

Positivist Buddhism

Research and education in Buddhist doctrines is definitely not the same as practice and personal realization of the Buddhadharma (the teachings of the Buddha). The primary goal of Buddhist cultivation is to factually realize the eight minds—to uncover and verify the existence of all of the eight minds (consciousnesses) through a practical and verifiable approach.

We frequently use the evidence-based approach in our daily lives. Take a very sweet fruit as an example. If one wants to find out how sweet it is, then one simply needs to buy one of those and try it. This is an evidence-based approach. Positivist Buddhism talks about the eight consciousnesses, or eight minds; we can use the same approach to uncover and identify them. However, to locate and identify these eight minds, one must first believe that there indeed exist the eight minds. One must also take refuge in the Three Jewels¹ and possess sufficient virtues, wisdom, and meditative concentration (samadhi). Only after having acquired all these prerequisites will it be possible for one to realize the eight minds.

The eighth consciousness (*tathāgatarbha*²) among the eight consciousnesses is like a precious shiny pearl that each of us possesses but cannot be seen with the naked eye. To realize it, one needs supporting causes and conditions such as the fulfillment of the necessary virtues, wisdom, and meditative concentration. Only then will it be possible for one to find the eighth consciousness. However, we cannot deny its existence just because we have not found it yet. Our eyes cannot see bacteria due to their tiny size; we have to rely on a

¹ The three principal objects of veneration or refuge in Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

² Commonly translated as matrix of the tathagatas, essence of the tathagatas, etc., which refers to the primordial essence that is fundamental to the existence of each sentient being. It is called the original mind, root consciousness, fundamental reality, non-arising dharma, nirvana, or *ālaya* consciousness in the Sound-hearer Vehicle. In the Solitary-realizer Vehicle, it is called the embryo-entering consciousness. In Mahayana, it is called the True Mind, True Suchness, *ālaya* consciousness, or retribution consciousness.

microscope to see it. It is unreasonable to deny the existence of bacteria just because we cannot see them with the naked eye.

In order to liberate oneself from the three realms and to attain Buddhahood, one must possess the profound wisdom of the ultimate reality of the dharma realm. In the *Numbered Discourses (Ekottara Āgama)*, the Buddha taught: “There are six things that tathagata [one of the names of Buddhas] will not be tired of.” Among these, the fifth is to tirelessly provide protection to sentient beings. That is, the Buddha protects sentient beings from falling into the wrong paths by helping them stay away from erroneous views. He tirelessly and incessantly guides sentient beings in practicing and learning the Human, Deva,³ Sound-hearer,⁴ and Solitary-realizer⁵ Vehicles till they ultimately achieve Buddhahood.⁶ The sixth is to tirelessly seek the correct, unsurpassed, and ultimate path. That is, the Buddha tirelessly and incessantly pursues the ultimate reality of the dharma realm. Buddha Sakyamuni achieved Buddhahood because he would not tolerate or harbor any erroneous views. If the Buddha harbored erroneous views, it would mean that he still possessed erroneous views and ignorance; then, he could not be called a Buddha because one of the ten titles of a Buddha is “the complete and perfect enlightened one,” which means that a Buddha has a complete understanding and knowledge of everything and every detail in the world. One cannot attain Buddhahood and be called a Buddha if there is even a single thing that one still has not yet fully understood or realized.

³ Heavenly beings, one of the six rebirth destinies in the cycle of birth and death in the desire realm.

⁴ The translation of the Sanskrit term *śrāvaka*, which literally means “listener”. It refers to the direct disciple of the Buddha, those who listen to the teaching of the Buddha.

⁵ The translation of the Sanskrit term *pratyekabuddha*. It is sometimes translated as “individually enlightened one” or “solitary buddha.” It refers to those who are enlightened on their own without the help of others. A solitary-realizer is enlightened through contemplation of the principle of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpāda*).

⁶ One classification of the Buddha’s teachings is to divide the teachings into five vehicles: the Human Vehicle, Deva Vehicle, Sound-hearer Vehicle (*śrāvakayāna*), Solitary-realizer Vehicle (*pratyekabuddhayāna*), and Bodhisattva Vehicle (*bodhisattvayāna*); the last of the five, the Bodhisattva Vehicle, is synonymous to the Buddha Vehicle (*buddhayāna*) and the Mahayana (Great Vehicle). Another classification is to divide the teachings into three vehicles (*triyāna*): the Sound-hearer Vehicle, Solitary-realizer Vehicle, and Bodhisattva Vehicle. Ultimately, there is only One Vehicle (*ekayāna*)—the Buddha Vehicle (*buddhayāna*). The details of these will be explained in the article *The Correlation among the Three-Vehicle Bodhi*.

As mentioned in the *Net of Brahma Sutra (Brahmajāla Sūtra)* in Chapter 14 of the *Long Agama Sutra (Dīrgha Āgama)*, there were recluses (*śramaṇas*) and Brahmans in ancient India who practiced the four concentrations,⁷ the four formless absorptions,⁸ and the five supernatural powers that enabled them to see their immediate previous lives or lives many eons ago. They saw that they lived, gathered and died over and over again along with many sentient beings. As a result, they believed: “My conscious mind can be connected to my previous lives; my physical body has always existed.” Thus, they formed the following erroneous view: “My conscious mind and physical body have always existed and will continue to exist forever.” How did Buddha Sakyamuni refute this erroneous view? The Buddha helped these non-Buddhists, who had achieved the four concentrations and the four formless absorptions, eliminate self-view and attain arhatship. Before the arhats⁹ passed away, the Buddha prophesied that they would no longer appear in the three realms after their passing. After the death of the arhats, the recluses and Brahmans, who possessed the five supernatural powers, the four concentrations and the four formless absorptions, could not find the arhats anywhere in the six destinations of rebirth in the desire, form or formless realms. The Buddha used this to show that the Sound-hearer Bodhi¹⁰ could help sentient beings liberate themselves from the continuous transmigration in the cycle of birth and death in the three realms.

The Buddha delivered the four great teachings in the *Marching Sutra* in Chapter 3 of the *Long Agama Sutra*. He taught that those who had heard a Buddhist monk (bhikshu) claim to have personally learned the teaching from the Buddha, the sangha community, learned elders, or one or many Buddhist monk(s), should not slander or doubt his words. They should instead investigate the whole discourse from the beginning to the end to see whether the teaching was true or false based on the sutras,

⁷ The four meditative absorptions (*dhyānas*) associated with the form realm (*rūpāvacaradhyāna*).

⁸ The four meditative absorptions associated with the formless realm (*ārūpyāvacaradhyāna*).

⁹ Those who have eradicated the afflictions (*kleśa*) and all forces that lead to future rebirth and will therefore enter nirvana upon death.

¹⁰ Bodhi is a Sanskrit term for awakening, enlightenment. There are generally three types of Bodhi: (1) Bodhi of the sound-hearer (*śrāvakabodhi*); (2) bodhi of the solitary-realizer (*pratyekabodhi*); and (3) complete, perfect enlightenment (*samyaksambodhi*) of the Buddha.

the disciplines (*vinaya*) and the Dharma.¹¹ They should inspect whether the content he said was true or false and whether it was in accordance with the reality of the dharma realm. This is the positivist method, which is also the most important core approach in Buddhism. Thus, everyone who has the intention to cultivate Buddhadharma should use wisdom to investigate and observe, use the positivist method to experience and realize, but never act like a yes-man, blindly say what everyone says, and end up being misled into the perverse path beyond rescue.

¹¹ Teachings of the Buddha, synonym for Buddhadharma.