Questions and Answers from Teacher Qi's 2010 Qingdao Seven-Day Retreat

Teacher Qi Zhijun

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Student: Those people say that the Middle Way is the right one.

Teacher Qi: Throw the Middle Way into the garbage can.

Student: There is no Middle Way either.

Teacher Qi: The Middle Way is one side; emptiness and provisional existence are the other side. That is still two sides. Even the doctrinal schools, when they explain it thoroughly, can reach this point. This is called, "Neither emptiness nor provisional existence is established; the middle, too, is absent." Chan does not speak this way.

Student: Can bodhi and Buddha-nature be equated?

Teacher Qi: You could write a whole book arguing that they are equal; you could also write a whole book arguing that they are unequal. Either approach can be used to good effect, but in the end it is all conceptual elaboration.

Student: Conceptual elaboration—still conceptual elaboration.

Teacher Qi: It is all conceptual elaboration. Yet perhaps, in the course of discussing it here, you may suddenly stumble upon something: "Oh—so that is how it is!" You forget the words that have been spoken and realize their true meaning. Then conceptual elaboration can no longer stand. Once conceptual elaboration cannot stand, so-called correct discourse cannot stand either.

Student: Like what the Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment says about "using illusion to cultivate illusion"…

Teacher Qi: Is it not using illusion to cultivate illusion? Let me put it this way: is the Heart-of-Heart Dharma an illusion or not? Is your seven-day retreat an illusion or not? If you think it is not an illusion, you are mistaken.

Student: What I mean is, would that not lead to a one-sided view of emptiness?

Teacher Qi: In what way are you empty?

Student: Using illusion to cultivate illusion—you keep thinking that everything in this world is false.

Teacher Qi: Of course everything is false.

Student: Then it seems as though there is no wondrous functioning.

Teacher Qi: Is wondrous functioning not false as well? Do you think wondrous functioning is real? Ah, then you have it wrong. Of course it is false! Then, turning it around: "Previously, the true was delusion; now, all delusion is true. One need only return to one's original nature; not a single dharma is new!"

Whenever you posit something as real, I will tell you that it is all false. When you say that you have fallen into emptiness, I say that you are attached to existence, for you have an "emptiness" there. Having an emptiness is also incorrect; that is attachment to existence, not falling into emptiness. If there is a theory of emptiness, it is a deluded thought; it is conceptual elaboration.

Student: If it is not conceptual elaboration, then there is nothing to say.

Teacher Qi: If it is not conceptual elaboration, then one can speak freely—one can speak so brilliantly that flowers rain from heaven and golden lotuses spring from the earth. Then one can say this: speaking is not speaking! "For forty-nine years, the Buddha did not utter a single word." Did he not utter a single word for forty-nine years? He said that he uttered not a single word!

Student: They are one.

Teacher Qi: The Heart Sūtra first says, "Form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form." Form and emptiness are the same; emptiness and form are the same. But this still does not fully express the point. Why? You might suspect that they are two things that merely happen to be alike. So it adds: "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form." They are not two things. If you read only the first half, it seems as though they are two things, but that is not so—they are one and the same.

Student: True emptiness and wondrous presence are one and the same.

Teacher Qi: In fact, true emptiness is wondrous presence, and wondrous presence is true emptiness. It is not at all that there is wondrous presence outside true emptiness, or true emptiness outside wondrous presence. It is not like that at all.

Student: If one is to safeguard it, what is the best way to begin?

Teacher Qi: Safeguard what? Let me give an example: “Oh, how should I raise my child?” “First let me have a look at your child.”

Student: What is to be safeguarded is what the Elder called, “When not a single thought arises, there is clear, numinous knowing.”

Teacher Qi: Do you merely understand this in theory, or have you truly experienced it?

Student: I have experienced it.

Teacher Qi: If you have experienced it, then of course you should safeguard it. This numinous knowing that you say you have experienced—is it present when there are no dreams and no thoughts?

Student: It is always present.

Teacher Qi: Tell me the evidence that it is present. Once you have proved that it is present, then you are on firm ground. Otherwise, you will keep doubting.

If you do not look for evidence, I will find some for you. What is your name? “XXX.” Go up to a stone and say, “XXX, XXX, get up, get up.” Will that stone get up? It will not, will it?

When you are asleep, with neither dreams nor thoughts, someone says, “XXX, get up,” and gives you a pat—you get up, do you not? How could it not be present? It is not annihilated.

Begin by understanding it from this angle. What I am saying is also an expedient expression: this material body of form is not me; that is me—the self of permanence, bliss, self, and purity; the self of the dharmakāya. Does it still undergo rebirth? That self has never undergone saṃsāra; it has never changed. If you want to escape the bitter ocean of saṃsāra, that self was never in the bitter ocean to begin with. That is why it is said, “Originally, one is a Buddha.” Did you cultivate it into being? Certainly not. Originally, you are a Buddha.

Student: I am always attached to appearances.

Teacher Qi: It has become a habit. Whenever you become attached to appearances, pull yourself back. That is called safeguarding.

Is there no way to point directly? This is direct pointing. But is it effective? So put forth some effort. Do not be afraid of hardship. Sit in meditation, and what you gain through that hard work will give you firmer footing.

Student: Teacher, if one has not realized Buddha-nature, does one go to the Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages?

Teacher Qi: Let me ask you: where are you now? Are you not in Śākyamuni Buddha's Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages?

Student: Teacher, does the Heart-of-Heart Dharma include undertaking solitary retreat?

Teacher Qi: Solitary retreat and seven-day retreats are good practices in themselves. I do not oppose them, but why do I not especially encourage them? Nowadays there is such a trend around solitary retreats and seven-day retreats—they have all become a way to enhance one's reputation!

Student: But when we undertake solitary retreat, we do it sincerely.

Teacher Qi: If you do it sincerely, undertake a mind retreat. Be sincere in your mind; sincerity of mind is what matters. A mind retreat includes finding a place to go into retreat, but it also includes being able to remain in retreat without finding such a place.

What I mean is, if you undertake solitary retreat, just go quietly and do it. Those who proclaim it everywhere are generally seeking fame and profit. It is not that I fear abuses might arise; abuses have already arisen. It has all become a way to enhance one's reputation.

Student: Teacher Qi, what should one do if one wants to meditate on a train or bus?

Teacher Qi: That is possible too. I have meditated that way myself. In fact, the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is suitable for busy people to practice; it is not unsuitable. But you cannot use that as an excuse to interrupt your practice. Once you interrupt it, trouble begins. In my experience, fewer than 10 percent of those who have received empowerment complete a thousand sessions. It is not easy; the proportion of people who persist through a thousand sessions is not large. Some have circumstances more difficult than mine, and some of them can still persist, but they are not many.

Student: Ultimately, cause and effect are empty too, are they not?

Teacher Qi: That is something to speak of later. The statement "cause and effect are empty" takes us through quite a few twists and turns. Let us take a more direct

route. Let me explain it to you this way:

What is the nature of cause and effect?—The nature of cause and effect is emptiness.

The law governing this great bitter ocean of the world is cause and effect. Must this bitter ocean be left behind?—It must.

How does one leave it behind?—One must cultivate supramundane dharmas, supramundane cause and effect.

Can supramundane dharmas extinguish this great bitter ocean?—They can.

Why can they?—Because it is originally empty; it is not that your cultivation extinguishes it. If it were not originally empty, you could not extinguish it. This is the sense in which it is originally empty.

If you state that single sentence directly, it will leave you confused. Once you understand it, the logic is very clear! Let me answer you with a sūtra. The Diamond Sūtra says: “Past karmic offenses will thereby be extinguished, and one will attain anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi.” Does this fall within cause and effect or not?

Student: It does not.

Teacher Qi: Right. If it fell within cause and effect, could it “thereby be extinguished”? One would have to undergo the retribution.

Once theories of cause and effect go too far, some people say that even a Buddha is subject to cause and effect. That is troublesome. Patriarch Bodhidharma’s Treatise on the Bloodline says: “A Buddha does not uphold precepts; a Buddha does not violate precepts. A Buddha has neither upholding nor violating; a Buddha has no cause and effect.” Not to mention a Buddha—even an arhat “undergoes no further existence”!

Student: Teacher, while I was meditating, I suddenly sneezed. I felt as though there were two selves. Is the self that was startled awake numinous knowing?

Teacher Qi: If you do not say it this way, it is so; once you say it this way, it no longer is.

Student: Hahahaha.

Teacher Qi: It can only be used, not flaunted. Once you show it off, it becomes distorted; it is no longer it.

Student: I call the self that sneezes the false self, and this self that is suddenly awakened the true self.

Teacher Qi: They are all false selves!

Student: They are all false selves?

Teacher Qi: There can even be many, many selves. Buddhas and bodhisattvas have still more selves, manifesting countless transformation bodies.

Student: What does this self have to do with realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature?

Teacher Qi: At this point, there is no concept of realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature. If you try to attach it to that, you contaminate realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature. It is something spoken of only in retrospect.

There is fundamentally no room even to say, "This is it!" Only then is it real. What is it? Buddha-nature? What kind of dried shit-stick is Buddha-nature! Only here is there true Buddha-nature. Awakening and seeing one's true nature? What a joke! What awakening is there? When were you ever deluded? You have never been deluded! This is true awakening. And what numinous knowing is there? You could not drive numinous knowing away even if you tried—it is always present, isn't it? Why would you need to develop it all over again? This is true numinous knowing.

Oh, if it is there at one moment and gone the next, that is false! None of that is real—how could it be real? When has it ever left you? It has never left you!

Student: Teacher, Layman Pang's daughter said, "The meaning of the Patriarch's coming from the West is atop the hundred grasses." Why did she say that the hundred grasses are the meaning of his coming from the West?

Teacher Qi: "The meaning of the Patriarch's coming from the West is atop the hundred grasses"—that was not said by Pang Lingzhao, but by Madam Pang. Layman Pang put forward a proposition, Madam Pang overturned it, and their daughter overturned them both.

Student: Ah, yes, yes.

Teacher Qi: If Layman Pang had not first made that statement, what Madam Pang said would not necessarily have been right. But given Layman Pang's verse, Madam Pang's statement was precisely fitting. If their two verses had not come first, Pang Lingzhao's statement could not have stood either. Since Layman Pang and Madam Pang had just spoken, what Pang Lingzhao expressed was exactly what they meant.

It appears to be opposition, but in fact it expresses exactly what they meant. This is using different language to say the same thing. That is the true meaning: the meaning lies beyond words; the true meaning is outside your language.

There is another case in which the wording differs but the state conveyed is the same: “Tathāgata Chan” and “Patriarch Chan.” Chan Master Yongjia’s Song of Enlightenment says: “Suddenly awakened to Tathāgata Chan, the six perfections and myriad practices are complete within one’s essential nature. In dreams, the six destinies appear distinctly; upon awakening, the great thousandfold world is utterly empty.”

That state is actually the same as that later expressed in the saying, “You may understand Tathāgata Chan, but you have not even dreamed of Patriarch Chan.” But why was Patriarch Chan introduced? Because Tathāgata Chan became contaminated: distinctions of high and low, ordinary and sage, were stuffed into it, and it no longer conveyed the nonduality of ordinary beings and sages, so the term was set aside. The words of the patriarchs express the state in which ordinary beings and sages are nondual, so I say: you cannot understand Patriarch Chan.

Thus, terms such as realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature, or awakening, may gradually become unusable after many years; then another term must be used. One can no longer realize ordinary mind! It gets turned into something with high and low, ordinary and sage. If one does not depart from assertion and denial, one is not in accord with seeing one’s true nature.

Student: There is a line in Yongjia’s Song of Enlightenment: “This illusory, empty body is itself the dharmakāya.” Is this realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature?

Teacher Qi: He says, “The true nature of ignorance is itself Buddha-nature; this illusory, empty body is itself the dharmakāya.” That is realization of the Way. “Do not eliminate deluded thoughts or seek the true”—this is said on the basis of having first “eliminated deluded thoughts and seen suchness.” It is like the Heart Sūtra’s “no suffering, origination, cessation, or path”: it is said after you have thoroughly understood the principles of suffering, origination, cessation, and the path.

Student: Teacher, while I am sitting in meditation, sometimes I feel a kind of emptiness within. At such times...

Teacher Qi: “If you do not regard it as an attainment of sagehood, it is called a good state. If you interpret it as such an attainment, you will fall prey to all kinds of deviant influences.”

Student: At such times, should I use mantra recitation or something?

Teacher Qi: Just leave it alone! Why leave it alone? Because it is good! I do not attend even to what is good, much less to what is bad! If you do this, is that not the path of liberation? If you attend only to what is good and do not want what is bad, you are still within saṃsāra.

Student: But sometimes it seems that I cannot overcome that force.

Teacher Qi: That is habitual tendency—eliminating habitual tendencies. Then you will know what habitual tendency is being eliminated. This is why it is said here, "Do not eliminate deluded thoughts or seek the true." Your habitual tendency is to eliminate deluded thoughts and seek suchness. Do not eliminate deluded thoughts or seek the true! See whether you have eliminated that habitual tendency. In fact, at the beginning, even if you eliminate deluded thoughts and seek suchness, it is not much of an error; it is an expedient path.

Student: Then eliminating the seeds of habitual tendencies is the main task?

Teacher Qi: Look at what habitual tendency you are eliminating. You always want to assert and deny; you always want to set the two sides in opposition. Eliminate that habitual tendency! How useful it is to say, "Do not eliminate deluded thoughts or seek the true." In this context, these words are very apt.

The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra has this meaning: when a bodhisattva departs from the two extremes of assertion and denial, this is called the bodhisattva's entering the Ground of Joy. If there are still Buddhas and sentient beings, still this and that, and one cannot leave the two sides, then one has not reached even the Ground of Joy.

If you are always revolving around "I am awakened" and "I am not awakened"—or, as you say, "I am not awakened," which to my ear sounds like "I am awakened"—they mean the same thing. What? Why do they mean the same thing? Because neither has departed from the two sides; are they not the same thing? Therefore, someone truly awakened will not say that they are awakened, nor will they say that they are not awakened. Only when one has left these two sides can one be believed.

If there are people in your family, you wish for family peace; if there is no one in your family, you want to establish a family. When you encounter Buddhism, you want to become a Buddha; when awakening is mentioned, you want to awaken… If awakening and realizing the Way are to be resolved within this scope, within this mode of thought, is awakening not merely deluded thinking?

Student: Yes.

Teacher Qi: At this point, if you do not seek awakening, you thereby become truly awakened. Oh, if your family is not going well or you have not become wealthy—is that a karmic obstacle? That is karmic force. You are within cause and effect; that is

not called a karmic obstacle. Karmic obstacles obstruct your realization of the Way and obstruct liberation; that is what is called a karmic obstacle.

What obstructs you? Mental obstruction! Apart from mind there is no dharma—mental obstruction! Because in your mind, you seek Buddhist attainment according to the same pattern by which you seek worldly dharmas, using that mode of "establishing." In fact, this must be relinquished! Let go of that seeking mind; only then will it do. Oh, when you can obtain nothing at all, you have obtained it. This is called "obtaining non-attainment." Obtaining non-attainment is what truly accords with the Way.

Student: If one studies Buddhism and cultivates practice in order to become a Buddha, does that not make one's practice conditioned?

Teacher Qi: If someone has just entered the Buddhist gate, then of course you should still have them reject worldly dharmas and affirm the Buddhadharma; otherwise, they cannot enter. But in the end, if you are still doing this, it will not work—you can make no further progress. Can your thinking remain like that? We are now holding a seven-day retreat, are we not? Some people call the place where a seven-day retreat is held a "testing ground for Buddhas."

Student: Teacher, there is this matter of good and evil. No matter what good deed one does, one must not seek anything.

Teacher Qi: Let us begin with this topic: "What is Buddhism?"

There is a concise answer: "Do no evil, practice all good, and purify one's own mind—this is the teaching of all Buddhas." "The teaching of all Buddhas" means that the Buddhas of the ten directions and three periods of time all teach in this way after attaining Buddhahood.

The three meanings of "Do no evil, practice all good, and purify one's own mind" may be put simply: "Do no evil" is the human path; "practice all good" may be counted as the heavenly path; and "purify one's own mind" alone is the path of liberation.

Elder Zhanyu, at the very end of his book Records of the Mind-Lamp, concluded with "Do no evil, practice all good." Well then, where did "purify one's own mind" go? Do you see how confused that is?

Student: Confused.

Teacher Qi: Therefore, Master Yuanyin said that it is not that this book cannot be read, but that one must read it with the discernment of a goose king separating milk from water. There is essential material in the book—it is not absent—but there are also flaws.

Student: Teacher Qi, please explain “a dog has no Buddha-nature” for us.

Teacher Qi: Someone once asked me to explain it, and I said, “No, no. Dogs have Buddha-nature; you do not!” Do not try to construct some theory! It is best to sweep away that theory of yours!

Student: Teacher Qi, intrinsic nature is luminous, and that luminosity…

Teacher Qi: Intrinsic luminosity of mind—ah, the mind is bright and clear within! That is what it is. It is not that there is no light resembling lamplight; there is. But do not mistake that for it. All sorts of spirits and ghosts can play with that sort of thing.

Student: The kind of light that has images and shadows…

Teacher Qi: It may possibly accompany it, but do not mistake it for the real thing.

Student: Is intrinsic luminosity of mind generally stronger than ordinary light?

Teacher Qi: The Buddhist scriptures describe intrinsic luminosity of mind as “surpassing hundreds of thousands of suns”—that is, exceeding the radiance of hundreds of thousands of suns.

Student: But it is not bright—not bright.

Teacher Qi: If it surpasses hundreds of thousands of suns, it certainly is not bright in that way; it is not bright in the way the sun is. Intrinsic luminosity of mind is simply the mind’s inner brightness and clarity.

Student: Master, when discomfort and pain arise during meditation, sometimes I cannot get rid of it through contemplation.

Teacher Qi: Yes, you cannot get rid of it. First, you need a diagnosis to determine whether there is an organic illness. If not, do not concern yourself with it. This place hurts, that place itches—even people who do not practice encounter such things all the time, and they do not care. Yet we care about them—are we more attached than they are? But there is one prerequisite: there must be no organic illness.

Student: When meditating, there are many karmic obstacles in this respect: if it is not pain here, it is itching there.

Teacher Qi: I have never liked using the term “karmic obstacles.” Why? There are obstructions in the mind, but people never understand them as mental obstructions. They interpret them as some external force coming to collect a debt for something they did in the past.

This interpretation is not entirely unacceptable for beginners who have just entered the gate. But now that you are already practicing, is it not an obstruction to continue understanding it that way? That itself is the obstacle! If you constantly speak of karmic obstacles, that very habit is a karmic obstacle. You cannot make these pains and illnesses empty; they are empty from the outset. What I mean is not that you contemplate their emptiness in order to get rid of them. I mean: “Let go of the mind that wants to get rid of them!”

Student: Śākyamuni Buddha is called the Great Dharma King and also the Great King of Physicians. Great Dharma King is relatively easy to understand, but what does King of Physicians mean…?

Teacher Qi: The Great King of Physicians does not mean healing your bodily ailments. It means healing the illnesses of the mind. To heal the illnesses of greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt is to be the Great King of Physicians.

Nowadays, many people take up Buddhism out of a wish for physical health. Frankly, in my personal view, this is not wrong, but do not place it together with the path of liberation. What does good health amount to? Once healthy, will one not die? Can one live a few more years? Not necessarily. A person’s lifespan may not be directly proportional to how healthy they are.

Student: Master, in the practice we cultivate, it is explained that certain mudrās can cure physical illnesses. When we form such a mudrā, it is actually the empowering force of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Teacher Qi: What you say is entirely reasonable. But if that is so, does it have anything to do with sentient beings? Since it does, the therapeutic effects will vary in countless ways. Because sentient beings differ in countless ways, the effects cannot be exactly the same. It also depends on the patient. Some illnesses can be treated by this method; for others, this method is helpless. How could even the best method be universally effective?

Student: What about illnesses caused by karmic obstacles?

Teacher Qi: Some illnesses caused by karmic obstacles can be treated, and some cannot. It is neither the case that all can be treated nor that none can be treated. Nowadays, whenever someone is in poor health, they call it karmic obstacles. What does a karmic obstacle obstruct? It obstructs your realization of the Way. For example, if bodily illness leaves you unable to meditate, it obstructs your realization of the Way; that may be called a karmic obstacle. It does not mean an obstruction to bodily health. So long as you realize the Way, “If one hears the Way in the morning, one may die content in the evening.” What does the body matter?

Student: Teacher, it is said that those who practice Buddha-recitation must avoid deadness, those who practice Chan must avoid an overbearing energy, and those who study Esoteric Buddhism must avoid a demonic air. How should these be understood?

Teacher Qi: These are possible pitfalls. Such warnings are meant to correct deviations: a practice may produce another drawback, but you can prevent it. For example, investigating Chan involves taking up a huatou, whereas our contemplation consists in letting go. Our contemplation is exactly the opposite of Chan investigation.

Student: What does that mean?

Teacher Qi: The methods differ, but the goal is the same, because they all return to realizing the mind, seeing one's true nature, and awakening.

Student: Master, when I am off the cushion and no deluded thoughts arise, if the mind simply remains empty like this, that is enough, is it not?

Teacher Qi: If no deluded thoughts arise, why concern yourself with it?

Student: Deluded thoughts start arising.

Teacher Qi: One thought follows another, and one does not even know it. You must be alert and notice them; you must not run along with them.

Student: Now I can notice them—ah…

Teacher Qi: Once you notice them, cut them off! Cut them off! Cut them off! Cut them off!

Student: Pah!

Teacher Qi: That too is a method. Buddha-recitation is also a method; rapid successive recitation is also a method… Whatever method you use, so long as you cut them off and do not run along with them, that is enough. But that is only the first step.

Do you understand? Once you have reached direct experience—when you recognize numinous knowing as your own mind, rather than deluded thoughts—why would you still need to counteract deluded thoughts? The moment you become alert, you return to numinous knowing. Yet this is still not the end!

When deluded thoughts no longer do harm, their arising is equivalent to not arising; when deluded thoughts fly about in profusion, it is equivalent to no thought arising at all! Until one reaches this point, it is not ultimate. But you cannot say that this is

just the profusion of deluded thoughts of an ordinary person. You still cannot say it is, nor can you say it is not.

Student: Then how many people can continue in this way?

Teacher Qi: Now everyone can! They are simply unwilling. Since they are unwilling, one can only give them an expedient. If you say, “I keep taking deluded thoughts for my mind instead of recognizing numinous knowing,” then you can only begin with the first step: do not run along with deluded thoughts.

Not following deluded thoughts is the beginner’s lesson. Why would you run along with them? Run after what? They are not even things—why should I follow them? The moment you become alert, numinous knowing appears before you.

Deluded thoughts are just a jumble. What harm can they do? Their being there is the same as not being there. Can they harm you? Why cut them off? Is not that the meaning? Is it not superfluous to cut them off? Why cut them off? They fundamentally cannot take charge. Formerly, they always took charge, and you always ran along with them. Now they may run as they please, but they can no longer take charge. Even here, one has not yet reached the final point.

Ah, some things lie beyond the words. If they are spoken of, they may be misunderstood; too much has already been said! Therefore, in the end one can only say: “Originally you are Buddha—what contemplation is there to practice?” This is true contemplation. Earlier sayings such as “do not turn with thoughts or be moved by circumstances,” or “with a sudden alertness, lucid awareness is immediately present,” are all expedient teachings—entirely expedient teachings.

Student: But we can still make use of them.

Teacher Qi: There is no way not to speak that way, because people have not reached that point. In fact, the more ultimate it is, the easier it is! They are simply unwilling, unwilling.

Student: Sometimes, after cutting them off, that “originally you are Buddha”…

Teacher Qi: What “originally Buddha” or “not originally Buddha”? Those words are only meant to evoke the meaning; you must not cling to the wording. Once you cling to that phrase, clarified butter turns instead into poison! The ultimate meaning cannot be captured in either assertion or denial; its meaning lies beyond the words. Thus there are times when there is a special transmission outside the teachings: no words are spoken, and with the holding up of a flower and a smile, the Buddha’s mind-seal is transmitted to you.

It is so difficult to explain contemplation here; it cannot be made clear. When I spoke of contemplation in Shijiazhuang, it could be explained in one sentence, and everyone understood: What is contemplation? Living Chan is contemplation! It is that simple; they understood Living Chan.

Student: Ah, yes—Living Chan is contemplation.

Teacher Qi: Living Chan is contemplation. Dharma Master Jinghui advocated Living Chan; it truly is a new approach. Why? If one still follows the old approach of investigating a huatou, modern people cannot arouse a sense of doubt. Getting them to let go is not easy, but getting them to arouse a sense of doubt is even harder.

Elsewhere, I also explained contemplation very easily. In Qufu, Shandong, there was a class in traditional Chinese learning that was to receive empowerment. I explained contemplation: What is contemplation? Eight characters express it: no preconceived ideas, no arbitrary insistence, no rigidity, no self-centeredness. They all understood.

Student: Master, is contemplation something like directly experiencing it?

Teacher Qi: This way of thinking treats contemplation as a task to keep bringing to mind all day long. That is a misunderstanding. Contemplation means having no such preoccupation. Whenever you discover that the mind has become preoccupied, that is when you contemplate. But if something is going on and you do not even notice it—if you are carried away by deluded thoughts without knowing it—you need to arouse vigilance. It is not that you arouse vigilance to see whether there is contemplation. Rather, when you discover that you have been carried away, stop! Cut it off! Do not follow it! That is contemplation.

Student: Teacher, when meditating, should entering samādhi be taken as the criterion of good or bad practice?

Teacher Qi: Once you make it a criterion, the matter has to be put the other way around. If you do not make it a criterion, then of course entering samādhi during meditation is a good thing. But if you make it a criterion, then I would say this: the session that was most difficult for you, in which it was simply impossible to enter samādhi, yet you stubbornly endured it to the end without interruption—that session was the best! This is said to counter your thought of pursuing samādhi. That session had the highest quality! Why? Because without that session, you would have interrupted your practice!

Student: If one repeatedly fails to enter samādhi during meditation, is it still possible to see one’s true nature?

Teacher Qi: When you are concerned with samādhi, set seeing your true nature aside. When you are concerned with seeing your true nature, set samādhi aside.

Student: Can one see one's true nature without meditating?

Teacher Qi: Of course. But such people are very rare nowadays. For now, continue until you have completed your thousand sessions, and there is hope.

Student: Right now, I feel I have no confidence. Why is my meditation getting worse and worse?

Teacher Qi: What do you mean by worse? What do you mean by better?

Student: Sometimes I simply cannot stay seated.

Teacher Qi: As I was just saying about him—he did not even have suitable conditions for meditation, yet he did not interrupt his practice. I consider that session to have been of the highest quality. That is precisely to correct this skewed view!

Student: I feel those words are meant to encourage people.

Teacher Qi: It is encouraging. But can entering samādhi make one a Buddha? If so, this stone would already have become a Buddha. Becoming a Buddha has no direct connection with your entering samādhi.

Student: There are some people who can see their true nature without relying on this power of samādhi—you mean…

Teacher Qi: Given what we are discussing in this seven-day retreat, if I were still to say that one can see one's true nature without relying on the power of samādhi, my words could easily be misunderstood. But neither have I said that one must rely on it in order to see one's true nature.

Student: But at the very moment you see your true nature, must you necessarily be in samādhi?

Teacher Qi: There is no such thing as samādhi or non-samādhi. If there are samādhi and non-samādhi, then they have nothing whatever to do with it. Are you still talking about a power of samādhi that one enters and exits?

Student: There are people, for example, who have relatively good wisdom faculties but relatively weak powers of samādhi.

Teacher Qi: That is speaking of samādhi that one enters and exits.

A person with strong power of samādhi but weak wisdom is liable to mistake lights and shadows for states of realization. They take those luminous experiences to be Buddha-nature. That is where they go astray.

A person with strong wisdom but weak power of samādhi is liable to fall into concepts. For example: “Seeing one’s true nature is not seeing one’s true nature; seeing without seeing is true seeing; there is neither awakening nor non-awakening…” They become extremely familiar with this whole set of theories. You can say anything else to them and they can bear it, but if you say they have not seen their true nature, they immediately become angry. Such people have fallen into concepts, so you cannot tell them, on the level of concepts, that they are wrong.

Student: Each of us now, and Śākyamuni Buddha, should be said to be the same; there is no difference at all…

Teacher Qi: To your “no difference,” let me add an annotation: difference itself is no difference! What is nondifference? The myriad differences are precisely nondifference!

Student: Among the Tripiṭaka and the twelve divisions of scripture, among the sūtras spoken by the Buddha, which are expedient teachings and which are ultimate teachings?

Teacher Qi: You must study the Buddhist canon in depth. You may study the Tiantai classifications of the four teachings by doctrinal content and the four teachings by method of instruction, the Five Periods of the Buddha’s teaching, and the Huayan classifications of the Lesser, Initial, Final, Sudden, and Perfect teachings.

Student: Such sūtras as the Lotus Sūtra, the Diamond Sūtra, the Kṣitigarbha Sūtra, and the Amitābha Sūtra—which of them are ultimate teachings?

Teacher Qi: I think they are all Perfect Teachings. It depends on the perspective from which you view them.

Student: The Amitābha Sūtra as well?

Teacher Qi: It too is ultimate! Why do all those Buddhas praise Śākyamuni Buddha for teaching sentient beings this Dharma that is difficult for the whole world to believe? Is not the place where the Buddha teaches the Dharma a Pure Land? Does the Buddha not teach the Dharma in a Pure Land? Then is this place not also a Pure Land? This too is a Pure Land, so why seek rebirth in the West? Look: this is implied, not plainly stated to you. You should know that the master once said: of all sūtras, the most difficult to explain is the Amitābha Sūtra, because its inner meaning cannot be brought out.

Student: Master, in that case, are the hells described in the Kṣitigarbha Sūtra also expedient teachings?

Teacher Qi: That depends on how you explain them.

Student: Hell is originally empty.

Teacher Qi: In your understanding, that is an expedient teaching: there is fundamentally no such thing as hell—is that what you mean?

Student: For great practitioners, what distinction is there between hell and the Pure Land? When the mind is pure, the land is pure, is that not so? Hell too is a Pure Land.

Teacher Qi: Then let me ask you: does the world before your eyes exist or not?

Student: As for the world before our eyes, one can say it exists, and one can say it does not exist.

Teacher Qi: Then why do you not speak of hell in the same way? When you speak of the world before your eyes, you speak both of emptiness and of existence. But when you speak of hell, you speak only of emptiness and not of existence. Can that make sense?

Student: For someone practicing the Pure Land dharma gate, is it acceptable to recite the Secret Manual of Attainment in the Intermediate State at the time of death?

Teacher Qi: If one practices the Pure Land throughout one's life, attainment means being directly reborn in the West, without taking on an intermediate-state body at all. How regrettable! How sad it would be to undergo the intermediate state at death!

Student: But one cannot make it up there.

Teacher Qi: Why can one not make it up there?

Student: Because there has been no actual cultivation.

Teacher Qi: If one truly practices the Pure Land, how could one fail to get there? "Of ten thousand practitioners, ten thousand go"—that saying is entirely correct. But if one entertains deluded thoughts inwardly, recites the Buddha's name with one's mouth, and rapidly fingers the prayer beads—without each bead corresponding to one recitation of the Buddha's name—then of course one cannot get there. Genuine practitioners all practice discreetly.

There was an elderly man in his eighties who recited the Buddha's name so loudly that his neighbors could hear him clearly. Yet he practiced discreetly. He did not tire at all, because he was accustomed to reciting. As it happened, a relative of a neighbor came to visit; he was a qigong practitioner. As soon as he heard the chanting, he experienced a sensation of qi. Qigong practitioners talk about sensations of qi, you see, so he wanted to take the old man as his teacher.

"What would you learn from me?"

"Qigong."

"I only know how to recite the Buddha's name. I do not know anything else."

In fact, the old man had already told him the method: reciting the Buddha's name was the method. But he did not understand. He thought there must be something mysterious about it; he did not understand it that way. In the end, feeling there was no hope, he said: "Ah, it seems that there is only the Buddha in your heart, sir."

Do you know how the old man replied? "No Buddha, no dharma!" That is what he said.

What do you think? In Pure Land practice, through Buddha-recitation, as long as one recites sincerely and steadily, one can also reach this state. It is the same: one can reach the ultimate meaning and certainly be reborn in the West. If a person like this old man could reach such a state and still not be reborn in the West, would the Buddhadharma have any efficacy left? That would be preposterous! Simply reciting the Buddha's name can bring one to this state. People are unwilling to practice sincerely and steadily, so they fiddle around and cannot attain realization in a lifetime. Originally, everyone could attain realization in one lifetime, without a single exception; any dharma gate can lead to attainment. But they are unwilling to do the work!

Student: Teacher, at two o'clock while meditating, there was simply nothing—only brightness. My heart felt so joyful and light… Is this what is called the heart blooming with joy? Was it a dream, or was it deluded thought?

Teacher Qi: I will not speak first. Let me hear everyone's opinions.

Student: The luminosity of intrinsic nature.

Teacher Qi: That is one opinion.

Student: Deluded thought.

Teacher Qi: That is another opinion.

Student: Clinging to that joyful blooming of the heart.

Teacher Qi: That is yet another opinion, somewhat close to the opinion that it is deluded thought.

Student: And what would it be like if the heart truly bloomed with joy?

Teacher Qi: Hmm. Does anyone have any other opinion?

Student: Master, last time you said that when one sees something, one should not cling to it.

Teacher Qi: This expansiveness of heart and blossoming of luminosity is not itself deluded thought. But your attitude toward it is deluded thought. That is the meaning of the Śūraṅgama Sūtra. “Do not regard it as an attainment of sagehood” means not becoming attached to it. “It is called a good state”—it is a good experience.

“If one interprets it as an attainment of sagehood”: if you understand it that way—“I have seen my true nature; I have awakened”—then “one immediately falls prey to all kinds of deviant influences.” That is deluded thinking. It is not that the state itself is deluded thinking; rather, your attitude toward and attachment to that state are deluded thinking. Therefore, both views are correct.

Student: If you do not speak of it, it is not deluded thinking; once you speak it, it is.

Teacher Qi: That is just how it is: the moment you show it off, problems arise.

We always extract isolated words and phrases from what the Master said. In the Master’s Brief Discussion of Realizing the Mind and Seeing One’s True Nature, he set out five points about seeing one’s true nature—one, two, three, four, five. Who still remembers them? The Master did mention “explosion,” yes, but did he speak only of explosion? Much is said about explosion, and little about the other matters.

Immediately after speaking of explosion, he went on to say, “unobtainable”! You did not notice “unobtainable”—can you blame the Master for that? Perhaps he merely mentioned that matter of explosion to you, but you took it as the endpoint. You have no impression of the five points that were the main emphasis. Look at this: can you say that the Master did not explain it?

Student: Teacher Qi, after meditation I like to lie down and sleep for a while. At home, on two separate occasions, as soon as I lay down there was a “boom” in my head. It happened both times.

Teacher Qi: The hawk has long since flown past Silla.

Student: What does that mean?

Teacher Qi: It means that the bird has already flown off to Korea. Can you still see its shadow now? What is the point of talking about it now? That is what it means. It was missed long ago, yet you are still talking about it.

Student: If I encounter this situation again in the future, what should I do?

Teacher Qi: If you have that line of thought, it is still mistaken.

Student: But at that moment, one is supposed to recognize it. If I fail to do so, it is still like a train coming straight toward me and passing by: if I miss it, I miss it.

Teacher Qi: The moment you say "recognize it," I know that the recognizing you mean is not what I mean. The "recognizing" you speak of treats it as an object: "I" am the subject, and it is the object. The "Buddha-nature that I have seen" has become an object.

When I speak of recognizing it, it is the subject, not an object! If one's standpoint changes, look—is that not a complete transformation, a change in one's very essence? When it comes so forcefully, is it not like empty space shattering and the great earth sinking away?

Student: Yes.

Teacher Qi: Ah! When one understands all at once, it comes forcefully—does it not seem like an explosion? What is there to recognize as some particular state? If you insist that there must be a state of explosion, then set off a firecracker for me—would that do any good?

Student: It does not require your recognition.

Teacher Qi: But are you not recognizing an object? What I mean is not recognizing an object. Here, the subject is gone; to speak of recognition or non-recognition is all conceptual elaboration. Once the standpoint changes all at once, whether one recognizes it or not is no longer up to you—you cannot help but recognize it. Moreover, what could be obtained through recognition? If you cannot grasp it, what are you trying to grasp? Can you grasp it? Can you drive it away? We provisionally give this the name "awakening and seeing one's true nature."

Student: The Master discussed this in that book. At the time, the First Patriarch asked their senior fellow disciple, "If one were to string together all seventeen hundred koans, what would it be like?" One fellow disciple answered, "Suffering." Then the First Patriarch asked, "Who suffers?" The Master covered his ears and ran out. I had never really understood this passage. Today I thought: covering his ears

means, “I do not delight in hearing the Buddha’s meaning”; running out expresses the saying, “Where there is a Buddha, hurry past”…

Teacher Qi: What you say makes sense. But that is merely explaining it in words. You would do better to cover your ears and walk out right now!

Student: Teacher, taking this teacup, I ask you: “What is this?”

Teacher Qi: This question is a test of the host—you are testing me as a Dharma teacher. The most direct answer to this kind of question may not be very pleasing to hear: “I am not as good as you!”

Teacher Qi: In the end, it is simply plain talk: do not think that seeing one’s true nature is something lofty and profound. It is an ordinary matter; it is one’s proper duty; it is what a practitioner ought to do. It is not lofty—it is only the beginning. It is not like climbing some high branch, attaining some mysterious state that others do not know, or scaling a mountain that others cannot climb. It is not like that at all! This is each practitioner’s proper duty. It is only because they are unwilling that it comes to seem increasingly mysterious and unfathomable.

Seeing one’s true nature is not something extraordinary. It is one’s proper duty; it is not something for you to parade about or show off.

To conclude this seven-day retreat, let us use a few words from Master Guifeng Zongmi: “Take numinous knowing as your own mind; do not mistake deluded thoughts for it.

“If deluded thoughts arise, do not follow them. Then, when the time of death comes, karma will naturally be unable to bind you. Though there is an intermediate state, you will be free to go wherever you wish, taking your abode at will in heaven or among humans… If the subtle continuous stream is utterly stilled, and only the great wisdom of perfect enlightenment remains, bright and lucid, then one can manifest countless transformation bodies in response to circumstances and liberate sentient beings with whom one has affinities. This is called Buddha.” As for us, the first sentence alone—the most basic standard—is something everyone can attain. You can attain it even without sitting in meditation for seven days, how much more so after you have sat here for seven days!

All right, let us conclude.