Pocket Guides to Buddhist Wisdom
Spiritual Growth Series

Exploring THE SELF

Master Sheng Yen

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Foreword

In this era that encourages "being yourself," have you ever taken a moment to seriously consider, "Who am I?" If you don't even know the answer to this question, how can you truly "be yourself"? Some people, in their pursuit of "being themselves," completely disregard the feelings and consequences for others, merely to satisfy their own desires. This is, in fact, a selfish behavior that doesn't truly understand the deeper meaning of "being yourself."

According to the Buddha's teachings, all suffering originates from attachment to the self, also known as "ego clinging." When everything is centered around oneself and personal gains and losses are prioritized, it leads to being trapped in suffering, distancing oneself from inner peace and happiness.

To help readers embark on the journey of self-exploration, this booklet features six selected articles from Master Sheng Yen's books: *There is No Unchanging "Self"*, *To Achieve Maturation, First Know Yourself*, *Control Your Emotions, Don't Suppress Them*, *Gathering in the Mind*, *Transform the Selfish*

Self into No-Self, and *Compassion as a Form of Self-Protection*. These articles emphasize the importance of understanding oneself and offer practical methods for cultivating self-awareness and resolving emotions. They further explain how to gradually transcend the boundaries of the self through acts of dedication and benefiting others, ultimately freeing oneself from suffering and attaining liberation.

Sincerely, the Editor

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There is No Unchanging “Self”

The many painful phenomena that arise in a person's mind all revolve around the axis of the "self." Because of belief in the self, we are never satisfied, always uneasy, always longing for external things; ever complaining and doubtful, envious, greedy and hateful, thus creating all kinds of karma. Later when we experience karmic retribution, this same self is unwilling to accept the consequences and therefore creating even more karma. Buddhism calls this "the suffering of the five raging aggregates." The five aggregates are form, sensation, perception, volition and consciousness. As the constituent elements of our body and mind, they can be divided into physical and mental aspects. Form is the physical aspect and refers to such characteristics as the shape, appearance, and physical parts of the body. The other four aggregates are the mental aspects: sensation refers to the experience provided by the sense organs; perception refers to the awareness of that sensation, volition refers to the response that is made regarding that perception.

The fifth aggregate, consciousness, is the principal factor in our life, a process encompassing birth and death,

from one lifetime to the next. When body and mind coalesce into the form of a person, this produces actions and behaviors, which create karmic forces that become the essence of our consciousness. Consciousness therefore arises from the karmic forces created by our bodily, verbal, and mental actions. These seeds of consciousness are carried forward within ourselves, and may flower in this lifetime or in a future life.

People may think that "consciousness" and "soul" mean the same thing. "Soul," however, refers to something that never changes and always remains the same; on the other hand "consciousness" is a never-ending process of change. As long as we continue to produce karma, either good or bad, and receive the karmic results, the consciousness aggregate changes accordingly. Therefore, even as we receive the results from past karma, we create new causes for future results. In such an unending cycle, the content of consciousness is always in a state of flux.

What we refer to as "self" is in fact a conglomeration of the five aggregates—a combination of causes and

conditions with no eternally abiding "soul" to be found. The self of yesterday and the self of ten years ago are not the same; even the self of one hour ago and the self at this very moment are different. Our bodies, our psychological states, our behavior patterns, the contents of our consciousness are constantly changing. This state of constant flux indicates that the self composed of the five aggregates is not an unchanging self.

The suffering of the five raging aggregates is caused by our failure to understand that consciousness, the main entity of our life, is always changing. The Heart Sutra says: "Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, while coursing in deep prajnaparamita, perceived that the five aggregates are empty and transcended all suffering." Ordinary people have not realized that the five aggregates are empty, and so they continue to suffer unspeakable misery. If we fail to realize that the five aggregates are empty, they will become a mechanism for producing affliction which rages like a forest fire, never ceasing to bring us all kinds of distress. On the other hand, if we understand that the five aggregates are empty in nature, they will cease to be

a source of suffering; instead, they will become tools for cultivating merits and wisdom, helping us attain complete liberation.

(excerpted from *True Happiness*)

To Achieve Maturation, First Know Yourself

Affirming the self, then maturing the self, and finally resolving the self are three stages in going from self to no-self. Indeed, before one has affirmed the self, they won't be able to reach the stage of no-self. Therefore, we must begin practicing by affirming the self. To affirm the self is to affirm one's conduct and deeds, both past and present, and taking responsibility for them all. As for the future, one should definitely have a direction and a plan.

What then is the self? The self includes all our past, present, and future selves. The self of the present moment is one's standpoint; therefore, the past is the self, the present is the self, and the future is the self. So what then are the past, the present, and the future? In terms of the expanse of time, the past might be last year, the year before that, or the far away past of our previous lives. The present could be this life, today, or this second, or this moment. Like the past, the future maybe near or distant.

In the limitless expanse of time of which the present moment is the foundation, we must by all means be responsible for ourselves. To possess self-value, we need

to establish our responsibilities and obligations to others. Even when alone, we still have responsibilities and obligations. Therefore, with the present moment as the standpoint, we take responsibility for ourselves and others. This is being responsible in the light of cause and effect. When we accept the causes we have produced, as well as the fruits of our actions, we then understand that good deeds produce karmic reward, and bad deeds produce karmic retribution. Endeavoring to do good deeds and avoid bad actions is the expression of responsibility.

Being responsible to oneself requires self-control; one must resist the temptations and influences of the external environment. For example, if someone offers me a cigarette, because I have never smoked, I can resist the temptation. But if I once smoked for many years, it might be hard for me to resist the urge to smoke again. It's in such times that one must practice self-control.

Everyone enjoys the five sensual pleasures, and for this reason they can easily be tempted. One must learn to judge and assess each and every action: "Should I do this?

Can I do that?" One can thereby become their own master. Most people don't understand themselves, usually seeing themselves as superior, never admitting their mistakes. They tend to defend their own concepts and ideas, even when they are clearly wrong. This kind of obstinacy and persistence is not at all affirming the self, because in defending themselves they negate others. It seems they feel better when tearing others down. The result of this opposition is that others will, in the same way negate them. Eventually, one will feel very isolated. This is not only not affirming the self, but digging one's own grave and drawing ruin upon oneself.

Therefore, affirming the self certainly must begin with understanding the self. What weaknesses does one have? What kind of bad thoughts does one have? In themselves, weaknesses and bad thoughts are nothing to be afraid of. Nevertheless, giving up one's weaknesses and dispelling one's bad thoughts, transforming bad into good, is real self-affirmation. Yet, like a drunken monkey, screeching, endlessly chattering, or a horse galloping around, our mind's natural state can tend to become unsettled, restless,

indecisive, and uncontrollable. This is the mind's habitual pattern, and also the natural result of the incessant flow of one's internal afflictions. It is no easy work to tame the mind to think and act in the way that we wish. Therefore, as much as possible we must make an effort to behave properly and improve our character. Very often our mind will be so unsettled and restless when we are not practicing. Therefore, the methods we use to settle the mind could be mindfulness of the Buddha, sutra recitation, or sitting in meditation.

When we recite sutras or practice mindfulness of the Buddha, we may discover that our mind is subject to deluded and fanciful thoughts. While these thoughts are very common and very easy to appear in practice, they can also be noticed and recognized easily. We can cultivate awareness of our mind through practice, which will enable us to go a step further to correct these weaknesses whenever we realize them. This is maturing the self through practice. Affirming the self must come from affirming one's strengths; after affirming one's strengths and weaknesses, one can gain self-maturation.

(excerpted from *Finding Way Home*)

Control Your Emotions, Don’t Suppress Them

There's a saying, "A clay figurine has the nature of dirt." The meaning is that even a doll sculpted of clay has its bad temper, so how could a human being not have one? Therefore, bad tempers and emotions are normal for humans. Yet, are emotional upsets really bad? Actually, when emotions arise, it's not that you have emotions but that the emotions have you; it's not that you control your emotions, but they control you.

Most people will experience quite intense moods in response to events that occur in life, as well as to external events. Sometimes it's the weather or society; sometimes it's personal relations. For instance, some people don't like chaotic noise, so when their baby cries, they can lose their temper and become emotional even without realizing it. It's like a pool of water where the surface is calm, but a single breeze will make ripples. If a little "breeze" can disturb one's emotions so easily, this means that they've not practiced enough.

Some people have dramatic mood swings, abrupt and unaccountable changes of mood, while others go through

dramatic ups and downs from changes in body chemistry. For instance, body chemistry can cause pain, itching and so on, and unbalanced hormones can produce emotional flightiness. When there's a problem with our physiology, it will often reflect in our body and sometimes in our mind. After these reactions, our emotions will often sink without our knowing, or we'll become excited. Under these conditions, only a person of great practice will have a method of control.

More seriously, pathological conditions can even cause some people to experience personality changes; this is extremely pitiable because such people are unable to control themselves. In the very end, they'll even have psychological problems. Modern medicine refers to psychogenic disorders—problems that come from one's psychology which then produce reactions in their body. When the body is uncomfortable, one's psychology becomes even more abnormal. Therefore, being unable to investigate and control one's emotions is not only a problem of the mind, but can even influence one's physical health. Therefore, we should often observe and try to

understand our psychological reactions, or the state of our mental activity. Are we angry, desirous, or in doubt? Or are we inexplicably excited or depressed? By paying attention to one's psychological situation at all times, while the situation is still slight, one is better able to control it promptly.

How does one control their emotions? One way is to use willpower so that it doesn't become more extensive. Another way is to divert the emotion. For instance, if one knows one is beginning to have a bad temper, they should promptly relax their body, head, and maybe sing a song, or listen to music. Even screaming very loudly is all right; anything that doesn't influence or harm others. First use a method to release or divert the emotion, and then handle the situation or find a solution. Nevertheless, emotions shouldn't be suppressed because in the long run, that will make them more intense. The person may then lose control and erupt like a volcano. It's like some highly cultivated people who, in public places and in front of others, control their emotions; but once they return home and see their family, they will erupt. Unable to control

their emotions, they can suppress them for a time, but in the end, the emotions must be released.

Therefore, when experiencing negative emotions, one must first find a way to relax them, and then a way to divert them. But the best method to control one's emotions is to practice the Dharma, because the Dharma speaks of no-self. When there's even not a self, what emotions are there to be controlled?

(excerpted from *Finding Way Home*)

Gathering in the Mind

Buddhism teaches about overcoming temptation and attachment to the seven emotions and six desires, by using methods including contemplating causes and conditions, contemplating compassion, and changing our perspectives and ways of thinking. There are times, however, when we are too overwhelmed by constant waves of thought, bogged down in a mire of desires, before we can even begin to apply these methods. Therefore, the fundamental method is to collect our mind by withdrawing and reining in the six sense faculties, so that the focus of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind turn inward rather reaching outward.

In general the sensation of "liking" occurs when our sense organs encounter external objects. Furthermore, the desire to possess these objects can create irresistible temptations. The impression made by something we see can remain in our mind long after we close our eyes. Sounds can linger in our mind after we block our ears. When this happens we should try to understand the nature of these distracting sensations: Are they pleasant or unpleasant? Are they a source of happiness

or unhappiness? In fact, when we visualize certain kinds of images with our eyes closed, it can actually be very disturbing, not at all pleasant.

This is what happens when someone is deeply infatuated: their sweetheart's face, smile and voice hover constantly in their mind, unable to be let go. Even when the object of their affection is a thousand miles away, it's as though they are right there with them. Such a person is lovesick, and if their love is not reciprocated, it is even more painful for them.

Let's carefully consider whether such lingering sounds and images are real in essence: when we open our eyes, those lingering images disappear; and when we pay close attention to those sounds they will also vanish. Therefore, we should constantly remind ourselves that these images and sounds are but illusions, and do not represent true happiness. If we still suffer from such thoughts, we can turn our attention to our breathing. This will allow us to shift our focus away from the lingering thoughts to that of sensing our breathing.

Analyzing our own thoughts in this manner is another way to withdraw and rein in the six sense faculties. It is in the nature of thoughts that they appear in our mind, one after another. Thus, when we are caught up with coarse and energetic thoughts, we can practice breath counting, and enjoy the sensation of our own breathing. When new thoughts appear, we gradually realize that what we are thinking now is not the same thought as what we had earlier. This is because by paying attention to our breathing, the previous thoughts are broken up into separate parts. But while focusing on our breath we will still have wandering thoughts. The thought—"I am following and enjoying my breath"—may also be disturbed by other thoughts. When we notice new thoughts arising, we should not give them any attention, but simply return to the sensation of our breathing, thereby cutting off those wandering thoughts. Continuing in this way, the constant procession of thoughts will gradually become scattered fragments. As such, they are mere illusions and imaginings, and gradually we will be able to let go of them.

If you find these deluded thoughts too chaotic to be

controlled, prostrating to the Buddha may help. When doing the prostration, pay attention to the physical sensations as you raise and lower your body. Even if you don't know how to make a proper prostration, it can still be beneficial to kneel before the Buddha and focus on touching your forehead to the ground. You can also go for a stroll, paying attention to the sensations that arise with every step. This too will bring your attention to your body and thereby help gather your mind.

In our daily lives we spend most of the time with our minds distracted by the outside world. We must practice collecting our mind, returning to our breath, our thoughts, and the sensations of movements. Through this practice, we will gradually be able to let go of external disturbances, reining in our six sense faculties.

(excerpted from *True Happiness*)

Transform the Selfish Self into No-Self

We often hear people say that a certain person is too selfish. "Selfish" is a word that has negative connotations; however to be concerned with the self is normal, and thinking of one's own benefit is proper. If people did not think about their own benefit, I'm afraid it would be difficult for them to survive. As a matter of fact, all living beings are concerned with themselves. Self-interest is one of the most distinctive traits of the average person. Charles Darwin proposed the theory that evolution is the struggle for survival through natural selection and the survival of the fittest. All living beings have an instinct to fight for their own survival. Self-interest also fulfilled an essential function of providing living beings with self-protection, which was particularly important to ensure survival during man's primitive existence. It is the search for a place to be, the opportunity to exist, and the preservation of one's life. Since human beings are among the living, their instinct for self-preservation is normal. There is nothing intrinsically right or wrong about being selfish.

Being selfish essentially means that one strives for

one's own benefits and interests in order to exist and survive. Otherwise, if one is unable to survive, what can one do? Nevertheless, there are ways one can benefit oneself and still benefit others. First, self-interest need not hinder others' chance to survive; this is the fundamental principle and moral standard for human beings. Second, while thinking of their own benefit, people can still benefit others; this is also the first step of the bodhisattva path, but it is also within the capability of ordinary people. Third, one should cultivate the spirit of giving oneself for the benefit of others. Even if an action seems to bring no benefit to oneself; it is still worthwhile if it benefits sentient beings. This is also the spirit of impartial giving and sacrificing the smaller self for the perfection of the greater self, as many philosophers and religious teachers have advocated through the ages.

Thinking about one's own interest is not necessarily wrong; but from the Buddhist perspective, is it a correct attitude? The result of selfishness and thinking of one's own benefit is the creation of what Buddhism calls self-attachment, which is the root of all afflictions. Even at the

third level of the greater self, as previously mentioned, one is still subject to a self that experiences affliction. Therefore, the next step is to go beyond the greater self to the realm of no-self. As described in the Buddhist teaching, no-self means taking our private, individual interest and sharing it with all sentient beings, transforming our personal benefit to the benefit of all. We consider the benefit of all sentient beings, and contribute unselfishly to them all with greatest respect. Moreover, we seek no credit, and after contributing to all sentient beings, we do not hope for anything in return. Furthermore, we do not calculate how much we've helped others, or what good things we have done. This is the spirit of the bodhisattva path.

As for what the bodhisattva path entails, one strives on the path of ultimate buddhahood while delivering all sentient beings, even those in the lower realms. To strive on the path of ultimate buddhahood means to increase wisdom and cultivate a mind of compassion. Delivering all sentient beings of the lower realms means liberating them from suffering so that they may attain happiness. The bodhisattva path emphasizes actions that enhance one's

own beneficial practices while earning merit. Moreover, dissolving the self completes the two aspects of benefiting oneself while benefiting others.

Buddhists will probably think that this principle is very good, and they would be willing to learn it. Yet, it is very difficult to really practice, let alone attain. One should at least achieve the first level of benefiting the self without hindering others, as it is a foundation to the second level, benefiting the self along with benefiting others. Nevertheless it is not so easy to achieve the third level of achieving the greater self, not to mention the fourth level of no-self. Though not easy to achieve, this is not impossible. At least it is a good direction and goal for one's life. One could keep their feet on the ground with the continuous effort of such practice.

(excerpted from *Finding Way Home*)

Compassion as a Form of Self-Protection

Empathetic compassion can help us remove attachment and resist temptation. However, in a society ruled by "survival of the fittest," there is no assurance that others will return our compassion. It is easy to become concerned that we will lose out when confronted with the struggle for power and material possessions. At first glance compassion for others may appear to cost us something, but if we can see things from a wider perspective, we will realize that there is nothing to lose and both parties actually benefit from it. If two people coming from opposite directions want to cross a bridge made of a single log but neither gives way to the other, then neither will be able to cross. This is like the saying, "When two tigers fight, even if neither dies one will surely be injured." When things reach this stage no one benefits; if we act compassionately and yield to others, we may appear to be losing but at the very least both are still alive and no one is hurt.

Therefore, when we encounter fierce opposition, or are in a deadlock which could lead to harm of both sides, we should let go of all ideas of success and failure as soon as possible. As a Chinese saying goes, "As long as the

green hills stand we will still be able to gather firewood." Compassion will not only benefit others, it will also help to protect ourselves. When others succeed as a result of our yielding, we may appear weak, useless and seen as the loser, but we are in fact protecting ourselves, by preserving our strength and avoiding any great harm.

Nowadays people find it very hard to let go of their romantic attachments. They constantly give their heart away but never get anything in return, so they start to feel thoroughly let down and disheartened. The fact is that all the valuable experiences in life come through such hardships, setbacks and loss. If we have already expended a great deal of energy pursuing someone, but it hasn't come to anything, then longing for that person is like climbing a tree to catch fish. People who do this are like gamblers who never give up, always thinking that they can win their money back. And when all their money is gone, they'll think of ways to borrow more so that they can keep gambling, losing more and borrowing more, sinking deeper and deeper into inescapable debt. This really is incredibly foolish behavior.

Many other aspects of our lives are like this: If we encounter a situation in which we are no match for our adversary, and can see no way to rescue the situation, we should avoid sinking further into trouble and immediately withdraw. Even if we lose something, we gain a lesson from the experience. This is a way to be compassionate to ourselves.

Some people are grateful to receive care and compassion from others. Unfortunately, there are those who believe that they are more deserving and have no need to be grateful. If you encounter this situation, there is no need to feel humiliated or inferior. The important thing is to realize that when we are compassionate with others, we are also protecting ourselves. However, there is a saying, "Do the right thing." If you have shown constant compassion towards a certain party who continues to harm others, you should not allow them to continue. Of course, before fighting for people's rights and interests you must consider your own strengths: if there is a possibility of success, then you should push forward courageously and fight to the very end; otherwise, your opponent could hurt even more people.

Compassion also means giving others a chance to find their own way. The whole world is like one living body, so helping others to be happy and free will also benefit us in the end. Compassion not only benefits other people but also helps protect ourselves. If we can generate a compassionate mind at all times, we will be of benefit to everyone.

(excerpted from *True Happiness*)

Appendix

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