Selected Answers by Teacher Qi to Students' Questions (Compiled from Recordings)

Teacher Qi Zhijun

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1. Misunderstandings of Chan

Question: Nowadays, everyone who studies Buddhism treats Chan as a kind of culture.

Teacher: In fact, there are many misunderstandings. Those who speak of Chan today are among those who misunderstand it most; it is Chan itself that they misunderstand. They do not know what genuine Chan is. They have not read the original works of the Chan school—that is, the works of the great masters of old. They read a few books on Chan written by modern people, acquire a somewhat broader way of thinking, and then say that this is Chan.

Is that Chan? For the ancient Chan masters, this is precisely what should be discarded! It is worldly cleverness and intellectual discrimination, and it should be discarded! If worldly cleverness and intellectual discrimination are not discarded, how can Chan emerge? There are now far too many idle trappings bearing the name of Chan. To truly understand Chan, one should read the original texts of the ancients. Cannot understand them? Then keep reading them!

When, all at once, you suddenly understand, and everything you previously could not understand becomes clear, that is Chan.

2. Koans Are Not for Study; They Are an Opening for Awakening!

Question: Nowadays, people all like to study the answers to koans.

Teacher: Do koans have answers? Koans can be used, but they absolutely have no answers. Now, do not mistake Sawing Open a Steelyard Weight for an answer. It may be regarded as an explanation of koans. Was that a merit or a fault? If one finds an answer in those explanations, one can no longer generate a sense of doubt; thereafter, one can never come to understanding through them.

Why, then, were they explained at that time? Because it had become apparent that cultivation had lost every trace of Chan flavor and style; everything had become rigid doctrine—and doctrine that had been misunderstood. Many people rigidly misunderstood the teachings and became completely bound by them.

Therefore, I wrote one piece a day. It took perhaps three or four months to explain one hundred koans from the Armory of the Chan School. Once they were finished, they had a little Chan flavor; gathered together, they became a book. But if they are taken as answers, the effect is entirely counterproductive. Sawing Open a Steelyard Weight was written by me. That was a fault, not a merit. It should not have been done that way. The more widely it circulates, the more troublesome it becomes. It was merely something to be used under appropriate circumstances; it cannot serve as a standard.

Can Chan be understood in that way? If Chan becomes theory and culture, it is utterly ruined! Chan itself is not like that. If you analyze every koan completely, what room is left for others? With that koan, others will no longer be able to attain genuine understanding through that opportunity. It all becomes thinking; it all becomes intellectual understanding. Is that Chan? Thinking is absolutely not Chan.

So why study them? Studying koans is of no use whatsoever. If you want to study koans, you would do better to study doctrine. Koans are not for study; they are an opening for awakening! It is good if you cannot understand a koan when you read it! If you could understand it, there would be no such opportunity. If you do not understand, continue reading! When, in an instant, everything becomes clear and all that you did not understand becomes clear, that is Chan.

Chan is sudden awakening; even to speak of awakening is superfluous.

3. Getting Caught in Conceptual Thinking Obstructs Chan Practice

Question: While reading, one may have some thoughts of one’s own.

Teacher: If you get caught in conceptual thinking, it becomes an obstacle to your Chan practice—do you understand? If you cannot understand, keep reading. Pay no attention to thought. Only when you finally overturn your own thinking can you possibly understand in an instant. Look: this adds the task of overturning your own thinking. Why add such an obstacle? Thought itself is the obstacle. People nowadays

take this thinking to be Chan; they take worldly cleverness and intellectual discrimination to be Chan, and have even formed Chan culture and Chan studies. Chan culture and Chan studies are not Chan.

Although the Chan school contains profound philosophical and cultural significance, it is, after all, not philosophy or culture.

4. Meditation Is for Opening, Revealing, Awakening to, and Entering the Buddha's Knowledge and Vision

Teacher Qi: First, we must have right view. If we rely solely on reading books and intellectual understanding for right view, we may very well become more mistaken the more we read. Without actual cultivation and without meditation, right view is not easily produced. Yet some people then split hairs over this: that one must meditate in order to have right view.

We did not say it is mandatory. This is our method; we did not say it is mandatory. Even without meditating, you may have right view, but that would not be through our method—it would be another dharma gate. Our way is this: one thousand meditation sessions! We do not argue about it; simply complete one thousand sessions.

What we pray for is the swift opening of wisdom. If wisdom opens, will there not be right view? Of course it is the same thing. Is speaking of knowledge and vision not the same as speaking of opening wisdom? Is there some separate wisdom of the Buddha and knowledge and vision of the Buddha? Why do we meditate? To swiftly open wisdom. It is to swiftly open wisdom, not to swiftly seek supernormal powers or rapidly increase our abilities.

That is not the point. It is to swiftly open wisdom, for knowledge and vision—indeed, to open, reveal, awaken to, and enter the Buddha's knowledge and vision. That is why we meditate. How can one say that meditation cannot open knowledge and vision? But you cannot say that only meditation can open knowledge and vision. Others have their own methods. The method of our Heart-of-Heart Dharma is seated meditation.

Seated meditation is for opening, revealing, awakening to, and entering the Buddha's knowledge and vision—for swiftly opening wisdom and attaining Buddhahood. Do we not constantly pray for the swift opening of wisdom? Is that not also a matter of knowledge and vision?

5. The Pure Land School Is the Gate of Faith; the Heart-of-Heart Dharma Is the Gate of Practice

Question: At present, I recite Amitābha Buddha's name without doubt, and I have especially great faith in this.

Teacher Qi: Then keep that faith without doubting it—that is best. It is what can lead you to rebirth. The Pure Land dharma gate is indeed the gate of faith. One must not doubt, for doubt makes rebirth difficult.

It is founded on faith. In order to emphasize this faith, and to make rebirth easier for sentient beings of Pure Land capacity, people say such things as: "In the Dharma-ending age, though billions upon billions cultivate, scarcely one attains the Way; only by relying on Buddha-recitation can one be liberated from birth and death." In the Dharma-ending age, there is no other method; there is only Buddha-recitation.

Do not consider these mistaken words. Although these words do not appear in the sūtras, they are correct. They accord with the capacities of Pure Land practitioners. Without such emphasis, their faith would be damaged. Firm faith is the basis for rebirth, because the Pure Land school is the gate of faith.

The Heart-of-Heart Dharma, however, is not the gate of faith; it is the gate of practice.

That is to say, if you have doubts—not thoroughgoing doubts, of course—such doubts are permitted. In the Pure Land school, however, they are not permitted; there cannot be the slightest doubt. In the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, you may have doubts, though not excessive ones. So long as you meditate and cultivate, you need not think your doubts through. Without thinking, they will be resolved. At some point, you will suddenly discover that there are no more doubts. It silently enters your mind and strengthens the power of your mind. This is not the gate of faith; it is the gate of practice.

6. There Is No Buddha to Become—That Is Attaining Buddhahood

Question: My question is this: when we attain Buddhahood through practice, does that mean there is only one Buddha? If so, when Śākyamuni attained Buddhahood, all of us would have attained Buddhahood too—but surely that is not what is meant. On the other hand, suppose Zhang San practices and attains Buddhahood. Zhang San can represent only himself; this has nothing to do with anyone else. That raises a theoretical question: is there one Buddha or are there many Buddhas?

Teacher Qi: This is what I was just saying: this is still delusion. You are still trying to use the thinking of worldly sentient beings to describe the profound Buddhadharma. In fact, language is sometimes inadequate; therefore it is said that the way of words is cut off. Thinking produces misunderstanding; therefore the activity of mind must cease. That is not a place that thought can reach.

When it comes to the ultimate teaching of attaining Buddhahood, what exactly is attaining Buddhahood? For example, if someone who truly knows were to explain it to someone who does not know, they would say this: “There is no Buddha to become—this is attaining Buddhahood.” That is all they would say. The other person might not understand, but this statement is most true.

Why? For example, can someone who knows colors explain color clearly to a color-blind person? How should they explain it? A color-blind person knows black and white, but not colors. So one tells them: it is not black, not white, not both black and white, and not neither black nor white. None of these is it—these are the four propositions of Buddhism.

The four propositions are true words, yet they are also conceptual elaboration. Color is simply color; is all this talk of neither black nor white not conceptual elaboration? The four propositions are conceptual elaboration, but one truly cannot avoid speaking this way, because the person is color-blind.

The Buddhadharma is the same. When explaining it to such a person, one can only speak in this way. How else can one speak? They are color-blind and do not understand. Thus, the meaning lies beyond words; the way of words is cut off, and the path of mental activity is extinguished. This is called the ultimate truth.

If we speak of expedient methods, such as the deliverance of the deceased, seeking blessings, and eliminating obstacles, these may all be expedient means. But let us agree not to discuss such matters in our conversations, because I have not studied these things. It would be pointless for you to ask me. Let us speak only of the ultimate truth, not of those things. So many people are already speaking about them —why add one more? Amitābha Buddha.

7. Not Asserting Existence Is True Existence

Question: Then, Master, may I ask: is the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss a yellow leaf used to stop a child from crying?

Teacher Qi: Is our world not the same? This is how we should look at it: is the Dharma spoken in our world like yellow leaves used to stop a child from crying? If so, why could the Dharma spoken in the Western Pure Land not be the same? Some people do not speak of yellow leaves stopping a child’s crying; they ask whether the Western Pure Land truly exists. But that is just like asking whether our world truly exists. Or does it not exist? Then might one not likewise regard the Western Pure Land as nonexistent?

What we mean by saying that the Western Pure Land does not exist is the same as what we mean by saying that our world does not exist. To regard this Sahā world as

existing while that Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss does not exist is attachment to appearances!

8. The Western Pure Land Also Teaches: Suffering, Emptiness, Impermanence, and Non-Self

Question: Master, may I ask: if the Western Pure Land is indeed a Buddha land, is it then a composite appearance?

Teacher Qi: Learn about composite appearances after you get there. The principle of a composite appearance cannot be explained clearly here either. What Dharma does it teach? The sūtras have already told you what Dharma the Pure Land teaches: the water, birds, and trees all teach what? Suffering, emptiness, impermanence, and non-self.

Pay attention: the Dharma taught in the Pure Land speaks of suffering, not of a dharma of bliss. In comparison with our world, it is blissful; but in the Pure Land, it is called suffering. It is empty, and thus not substantial. It is impermanent: what we call everlasting is, there, impermanent—not everlasting. And there is also non-self.

In fact, as long as something has an appearance, how could it be eternal? “All appearances are illusory.” If the Western Pure Land did not someday come to an end, when would Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva become a Buddha? It must come to an end; is that not impermanence? Yet, measured against our world, that impermanence is virtually equivalent to eternity. Why? Because it lasts so very long—far longer than the kalpas here. You simply cannot imagine how long it is, but it still has an end, however long it may be.

9. Heart Esotericism Seven-Day Retreats Must Not Exceed Four Seven-Day Periods

Seven-day retreats were originally held only in winter. Who still holds them only in winter now? No—why say this? Because seven-day retreats are now being held outside the winter season.

Moreover, in heart esotericism, one must not exceed four seven-day periods, yet cases of exceeding four seven-day periods also exist. In fact, a heart-esotericism seven-day retreat does not necessarily mean sitting more. Do not exceed four; there is an upper limit. But some people, once meditation is emphasized, simply sit more. They may hold more than twenty seven-day periods. That is not how it should be done.

Originally there were only three seven-day periods. Later, the Elder said, “All right, add one more,” making four seven-day periods; originally, one was not permitted to exceed three. Heart esotericism is not a dharma gate that asks you to spend your

entire life sitting in meditation. It asks you to meditate during this particular period of time, and even that cannot be done, so meditation is emphasized.

Why is it emphasized? Because even this cannot be done: one need only meditate during this period, and in three or four years complete one thousand meditation sessions. Yet even this they do not do, so it is emphasized again and again. Once the emphasis goes too far, people think that whatever is emphasized must be right, and say, “Then I shall do more than twenty seven-day periods.” How could that be right? One must not exceed four!

One must not exceed four seven-day periods. Heart esotericism is not a dharma gate that takes meditation as its cultivation; its aim is to open wisdom.

What are you praying for when you meditate? It is not to swiftly enter meditative absorption and become a Buddha. All right, if one focuses on meditative absorption, one might pray to swiftly enter samādhi and become a Buddha; then one enters samādhi, and samādhi gives rise to wisdom. But that is fundamentally not our way. Our way is to swiftly open wisdom and become a Buddha—directly opening wisdom. It is not about how many meditation sessions you sit. Do not think so much about it.

10. Do Not Forget to Eliminate the Most Fundamental Habitual Tendency: Attachment to Appearances

Question: I feel that my habitual tendencies are especially strong. For example, I do not know what happened, but last weekend I suddenly wanted to eat meat again, even though I had not eaten meat for a long time.

Teacher Qi: What you describe cannot be said not to be a habitual tendency. You are speaking of a habitual tendency, and you have recognized it as such. But you have not seen your greatest habitual tendency—attachment to appearances and insisting on taking things as real. Before you had heard of “realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature,” you did not cling to that idea, because you knew nothing about it. But once you learned the term, you kept clinging to it.

Moreover, if you cling from the standpoint of appearances, how can you reach the goal? It is impossible to reach it. Your talk of eliminating habitual tendencies and seeing one’s true nature is all concerned with appearances. What we call seeing one’s true nature is formless. Your goal itself is problematic; your aspiration is problematic. There is no need even to mention anything else.

11. What Does It Mean to Acknowledge It?

Question: Teacher, people nowadays do not dare to acknowledge it directly. The great patriarchs of old would understand as soon as they were given a hint, as you just said. But what about us now, in this very moment?

Teacher Qi: That is because you misunderstand the word “acknowledge.” What did I just say? What is original? Or perhaps there was originally nothing at all. That is what you acknowledge—not some qualification, status, or state of mind, such as “My afflictions have become lighter or disappeared.” That is absolutely not what is meant. Why would anyone want to claim such a thing?

Question: In fact, are we also seeing our true nature in this very moment?

Teacher Qi: How is that different from saying that, in this very moment, we are not seeing our true nature? If you ask me, those who speak this way should avoid such terms. If they do not avoid them, they sell themselves into bondage—they sell themselves. Speak instead in plain words that truthfully express what is in your heart. [Understood.] To speak of ordinary beings or sages, Buddhas or sentient beings, is all conceptual elaboration—entirely conceptual elaboration. Yet these are all expedient expressions; when used well, they are very good.

12. What Are One Thousand Meditation Sessions For?

Teacher Qi: You keep saying that after one thousand meditation sessions you have not reached the goal, but have you ever reflected on what your goal is? [Student: The goal is not to run after deluded thoughts.] No, do not use such terms. If you say that the goal is not to run after deluded thoughts, it will be very difficult to reach the goal.

The goal is to see that neither deluded thoughts nor the act of following them can be apprehended. You have never actually run after them at all! Whether or not you run after deluded thoughts—that itself is a deluded thought! That is the goal. But if you understand this in principle yet cannot put it into practice, then you may undertake one thousand meditation sessions; you will certainly reach the goal. Only in this way will it work.

13. Expedient Means and the Ultimate

A disciple asked: The Elder once said that before realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature, whatever one cultivates is blind practice. Is that so?

Teacher Qi: That is something to say later. At present, it is not blind practice. First cultivate, and in time you will know what blind practice is.

At present, our goal is simply this: to proceed in the direction of realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature. Once you truly understand, you will say, “What is all this?” What seeing one’s true nature or not seeing one’s true nature? So much has been made of it. What “realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature”? The nature is originally luminous; does it need to be illuminated once more? What nature is there to see? If there were no nature, could you see it? Thus: “How can the mind be

made luminous? How can nature be seen?" To arrive at this is to say the same thing as emphasizing realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature.

Perhaps you cannot get past this. You say that there are now birth, old age, sickness, and death. Precisely this is nirvāṇa: there is no birth and death.

Perhaps you cannot get past even "birth and death are nirvāṇa." One can say this only upon reaching the end; before reaching the end, one should not say it. If one says it beforehand, will it not be misunderstood? These are the words of one who has thoroughly awakened! Birth and death and nirvāṇa are equally like flowers in empty space. The ancients were all like this; both the Chan school and the doctrinal schools were entirely like this, unless they had not awakened thoroughly. It is absolutely not that one is Chan and the other doctrine. The doctrinal schools also speak to this thoroughly awakened point. Without reaching this, one has not touched the true essence of the Buddhadharma.

But if this is brought out at the very beginning, even Śākyamuni Buddha would be at a loss. What he awakened to beneath the bodhi tree was precisely this, and it left him deeply troubled: "My Dharma is wondrous and difficult to conceive." That is, the Dharma I have awakened to is wondrous and difficult to conceive. But he would not speak of it to sentient beings. Why not? Because they would misunderstand it; how could this Dharma be explained to them while they were still deluded? So he considered entering nirvāṇa at once. He wanted to pass away in meditation and simply remain seated beneath the bodhi tree.

The Dharma protectors would not allow it. They said, "Every Buddha, after attaining Buddhahood, must teach the Dharma. Why will you not teach?" But the Buddha asked himself, "What could I teach?" That is to say, those of initial capacity were far too unlikely to believe it, so one had to begin with expedient means. What expedient means? He thought, "Ah, this will do: suffering, origination, cessation, and the path. I shall begin there."

First speak of what sentient beings see before their eyes: before them is suffering, so begin there. They should leave it behind. Then explain the root of suffering: it is origination. Is there a Dharma by which one may be freed from this? Yes: there is cessation. Cessation is nirvāṇa. How can cessation be attained? By cultivating the path, one can attain cessation. Thus he began teaching from there.

Therefore, it is all expedient teaching. Later on—though in fact he had realized the Way from the very beginning—what he taught was all expedient. But at the end, in the Lotus and Nirvāṇa teachings, he spoke directly, saying that sentient beings are originally Buddhas. Only at the very end could this be spoken directly. The teachings at the beginning and at the end are both thoroughly penetrating, while in between

there are many expedient means: eighty-four thousand dharma gates, and the Tripiṭaka and twelve divisions of the scriptures.