Initial Aspiration Is Itself Perfect Enlightenment

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Contents

The Process and Experiences of Practice

Reflections on the Process of Transmitting the Dharma

What Distinguishes the Heart-of-Heart Dharma's Entry Point from Chan and Other Dharma Gates?

Explosion: Is the Clear, Numinous Knowing at the Point Where Thought Ceases Buddha-Nature?

What Do You Consider the Key to Buddhist Practice?

The Process and Experiences of Practice

Question: To commemorate Master Yuanyin and better propagate the Buddhadharma, Yuanyin Ancient Temple in Boluo, Guangdong, has initiated the production of this video disc. You are a Dharma teacher designated by Master Yuanyin to transmit the Dharma. We would like to ask you to speak about the causes and conditions through which you came to study with the Master, the course of your practice and the insights you gained, and some of your reflections on transmitting the Dharma.

Answer: These are three questions: the causes and conditions through which I received the Dharma, my experience of practice, and the circumstances of transmitting the Dharma. All three concern me personally, but I think that this video disc, Master Yuanyin and the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, should emphasize the Master and the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. So I will simply answer in a few words:

One concerns the Master: "It is not that I have not studied the Dharma with other spiritual friends. My experience of seeking instruction has shown me that my venerable teacher, Master Yuanyin, is a great spiritual friend of a kind rarely encountered. To encounter Master Yuanyin in this lifetime, I firmly believe, means that I must have planted wholesome roots not merely in the presence of one, two,

three, four, or five Buddhas, but in the presence of immeasurable millions of Buddhas."

The other concerns the dharma gate: "It is not that I have not studied other dharma gates. My experience of practice has shown me how powerfully the Heart-of-Heart Dharma works on the mind. Its subtle, gradual, continuous influence changes one's character without one's even noticing. In these respects, its effects truly cannot be matched by other dharma gates.

"That is the actual situation; I will say no more. This is my personal experience. Of course, some may disagree with what I say; each person has their own causes and conditions. Yet because the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is suited to my capacity, this is how I myself experience it."

These causes and conditions are a continuation of learning the Dharma life after life. Take you, for example: you have faith in Buddhism. If you had not studied Buddhism in a previous life, it would be unlikely that you would study Buddhism in this life. This too is a continuation. The power of vows extends throughout the future; this is originally a phrase from the bodhisattva precepts, which always speak of "upholding them throughout all future time." Practicing life after life is a feature of the Buddhadharma of Śākyamuni Buddha. The causes and conditions for our learning the Dharma are that, in this life, we have an affinity with the Heart-of-Heart Dharma.

In fact, it is not simply a matter of being limited to an affinity with one particular dharma gate; rather, it is an affinity with the Buddhadharma. In this life, whichever dharma gate you need to use to cut off afflictions is the dharma gate with which you have an affinity. For example, many people now need to use the Heart-of-Heart Dharma to cut off afflictions. When there are many such people, it appears that heart esotericism is being propagated.

This brings us to your third question: carrying on its propagation. Suppose those who should be liberated have already been liberated, and the problem of cutting off afflictions has been resolved. Would it still matter whether heart esotericism were propagated? Would that still be an important question? The focus of the Buddhadharma is not worldly dharmas.

Worldly dharmas are like this: if you want to establish an enterprise, you must promote your enterprise so that it can flourish and prosper. If one treats propagating heart esotericism in this way—or even treats other dharma gates, or the Buddhadharma itself, in this way—that is not the Buddha's intention. The Buddha responds to sentient beings' minds according to their capacities for understanding; when sentient beings' conditions for liberation are mature, the Buddha appears in the world. When sentient beings lack the conditions for liberation, even if the Buddha appears in the world, you will not study with him.

Reflections on the Process of Transmitting the Dharma

Question: You are a Dharma teacher appointed by the Elder to transmit the teaching. Would you please share some of your reflections on the process of transmitting the Dharma?

Answer: Speaking of transmitting the Dharma, let me use an analogy. In Buddhism there is a term, “Dharma food.” It compares methods of practice to food, and greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt to hunger. Once you eat food, you are no longer hungry. This is only an analogy.

So let me use this analogy for the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. If we compare the Heart-of-Heart Dharma to food, then as long as someone knows they are hungry, and as long as they are willing to live and do not wish to starve to death, I will certainly give them food. I will never be miserly or lazy. That is only half of it. The other half is this: if they do not know they are hungry and no amount of prompting makes them realize it, then there is nothing I can do for them. Let us provisionally call this spreading the Dharma.

There are two extremes here. At one end are lazy people and those concerned only with their own liberation; at the other, those who treat the Buddhadharma as a worldly undertaking. This does not concern outward appearances. I am speaking entirely of the mind: inwardly, do not become one who seeks only personal liberation, and inwardly, do not regard the Buddhadharma as a worldly undertaking. It is not a matter of outward appearance. Outwardly, one may live in the mountains. Better still, one may be fully engaged in vigorous activities while remaining inwardly as untroubled as if living in the mountains.

Of course, vigorous activity does have an outward form. Without such form, there is nowhere to begin. But inwardly, you must not hold on to it. Chan Master Baizhang once said: “How fortunate to be a monk in the robe that is a field of blessings! Heaven and earth have gained one person at leisure. Where there are conditions, I remain; where there are no conditions, I depart, leaving it to the clear breeze to send off the white clouds.” Yet he was famously busy: “A day without work is a day without food.”

Yet he said that he was a person of leisure! This means that his mind clings to nothing; he did not treat spreading the Dharma as a worldly undertaking. Though outwardly things may be very lively—using the language of the doctrinal schools, one might say that the Dharma affinities are especially favorable—that is all well and good. But in your mind, you must not be carried along by it.

For example, when reading a sūtra, the Sixth Patriarch said: Do not let the sūtra read you. You read the sūtra; you turn the sūtra. Do not be turned by the sūtra. One must "eat all day without biting a single grain of rice, and wear clothes all day without a single thread catching on one's body." If your mind clings to anything, then—even if you do not act—you still have deluded thoughts and attachments.

Because it is lodged in your mind and cannot be dissolved, whether you act or do not act, it is all deluded thought and attachment. To use a term from the Chan school: ah, idle trappings! He called those deluded thoughts and attachments idle trappings. It is not a matter of acting or not acting. Attachment does not arise only when one acts; one may have attachment even without acting.

The Buddhadharma truly works upon the mind. This leads us to another topic: Nanquan killing the cat. You must not imitate the killing; what you can learn is Nanquan's state of mind. Practice is the cultivation of mind. Outside the mind there is no dharma; to posit a dharma outside the mind is a heterodox view. Everyone knows that there is no dharma outside the mind, yet when something happens, they seek dharma outside the mind.

Chan Master Nanquan had no mind of killing. It would be more accurate to say that Nanquan liberated the cat than that he killed it. When Nanquan killed the cat, the cat attained liberation. If you kill a cat, you form an enmity with it. You cannot imitate his killing; you should learn from his state of mind, utterly free of hindrance. Another example is Guizong killing a snake.

Guizong said: "Ah, set this matter aside for the moment—do not imitate me in killing the snake. Set it aside for the moment. I ask you: where did you see me kill the snake?" This question is the most important one. This is where the issue lies! Ultimately, Nanquan did not kill a cat.

Was there really a cat? All appearances are illusory; is the appearance of a cat not illusory as well? If you have not reached that state, you become attached to it. Once you become attached, another illusion arises: you undergo karmic retribution and are later killed by that cat.

This too is illusory. Although all is illusory, cause and effect are ironclad. These two illusions are necessarily linked together. If we compare illusion to a dream, worldly cause and effect is an ironclad law within the dream. Once you awaken from the dream, do these illusions still exist? To say "they exist" is conceptual elaboration; to say "they do not exist" is also conceptual elaboration.

You still cannot say that they do not exist. Why? Having awakened, can you say that you never had that dream? If you conclude that there was "nothing," you are wrong, because you remember the dreamscape with perfect clarity. How could it be

nothing? Does it exist? To say that it does is also wrong, for it was, after all, a dream! Thus, to speak of existence or nonexistence is conceptual elaboration. Only here is there a genuine awakening from the dream; only this is real. It is not a matter of merely learning a little theory and playing with words.

As for spreading the Dharma, it should be like this: first, do not chase after opportunities to spread the Dharma; second, do not refuse anyone who seeks the Dharma. These two statements sum up what may provisionally be called spreading the Dharma.

What Distinguishes the Heart-of-Heart Dharma's Entry Point from Chan and Other Dharma Gates?

Question: Master Yuanyin once said that the Heart-of-Heart Dharma "takes Chan as its essence, Esoteric Buddhism as its function, and the Pure Land as its ultimate destination." Could you discuss the distinctive features of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma's point of entry, in comparison with such dharma gates as the Chan school?

Answer: The difference is obvious. The Chan school's method of practice is to investigate a huatou. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma does not investigate a huatou. Its primary practice is contemplation, and its auxiliary practice is seated meditation with the six mudrās and one mantra. Contemplation is not the same as investigating a huatou. Investigating a huatou means taking something up, whereas contemplation means letting go. It is precisely not taking something up, but letting go—letting go of your present deluded thoughts and no longer attending to them. This is an expedient means. The methods of entry differ, but both prevent deluded thoughts from ruling you, and both require that you not follow deluded thoughts.

"Not following deluded thoughts" is not exclusive to the Chan school, nor is it only a teaching of the present day. The ancients, ancient Chan masters, and great patriarchs of the doctrinal schools all taught this way. Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi is one example. He was not only a patriarch of the Chan school, but also a patriarch of the Huayan school among the doctrinal schools. He said, "If deluded thoughts arise, do not follow them. Then, when the time of death comes, karma will naturally be unable to bind you."

This is exactly what the Elder meant by not following deluded thoughts. Moreover, his wording is the same as the Elder's: the Elder spoke of "the nature of numinous knowing in which not a single thought arises, yet there is clear and distinct awareness," while Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi said: "Take empty quiescence as your own essence; do not mistake the physical body for yourself. Take numinous knowing as your own mind; do not mistake deluded thoughts for it."

According to Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi, if one can refrain from following deluded thoughts to this degree, “karma will naturally be unable to bind one.” That is, karmic force can no longer bind that person; one has escaped saṃsāra. That is realizing the Way; that is liberation. To remain bound by karmic force is saṃsāra.

Chan Master Guifeng then continued: “Though there is an intermediate state, one is free to go wherever one wishes, taking one’s abode at will in heaven or among humans.” Although one has not yet transcended birth and death, one is already liberated. Karma can do nothing to such a person, who is no longer within saṃsāra. This is the expedient method of entry. Although the Heart-of-Heart Dharma differs in its expedient method of entry, that is the only difference; in all other respects it is the same as the Chan school.

“Taking Chan as its essence” is the point of sameness. “Taking Esoteric Buddhism as its function” is the point of difference. “Taking the Pure Land as its ultimate destination” gives it universal scope. Without the phrase “taking the Pure Land as its ultimate destination,” heart esotericism would set too high a threshold and would not readily accommodate the general public. With “taking the Pure Land as its ultimate destination,” the threshold of heart esotericism is no longer high. It can then address the general public, and practitioners of all three capacities—superior, middling, and lesser—can study heart esotericism.

Does not heart esotericism have these three statements? It takes prajñā as its principle, dhāraṇī as its method, and the Pure Land as its ultimate destination.

The first statement: prajñā as its principle.

This relates to the question you just raised. If Chan is taken as the essence, then from this perspective one can open up one’s original nature without even practicing the six mudrās and one mantra. Taking prajñā as its principle means awakening upon hearing the Dharma. This is for those of the very highest capacity. Such people are indeed very rare; I have never seen one.

I once asked the Elder, “Have you ever seen anyone who awakens so directly?” The Elder said, “Have you?” I said, “Without needing to practice any Dharma at all —‘principle is realized through sudden awakening; with that awakening, delusions are all dissolved’—at the very instant of opening up, could all the deluded thoughts, attachments, and habitual tendencies accumulated over immeasurable kalpas be exhausted? I have never seen such a person.” The Elder said, “You have not seen one? Neither have I!” Such people are exceedingly rare.

The second statement: dhāraṇī as its method.

With the guiding principle of the first statement in place, one then uses the method of dhāraṇī to guide people. Dhāraṇī means encompassing all dharmas and retaining immeasurable meanings. The method of mantra recitation and Esoteric Buddhist practice is a dhāraṇī method. It takes this as its method, rather than investigating a huatou; herein it differs from the Chan school. This is a difference in the point of entry. What is the same as and different from the Chan school has just been explained.

The third statement: the Pure Land as its ultimate destination. Here there are three kinds:

1. Does the approach that takes prajñā as its principle not also take the Pure Land as its ultimate destination? Those who awaken so directly likewise take the Pure Land as their ultimate destination—the Land of Eternal Quiescent Light. Some say, "I will not be reborn in the Pure Land." There is a problem with this statement: they have fallen from one extreme into the other. Who says that this is not rebirth in the Pure Land? This is true rebirth in the Pure Land! The Land of Eternal Quiescent Light has neither coming nor going, neither arising nor ceasing.

There is no ceasing here and being born there; it has none of these appearances. Such rebirth is indeed of the highest grade! Eternal Quiescent Light is immeasurable light and immeasurable life; it is the dharmakāya of Amitābha Buddha. If one directly sees Amitābha Buddha's dharmakāya, how could that not be rebirth in the Pure Land?

2. Taking dhāraṇī as its method also includes rebirth in the Pure Land. Buddha-recitation is the Pure Land school's method for rebirth in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss. Each school likewise has its own expedient means for rebirth in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss. For example, both Japanese Esoteric Buddhism and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism have a Lotus Family. The Lotus Family takes Amitābha Buddha as its presiding Buddha; by practicing the methods of the Lotus Family, one can be reborn in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss.

For another example, the Tiantai school nowadays follows the principle, "Its teachings are founded on Tiantai; its practice rests in Amitābha." Although it too practices Buddha-recitation for rebirth in the West, its doctrinal teaching takes the Tiantai school's teachings as its guiding principle. The Pure Land school is likewise among the doctrinal schools, but its teachings take the Pure Land as their guiding principle rather than Tiantai. Thus, just as the Lotus Family is the method in Tibetan and Japanese Esoteric Buddhism for rebirth in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss, here taking dhāraṇī as its method is heart esotericism's method for rebirth in the Pure Land.

3. For those who insist that there must be coming and going, and for whom statements such as “originally there is no coming or going, originally there is no arising or ceasing” are simply impossible to understand, one may speak only of the third statement, taking the Pure Land as the ultimate destination, without mentioning the first two. They can then be reborn in the Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages.

Rebirth in the Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages is equally viable. One can continue studying the Dharma there with Amitābha Buddha, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva, and the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the Lotus Pool Assembly. One can also see Maitreya Bodhisattva, for after rebirth in the West one sees the eight great bodhisattvas, among whom is Maitreya Bodhisattva. This is how one speaks to Heart-of-Heart Dharma practitioners of this capacity: in three statements.

The first statement is: take rebirth in the Pure Land as the goal. This is the first statement because the goal must be emphasized first; it is most important, whereas the methods are secondary. The next two statements are both methods: “take Buddha-recitation as the primary practice and one thousand sessions of the six mudrās and one mantra as the auxiliary practice.” This is a very reliable method in heart esotericism for rebirth in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Take Buddha-recitation as the primary practice. Do not get entangled in such matters as safeguarding realization, seeing one’s nature, opening up, awakening, or realizing the Way; do not concern yourself with these. “Take rebirth in the Pure Land as the goal, Buddha-recitation as the primary practice, and one thousand sessions of the six mudrās and one mantra as the auxiliary practice.”

With this auxiliary practice, one does not depart from mind; it is not outside your mind. In your own mind, you feel assured of rebirth. What others say does not count; only your own inner assurance counts. Do not merely listen to me expound theory here—go and do it yourself. Take one thousand sessions of the six mudrās and one mantra as the auxiliary practice, and Buddha-recitation as the primary practice. You yourself know that assurance; what others say does not count. It is like drinking water: only the drinker knows whether it is cold or warm.

Therefore, heart esotericism is a path of practice: what matters is your willingness to do the work. It is not a path of faith in which one cannot proceed without belief. Of course, heart esotericism also requires faith; one must not doubt its foundation. But its chief emphasis is practice.

Who transmitted the Dharma at the source of Chinese heart esotericism? Once you understand this, you will know: Samantabhadra Bodhisattva of Great Conduct! Its emphasis is therefore on practice, on genuine cultivation; it is not a matter of merely

expounding teachings and being done with it. That is not the case. The emphasis lies here. It does not even fear doubt! It does not fear your doubts. As long as you are willing to practice, those doubts will vanish imperceptibly.

Before you know it, you may say, “Eh? When did I stop doubting?” Even you yourself will not know. The power of this gradual and imperceptible transformation is beyond that of other dharma gates I have practiced. With other dharma gates, some people become more doubtful the more they practice. A characteristic of some intellectuals today is excessive doubt.

This is why heart esotericism is somewhat suited to intellectuals. It does not fear your doubts. But if you are unwilling to practice, there is no remedy; nothing can be done for you. As long as you are willing to practice, your doubts need not be removed through theory at all; there is fundamentally no need to eliminate them theoretically. Before you know it, you yourself will attain thorough understanding.

How does one come to understand? One understands without having thought it through! Explained from this point of view, the practice works upon the eighth consciousness. The eighth consciousness is the subconscious. Because it works imperceptibly upon the eighth consciousness, the eighth consciousness becomes great perfect mirror wisdom. Naturally, greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt then have no root. In other words, such wrong views as the view of a self in the body, extreme views, heterodox views, attachment to views, and attachment to precepts and prohibitions no longer exist. Yet when encountering circumstances, greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt may still arise and need to be removed. This is the removal of habitual tendencies.

Before you have opened up, before wrong views have been eliminated, this is not called removing habitual tendencies. Removing habitual tendencies refers to after one has opened up one’s original nature. Before opening up one’s original nature, one is carried along by karmic force.

Of course, doubting the foundation is almost impossible. Our doubts are all a mixture of faith and doubt; if one doubted the foundation, one would not study Buddhism at all. One must break through doubt. If you do not break through it and remain caught in doubt, that is also very painful: one day you think it exists, the next you think it does not; one day you think it is right, the next you think it is wrong. This leaves one burdened with afflictions.

When you have not yet broken through, that is precisely the time to practice. That is, practice according to the three statements. If the first statement, taking prajñā as its principle, is sufficient, then one arrives in a single step and there is no need to say more. But this is very rare; we have never seen such a person—not even the Elder

has. So let us speak of the second statement: take dhāraṇī as the method; be willing to meditate and to take contemplation as the primary practice.

If even that is not possible, then use the third statement: take the Pure Land as the ultimate destination—that is, take rebirth in the West as the goal, Buddha-recitation as the primary practice, and one thousand sessions of the six mudrās and one mantra as the auxiliary practice. The crucial question is whether you are willing to do it. So long as you are willing to act, rather than being tossed back and forth by your doubts, it is better to choose one practice and carry it out well. Choosing one and doing it is the path of practice.

On this path of practice, of course one must also understand the theory. But once one understands it, one no longer concerns oneself with it. This is called “when practice begins, understanding ceases”: once cultivation has begun, cut off that conceptual understanding. Some people keep turning things over and over in their conceptual thinking; the more they do so, the more afflicted they become. That is precisely getting it backward. Heart esotericism is a path of practice; you must actually practice it.

I also believe that, for a considerable number of those who have received empowerment in heart esotericism, the third approach is the most suitable. Whom should you ask? Ask yourself. Others do not know how certain you are of rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Do not let this person’s remarks make you doubt, and then that person’s remarks make you doubt again. If you go on doubting your whole life, then at the moment of death you will be flustered and at a loss, and this life will have been wasted again.

You yourself are the most certain; do not ask others. Even if someone says that you cannot be reborn in the Western Pure Land, you will not accept it: “How could he know my state?” That will do. Then there will truly be results.

To base your assurance on other people’s words is merely to deceive yourself. In the end, you will again become confused. Once doubt arises, you will doubt yourself and that other person as well; you will doubt everything. That is not good. It is better for you yourself to be certain. Thus, when we speak of certainty, it is something you yourself know. Practice has indeed shown this to be so; such cases truly do occur. That is to say, certainty lies in one’s own mind.

Explosion: Is the Clear, Numinous Knowing at the Point Where Thought Ceases Buddha-Nature?

Question: Did Master Yuanyin say that one can see the Buddha-nature once one's practice reaches the point of an explosion, and that one should recognize the clear,

numinous knowing at the point where a thought ceases as Buddha-nature? Some people do not understand these statements.

Answer: The books do say this, but do not read only the beginning and not what follows—unless you intend to cut off and discard what the Master says afterward. I, too, was once attached to this appearance. The Master would glare with his eyes wide open and say—not just once—"What is all this talk of explosion or no explosion?" Only then was I willing to read those books carefully and continue further on. Ah! It turns out that nothing can be obtained and nothing should be clung to!

As soon as you give rise to a thought, there is certainly an appearance; then it is not the state in which not a single thought arises, nor is it clear and distinct knowing. It becomes a worldly dharma characterized by appearances. This can be known only through realization.

"Oh, I understand—it is like this!" What difference is there between that very moment of understanding and an explosion? For some people it comes with force: it is not merely such an understanding, but with a "crack," an explosion. Yet this is no different from suddenly understanding—is it not, in both cases, radiant clarity manifesting before one? By "radiant clarity manifesting before one," you always understand that there is something appearing before you. But to say that there is a thing or that there is no thing—both are mere conceptual elaboration.

It is like dark clouds dispersing and blue sky being revealed. It is not that, outside yourself, you have cultivated a blue sky; it is not that what was formerly absent has now arrived. Rather, at that time your own deluded thoughts and attachments are no longer active. "Ah, so that is how it is! It was like this all along!" This is called merely casting off delusion, without seeking the true.

Why is there no need to seek it? Because it is complete and present right here and now—this alone is genuine. If you grasp at an appearance, it becomes an image, and that is no longer what the Master meant. At that point, the Master would glare and rebuke you: "What is all this talk of explosion or no explosion?" This is precisely what he meant.

There is another thing the Master often rebuked people for: "What is all this talk of numinous knowing or no numinous knowing?" This is because that so-called numinous knowing has become, for you, a verbal concept. What it should be is what is immediately and directly present.

Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi also used the term "numinous knowing" in his day. The ancients all used it, and the Master used it as well—what is wrong with that? It was

not only Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi; other great masters used it too. It refers to the realm of direct realization.

Fearing that you might make something out of the words themselves, the Master swept it away himself: “Numinous knowing, too, cannot be obtained!” Read on, and you will certainly find these words.

Otherwise, would that not establish a dharma? This is not merely the Master’s meaning; it is the Buddha’s meaning, the meaning of the patriarchs and great masters of every school and tradition throughout the ages, and also the Master’s meaning. This is what is correct. Otherwise, would it still be Buddhadharma? Would that not be a misunderstanding? Once it is misunderstood, it may no longer be Buddhadharma; it becomes conceptual assertion and denial. One must leave behind both assertion and denial.

Therefore, when some people criticize this “numinous knowing,” they should go criticize the ancient Chan masters—it was all said by them. In fact, what they criticize is numinous knowing as they have misunderstood it; they first misunderstand it and then criticize it. Before it is misunderstood, there is simply no room for criticism. When true nature manifests in radiant clarity, what is there to criticize? Nor is there room to praise it—not even praise is admissible. Neither criticism nor praise is admissible. Numinous knowing is not within your criticism or praise; it is not there, not within conceptual assertion or denial.

What Do You Consider the Key to Buddhist Practice?

Question: What do you consider to be the key to Buddhist practice? Can you summarize it in one brief sentence?

Answer: I think the foundation of Buddhist practice can be expressed in just three Chinese characters: “initial aspiration.” The foundation is your initial aspiration; that is the true foundation. Outside the mind, there is no dharma. To seek dharmas outside the mind is a non-Buddhist path. If one’s initial aspiration is truly pure and right, then at the very arousing of that aspiration, one attains perfect enlightenment!