

PURELAND :

QUESTION & ANSWERS

Original: “*Tịnh Độ Thập Nghi Luận*”

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• QUESTION ONE :

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas take compassion as their life calling. Therefore, if those who have developed the bodhi mind wish to ferry other sentient beings across, they should vow to be reborn in the three worlds, in the depraved life of the three evil realms, in order to save sentient beings.

Why should we, who are followers of the Buddha, separate ourselves from sentient beings to live a selfish life of peace? Are we not lacking in compassion, obsessed with our egoistic needs, in contradiction to the very teachings of the Buddhas?

ANSWER:

There are two categories of Bodhisattvas.

- 1) To those who have practiced the Bodhisattva path for a long time and have achieved ultimate patience, the above reproach does apply.
- 2) Those disciples who have not yet reached the stage of non-birth, and those human beings who have just begun to develop the Bodhisattva mind, need to spend most of their time close to the Buddhas. Only then can they hope to master the power of patience. Which would allow them to enter into the depraved environment of the triple realm, to save sentient beings.

This is the reason why the **TRÍ ĐỘ LUẬN Commentary** states:

It is not a wise move for human beings who are bound by afflictions, even if they are possessed of a compassionate mind, to seek a premature rebirth in this evil life, to save suffering beings.

Why is this so? Because in this life of depravity, awash with retribution and afflictions, those who do not possess the power of patience are, by necessity, influenced by external circumstances; they are bound by sight, sound, fame and profit, which lead to the three poisons of desire, anger and ignorance. Thus, they cannot even save themselves, much less others.

If, for example, you are born a human being in the depraved and wicked environment, full of heretics and nonbelievers, of the human realm, you will find it difficult to meet individuals who truly follow the right path. Therefore, it will not be easy to hear the Buddha dharma and attain the goal of the sages.

Of those who planted the seeds of charity, morality and blessings in past lives, and are now, therefore enjoying honor and power, how many are not infatuated and sunk in their environment of wealth and fame, dissipated in the entanglement of desire and lust?

Thus, even if they were to be counseled by a good spiritual advisor. They would refuse to listen and take the necessary action. To satisfy their lust, they take advantage of their existing power and influence, and create many bad karmas. Thus, when their current life comes to an end. They will fall into the lower realms for countless eons, after which they will be reborn as human beings of low social and economic status. At that time, if they do not have the good fortune to meet a true spiritual advisor, they will continue to be deluded and create more bad karma, falling once again into the lower realms. From immemorial time, sentient beings caught up in the cycle of birth and death have belonged to this category. This is what is referred to as the **“difficult path to salvation”** in the **TRÍ ĐỘ commentary**.

The **“Vimalakirti Sutra”** also says:

If one cannot even cure one's own afflictions, how can one cure the afflictions of others?

The “TRÍ ĐỘ Commentary” also states:

It is as if there were two persons, each of whom sees a relative being carried away by flood waters. The first person, acting on impulse, hastily jumps into the water. However, because he lacks the necessary skillful means, both he and his relative would drown.

The second person, more intelligent and aware, hurries off to find a boat. He thus saves his relative without harming himself in the process. As in this example, the newly aspiring Bodhisattva, lacking the power of patience, cannot save sentient beings. Those Bodhisattvas who are close to the Buddhas and have attained ultimate forbearance can substitute for the Buddhas and ferry sentient beings across the sea of sufferings.

This is like a young child who should not stray too far from his mother. If he does, he could either fall into a hole or a well, drown in the river or die of starvation. This is also the case of the newly hatched bird whose wings are not yet fully developed and who can only hop from branch to branch. It can only bide its time until it can fly afar leisurely and without impediment.

Human beings who lack forbearance should concentrate on reciting Amitabha Buddha's name, to achieve one – focus mind. Once that goal is reached, at the time of death they will certainly be reborn in the Pureland. When they have seen Amitabha Buddha and reached the state of non – rebirth, they can, at will, guide the boat of ultimate patience in the sea of birth and death, to ferry sentient beings across and fulfill the countless words of the Buddhas.

That is why Buddhist disciples of compassionate mind, who wish to teach and convert sentient beings in hell, and to enter the sea of birth and death, should bear in mind the cause and conditions for rebirth in Pureland. This is referred to as the “easy path to salvation” in the “Tỳ- Bà-Sa Commentary” by Patriarch Nagarjuna.

● **QUESTION TWO:**

The nature of all phenomena is emptiness, always unborn, equal and still. Are we not going against this truth when we try to leave this world and seek rebirth in Pureland ? The sutras also teach that “to be reborn into Pureland one should first purify one's mind; only when one's mind is pure will the Buddhas' lands be pure”. Aren't Pureland devotees violating this truth ?

ANSWER:

This question can be answered on two levels.

- 1) **On the macro level.** If you think that seeking rebirth in Pureland is leaving here and seeking rebirth there and is therefore incompatible with the truth, which is always equal and thus, are you not falling into the same trap by getting stuck in this world and not seeking rebirth?

If, on the other hand, you say, “**I am not seeking rebirth there nor do I want to remain here**”, you fall into the error of nihilism. [A quote from the Diamond Sutra follows].

- 2) Specifically, since you have pressed the issue of “**no birth**” and the “**pure mind**”, I would like to explain as follows.
- 3) “**No birth**” stands for the truth of no birth, no death. “No birth” means that all phenomena are false aggregates, born of causes and conditions, with no intrinsic nature of their own. Therefore they have no “**birth nature**” or “**birth time**”. Upon analysis, they come from nowhere, and therefore they are said to have no birth.
- 4) “**No death**” mean that, since phenomena have no intrinsic nature, when they are extinguished they

cannot be said to be dead. Because they have no real place to return to, they are said to not be extinct (*no death*).

That is why the truth of no birth, or no birth no death, cannot exist outside of the temporary phenomena. Thus, no birth does not mean not seeking rebirth in the Pureland.

The “TRUNG QUÁN Commentary” says:

All phenomena are born of causes and conditions. I say they are thus empty. They are also called false and fictitious, and that is also the truth of the Middle Way.

The “Vimalakirti Sutra” says :

Although [the Bodhisattvas] understand that all Budha Lands and sentient beings are empty, they still often practice the Pureland dharma to teach and convert sentient beings...It is as if you were building houses and palaces.

If you decided to build on empty lots, you could do so at will; however, if you wanted to build in the middle of empty space, it would of course, be impossible. When the Budhas preach, they usually rely on the relative and absolute truths. Thus, while revealing the true nature of all phenomena, they do not destroy their fictitious nature.

That is why those who have wisdom. While striving for rebirth in the Pureland, also understand that the nature of rebirth is non-existent. This is the true meaning of **“no birth”** and a **“pure mind in a pure land”**.

On the other hand, the dull and ignorant are bound up in words. When hearing **“birth”**, they immediately think of actual birth; upon hearing **“no birth”**, they cling to its literal meaning, thinking that there is no rebirth anywhere. Little do they know that **“birth”** is **“no birth”** and **“no birth”** is not incompatible with **“birth”**.

Because they do not understand this truth, they become argumentative, slandering and deprecating toward those who seek rebirth. This is a great mistake.