THE ANANDA REQUESTS THE BUDDHA’S INSIGHT INTO THE WOE AND WEAL OF THE FAITHFUL SUTRA

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As the translator of this sutra, I hereby dedicate all of the blessings and merits accrued from translating this sutra to my Mother and Father. May they have long life, prosperity, leisure and health.

- Brian Chung (Translator), June 11th 2016
TRANSLATOR’S FOREWORD

This sutra is of unique importance in our current era, and all who wish to cultivate the Dharma must study it as their first text. For this sutra clearly outlines important and fundamental principles that all cultivators must heed in order to not fall astray. With the right mind and understanding, practice of the Way can be straightforward and swiftly rewarding. However, the greatest danger is to think that one is walking on the correct path but actually veering further and further away from all that which is proper. If one then slanders the Dharma as retributions inevitably arise, evil karma and the attendant woes would only accumulate to ever more disturbing levels.

Unfortunately, such pitiful occurrences are particularly common in the age we currently live in, which is the Dharma-ending age. Therefore, the Buddha spoke this sutra specifically to benefit cultivators in our current era of obstacles, turbidity and temptations.

I would also like to express my great gratitude to the Venerable Master Chin Kung. If it were not for his excellent Dharma lectures and his detailed commentary on the Classical Chinese version of this sutra, this translation would not have been possible.

Lastly, I wish to make clear once more that this translation has been released into the Public Domain. Thus, anyone may use it for any purpose. As it is meritorious to spread the Dharma, I beseech all who read this to share it with their friends and family.
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Ananda asked the Buddha: “Some who practice the Dharma become prosperous, noble and achieve their dreams, however, others who do the same descend into poverty, disgrace and ruin. Why the difference? I humbly request He Who Surpasses Even The Heavens to reveal insight regarding this matter to the masses!”

The Buddha replied: “Some who practice the Way receive the Dharma and precepts from Sages. They faithfully and attentively observe everything they have been taught without fail. They cultivate diligently and are loath to lose their virtue.”

“They honor Buddha images and emulate the virtues exemplified by them. With reverence, they rectify their conduct; with respect, they offer light offerings. Moreover, they shed their defilements by practicing generosity without attachment. Thus, they reap true peace in return. Their hearts and minds are untainted by anything that contradicts virtue, righteousness and the Dharma. Furthermore, their purity and temperance are unhindered by slothfulness. Blissful are their hearts! As they are protected by auspicious devas, their endeavors meet no resistance and progress with unrivaled swiftness. The gods, celestial dragons and the masses all respect them.”

“Eventually, they will attain the Way. Only men and women of such virtue are fit to be called the Buddha’s true disciples.”

“There are also some who think they are practicing the Dharma but do not follow virtuous teachers. They neglect to study the true meaning of the sutras and they receive the precepts in name only. They are obstinate and of little faith. Thus, their actions contradict
the precepts. Their faith in the principles of the Dharma are always compromised, and so, they capriciously choose to accept some and reject the other. Moreover, they show no respect towards the sutras and Buddha images. As they fail even to light incense, offer lights and show reverence, evil habits and doubts inevitably become entrenched within their hearts.”

“Furthermore, they unleash scathing words upon others and are jealous of the virtuous and their good deeds. They also do not observe the eight precepts on the six designated days of each lunar month. With their hands, they take life and shed blood. As they do not respect the sutras, they irreverently place them in dirty closets, hang them from walls or toss them onto their marriage beds. They fail to treat the sutras like honored guests and make light of them by handling them the same way they would a common book or rag.”

“Whenever such people are stricken with illness, they do not seek recovery through virtue and the proper Dharma. Instead, their doubts prompt them to seek the counsel of occultists or quacks. As they sacrifice to evil spirits and ghosts, auspicious celestial devas are forced to abandon them, leaving them bereft of divine protection. Naturally, demons move closer to them with each passing day and evil ghosts quarter at their gates. Thus, decline and decay becomes their reality, and their endeavors meet stiff resistance.”

“Such people have only just been reborn here after lifetimes in the evil realms. As they commit evil in this life, they are not fit to be counted among the Buddha’s disciples.”
“Upon death, they cannot avoid descending into the hells where they will be judged and punished. Thus, the evil are troubled by waning prospects while they live and are punished in the evil realms after death. Such indescribable suffering is caused by the accumulation of evil and the rejection of kindness and virtue.”

“The deluded who lack discernment tumble amid their own blindness. They never ponder deeply their past lives and the cause of their retributions. Yet, they blasphemy that cultivating the Dharma yields undesirable results. They are ignorant to the fact that they have accomplished no merit or good deeds in their prior lives. Foolishly, they become hostile to both Heaven and Earth. Moreover, they criticize the Sages and level accusations against the Heavens above. Such people of this world are sorely confused and lack wisdom.”

“The hearts of the confused are far from serene and very irresolute. Thus, their every move fails to accord with sense and reason. Moreover, they disregard the unsurpassed kindness shown to them by the Buddha and stubbornly refuse to repent. They are mired in the very three poisons which create the infernal realms.”

“Therefore, it is paramount for everyone be aware of the consequences of their own good and evil conduct, and of situations that may provoke their past evil tendencies. For every act there is an echo. Thus, prudence is absolutely necessary!”

“The Ten Evils are your nemesis while the Ten Virtues are your dearest allies. The key to achieving an easeful heart and realizing the Way is to practice virtue and good deeds.
Virtue is a cuirass that fears no enemy; virtue is a mighty ark that can sail across the stormy seas. If you can be resolute in virtue, good fortune and harmony will naturally dawn upon you. From virtuous deeds to blissful blessings, it is all entirely of your own doing, and not that of the gods. Thus, if you refuse to be faithful and do good from now on, your retributions are bound to worsen.”

The Buddha continued: “Ananda, the results of good and evil pursue people like a shadow following the form. Therefore, neither reward nor retribution can be evaded. The matter of virtue and vice is thus. Do not be doubtful and end up falling into the evil realms. Virtue and vice are clearly distinguishable, thence, always exercise proper faith and careful discernment. All who do so will surely find lasting peace. The Buddha’s words are ever sincere and never false.”

The Buddha reiterated: “The essence of the Tathagata’s message has always been thus. To be able to witness a Buddha’s appearance in this world is the rarest privilege. Moreover, opportunities to study the sutras or hear the Dharma are always extraordinarily limited. Only those who have amassed merit in lives past may have the honor of waiting upon the Buddha today.”

“Thus, always be grateful and take nothing for granted. Show your gratitude by spreading the Dharma at every opportunity. Become a model of virtue and point the way towards fields of merit. He who faithfully plants good deeds will certainly reap prosperity and leisure in the lives to come.”
Ananda reverently accepted the Buddha’s teachings and proceeded to cultivate it in accordance with the spirit of Samantabhadra.

Ananda then asked the Buddha: “If a man does not personally kill with his own hands, is he blameless?”

The Buddha replied: “To teach or order another to take life is a greater offense than doing it yourself. The reason is that some people kill because they are forced to do so by magistrates and those who wield authority. Moreover, persons of low and servile status are often lacking in discernment and must follow orders. Thus, their culpability is lower. However, those who abet the taking of life or conjure murderous schemes and commands have malice in their heart. They are dark hearted, bent on harming others and have no compassion. Their actions make light of the Triple Jewel and betray their own conscience. Thus, they eagerly commit atrocities or strike fear in the hearts of men. Grave are their guilt and culpability.”

“From murder rises blood feuds and cycles of vengeance that span across endless lifetimes. Never enjoying peace and safety for as long as they live, the murderous must suffer an onslaught of threats and misfortunes. Afterwards, they will fall into the hells. Losing their human form, they are reborn as animals to be slaughtered. Floundering amidst the three sufferings and eight difficulties, they are repeatedly served on men’s dinner tables for hundreds of millions of eons, without an end in sight. Their lot is to bear hardships; to graze and drink from creeks.”
“In the past, when the present generation of beasts and animals were still men, they were violent and rebellious. They engaged in intrigue and held no faith in the Dharma. Ever full of resentment in every lifetime, they are trapped in a cycle of mutual enmity. Though the deluded are the same in spirit, they assume different forms as they cycle around the Samsara, thus driven by their heavy evil karma.”

Ananda then asked: “When people and disciples disdain and make light of their teachers or virtuous cultivators, what is the offense they incur?”

The Buddha replied: “All must know that it is their duty to delight in the good deeds of others. They must never be jealous. To harbor evil intent against cultivators of the Way and sagely teachers is the same as to blasphemy against the Buddha. Such behavior is as foolish as shooting oneself with a heavy ballista.”

The Buddha turned to Ananda and asked: “Wouldn’t that be painful?”

Ananda replied: “Very painful, very painful indeed!”

The Buddha then said: “He who harbors malice against cultivators of the Way and sagely teachers will suffer such terrible and acute retribution that even the pain of being shot by a heavy ballista pales in comparison.”

“Those who are disciples must never make light of their teachers or treat virtuous cultivators with contempt. They must respect them as they would the Buddha himself.”
Moreover, thoughts of jealousy or irreverence must not be entertained. When they witness good deeds being done, they must delight with joy and offer praise and assistance. He who truly and diligently cultivates virtue commands the admiring respect of the Heavens, celestial dragons and spirit deities. The karmic retributions of those who jealously subvert the endeavors of the virtuous are so frightening that even an inferno or the pain of slow slicing are mild in comparison. Offenses of such gravity must be vigilantly avoided.”

Ananda further inquired: “If a teacher were to punish arbitrarily, or if he were to punish a light mistake severely, would he be in the wrong?”

The Buddha replied: “Such abuse is strictly forbidden. There must be righteousness between master and disciple, and only such honor will generate true and mutual trust. They must warmly interact like kinfolk. Moreover, the master must look upon the disciple as his own offspring and the disciple should likewise see him as a father or elder brother.”

“When discipline is warranted, it must be meted out in accordance with reason, and teachings must reflect propriety and the Way. Do not dole out what you loathe to receive. By propagating and displaying propriety, moderation and virtue, grievances will naturally subside. The same is true for the disciple. Both sides must sincerely do their duty and know their responsibilities. They must never slander each other. Furthermore, neither should disciples harbor toxic resentments nor teachers exaggerate minor flaws as major offenses. They are one unit and must mutually cooperate.”
“If you are fortunate enough to study under a great master, you must be filial. Never even dare display arrogance or contempt. To make light of a good teacher is to make light of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and your parents. Such ingrates are rejected by even the all-embracing Heaven and Earth!”

“I will tell you now that in the future Dharma-ending age, the ranks of men will be swamped by the wicked. They will be treacherous, unfilial, cruel, unrighteous and inhumane. In this era of delusion, demons and scoundrels will infiltrate the Sangha. Whether monk or novice, many of them will be willfully blind to their own ever mounting evil but eagle-eyed to the real or perceived offenses of others. They will envy the Sages and be jealous of the virtuous. Moreover, they will proceed to subvert the good works of others. They themselves will disdain to do any good, be brutishly obstinate and envious of the Sages. Not only do they neglect to uphold the Dharma, they shamelessly sabotage the efforts of the faithful who do so. Thus, they effectively block the Way path to salvation and lead many astray. As they are decadent and hanker after profit, they hoard wealth and pile up money. Ignorant they are to the fact that such conduct is both harmful and corrupting. Naturally, when their lives end, they will fall into the evil paths and become hell-beings, emaciated ghouls and animals.”

“It shouldn’t be like this. Thence, what is the proper way to act in this world? It is simple: Cultivate perseveringly in order to repay the Buddha’s kindness, uphold the sutras and the precepts, and be a guiding light to the masses. The Way must be studied, the sutras must be read and recited, and good deeds must be done. Cultivate kindness and become a worthy model of virtue. Lift your consciousness away from suffering and forever out of the
clutches of birth and death. Neither make light of the Sages nor slander the virtuous. Moreover, do not misrepresent small mistakes as major crimes. Great is the offense of acting contrary to the Dharma and its tenets. As reward and retribution are clearly delineated, who can afford not to be cautious?”

Finally, Ananda asked: “To You Who Surpasses Even The Heavens, how should the faithful of the Dharma-ending age, having arisen due to causes and conditions, support their households and manage temporal matters?”

The Buddha said: “Ananda, they must abide by the precepts and cultivate with faith and sincerity. They shall be filial and prudent. Moreover, they are to respect and take refuge in the Triple Jewel, support their parents and be loyal to their community. They must be virtuous to the core and refrain from hypocrisy. Although they are allowed to manage temporal affairs, they may never be guided by a worldly heart.”

Ananda then said: “He Who Surpasses Even The Heavens, please explain the difference between temporal affairs and the worldly heart.”

The Buddha further elaborated: “Laypersons may engage in trade, commerce and business. However, they must do so with honesty, honor and in accordance with their conscience. Moreover, time honored traditions such as marriages, funerals, ceremonies, traveling and soirees are all considered to be temporal affairs. However, a worldly heart is given to ignorance. Thus, cultivators are forbidden from fortune telling, Feng Shui, consorting with shamans, practicing occult mantras, inflicting curses, sacrificing to evil
ghosts, ritually petitioning to deities and spirits, and from selecting auspicious dates and hours.”

“Those who have truly received the Buddha’s precepts are blessed and meritorious. If they happen to meet a dilemma, they should consult the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, for their vast wisdom is deeply profound and their foresight unsurpassed. The virtuous and temperate enjoy divine protection on account of their cultivation of the Way. They are revered by the Heavens, celestial dragons and deities. Furthermore, strict virtue begets the highest honor and blesses all endeavors. Thus, when protected by virtue, what is there to fear?”

“As the Way is boundless and encompasses both Heaven and Earth, only those who fail to understand are anxious and impeded. The matter of virtue and vice lies squarely in the hearts of men, and woe and weal will follow each like a shadow, an unavoidable echo of their own doing. Unwavering virtue and strict adherence to the precepts will naturally draw in blessings and responses. Protected by the Heavens, the will of the virtuous are always realized. Their kindness moves the entirety of the ten quarters to tears and they conform with natural law. Moreover, the augustness of their merit is indescribable and praised by the multitude of Sages! The wise can easily see the true nature of the Samsara, and so, they ardently guard against committing any evil. Lastly, anyone who can cultivate the Dharma with artful skill and adaptability may transcend this world.”

Ananda, having heard the Buddha’s teachings, immediately straightened his robes and prostrated with his head touching the ground.
He then declared: “I have faithfully received your teachings for the benefit of the masses. The assembly present today, being of abundant merit, has enjoyed the rare honor of meeting the Tathagata, who is impartially kind, of boundless compassion, and establishes fields of merit for all beings so they may be liberated. The Buddha’s words are true but believers are few, for this world is full of evil and lacking in good. People curse and slander each other, creating a truly pitiable sight! If there are those who take heed of these teachings, they number but one or two. How did the world come to such a sorry state? After the Buddha’s parinirvana, the sutras will still remain but will find no believers, and will gradually fade away as a result. Alas! Such a shame! Oh World-Honored One, I beseech you to forever remain in this world so that the multitudes who depend on you will not be left orphaned in glooming darkness!”

Ananda then spoke the following hymn:

“The Buddha is the savior of the three realms; he is of vast kindness and universal compassion. For the sake of the unsaved, he cannot retire from this world. Those who can heed the Dharma are few and far between. Eyes and minds are now increasingly closed to the truth. What a pity! But those sunk in offenses are unfortunately so.”

“Those of past merit who heed the Dharma today, Number as few as one or two, As the Dharma teeters and falls away, Precious little remains for others to look up to!”
“The Buddha’s kindness is certainly not small,
And your karma is authored by you alone,
The Dharma-drum can shake the universe and all,
Thus, how could it not be widely known?”

“This turbid world reeks of the depraved,
For its people are willingly tumultuous,
They exploit the Dharma while slandering Sages,
And destroy the righteous with the false and heinous.”

“They refuse to believe in the Thus Come One,
And blasphemy that the Dharma is not Great,
Thus, they are unworthy of humanity and are done,
For they accumulate crimes of great weight.”

“Life ending they descend into the Relentless Hell,
Where swords and cutlasses quarter and carve,
Pursued by the cruel and hideous wardens as well,
They are then tossed into cauldrons filled with boiling tar.”
“The lustful must embrace searing bronze columns,
While engulfed in flames and fires,
And those who have defamed the pure and solemn,
Will have their tongues torn out by pliers.”

“The drunk are crude and sunk in impropriety,
So confused they ignore duty and lose their dignity,
Naturally, they will tumble into the hells,
Where they are forced to drink from molten wells.”

“The evil always suffer and groan,
For their pain is simply indescribable,
And when they are finally reborn as men,
They will be poor, base and undesirable.”

“All those who steadfastly refuse to take life,
Will naturally enjoy health, strength and long lives,
And he who abstains from larcenous stealth,
Shall be rewarded with great and overflowing wealth.”

“The chaste become pure, tranquil and fragrant,
Their bodies will be scented and serene,
And as they are ever so august and resplendent,
They will surely attain the dignity of a Great King.”
“The sincere, honest and truly genuine,
Are whom all men will surely venerate,
And the Way and bright inner wisdom,
Are forever the birthright of the temperate.”

“The five kinds of wealful virtue soars above mundane concerns,
For they are equal to the merit of those who dwell in Heaven,
Virtuous seeds generate unsurpassed and manifold returns,
And the law of good and evil is clearly distinguished and even.”

“In the Dharma-ending age when the wicked thrive,
Many will lack faith and be seeped in doubt,
As the foolish are discernment deprived,
Upon them glooming offenses always lour!”

“They smother the Sages and hinder the Bodhi-path,
And so they fall into the Tartarus of Jagged Steel when they pass,
As their souls are fated to be mired in hell’s ire,
They will be mockingly crowned with iron and fire.”
“Though they yearn for the relief of death,  
They will find not even an ounce of rest,  
For their retribution is overwhelming and loath to relent,  
And so they must spend life after life in torment.”

“Alas, all this is the fruit of the worldly heart,  
Of misplaced faith in ghosts and wicked spirits,  
Of fortune telling and black art,  
For sacrifices are cruel and beget demerits.”

“Upon death they descend into the Eighteenth Hell,  
Where they will be punished by bladed rope,  
The eight types of hinderances are entrenched very well,  
And human rebirth is so elusive it is nearly a forlorn hope.”

“Finally they cycle back to the realm of men,  
But obstinate and dull they still remain,  
Fated to be deformed, deaf, mute, blind and crippled,  
They are ignorant of the Dharma, wicked and fickle.”
“As they are confused and ever so fallible,
In vile ideas and evil they quickly dabble,
And so Yama sentences them to become cattle,
Soon to be slaughtered by their foes and sold as chattel.”

“It is only natural for the nefarious to reap evil realm rebirth,
Where escape and pardon are supremely rare,
To gain the hard to get human form is cause for great mirth,
And the chance to meet the Dharma is scarce no matter where.”

“The World Honored One blesses everyone and you,
The entire Trailokya has benefited from his benevolence,
His widespread teachings are just like divine sweet dew,
For they guide the multitudes to cultivate with ease and excellence.”

“The exalted faithful who have already found their inner erudition,
Pities all who are still mired in cause and condition,
Thus, they eagerly pave for them a way to salvation,
Allowing the virtuous and heedful to escape from perdition.”

“Fortunate are we to be human and heedful of true guidance,
Such privilege must be complemented by purpose and pathfinding light,
Profound insight leads to true understanding of Non-abidance,
So take refuge and plant in the great merit field the seeds of everlasting life.”
“The Buddha’s kindness is second to none,
He remains in this world to turn the Dharma-wheel,
Sincerely vowing that all and everyone,
Will taste the sweet dew of Dharma that truly heals.”

“So board the ship of wisdom to the shores of liberty,
Sound the Dharma-gong to alert the three thousand realms,
We are all one for there is certainly no duality,
Thus, delay not in vowing for the unsurpassed truth!”

At the very moment Ananda finished his exhortation, the entire congregation opened their eyes and became resolute in their faith. They all vowed for the true and unsurpassed Way. Donning the armor of diligence, they eagerly advanced to retrieve the elixir that is Bodhi. Just as incense pervades across the three thousand realms, the newly Enlightened will preach to the unsaved and become a bridge leading to salvation.

And so, the entire assembly consisting of kings, officials, subjects, celestial dragons, gods and spirits all became jubilant after receiving the Buddha’s teachings and Ananda’s exhortation! They also felt a solemn pity for the yet to be saved and became fearful of ever falling astray again. Afterwards, they expressed their gratitude for the teachings they have received from the Buddha and Ananda, and proceeded to return home to cultivate.

Namo Amitabha!
THE PARABLE OF THE GUEST’S STAY

In a poem promoting abstinence from meat by Sung dynasty poet and statesman Su Tongpo, it is written that: “Human life is truly as short as a guest’s stay”.

He could not have been more correct. In this sutra, the Buddha has already mentioned that karmic retributions for our misconduct in this one life can last for hundreds of millions of eons. Thus, compared to such an unimaginable length of time, even the often sought for but rarely attained lifespan of a hundred years is much dwarfed in comparison.

Therefore, the temptations that we meet in life are indeed highly impermanent and illusory. In a way, our life in this world is like a trusted employee’s short business trip to a foreign country. No doubt, the employee will have a company provided credit card and hotel room reservation. These are like the home and income we have in our life. Moreover, the employee will also have fellow guests in the rooms next to his. These transient guests who will soon scatter to destinations all over the world are like the various people we meet throughout our life.

The employee’s purpose is to do his best to further the company’s interests during his short stay. If he does so, he will have a prosperous future when he returns. Likewise, our duty is to amass merits by being charitable, benefiting others and promoting proper teachings.
If the employee were to neglect to meet with prospective clients and instead become foolishly attached to the hotel (as if it were his own home) and hanker after room upgrades, abuse his company issued credit card on luxuries and feud with the other transient guests, then he would have utterly failed at his duty. Eventually, he will have to check out and return home to unemployment, embezzlement charges and civil lawsuits. Compared to his short one or two week trip, his woe will last for as long as he lives.

However, if he had focused dutifully on furthering the company’s interests, charged only reasonable or business related expenses to his credit card and remained unattached to the hotel, outside luxuries or other guests, then he would be able to return home to bonuses, promotions and a dream home. In this case, his weal will last for a lifetime.

Thus, the temptations, attachments and people we meet in this life are as impermanent and unimportant as hotel guests and hotel rooms. Moreover, wider sociopolitical matters are also as unworthy of deep emotional attachment as the local matters of a particular country are to the short term foreign visitors transiting through. Therefore, there really is nothing we can keep in this world. What matters are the lives to come. The good and evil we do in our short time here will make or break us for eons to come.

We must also keep in mind that even a seemingly small good deed will have massive rewards. For instance, according to the Ven. Master Chin Kung, a poor servant once offered leftovers to the Buddha as that was the only food he had. The Buddha declared that his act of generosity will result in many eons of Heavenly rebirth. **Thus, I encourage all who read this to henceforth do all good and refrain from all evil!**
THE IMPORTANCE OF STATUES AND IMAGES OF BUDDHAS AND BODHISATTVAS

“Moreover, Earth Store, in the future, good men or women, upon encountering images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Pratyekabuddhas, or Wheel-Turning Kings, may give gifts or make offerings to them. Such persons will obtain limitless blessings and will always enjoy supremely wonderful bliss among people and gods. If they can dedicate that merit to the Dharma Realm, their blessings and benefits will be beyond compare.”

-Chapter 10, Earth Store Sutra

According to the above passage from the important Earth Store Sutra, it is clear that those who revere and make offerings to Buddha images will receive enormous merit. For example, it is recorded in the sutras that those who offer flowers or fruits will be rewarded with beauty, wealth, upright appearances and so forth.

However, such good fortune is not the result of quid pro quo with the Buddha. They are the karmic results of education, virtue and wisdom. For instance, according to the Ven. Master Chin Kung,

“Buddha and Bodhisattva statues do not represent polytheism, the worship of more than one god. Each statue serves to inspire wisdom and awakening in each of us. They also represent certain aspects of Buddhism, which remind practitioners of the particular topic of teaching. For example, Guan Yin Bodhisattva, the most popular
Bodhisattva in China, represents Infinite Compassion. When we see this statue, it reminds us to apply compassion when dealing with the world, its people and surroundings. However, people nowadays worship Guan Yin Bodhisattva as a god and pray for the relief of suffering and to eliminate obstacles. This is a superstitious view and misconception because people forget the fact that the statues are expressions of concepts in Buddhism.”

Therefore, as mentioned by the Buddha in the Woe and Weal Sutra, the virtuous revere Buddha images and strive to emulate the wisdom and virtues the images represent. Each Buddha image has both obvious and hidden meanings that represent a principle of Dharma. For instance, Maitreya Bodhisattva’s large belly represents generosity and Manjusri Bodhisattva’s sword represents using diligent cultivation to cut through the gordian knot of delusions.

Thus, the practice of giving offerings is an expression of the virtues of courtesy, etiquette and propriety, and of gratitude for the teachings received. Moreover, the passage from the Earth Store Sutra begins by mentioning, “Good men or women”. In Buddhism, a good man or woman is someone who cultivates morality and virtue (e.g. the five precepts and eight precepts). Thus, Buddha images are about respectful learning and cultivation; they are not meant to be regarded as idols who bestow favors in exchange for sacrifices or homage. Only those who are sincere in rectifying their conduct can truly benefit from the Dharma.
According to the Ven. Master Chin Kung, how much a student can learn depends on the level of sincerity and propriety he shows. Therefore, the respectful and reverent naturally progress the most.

Therefore this is why cultivators must revere images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and make offerings of light, incense, flowers, valuables and fruits whenever they can. As long as they do so, they will gain both merits and seeds of wisdom.

Moreover, the merit from creating Buddha images are also profound and vast. For instance, according to the Sutra on the Production of Buddha Images, those who produce images of the Buddha will never again be reborn in the three evil paths. Moreover, they will have handsome features, good rebirths, virtuous families and great wealth.

Thus, no one should let this precious opportunity slip away. An altar where offerings can be placed must be sincerely set up; images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas should be printed and distributed.
BUDDHISM IS NEITHER RELIGION NOR PHILOSOPHY, IT IS AN EDUCATION

In the following excerpts from Ven. Master Chin Kung’s excellent speech titled “Buddhism as an Education”, the Dharma Master clearly outlines the true purpose of the Buddha’s teachings. People nowadays are confused about the true nature of Buddhism and increasingly regard it with the ignorance of the worldly heart. However, the truth could not be more different:
“The Cause of Our Chaotic World

Today’s societies in Taiwan and elsewhere in the world are rather abnormal, a phenomenon that has not been witnessed before either in the West or the East. Some Westerners have predicted that the end of the world will occur in 1999 and that Christ will return to earth for Judgement Day. Easterners have also predicted impending disasters that are similar to those predictions in the West, the only difference being the time frame, which is some twenty years later. Some of these are ancient prophecies, which we should not place too much importance on. However, if we view our environment objectively, we will realize that this world is really in danger. Environmental pollution has become a serious problem and now humankind has finally begun to understand the need for protecting our environment. However, the problem of mental or spiritual pollution is many times more serious than that of the environment. This is the source of worldly ills that not many people realize. The Chinese have a saying, “Education is most essential to establish a nation, train its leaders and its people.” For centuries, the Chinese have always believed in the primacy of education, which is considered the foundation for a peaceful and prosperous society. It provides the solution to a myriad of social ills and leads the way to changing one’s suffering into happiness. Education has a strong impact on the nation and its people. Moreover, elementary school is the foundation, the basic building block in an educational system.”

“Buddhism as an Education

Buddhism officially came to China in 67 AD. The Emperor had sent special envoys to India to invite Buddhist monks to come to China to teach Buddhism, which in that period, was regarded as an educational system, and not as a religion. Regretfully, about two hundred years ago, the practice of Buddhism had taken on a more religious facade. Therefore, the purpose of this talk is to correct this misunderstanding, by leading us back to the original form of Buddhism as taught by Buddha Shakyamuni.”

“The Goal of the Buddha’s Teaching

Buddhism is Buddha Shakyamuni’s educational system, which is similar to that of Confucius for both presented similar viewpoints and methods. The goal of Buddhist education is to attain wisdom. In Sanskrit, the language of
ancient India, the Buddhist wisdom was called "Anuttara-samyak-sambhodi" meaning the perfect ultimate wisdom. The Buddha taught us that the main objective of our practice or cultivation was to achieve this ultimate wisdom. He further taught us that everyone has the potential to realize this state of ultimate wisdom, as it is an intrinsic part of our nature, not something one obtains externally. However, most of us have become confused through general misconceptions and therefore, are not able to realize this potential. Therefore, if we break through this confusion, we will realize this intrinsic part of our nature. Thus, Buddhism is an educational system aimed at regaining our own intrinsic nature. It also teaches absolute equality which stemmed from Buddha's recognition that all sentient beings possess this innate wisdom and nature. Therefore, there is no inherent difference among beings. Everyone is different now because we have lost our true nature and have become confused. The degree of wisdom exhibited by individuals depends on the degree of delusion and has nothing to do with the true nature of the individual. The Buddha’s teaching helps us to realize that innate, perfect, ultimate wisdom. With wisdom, we can then solve all our problems and turn suffering into happiness. Due to our lack of wisdom, we perceive, view and behave foolishly, and thus suffer the consequences evoked by our incorrect actions. If we have wisdom, our thoughts, viewpoints and behavior will be correct; how then can we suffer when there are no ill consequences to suffer from? Of course, we will be happy. From here, we can see that suffering is caused by delusion and the source of happiness is our own realization of wisdom."

“The Core of the Buddha’s Teaching

The Buddha's teaching contains three major points: discipline, meditation and wisdom. Wisdom is the goal and deep meditation or concentration is the crucial process toward achieving wisdom. Discipline through observing the precepts, is the method that helps one to achieve deep meditation; wisdom will then be realized naturally. Buddha's entire teachings as conveyed in the sutras never really depart from these three points. Buddhism encompasses the entire collection of works by Buddha Shakyamuni and is called the Tripitaka. This can be classified into three categories: sutra, vinaya (precepts or rules), and sastra (commentaries) which emphasize meditation, discipline, and wisdom respectively.”
“The Buddhist Educational Organization in China

Buddhist education is based on filial piety, as is the Chinese culture. Prior to the introduction of Buddhism to China, filial piety was the pillar of society and was supported by the wise men of ancient China. When Buddhist monks from India came to China and started to discuss Buddhism with government officials, it was immediately apparent to everyone that Buddhism shared numerous similarities with the indigenous Confucian traditions. Consequently, the government embraced them and requested that the monks stay in China permanently. The first two monks, who came to China, Moton and Chufarlan, were received by the "Hong-Lu-Si" which is equivalent to our present Foreign Ministry or State Department. "Si" was designated as a ministry of the government. The Chief of Hong-Lu-Si is equivalent to a foreign minister or Secretary of State. However, Hong-Lu-Si could only receive foreign guests temporarily. In order to allow them to stay permanently, the Emperor added another ministry, "Bai-Ma-Si," to take charge of Buddhist education. Originally, the "Si" had nothing to do with a temple, but merely denoted a ministry of the imperial court, now it denotes a temple in contemporary Chinese. So, there were two ministries in charge of education. The "Li-Bu," managed by the Prime Minister, was in charge of the traditional Confucian educational system. This organization served the same function until the early 1900’s. As the Emperor had given enormous support to the "Bai-Ma-Si," Buddhist education rapidly spread throughout China. In many instances, it had even far exceeded the efforts to educate people than the traditional education system of "Li-Bu." Consequently, there may not have been a Confucian school in every village, but there was a "Si" everywhere. Again, the Buddhist "Si," or temple, used to be an educational institution and did not perform religious ceremonies at all, unlike what often takes place in contemporary temples nowadays.”

“Another important mission for the original "Si" was sutra translation. The scale of the translation effort is hard to imagine today. During the seventh century, the famous monk Xuan-Tsuang had supervised six hundred scholars in sutra translation. Prior to this, a monk named Kumaraja had a translation team of about four hundred scholars. Therefore, the "Si" was a large governmental organization. Unfortunately, it was completely transformed into a place to deal with superstition and spirits around two hundred years ago. Its educational characteristics totally disappeared, which was truly regretful.”
“The Four Current Types of Buddhism

Today, there are four types of Buddhism being practiced. First, there is the religious Buddhism, which can be witnessed in temples throughout Taiwan. However, this does not represent the real Buddhism. Second, there is the academic Buddhism being taught in many universities today, where we see Buddhism being treated purely as philosophy, an academic pursuit, especially in Japan. This is not exactly Buddha's education either. Third, and the most unfortunate of all, is the total degeneration of Buddhism into a cult. This third type of Buddhism is much more damaging to the public than the first two types. Finally, there is the traditional Buddhism, the teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni in its true essence, which is very rare in our day and age.”

Link to full speech (highly recommended):

http://www.buddhanet.net/budasedu.htm
RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Venerable Master Hai Xian (1901-2013) Pure Land Rebirth Documentary (English subtitles):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoritpHKxm4