



Buddhism in China: Past, Present and Future

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Buddhism in China: Crisis and Hope

By Master Jingzong

English translation by Jingfa,
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Since its introduction into China two millennia ago, Buddhism has been accepted, digested, absorbed and transformed to nourish the spirit of the nation, providing sustenance to the Chinese soul. Such disciplines as philosophy, religion, culture and the arts have all been deeply influenced by Buddhism. Its impact was profound on the worldview, outlook on life, and values of the Chinese people. Indeed, Buddhism has been an inextricable part of China's distinguished traditional culture, entwined with popular customs, lifestyles and attitudes. China also became a second homeland to Buddhism.

How can Chinese Buddhism survive and develop in the present era? This is an issue of concern not only to the Buddhist community, but to our society at large. It has great significance for the preservation of our cultural roots, promotion of national peace and happiness, and development of social harmony and stability. It even affects our interaction with a multicultural world, for the purpose of coexisting peacefully and enjoying common prosperity.

This essay attempts to analyze the current status of Chinese Buddhism and assess its prospects – how it can avoid crisis and ignite hope. The author is acutely aware of its shortcomings and only wishes to initiate a discussion.

1. The Current Crisis in Chinese Buddhism

In short, Chinese Buddhism is facing a crisis. Though there are many aspects to the crisis, this article will examine it from a linear and a vertical perspective.

From a vertical, historical view, Buddhism flourished from the introduction of scriptures into China and their translation, through its localization process and the establishment of eight major schools during the Sui and Tang dynasties. Shining brilliantly, it spread to Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia and was uniquely influential in these regions. Then, like an arrow in a fully drawn bow, its momentum peaked and it went into decline during the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Today it has plumbed a nadir, with few accomplishments in Dharma-explication, the nurture of talent and expansion of the schools. The flames of enthusiasm from yesteryear have long since cooled. All that remains are a few flickering embers, buried deep within the ash heap of history.

From a horizontal perspective, modern transportation and communications, especially the rise of the internet, have accelerated the process of globalization. Even the vast Pacific Ocean has become a narrow ditch. As though through a magic lens, distant South America and Western Europe come into focus right before us. All kinds of peoples, languages, religions, cultures, beliefs and goods, seem to have assembled in a single room, before our very eyes. Chinese Buddhism was clearly unprepared for this new situation, and is at a loss to deal with it. It's as though many unfamiliar guests suddenly entered someone's home. Not only does the host not know how to treat his guests, he even feels his own identity under threat and his maneuvering space reduced. This is the predicament confronting Chinese Buddhism.

Consider a revealing example. During China's policy of reform and opening to the world over the last 30 years, the number of Christians in the country grew by several million. This should provoke Chinese Buddhists to reflect seriously: Can we still say that Chinese people don't need religion? Do Chinese have no affection for the Buddha? Are the teachings of Christianity superior to those of Buddhism? How did the progress of 30 years come to

exceed the advances over 2,000 years?

Clearly, Chinese Buddhism has been unable to keep pace with the times. After two millennia's immersion in a feudal agrarian system, it was abruptly dragged into the modern era and its complexities by three decades of reform and opening up. It can only look, astonished, at contemporary society, while the latter regards it as odd. So Buddhism and modern society are strangers to each other. They neither know each other, nor how to deal with each other. Some people even think of Buddhism as a cash cow, using religion to serve commercial ends. Repeated prohibitions of such activity have been ineffective.

If Chinese Buddhism doesn't transform and rejuvenate itself according to the temper of the times, it faces a bleak future.

2. Hopes for Chinese Buddhism

As long as the tinder isn't exhausted, there are hopes of reigniting the fire.

Buddhism in China faces a severe crisis, but it still has a solid foundation, built over 2,000 years. As long as we can identify the inheritance and recover the original inspiration, Chinese Buddhism can certainly flourish anew and illuminate the human world.

To be relevant, in both principle and practice, has always been the key to Buddhism's survival and development. In terms of principle, the goal must be to achieve nirvana and Buddhahood. In terms of practice, Buddhism must suit the needs of the time, place and people. And people must be able to practice it. In other words, Chinese Buddhism will only have a hopeful future if it can find a teaching and practice that would allow modern people to achieve Buddhahood in the contemporary environment.

With regards to principle, or teachings, the eight schools of Chinese Buddhism are equal. In terms of practice, however, people today live busy, fast-paced lives. They are full of worries and under heavy pressure. The Pure Land path fits the capabilities and circumstances of today's practitioners, allowing them to "attain nirvana without eliminating afflictions," as the saying goes. That is why we say the future of Chinese Buddhism lies with Pure Land. Indeed, the name *Namo Amitabha Buddha* is the undying spark of Buddhism.

There are five reasons for this:

i) Historical Evolution

Buddhism's evolution in China over two millennia can be summed up in the phrase, "With Ch'an as special characteristic, and Pure Land as summation."

The establishment of the various schools in the Sui and Tang dynasties marked the completion of the Sinification of Buddhism. Before that, it was mostly a process of transplantation, imitation and exploration. Though there were eight schools, the two that stood out

in terms of longevity, numbers of adherents and influence were Ch'an and Pure Land.

Ch'an was mainly for people with advanced abilities and received high acclaim, especially during the Tang and Song dynasties, which had a wealth of capable practitioners. Its momentum did not slacken until recent times, and it became the mainstream of Chinese Buddhism.

Pure Land accommodated practitioners of all capabilities, with average and lower ability as the mainstay. When practicing Pure Land, even those of superior ability considered themselves among the less adept, adopting extremely low profiles and exercising influence discreetly. Pure Land became the Dharma school with the most followers and the deepest roots in society. After all, practitioners with average and lower abilities far outnumbered those of advanced aptitude.

The Ch'an and Pure Land schools had close interactions, either openly or subtly, directly or indirectly. Ch'an provided the form, Pure Land the substance. Ch'an served as a guide, and Pure Land was the destination. It was during the Song Dynasty that Master Yongming

advocated a fusion of the Ch'an and Pure Land paths, steering followers of the former towards the latter. Subsequent patriarchs continued this course until Master Yinguang in modern times promoted Pure Land teaching and practice exclusively. The baton of Chinese Buddhism can be said to have passed from Ch'an to Pure Land. As Master Taixu of the Republican era said, "All Chinese Buddhism can now be summed up in a single recitation of 'Amitabha Buddha.'"

The Pure Land path of Amitabha-recitation was affirmed and promoted by the entire Buddhist community in China. It became the summation of Chinese Buddhism, the school with the most followers and the broadest foundation of faith. It was the greatest common factor of Buddhism in China.

Having received the baton, the Pure Land school must shoulder the heavy responsibilities of running the next leg of the relay. Clearly, it is not realistic to discuss the future development of Chinese Buddhism without considering the foregoing historical background and realities.

ii) The Call of the Times

If we look around, we can see that we are living in an era of complete other-power. Social productivity is continually rising and the division of labor is increasingly meticulous. Transportation, communications, the internet ... In everyday life, we are relying more and more on other people. The self-sufficiency of the agrarian era is long gone; these are times of intensive other-power karma. From food and clothing to transportation and travel, communications and shopping – everything is intangibly providing proof of that.

What kind of Buddhism do people of the current era need? Shakyamuni Buddha said, "The world is a projection of the mind, and the external environment reflects our inner state." When those who live in the material world are so dependent on other-power, they would be all the more so in their invisible spiritual life.

In the Amitabha-recitation of the Pure Land school, we rely entirely on Buddha-power. Reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha is simple, easy and can be done by anyone. Amitabha's vows ensure that everybody can achieve rebirth in the Land of Bliss. The path is most

suiting to the needs of contemporary people. It is practical, functional and efficacious, capable of benefitting modern people amid the rush of their busy lives. They will be at ease in life and unafraid of death. In this life and the next, they will feel complete and happy.

iii) The Prediction of the Buddhist Scriptures

In various sutras, Shakyamuni Buddha stated clearly that after he entered nirvana, his teachings would pass successively from the Age of Right Dharma (500 years), through the Age of Semblance Dharma (1,000 years) and to the Age of Dharma Decline (10,000 years). Then would come the Age of Dharma Extinction.

The *Great Collection Sutra* says, “In the Age of Dharma Decline, billions may practice but hardly one will accomplish the path. The cycle of rebirth can be transcended only through recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name.” States the *Infinite Life Sutra*: “In times to come, the sutras and the Dharma will perish. But out of pity and compassion, I will retain and preserve this sutra for a hundred years more. Those sentient beings that

encounter it can obtain deliverance as they wish.” We are now a thousand-odd years into the Age of Dharma Decline. It is precisely the time for the Pure Land path of Amitabha-recitation to come into its own and become popular.

iv) Factual Evidence

When people see monks, the first thought they have is “Amitabha.” In any temple, the first thing one sees is “Namo Amitabha Buddha.” In every monastery, the *Amitabha Sutra* is invariably chanted during morning and evening services. When monastics or lay Buddhists pass away, people recite “Namo Amitabha Buddha” to help them gain rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

In traditional monasteries, Ch’an meditation halls are closing one after another. But in cities and villages, centers for Amitabha-recitation are sprouting everywhere. Gaining enlightenment via the other schools is rarely reported, while rebirth in the Pure Land through Amitabha-recitation is regularly witnessed. If Chinese Buddhism hadn’t retained the imperishable spark of rebirth through recitation, it might have become history already.

iv) New Hope

Throughout the ages, even though the Pure Land path of Amitabha-recitation was well developed in China, it had not fully demonstrated its vitality. The main constraints involved principle and practice. Regarding the former, three masters, Tanluan, Daochuo and Shandao, had established during the Sui and Tang dynasties a complete system of thought for Pure Land Buddhism. However, the tradition wasn't passed on. After the Huichang Buddhism persecution of the late Tang and the chaotic wars of the Five Dynasties period, the transmission was lost in China. In subsequent times, successive generations in China learned Pure Land principles relying on interpretations by the Tiantai and Huayan schools. As for practice, they were heavily influenced by the self-power orientation of the Ch'an school. That was why the uniqueness of Pure Land deliverance, through the power of Amitabha's Fundamental Vow, could not be fully expressed.

It was only a century ago that the writings of Tanluan, Daochuo and Shandao returned to China from Japan. This laid the theoretical foundations of a new era

for the Pure Land school. Now, it has become a trend in Buddhist and academic circles to study the thought of Master Shandao and practice according to his teachings. The first light has dawned on a renaissance of the Pure Land school.

There are four special characteristics to Master Shandao's Pure Land thought. The first is that the school has its own independent, systematic principles for Dharma classification. It does not need to borrow anything from other schools. Secondly, with the guiding principles of "accepting and having faith in Amitabha's deliverance" and "single-mindedly reciting Amitabha's name," Pure Land is no longer subject to the self-power influences of the other schools. Third, it stresses "recitation of Amitabha's name, relying on his Fundamental Vow," "rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land's Realm of Rewards," "rebirth assured in the present lifetime" and "non-retrogression achieved in this lifetime." The benefits are even broader and more complete, with practitioners being reborn directly in the Pure Land's Realm of Rewards. Benefits also accrue in the present lifetime.

Finally, Pure Land Buddhism itself is classified into the “Path of Importance” and the “Path of the Great Vow.” This expediently makes use of the former, with its “dedication of merit from meditative and non-meditative virtues towards rebirth in the Pure Land,” to incorporate the practices of all other schools into the Pure Land tradition. The result is a system of Pure Land thought that is complete, rigorous and highly flexible in its functioning. It establishes the thought and perspectives of Pure Land from various eras, lending order and coherence to more than a millennium of Pure Land developments. Creating a scenario where there was a pooling of efforts to teach sentient beings and end doctrinal disputes, it boosts unity among Pure Land practitioners.

This essay is not an in-depth investigation of Dharma principles. But with many years’ experience of Dharma study and propagation, the monastic sangha of Hongyuan Monastery firmly believes that the Chinese Pure Land school established by Master Shandao during the Sui and Tang dynasties can bring about a modern transformation of Chinese Buddhism. Suited to the characteristics and capabilities of the contemporary public, it can open the path to a new future.

Some specific actions that would facilitate such a transformation:

1) Strengthening the Study of Theory

Theory, or doctrine, guides practice. We should take the three Pure Land sutras spoken by Shakyamuni Buddha and the commentaries of our lineage masters as the backbone, then incorporate teachings of the other schools and worldly virtuous practices into a theoretical structure comprising Ultimate Truths and Worldly Truths. We must also emphasize practical applications in today’s society.

2) Legalizing Amitabha-Recitation Centers

Chinese Buddhism has a long tradition of practitioners forming recitation centers. Pure Land practitioners believe deeply in karma, are mindful of impermanence, and are modest. Illuminated by the compassionate light of Amitabha Buddha, they have an anchor in life. Their hearts are serene, at peace, and they a source of positive energy in society. An Amitabha-recitation hall is like a spiritual green park in

a community. It nurtures the elderly, diminishes societal pressure, lifts negative sentiment, and purifies the heart and mind. It helps stabilize and harmonize society, as well as resolve conflict. And it does all this in a subtle manner.

Amid today's emphasis on the rule of law in national affairs, it is essential to register recitation halls in all parts of the country according to the law. It will guarantee that their positive energy is transmitted to society.

3) Enhancing Organizational Structure

The present structure is that the Buddhist Association of China, at all levels, is under an administrative subdivision of the government. In some places, the bureaucratic style is onerous and out of touch with practitioners. They even become arenas for the pursuit of fame and material gain. Perhaps authorities can permit believers independently to establish and register Buddhist organizations – such as Buddhist youth study groups or Pure Land associations. That would create a competitive mechanism and encourage the construction of a style and specific characteristics for Buddhism. It would also foster closer ties and communications between party and government officials, and practitioners.

4) Emphasizing the Development of Skilled Speakers

We should actively promote the tradition of Dharma discourses, emphasizing the actual experience and functionality of talented speakers. We need to develop a team of speakers whose beliefs are correct and whose Dharma knowledge is specialized. They should be well-received by audiences, and needed by the nation.

Take, for example, the Pure Land talent-development program of Donglin Monastery, as well as the “Assessment and Certification Method for Lecturers of the Pure Land School” venture now under way at Hongyuan Monastery. Such initiatives to nurture Buddhist talent, centered on specific Dharma centers, are commendable experiments.

5) Speeding Up Religion-Related Legislation

At present laws relating to religion are skimpy, fragmented and unsystematic. In some places, religious affairs are handled opportunistically and arbitrarily. Some people hold on to leftist thinking and show little tolerance for religion. They put up all sorts of restrictions, artificially raising tensions. Other places are overly lax, with religion-related activities being undertaken in the name of the government, thereby violating the legal rights of the religious community. From a global perspective, conflicts often arise between different faiths and sects often create conflicts. They cause much unease. How can an increasingly open and religiously diverse China avoid disputes resulting from its religious pluralism? All these issues require clearer legal norms.

Finally, because of limitations in the author's knowledge and perspective, this essay will inevitably contain points that may seem stark or impudent. May it benefit from corrective comments by all esteemed practitioners and big-hearted Bodhisattvas who care about the future of Buddhism in China.



On the 'Schools' of Chinese Buddhism

By Dharma Master Jingzong

English translation by Foqing, edited by Jingtū

1. Establishment of the Schools

When people talk, act or write, they follow specific motifs. As the Chinese saying has it, “despite all changes, the core theme stays the same.” Buddhist practice must all the more be guided by particular lines of Dharma teaching, or a school of thought. A school offers a central system, which supports adherents properly and allows them to practice effectively without losing their way.

Buddhism was introduced from India to China through the translation of scriptures. On most occasions, translation centers concurrently served as teaching venues. Whenever a sutra was translated, its Chinese version would immediately be expounded, studied and circulated. Things were simple in those times and the need for Dharma schools was not yet an issue.

As translations accumulated, however, the situation became increasingly complex.

First, Buddhist scriptures contained numerous Dharma paths -- some 84,000, as it is said. The vast number of texts meant it was impossible for ordinary people to learn them all. How should a practitioner make a choice?

Second, there are substantial differences among the Dharma paths. How can they be classified coherently?

Third, teachers of the Dharma instruct differently. For a given sutra, interpretations may vary and even contradict one another. Which explication should a learner rely on?

Faced with this dilemma, practitioners inevitably ask themselves, “Which method should I choose -- and why? How do I practice? And how should I regard the other Dharma paths?”

At first those questions were personal and somewhat random. But as they became widespread and consensual, there arose among Buddhist circles a “movement to establish schools” of thought and practice. A few centuries of effort led in the Sui-Tang period (the Sui and early Tang dynasties) to the formation of eight Mahayana

schools in China. These schools provided the public with eight theoretic systems to guide their practices.

The Buddhist schools were China-specific. Formed after the Buddha's teachings entered the country, they showcased the fundamental characteristics of Chinese Buddhism. In the context of the schools' creation, people invariably focused on the founding patriarchs' roles and contributions. That is understandable. But in reality, it wasn't a mission that a few patriarchs could accomplish over their short lifetimes. The process consolidated the achievements explored, pursued and participated in by Buddhist practitioners over the six or seven centuries after Buddhism entered China, till the Sui-Tang era. The founding masters, with their wisdom, merely applied the finishing touches to this ongoing, extensive mass effort.

With such a deep-rooted popular foundation, the creation of schools symbolized the flourishing and entrenchment of Buddhism in China. Thenceforth they would have a lasting and profound influence, even as they strode onto the international stage.

The schools' founding was a milestone not only in the history of Buddhism in China, but in the world

as well. It was an inevitable and irreversible process. It met the actual requirements of Buddhist practice, and was an inescapable result of the need to select, cultivate and propagate specific Dharma paths. Yet some people today are unfamiliar with the context. They allege that the various doctrines are complicated and the creation of schools unnecessary. Lacking vision and knowledge, they even denigrate the founding of schools as sectarianism. Practicing without following a school, or without an awareness of the need to follow a school, is like sailing in the ocean and discarding the compass, or traveling in the dark while failing to recognize the Big Dipper. Such an indiscriminate approach was given the fine-sounding name of "simultaneous practice and propagation of multiple approaches" or "perfect interpenetration without obstruction." In fact it undermined the foundations of Buddhism and was a sign of decline.

2. *Evolution of the Schools*

After the schools' establishment, their norms were adopted as benchmarks for their respective activities relating to propagation and practice. The Yogacara, Sanlun ("Three Treatises" or Madhyamaka) and Esoteric schools did not last long and were suspended. The Vinaya (Precepts) school was later replaced by the "pure regulations." Of the eight major schools, four enjoyed relatively enduring popularity and influence. They were the Tiantai, Huayan, Ch'an and Pure Land. The first two, due to the abundance and rigor of their theories, were called the "scripture-based schools" (*jiaoxia*). The Ch'an described its own lineage as "transmission without sutras" (*zongmen*).

In the lengthy course of their propagation, the schools' doctrines inevitably interacted with and influenced one another, as did the respective methods of practice. Even so, each school managed essentially to preserve its own features. The reason: Before the

doctrines of a school could penetrate the thought system of another school, they had to undergo interpretation by the latter, which basically "localized" them. It is therefore evident that the various traditions' theories were sufficiently sophisticated and mature to enable each school to be accommodating towards others. At the same time, they provided the school in question with a self-protective function, akin to a firewall. That enabled it to absorb useful ideas from others' doctrines to serve its own interests.

The Pure Land school was an exception. On the one hand, all other schools converged with it, making Pure Land increasingly influential. On the other, the school lost its original founding philosophy and became unable to withstand absorption and transformation by other traditions. As a result, while it turned into a "shared sect," it also became a "dependent" one -- the largest school with the least school-specific attributes.

The convergence of other paths with Pure Land was the result of certain changes over time. As their declining aptitudes made people increasingly unsuited to practice the self-power paths, they converted to the

Amitabha-recitation of Pure Land and sought rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Ordinary folk lacked the mental strength and intelligence to study and grasp the doctrines of the Tiantai and Huayan schools, let alone practice “Threefold Contemplation in One Mind” according to the former’s principle of “Three Thousand Realms in a Single Thought,” or cultivate “Perfect Interpenetration of the Dharma Realm” in line with the latter’s “Ten Kinds of Non-obstruction.” The Ch’an school was even more profound and difficult. Suitable only for practitioners of superior capabilities, it left the less accomplished at a complete loss.

Hence, shortly after or even upon the founding of the other schools, their monastic leaders started either to compose commentaries on the Pure Land tradition or to practice it concurrently with their own schools’ cultivation. For example, renowned Tiantai patriarch Master Zhiyi wrote commentaries on Pure Land and, at the point of death, was accompanied by auspicious signs heralding rebirth in the Land of Bliss. Thenceforth, all Tiantai practitioners simultaneously practiced Pure Land. Thus the saying, “Tiantai and Pure Land are one indivisible family.”

In other schools such as Huayan, Ch’an and Vinaya, countless eminent monks who practiced personally and enjoined others to do likewise, also aspired to rebirth in the Land of Bliss. That contributed to the trend of convergence with Pure Land. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Pure Land school already took under its wing the other traditions. The recitation, “*Namo Amitabha Buddha*,” came to represent all of Buddhism. In modern times, more than 90% of Chinese Buddhists practice the Pure Land path.

But the “Pure Land school” formed as a result of the convergence saw a great dilution of the characteristics that distinguished it when Master Shandao established the lineage. Its theoretical structure and forms of practice obviously adhered to the norms of the schools of the Sacred Path (non-Pure Land schools). Such compliance obscured the school’s own fundamental features -- “recitation of Amitabha’s name, relying on his Fundamental Vow (the 18th)” and “rebirth of ordinary beings in the Pure Land’s Realm of Rewards.”

That’s because in the late Tang-early Song period, the core texts on which the Pure Land school was founded

became lost in China. They included Master Shandao's *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, Master Daochuo's *Collection on the Land of Peace and Joy* and Master Tanluan's *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*. The absence of these works meant that later generations of practitioners lacked benchmarks for reference. In order to practice and propagate Pure Land, they were obliged to rely, if only expediently, on the other schools.

In the late Qing-early Republican era, Householder Yang Renshan shipped back from Japan the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra* and the *Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*. Only then did a clear and complete theoretical framework for the Pure Land school begin to emerge, underpinning practice methods.

Thanks to today's convenient transportation and advanced information technology, besides traditional Chinese Buddhism, the public has easy access to other paths, such as Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism. In addition, "Humanist Buddhism" has become a new trend. Tibetan Buddhism stresses the purity of lineages,

so its sectarian characteristics are still distinct. This is a precious feature. However, modern people are restless and facile. They have little patience for meticulous, complex teachings, habituated as they are to "fast-food" culture. If someone casually designates a sutra or advocates a particular Dharma path, he can quickly attract a large following. People no longer know what a "school" means, and have little interest in finding out. Of course, a serious seeker or practitioner would never be so rashly indiscriminate. Given the earlier "convergence," the Pure Land school must revert to what it originally was, and resume its independent and integral status. Only then will Buddhism be able to stand straight again after a long period of decline. For contemporary Buddhists, it is also the task of the times.

3. Definition of ‘School’

In his *Essays on the Forest of Meanings in the Mahayana Dharma Garden*, Master Kuiji (Master Xuanzang’s disciple) of the Yogacara school explains that the term “school” carries the meanings of supreme, sublime and dominant. “Supreme” means superior, preeminent. “Sublime” signifies revered and admired. And “dominant” evokes an overall command. Extended meanings of “school” include “esteem exclusively,” “have dominion over,” “uniquely” and “most extraordinary.”

A school can only exist by incorporating supreme, sublime and dominant elements from the 84,000 Dharma paths. Otherwise, there is no school.

Accordingly, we can give “school” a simple definition: It is a doctrinal system that takes as supreme only one of the Dharma paths expounded by the Buddha, and applies it to govern all the others.

4. Features of a School

Its definition tells us that a school has the following features: exclusiveness, preeminence and systematic structure.

i) Exclusiveness

A school solely and exclusively honors a Dharma path. No other path can co-exist with it on a parallel and equal basis.

Two kings cannot rule the same kingdom, for example. Within a school, it’s impossible to have two equal, parallel traditions. The Ch’an school, for instance, stresses the principle of “pointing directly to the mind and achieving Buddhahood by perceiving one’s own nature.” The Pure Land tradition exclusively advocates the recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name. Such exclusiveness is necessary to found schools. In its absence, no school can come into existence.

These were not arbitrary requirements imposed by patriarchs while creating their schools. Rather, the pertinent principles already existed in the Buddhist sutras, and were adopted as the basis for the founding of schools. For example, the *Lotus Sutra* says: “There is only the law of the One Vehicle, not two and not three.” That was the premise on which the Tiantai school was established. The *Infinite Life Sutra* acclaims Amitabha Buddha, noting that as Bhikku Dharmakara, he had “made vows unrivaled in all the worlds.” The scripture also says, “No other Buddha’s light can match” Amitabha’s, and that Amitabha Buddha is “the king of all Buddhas, and supreme among all sources of light.” The Pure Land school was founded accordingly.

ii) Preeminence

A school applies its exclusively esteemed Dharma path to dominate and incorporate all other traditions. That’s so the entire Dharma can be taken into account and reconciled with the founding of that particular school. If the school’s Dharma path failed to prevail over all others, its preeminent status would not be assured.

For example, compared with the Mahayana (Greater Vehicle), the Lesser Vehicle is unable to evoke exclusive esteem because it manifests a relatively limited capacity of mind and its attainments are finite. How can it dominate or incorporate the Mahayana paths? But the latter may do so with the former.

The Mahayana comprises different traditions. They include gradual and sudden paths, expedient and ultimate lineages, and partial and complete teachings. It is always the sudden, ultimate and complete heritages that encompass the gradual, expedient and partial ones.

iii) Systematic Structure

Preeminence must be supported by an architecture wherein all Dharma paths are properly positioned according to their outward aspects, status, value and function, thereby forming an integral and rigorous system.

Such a system ensures the overall dominance of the school’s own Dharma path, even as it maintains the integrity of all the Buddha’s teachings and positions the

various traditions appropriately. This way, the school can absorb useful teachings from other paths and formulate a set of independent principles to guide its adherents in their study and practices. Without the system, there would merely be fragments, full of loopholes. Forming a school would be impossible, let alone directing the practice of followers.

5. A School in a Mature and Complete Sense

A school is formed after a gradual process of development and maturation. The initial motivation was the need of individual practitioners, which later became an imperative to guide the practice of much larger groups. Efforts began with the study of one or several scriptures, then extended to the analysis, appraisal and classification of the Buddha's entire teaching. A mature and complete Dharma school must be characterized by exclusiveness, preeminence, and a systematic structure. Without these features, formation of a school would be premature.

The founding patriarchs obtained exceptional inspiration from their own study and practice of the Dharma. Out of compassion for other beings, they wanted to propagate their chosen paths, so they set out to create the schools. They didn't do so to glorify themselves or pursue sectarian independence. Unlike the Buddha himself -- the only one capable of delivering beings of

all aptitudes and teaching all Dharma paths -- Buddhist masters must, when propagating the Dharma, rely on their own schools' methods to influence and transform those with karmic affinities.

The schools were founded to propagate the Dharma, and propagation must follow the schools' system of thought. The "exclusiveness" was necessary for a school to highlight its own Dharma teaching. Its "preeminence" guaranteed that the school incorporated all other doctrines. And the "systematic structure" maintained an orderly relationship between itself and other schools. Once established, the system did not allow disruption. It would reject alien factors, the same way living organisms might.

Once in place, the system must maintain stability. If it were disrupted and fell apart, its "exclusiveness" would vanish and its propagation efforts would fail.

A living entity only accepts what is compatible with its bodily systems and rejects other elements. For example, in bone-setting or fracture plating, the body will reject non-homogeneous implants. A mature, complete school is like a living organism. It has a life and

energy flow of its own, and hence a rejection function. Otherwise, the school would not be able to provide proactive guidance to its adherents in their practice. It would be as good as dead.

As to the "rejection," it was subject to the premise that a system had been created to accommodate the Buddhist teachings in their entirety. The sole purpose of rejection was to preserve the purity of the school-specific doctrines. Therefore such rejection would not affect the whole of Buddhism.

The establishment of schools in Chinese Buddhism offered twin benefits. On the one hand, each school effectively accentuated its own Dharma path; on the other, it embraced all other approaches. Such attributes allowed people more easily to choose practice methods with which they had karmic affinity, so that Dharma teaching expanded in an orderly manner. The founding of schools was a great breakthrough by the Chinese patriarchs, a tribute to their wisdom.

By stressing its own doctrines, a school was able to enhance the confidence of karmically compatible followers. And because it incorporated all other

approaches, it allowed other schools to interact and evolve. Thus the eight major schools did not constrain one another. On the contrary, they cooperated even as they moved separately towards a common goal -- the well-organized propagation of the entire Dharma.

The history of Chinese Buddhism shows that from the formation of the schools through their development and evolution, they have coexisted harmoniously and flourished together. They remained free of sectarian rift, let alone sanguinary conflict. This amply underscores the truth of *sunyata* (emptiness) and the spirit of compassion taught by the Buddha. It also reflects the benevolence and wisdom achieved by the patriarchs, in their efforts to benefit themselves as well as others.