original mind is never the same and can never be equated with any existing activities of the mundane world or any form of mental consciousness such as the conscious mind or the states of meditative concentration. As long as it is a mental consciousness, it will have the characteristics and functions of discerning and discriminating when encountering any state of existence no matter how gross, subtle, fine, or extremely subtle the mental consciousness is; as long as the mental

consciousness has the fundamental characteristics of discriminating and discerning, it cannot be the True Mind, original mind, mentioned in the *Heart Sutra*. This is a very important point to be remembered and kept in mind.

The Path to the Buddha's Bodhi is the Path to Buddhahood; it is also the path in which a bodhisattva practices—the Bodhisattva Way. Practicing in accordance with the Bodhisattva Way, one can realize one's original mind. Basing on the merit acquired from awakening to the True Mind and seeing its Buddha nature, enlightening oneself as well as helping others along the way, and accomplishing the complete practice of awakening, one can eventually achieve Buddhahood.

How can one authenticate the Path to Buddhahood in the Great Bodhi? Below are some guidelines:

The first criterion: the Path to Buddhahood requires a personal realization of one's own True Suchness and Buddha-nature. In other words, the authenticity of the Path to Buddhahood is predicated on first having personally realized the True Suchness and Buddha-nature. If such personal realization has not yet been accomplished by a practitioner, the teaching of the path should at least be capable of leading the Buddhist learner in the direction of personal realization of True Suchness and Buddha-nature; only then can such path be named the Path to Buddhahood. Personal realization means personal experience and verification; it is not a slogan or catchphrase, not a concept or an opinion; it is a real and verifiable experience. It has definitive practicing goals and methods. Thus, when someone claims that "the Buddha dharma of Mahayana is all about dependent arising without an intrinsic

nature; there should be nothing else except for dependent arising without an intrinsic nature,” such statement is missing the most important core—True Suchness and Buddha-nature. The expansive scope of True Suchness and Buddha-nature can never be encompassed by the principle of dependent arising without an intrinsic nature because the principle of dependent arising without an intrinsic nature only touches on the superficial aspects of things or phenomena. True cultivation of the Path to Buddhahood and true realization of the original mind cannot be just a slogan or concept; it has to involve the personal realization of the True Suchness and Buddha-nature—the ultimate truth.

The second criterion: the Path to Buddhahood must rely on the merit acquired from awakening to the True Mind and seeing the Buddha-nature to foster the development of every single one of all the functions of the True Mind until the ultimate achievement of Buddhahood. In other words, a practitioner is not yet a Buddha even after having realized the True Mind and seeing the Buddha-nature. In fact, one is still very far from becoming a Buddha after realizing the True Mind and seeing the Buddha-nature; there are still lots of learning and practicing waiting to be completed. Therefore, the second criterion requires that the Path to Buddhahood cannot be just about the realization of a True Mind and the seeing of the Buddha-nature; it has to encompass all the necessary and required practices leading all the way to Buddhahood, starting from the realization of the True Mind and the seeing of the Buddha-nature.

The third criterion: the Path to Buddhahood completely encompasses the Path to Liberation; all the principles and practices in the Path to Liberation are

completely contained within the Path to Buddhahood. Therefore, if a teaching does not conform to the basic teachings in the Path to Liberation, it is definitely not a part of the Path to Buddhahood in the Great Bodhi because the teachings of the Path to Liberation is only a small portion of the Path to Buddhahood. If the teaching does not comply with even this small subset of the Path to Liberation, then it certainly cannot be the teachings of the Path to Buddhahood in the Great Bodhi.

Above is a brief introduction to the criteria that you can use to verify the authenticity of the Path to Liberation in the Two-Vehicle as well as the Path to Buddhahood in the Great Bodhi. Hopefully, you can soon acquire the correct understanding and concepts about the Path to Liberation in the Two-Vehicle and the Path to Buddhahood in the Great Bodhi and resolve to realize both the Path to Liberation as well as the Path to Buddhahood.

