

Increase Meritorious Blessings and Longevity

Translation of Venerable Yen Pei's talk, delivered in Mandarin,
on 23 October 1981, at Singapore Buddhist College

1 Introduction

Our college is holding the “Dharma Assembly for Increasing Meritorious Blessings and Longevity” this month. Hundreds of awe-inspiring Medicine Buddha images are enshrined in this hall, along with hundreds of glittering light offerings.

Amidst this solemn and pure religious atmosphere, we feel as if we were in the Eastern Lazuli Lapis Pureland. With deep veneration, pure faith and spiritual bliss, we rejoice in the merits and pay homage with pious sincerity.

Even if you do not participate in the Assembly, just by this pure faith and reverence, you have already gained immense merits. At the end of the Assembly, you may bring a Buddha image back for enshrinement at home, or bring a lamp back to continue your light offering at home. In this way, the light is passed on and becomes “Infinite Light”.

More importantly, by virtue of your external light offering, you kindle the inner “lamp of your mind”, to illuminate the darkness of ignorance and attain the infinite light of wisdom.

Your participation in this Assembly is exceedingly meaningful, as you increase meritorious blessings and longevity in this life. Moreover, you will certainly attain Buddhahood in future.

Buddhism teaches that life is suffering. In general, people have misconceptions of this statement. I shall explain the meaning of life, as well as the meaning of “increasing meritorious blessings and longevity”, so as to correct such misconceptions.

I shall also elucidate the true meaning of life and affirm the value of life, in the hope that you make skilful use of this precious human rebirth, to liberate yourself and other sentient beings from suffering, advance together on the path to liberation and Perfect Enlightenment, thus accomplishing the blissful life of ultimate perfection.

2 Affirmation that Life is Suffering

Besides Buddha who affirmed that life is suffering, other Indian religious teachers and philosophers of His time also said that life is suffering. This was not meant to frighten people. It is a realisation gained through observation of life.

From birth to death, is there any experience in the life process that is not characterised by unsatisfactoriness and suffering?

Life is suffering. This is not a deliberate portrayal of life as very miserable. It is a realistic problem. Very few Indian religions and philosophies were transmitted to China, with the exception of Buddhism, which was extensively disseminated to China. The Buddhist disciples, who propagated Buddha’s teachings, often declared that life is suffering. As a result, some people hold misconceptions that Buddhism is pessimistic and world-weary.

Actually, Buddhism teaches that life is suffering, to enable us to find the ultimate meaning of life, amidst its multifarious suffering.


This is the true purport of the Buddhist teaching on suffering. We absolutely must not have misconceptions that human existence is meaningless due to its suffering.

We shall not discuss past lives or future lives. Just examine the present life — nobody can deny that life is full of unsatisfactoriness and suffering. People invariably think that only the poor suffer. Little do they know that rich people also suffer due to their wealth. Their suffering may be worse than that of poor people. Many rich people had committed suicide because they were so oppressed by suffering that they did not wish to live on.

Therefore, the suffering in life does not depend on whether you have money or not. Life is actually a massive aggregate of suffering. People are afflicted with multifarious suffering, whether they are rich or poor, clever or silly, male or female, old or young. Nobody can say that he has no suffering, but merely can say whether his suffering is light or severe.

Shakyamuni Buddha appeared in India and affirmed, from his own personal experiences, as well as on the basis of Indian philosophical thought development, that life is suffering. For instance, who can avoid the suffering of birth, old age, sickness and death? Since the advent of mankind in this world, has there been anyone born who does not age, fall sick or die?

Shakyamuni resolutely renounced secular life, in order to seek personal liberation from birth, old age, sickness and death. After attaining Perfect Enlightenment, Shakyamuni Buddha founded Buddhism and started propagating the Truth, in order to help sentient beings to be liberated from birth, old age, sickness and death too.



Buddha expounded Four Noble Truths to the Hearers, making clear from the very beginning that life is suffering. When Buddha expounded Twelve Links of Dependent Co-Arising to the Self-Enlightened Ones, He also declared that “birth is the condition for old age, death, worry, sorrow and vexation”. It is thus clear that Buddha declared life is suffering, not only based on his personal experience, but also His realisation of Truth. Therefore, we should accept His admonition that “life is suffering”.

Buddha’s declaration that “life is suffering” was not made arbitrarily without basis. He uttered this conclusion based on reality.

3 Basis of the Tenet that “Life is Suffering”

Everything in the universe is in a state of flux, continuously changing in every moment and never the same in the next moment. Based on this phenomenon of impermanence and incessant change, Buddha demonstrated the world as a massive aggregate of suffering and human life as an immense vexation, so Buddha repeatedly said that “impermanence leads to suffering”.

Suffering arises from impermanence. This is an irrefutable truth. In Connected Discourses, Buddha asked, “What do you think, monks? Is form permanent or impermanent?”

The monks replied, “Impermanent, Venerable Sir.”

“Is that which is impermanent unsatisfactory and leads to suffering?”

The monks replied, “Suffering indeed, Venerable Sir.”


Buddha's teachings that "all phenomena are impermanent" and "impermanence leads to suffering" are not only judgements based on reality, but also value judgements.

There is multifarious suffering in life, as it undergoes change incessantly. Who does not wish to be young forever? Who does not wish to maintain the vitality of life? However, due to impermanence, a once lively and handsome youth gradually becomes a white-haired old man, losing his vitality and radiance of yesteryears. There are many things that he wants to do, but he cannot do so now. He would like to travel around and visit various places, but lacks physical strength now.

Therefore, in old age, one perceives acutely the emptiness of life with its countless vexation. Every elderly person experiences such feelings. Who could deny that life is suffering? Such suffering arises from changes due to impermanence.

In general, when people reach adulthood, they establish their families. With a virtuous wife and many filial children, one's family is full of harmonious bliss, so one does not feel that life is unsatisfactory at all. However, decades elapse in the twinkling of an eye and one becomes old gradually. One then lacks the interest that one used to have in doing things, so one starts to feel that life is not as satisfactory as one used to think.

Young children obey and delight parents. When they grow up, get married and strive to realise their ambitions, they are seldom with their parents. Filial children visit their elderly parents and fulfil their duties to parents. Unfilial children neglect their parents and fail to be dutiful to parents, as if they have forgotten their parents.



There are many examples of such lack of filial piety in modern times, so in old age, would we still feel the joy of having many children?

By thirty to forty years of age, one would have established a family, being master of the household who makes decisions for all family affairs. However, when one becomes old, with no energy to manage the household, one has to let children handle some matters and take charge of the family property. Some children act on their own, without heeding parental advice. When you gradually lose parental authority, wouldn't you be disillusioned with family bliss?

A person, who strives assiduously to establish his career, accumulates substantial wealth to enrich his family living.

He can allocate his wealth freely, for use in education, culture, charity and other aspects of life. When he becomes old and incompetent, he passes his wealth to his children to manage. When he needs money, he has to get it from them with difficulty, depending on their moods. At this time, he then realises that everything comes to naught in the end, so is there really any happiness in life?

A young person looks forward to his future, feeling that life is full of hopes. He works hard for the sake of his children and career, thinking that he can enjoy bliss in old age. Yet, when he becomes old, he is left with nothing, as if he has awakened from a dream in life, so he feels an inner void and boundless vexation. This feeling gets stronger as he gets older. He cannot help but question what the purpose of life is exactly. Not only has his career come to naught, he has also become estranged from his children. He has lesser and lesser friends, as many old friends had passed away. He does not have anyone to talk to, so how could he not feel lonely?

In particular, in the small families of modern times, if children are not willing to live together with their aged parents, elderly people will all the more feel that life is infinitely empty.

The declaration that life is suffering was made not only in Buddhism, as well as Indian philosophies and religions. There is a Chinese folk poem entitled All is Empty, which also illustrates the impermanence of all worldly phenomena.


One line in the poem runs as follows: “Human life is like a bee collecting nectar from a hundred flowers to make honey, but everything comes to naught after all that hard work.”

A person, who strives assiduously to establish his career, accumulates substantial wealth to enrich his family living. He can allocate his wealth freely, for use in education, culture, charity and other aspects of life.

Due to impermanence, everything, including children and career, comes to naught in the end, so people feel that life is meaningless. Once they have this idea, they become pessimistic and passive, thinking: Why should I do this? For whom do I work so hard? Why do I make myself so busy? Isn't everything futile in the end?

However, such a view is absolutely wrong! The Buddhist teaching on the suffering and emptiness of life does not negate life. Neither does it mean that there is no need to do anything at all.

Buddha concluded from his observations of the transience of worldly phenomena that life is bound up with suffering. Suffering arises due to impermanence.



Not only Shakyamuni Buddha expounded this truth to people, all Buddhas of the ten directions in the past, present and future expound the truth of suffering in life, based on the principle that “impermanence leads to suffering”.

This view of life that “impermanence leads to suffering” may sound like world-weary pessimism, but if we gain deeper experiential understanding of this truth, we know that Buddhist teachings absolutely are not shallow, world-weary or pessimistic.

Instead, Buddhism encourages people to uplift life through self-cultivation. Buddha awakened people to the truth that “all phenomena are impermanent” and “life is suffering”, so that we will not indulge inextricably in sensual pleasures.

4 What is the meaning of life?

Then, what exactly is the meaning of life?

Despite the multitude of suffering in life, it is imbued with meaning after all. The diverse philosophies and religions in the world offer different views about the meaning of life. For instance, in Chinese Confucianism, the meaning of life lies in “Three Immortal Deeds” of establishing merits, virtues and edifying words. There is enduring value in rendering meritorious service to one’s country or mankind, as well as in virtuous character. There is enduring value even in writing books to propound ideas. One who fulfils any one of these Three Immortal Deeds is worthy of eternal reverence, such as Confucius, Guan Yu, Yue Fei and Zheng Chenggong. How could it be said that life is meaningless? The crux actually lies in how we conduct ourselves as a humans.

We should emulate the virtuous sages, strive in the direction of goodness and uplift, as well as perform deeds which are beneficial to people in society.

Considering the family as very important, many Chinese place the meaning and value of life on the family. For some people, the meaning of life lies in the country, so they contribute to the prosperity and strength of the country. These are different ways of affirming the meaning of life.

In the final analysis, life is imbued with meaning, despite its suffering and the transience of worldly phenomena, so we should strive in the direction of goodness. However, this is the worldly perspective. Upon deeper probing, this way of affirming the meaning of life is inevitably problematic: if the meaning of life is placed upon the family, then where does the meaning of life lie for one who does not have children?

As for the country, history tells us that countries may flourish, decline or even perish. If the meaning of life is placed upon one's country, wouldn't it also come to naught?

The above analyses show that we cannot find the true meaning of life from worldly thought and theories.

In my opinion, it is only in the Buddhist teachings that a definitive elucidation of the true meaning of life can be found. Even though Buddhism teaches that life is suffering, it does not negate human life and moreover, does not allow people to give up on life. Buddhism encourages people to affirm life resolutely, as well as make positive use of life and enrich life, so as to accomplish the perfection of life, whereupon one will enjoy true freedom and bliss.

This is the highest ideal in the Buddhist affirmation of life. It is only by striving toward this highest ideal in life that one can discover the true meaning of life. Of course, this highest ideal in life cannot be achieved in one single leap.

Buddhism elucidates the meaning of life from two aspects:

(1) Relative Meaning of Human Life

In the Buddhist view, the relative meaning of life is not ultimate.

Life neither appears suddenly nor becomes nullified at its end with nothing left. The Buddhist view of life extends across the past, present and future. This applies not only to human beings, but also heavenly gods, hell beings, animals and other sentient beings. For every life form, there are causal relationships extending from past lives to subsequent lives. A human has material form of the body and inner mental functions, being a union of mind and body. This is true not only in the present life, but also in past and future lives.

The flow of life extends continuously through the past, present and future, like one wave succeeding another without interruption. This is the Buddhist view of life phenomena. It is a misconception to think that nothing is left after death.

There is a Buddhist saying, “Everything has to be abandoned, only your deeds (karma) follow you.”

The deeds of a person in his life, whether good or bad, are not nullified after the actions, but will produce their effects. In Buddhism, deeds or volitional actions are called “karma”.

Any volitional action, whether it is thought in the mind, spoken by mouth, or done with the body, seems to be past after the deed, but there is actually a remaining effect called “karmic force”.

When this life comes to an end, you get reborn into another life form and start volitional actions again. Whether the new life is good or bad depends on how well you fare in this life. If you live wholesomely in this life, your future life will certainly be good. If you live unwholesomely in this life, your future life will naturally be unfavourable.

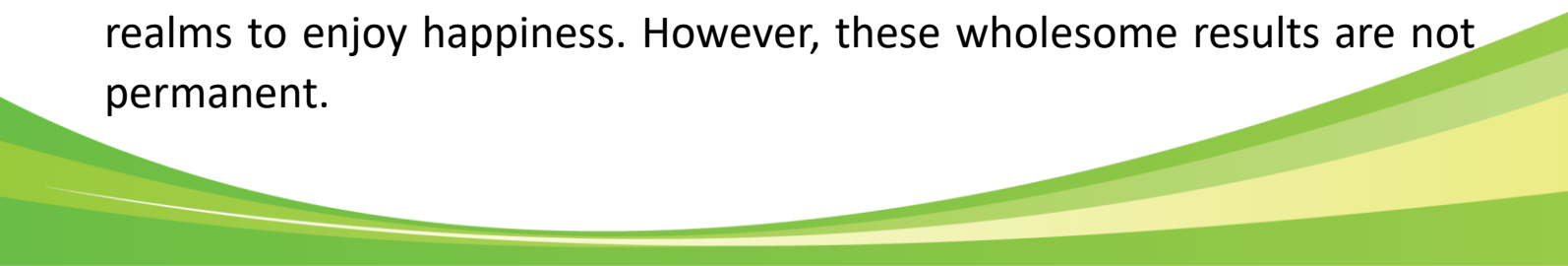
Our actions in this life will affect our future lives. Therefore, we absolutely cannot say that nothing is left after death. One’s physical body disintegrates at death, but the good and bad deeds that one has done will certainly produce their respective results of happiness and suffering in future lives. Based on the Buddhist teaching on the law of karma, which operates through the past, present and future, we have deep conviction that volitional actions will produce results, so life cannot be said to be meaningless.

Since life is imbued with meaning, everyone should conduct himself properly as a human, then how could anyone be pessimistic or world-weary?

The Ultimate Meaning of Human Life

The meaning of life mentioned above is elementary and worldly. That is not the highest, ultimate meaning.

Good deeds bear good results for rebirth in the human or heavenly realms to enjoy happiness. However, these wholesome results are not permanent.



When the karmic force is exhausted, one will degenerate into lower realms of existence again.

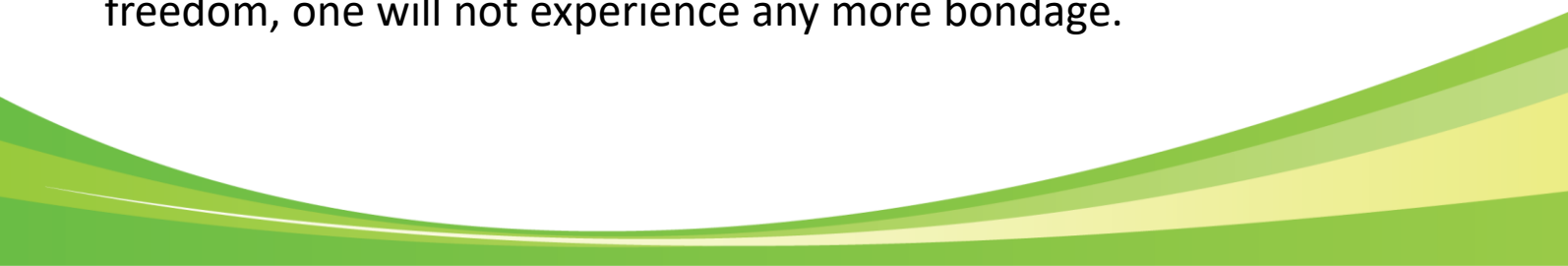
With bountiful wholesome karma and meritorious blessings, one can be reborn in the highest heaven. Yet, regardless of how long a celestial lifespan is or how abundant heavenly bliss is, one will eventually degenerate from the heaven.

We circulate endlessly in the six realms of rebirth, sometimes in higher realms of existence and sometimes in lower realms. In this regard, life seems to be meaningless. Some people become disheartened by this and disinclined to do anything at all. “Lead a mediocre life and just flow along with the circumstances! There is no need to be so serious.” If you think in this manner, you might become pessimistic and world-weary!

Then, can the problems of human life be overcome? Can we not circulate in cyclic rebirths? According to the ultimate teachings of Buddhism, we certainly can be freed from cyclic rebirths, to gain true freedom and happiness. Viewing life from the highest ideal, Buddhism not only considers cyclic rebirths as absolutely surmountable, even Buddhahood can be accomplished by all.

Therefore, it is said in Mahayana Buddhism that “everyone can attain Buddhahood”. Once one attains Buddhahood, one gains absolutely limitless life, thus achieving the ideal state of permanence, bliss, true self and purity.

This enduring Dharmic bliss is different from the relative suffering and happiness of worldly existence. With the attainment of enduring freedom, one will not experience any more bondage.



With the attainment of enduring purity, one will no longer be tainted by defiled volitional actions. Accomplishing the absolute life of permanence, bliss, true self and purity is perfect fulfilment of the ultimate meaning of human life, so how could it be said that life is meaningless?


In Buddhism, the ultimate meaning of human life lies in the ability of everyone to attain liberation and Buddhahood, which is the highest ideal in life.

Buddhism takes the preliminary view that life is impermanent and hence full of suffering, illusory and not truly substantial. However, this absolutely does not imply that life is meaningless. Buddhism wants us to gain insight into the imperfection of life.

Even so, amidst the ups and downs in cyclic rebirths, if we truly do good deeds, we still fulfil the meaning of life. Before attaining supramundane liberation, it is essential for us to do good deeds. Otherwise, we will degenerate in future lives. Neither will we fare well in this life.

As a human, it is most important to think constantly of how to be free from vexation and suffering, so as to gain lasting, ultimate happiness. Therefore, whether from the worldly or supramundane perspective, Buddhism considers life as meaningful.

If a person thinks that he is useless and his life is meaningless, then he will not be inclined to do good deeds or cultivate himself through spiritual practice. Buddhism regards such people who despise themselves as most pitiable.



A true Buddhist must affirm the meaning of life, so he has to do good deeds, place his faith in Buddha, cultivate himself through spiritual practice, achieve liberation and moreover, strive towards Buddhahood.

Professor Ba Yinan said in Investigation on Eternal Life, "... having known from experience the true flavour of all suffering and happiness, yet able to transcend the influence of suffering and happiness, one thus understands and attains the true eternity of life."

I think this is indeed the meaning and value of life. It will be even better if one makes skilful use of this life, to gain liberation from suffering and help other people likewise.

5 Significance of Increasing Meritorious Blessings & Longevity

We have gained deeper understanding of the true meaning of life, so we participate earnestly in this Assembly to increase meritorious virtues and prolong our lives, as well as make skilful use of our lives to gain peace and happiness.

The objective of this Assembly is quest for happiness in this life, as Medicine Buddha's method of spiritual practice places importance upon happiness in this life. However, the achievement of happiness in this life merely fulfils the preliminary significance of human life.

A practitioner, who truly understands the Buddhist teachings, should not merely seek extensive meritorious blessings and longevity in this life, or get satisfied with that. He should further fulfil the ultimate meaning of life, that is, to seek the bliss of ultimate liberation. This is the root objective for participating in this Assembly.

Worldly bliss and blessings, no matter how wonderful, will eventually pass away. It is neither everlasting nor ultimate.

We cannot say that there is no need to seek worldly bliss and blessings, but it is limited after all. When one's blessings are exhausted, surfeited happiness turns into sorrow instead.


The blessings that a Buddhist seeks should be the immeasurable meritorious virtues of Buddhahood, which are perfect and ultimate, limitless and endless, as well as truly enduring.

In Buddhist discourses, Buddha is eulogised as being “awe-inspiring with perfect virtues” and Buddha's merits are described as immeasurable. All these express Buddha's perfection in merits and virtues.

We hold this Assembly for increasing merits, not just meritorious blessings for blissful human and heavenly existence, but more importantly, meritorious virtues for attainment of Buddhahood.

Therefore, I hope that you seek increase in meritorious blessings with this sublime aspiration, instead of merely seeking blessings for bliss in this life. Then, your participation in this Assembly will be even more meaningful. This is a very important aspect.

A long human life is certainly most ideal, so everyone likes to receive well wishes for longevity, such as “may you live to a hundred years”. Yet, human life certainly has to end one day, regardless of its span. It is absolutely impossible for us to be immortal without aging or have a limitless lifespan.




Our college holds this Assembly for increasing longevity. We do not just hope to lengthen your present lives. We all the more hope that you attain immeasurable life like Buddha. Buddha had attained immeasurable life, by virtue of his Three Bodies.

His Dharma-body has immutable continuity. His reward-body, dignified with immeasurable meritorious virtues, has unceasing continuity. His transformation-body, which manifests in diverse forms according to the needs of sentient beings, has successive continuity.

These Three Bodies constantly abide, so Buddha's life is immeasurable. It is only by attaining these Three Bodies like Buddha that one can gain immeasurable life. I hope that you come in quest of longevity with such an aspiration. If so, your participation in this Assembly will be exceedingly meaningful. Moreover, you will also attain immeasurable life gradually, thus truly achieving the objective of increasing longevity.

Everyone longs for meritorious blessings and longevity. A life with meritorious blessings and longevity is a most ideal life. However, it is only by attaining Buddhahood that one can truly gain immeasurable merits and immeasurable life. For one has not reached Buddhahood, his merits and lifespan are always limited.

Immeasurable merits and immeasurable life do not arise suddenly overnight. Neither can they be gained just by praying to Buddhas. They have to be gained through continual cultivation over long periods of time. For instance, in the course of fulfilling the bodhisattva practices, Shakyamuni Buddha had practised extensive giving of everything he had. Moreover, he abstained from harming all forms of life, even if they were minute.



We should start right now, bit by bit, to emulate Buddha's exemplary conduct when He was a bodhisattva-aspirant in the causal stage. Through cultivation over a long period of time, we shall achieve immeasurable merits and immeasurable life just like Buddha. Therefore, you should constantly seek increase in both merits and longevity. This is proper in the Buddhist path of practice.

6 Conclusion

Today, we participate in this Assembly for increasing meritorious blessings and longevity. It is clearly stated in Discourse on Medicine Buddha, "He who seeks longevity shall gain longevity; he who seeks abundance shall gain abundance." Buddha's utterances are words of truth and veracity. Meritorious blessings and longevity can indeed be gained through earnest aspiration. You can have deep conviction in Buddha's words beyond any doubt.

However, in our quest for meritorious blessings and longevity, we should not be satisfied with meagre gain. Do not think that you have gained sufficient meritorious blessings and longevity by participating in the Assembly this year, so you need not increase meritorious blessings and longevity any more in future. This is a wrong idea. Before attainment of Buddhahood, we must not consider our meritorious blessings great enough or our lifespans long enough.

You may be satisfied with your estate property or wealth, then you will not seek more of these. However, you can never have too much of meritorious virtues. We should constantly seek merits. Buddha is a Fully Enlightened One with perfect meritorious virtues, yet He does not consider Himself to have excessive meritorious virtues, so how could we not seek further merits? It is the same with the quest for longevity.

We gather here today to increase meritorious blessings and longevity. Now, you have deep conviction that meritorious blessings and longevity can be gained with pious sincerity, so you are full of spiritual joy and beaming with smiles. I share your joy, which arises from the Dharmic bliss that you have gained. Amidst this Dharmic bliss, let us advance together on the path to Perfect Enlightenment! Let us cultivate extensively the causes for longevity and abundant meritorious blessings, so as to attain immeasurable life and merits!

