

The General Aspect of the Sound-Hearer Bodhi

To accurately summarize the content of the Three-vehicle Bodhi, one must first have an accurate understanding of its general aspect. Since each of the schools of early Sectarian Buddhism of the Sound-hearer Bodhi has its own opinion and interpretation on the general aspect of the Three-Vehicle Bodhi, there are those who argue that each of these different interpretations should be taken into consideration based on its own unique perspective. However, the Buddha Dharma teaches the ultimate reality of the dharma realm; therefore, there should not be different versions of the Dharma or the Sound-hearer Bodhi regardless of different schools.

There is one fundamental principle that one should adhere to when learning and practicing the true Dharma. That principle is that there is an everlasting abiding ultimate reality in the dharma realm; this is the one and only general aspect of the Sound-hearer Bodhi. The contents of realization in the Sound-hearer Bodhi involve all the arising-and-ceasing dharmas. While investigating the arising and ceasing of all dharmas, however, one should not forget and ignore the synergistic existence of a neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma. In other words, although practitioners of the Sound-hearer Bodhi do not have to personally realize the neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma, they must still understand and accept that besides all the arising-and-ceasing dharmas, there exists a neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma—nirvana, which is also called *tathāgatagarbha*, the original mind, and the primordial or fundamental consciousness.

When discussing and exploring the general aspect of the Sound-hearer Bodhi, one must first understand the nature and characteristics of the arising-and-ceasing dharmas. The five aggregates (*skandhas*), which consist of the form, sensation, perception, formation, and consciousness aggregates, for examples, are part of the arising-and-ceasing dharmas.

The relationships among the arising-and-ceasing dharma is layer upon layer of interdependence—the shorter-lived dharma depends on the longer-lived dharma, and the longer-lived dharma depends on yet even longer-lived dharma, and so forth. This is how all dharmas exist and function. Take a house for instance; a house is an arising-and-ceasing dharma that depends on the land; the land depends on the earth; the earth

depends on the solar system while the solar system depends on the Milky Way, and the Milky Way depends on a much more gigantic and longer-lived universe. Even the universe is an arising-and-ceasing dharma.

According to their nature of dependency, all arising-and-ceasing dharmas must depend on longer-lived dharmas as well as a neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma for their existence. There must be a neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma that never arises and will, hence, never cease to exist that all arising-and ceasing dharmas can depend on to exist and function. Only such is in accordance with the ultimate reality of the Dharma realm.

Sound-hearers must know and ascertain the limit and boundary of all arising-and-ceasing dharmas or they might mistake an arising-and-ceasing dharma for the neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma, and fall into the wrong view of annihilationism. All dharmas that ordinary people refer to are arising-and-ceasing dharmas because they are what ordinary people can see, sense or perceive. Any dharma that is visible and has forms is arising-and-ceasing dharma.

The neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma cannot be seen by the naked eye, and it does not fall into the realm of any dharma known to the ordinary people. All the dharmas ordinary people talk about are arising-and-ceasing dharmas, never the neither-arising-nor-ceasing *tathāgatagarbha*. The characteristics (dharma-natures) of both are different. The *tathāgatagarbha* is a different type of dharma than the arising-and-ceasing dharma. Therefore, one should never classify the neither-arising-nor-easing dharma under the arising-and-ceasing dharma and treat it as a part of all dharmas.

The form aggregate, such as our bodies and the external material dharmas, is arising and ceasing. The sensation aggregate, such as unpleasant, pleasant, and neither unpleasant nor pleasant sensations, is an arising-and-ceasing dharma as well. The perception aggregate, such as the desire to eat, to rest, to walk, to play, etc., is an arising-and-ceasing dharma also. The formation aggregate, such as going from one place to another or from one moment to another, is an arising-and-ceasing dharma. The eye-consciousness of the consciousness aggregate sees things during the waking hours and goes into extinction at night during sleep. The ear consciousness hears sound during the waking hours but becomes extinct during sleep and likewise for the remaining consciousnesses. Therefore, the six consciousnesses of the consciousness aggregate are also dharmas that arise and cease. The five aggregates of body and mind in this lifespan

are always arising and ceasing and must rely upon a neither-rising-nor-ceasing dharma to allow the new five aggregates to arise in the next life after this life ends.

As has been explained above, the arising-and-ceasing dharmas have to depend upon the neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma in order to exist. It is only through the existence of such a neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma that all arising-and-ceasing phenomena continuously undergo cycles of arising and cessation—they arise anew after each cessation; they do not arise from nothing but originate from the neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma in dependence upon various causes and conditions—such is the true and correct general aspect of the Sound-hearer Bodhi. This is an extremely important view that every practitioner of the Sound-hearer Bodhi has to firmly establish.

If a Sound-hearer does not correctly understand and know the scope and purview of the arising-and-ceasing dharma, he will inevitably fall into the erroneous view of either eternalism or annihilationism. Only after being able to differentiate clearly the characteristics of the arising-and-ceasing dharma from the neither-arising-nor-ceasing dharma can a Sound-hearer truly realize the Sound-hearer Bodhi; moreover, a Sound-hearer is only capable of realizing the former while only bodhisattvas of the Great-Vehicle can realize the latter. Hence, the content of realization achieved by the bodhisattvas of the Great-Vehicle is by far more profound, and it encompasses the content realized in the Sound-hearer Bodhi.

There are two ways to cultivate the Sound-hearer Bodhi: as monastic and lay practitioners. To cultivate as a monastic practitioner is to have one's head shaved, wear dyed robes, and live in a monastery, or to have three robes and a bowl, roam around in the mundane world, and go on alms rounds for food while trying to extinguish the desire to stay in the three realms. Another approach of cultivation is to stay home as a lay practitioner to cultivate "pure practices" or "religious life." Whether it is monastic or lay, anyone with wisdom can be liberated from the bonds of rebirth. This can be verified through the following elaboration by the World-Honored One in Volume 11 of the *Saṃyuktāgama*.

After having heard the World-Honored One's preaching, Acelakassapa was gored and killed by a bull while trying to protect a calf. Since Acelakassapa was a lay person, the bhiksus asked the Buddha where Acelakassapa would be born and what fruition he had attained. Buddha Sakyamuni told those bhiksus: "Acelakassapa had entered nirvana because he had realized the Dharma as well as the supporting dharma ." The Buddha

conferred the highest prediction to Acelakassapa—the highest fruition of arhatship for a Sound-hearer, meaning that this arhat has entered nirvana without remainder. Even though Acelakassapa was a lay Buddhist practitioner, he was able to realize the Sound-hearer fruition and attain the Fourth-fruition of Arhatship. Thus, there is no difference between cultivating while as a lay person or as a monastic monk. What is needed to be liberated from the three realms of existence or to achieve Buddhahood is wisdom, not the superficial appearance of being lay persons or monastics.

In addition, one's gender does not make any difference in the realization of the Dharma, as shown in the following scripture passage:

Śāriputra said to Buddha: “What the World-Honored One has taught is the most profound and wondrous that even women can comprehend and realize; with the eradication of the tainted, achievement of the taintless, and liberation attained through either meditative absorption or wisdom, one can thus verify presently that the cycle of birth and death has ceased, the pure practice has been accomplished, what must be accomplished has already been accomplished, and so all future existence thereupon exhausted. Such is the ultimate extinction that the tathagata has expounded.”

This passage in the scripture indicates that Buddha's teaching is the most profound and wondrous. There was a caste system and gender discrimination in ancient India. Even with an inferior social status, women were still able to realize all the profound and wondrous Dharmas that Buddha had expounded. The Dharma does not discriminate based on the social status, lay or monastic practitioners, male or female, noble or ignoble, old or young, poor or rich; everyone can equally cultivate, attain, and realize the wisdom of the Dharma. The Buddha Dharma is a dharma of equality that can be realized by all sentient beings as long as they practice and cultivate step by step accordingly. The wisdom of the Dharma realized by the four assemblies—staying home male and female lay persons, monks and nuns—are all equal with no difference whatsoever.

Not only are the four assemblies in the Sound-hearer Bodhi completely equal in terms of their chance of cultivation, attainment, and realization; the four assemblies in both the Solitary-realizer Bodhi and the Great-vehicle Bodhi are also totally equal. Only such is true equality. The Dharma states that all sentient beings are equal. The cultivation and all sentient beings' chance of awakening are equal; as long as the conditions are

present and ripe, everyone can cultivate and be awoken to the Three-vehicles Dharma regardless of gender or age. What is crucial and important is how to accumulate and fulfill the needed merits and virtues and how to attain the necessary wisdom and skill of concentration to facilitate the ripening of conditions for the realization of the true Bodhi. The most critical factor is the determination and perseverance on cultivating and accumulating merits to facilitate the sooner ripening of the needed conditions. With that, anyone can realize the Dharma—this is the true equality of the Dharma.

