The Initial Determination in Learning Buddhism

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Contents

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When ordinary people reach a crossroads and cannot decide which way to take, that is their most painful moment; every kind of doubt, fear, and panic arises with it. If someone suddenly shows them the way to safety and keeps them from entering a dangerous path, their gratitude is beyond description. Yet there are also those who have already entered a dangerous path without knowing it. Even if someone shows them the way to safety, they will not believe it.

Only when they personally encounter danger, have nowhere to turn for guidance, and are seized by fear—only then, when they are shown the way, will they begin to trust and enter it. Yet there are others who, though they have entered a dangerous path, urgently seek instruction. Even when someone shows them the way to safety, their habit of excessive doubt persists. Because guidance was so readily offered, they become suspicious, constantly fearing deception, and turn away from it; thus the instruction ultimately does them no good. These three kinds of people are everywhere. How difficult it is to liberate people! This is why there are so many deluded people in the world: they repeatedly mislead themselves and, further, mislead others. Is this not what gives rise to the great compassion of Buddhas and bodhisattvas?

For forty-nine years the Buddha taught the Dharma through all manner of dharma gates. In a single phrase, it may be summed up as “helping people reach a decision.” Bodhisattvas, however, often liberate people at the beginning, before they have faith or entry, sometimes urging them forward by force of encouragement. The Buddha liberates people when the occasion accords with their capacity, without fruitless toil or waste. He has not the slightest view of gain or loss, success or failure; he merely awakens them in accordance with conditions.

At the very beginning of learning Buddhism, one should not only seek a good spiritual friend to help one reach a decision; one should also make a decision for oneself. First ask yourself: Why do I study Buddhism? The answer is: To seek the ultimate. What is meant by the ultimate? All things of the world—such as matters of suffering and happiness, wife, wealth, children, and livelihood—are ultimately unreal. They vanish before one's eyes, appearing only briefly like an epiphyllum flower, and in the end return to arising and ceasing. Suffering never seems to end.

Thus, having things is suffering, and lacking them is also suffering. If one says that one wants nothing at all, one falls into annihilationism, which the Buddha does not allow. If one says that one wants everything, one falls into grasping attachment, which the Buddha likewise does not allow. Therefore, even if worldly pleasures are wholly satisfying, they are only temporary empty joys, not ultimate consolation. How, then, should one reach a decision in the Buddhadharma?

Before resolving this question, one must first determine what suffering and happiness are. Know that suffering and happiness have absolutely nothing to do with affairs or things; they truly concern the mind. When the mind stirs, intentions arise; intentions give rise to meanings; meanings form views; views lead to attachment to self; attachment to self binds one; bondage causes one to lose freedom; and, having lost freedom, one undergoes all kinds of suffering. When one obtains something, one calls it satisfaction and contentment.

When one obtains nothing, one becomes dejected, distressed, and troubled. Therefore, to curb suffering, one must first curb greed. Without greed, there is nothing to seek; with nothing to seek, anger does not arise. Without greed and anger, views such as ignorance, doubt, pride, and wrong views naturally do not arise. Yet everything comes down to mastering the mind: to catch the thief, catch the king. To end suffering and seek happiness, the mind must gain its master. First recognize your own true master; this is the first decision in learning Buddhism.

This decision applies not only to learning Buddhism; learning Confucianism is the same. It is said, "The Way of the Master consists only in loyalty and reciprocity." Learning the Dao is likewise so: it is said, "The valley spirit does not die." Otherwise, one falls into shallow talk of essence, energy, and spirit and loses the true Dao. Teachings such as Christianity and Islam are no different: they speak of honoring the spiritual efficacy of their sages. How much more so is this true of the all-embracing, vast, and boundless Buddhadharma, whose central principle is realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature.

Moreover, it is not only one Buddhist teaching that is so; every dharma is so. It is not only one Buddha who is so; throughout countless kalpas, every Buddha is so. In all cases, one must first decide upon the mind. Apart from this, there is no second

path; apart from this, there is no other dharma. It is so plain and easy to understand, yet its actual realization is so profound and exacting.

One might think it could be fully disclosed in a single sentence. Yet although a single sentence may disclose it, even hundreds and thousands of lifetimes may not suffice for complete realization. Alas! The Buddhadharma is utterly ordinary, and precisely for that reason it is most difficult. If one does not first settle the causal ground, one will never emerge from saṃsāra. One must first understand this principle; then every question will be readily resolved.

Learning Buddhism is not seeking the Buddha; it is seeking oneself. Seeking oneself is simply mastering the mind. If one learns that this mind is nondual with the Buddha, and restrains its three poisons, clear wisdom naturally unfolds. Yet the three poisons cannot be restrained without wisdom. Which of the two comes first: restraining the mind, or first bringing forth wisdom? This is a question. One does not realize that being able to restrain the three poisons is itself the bringing forth of wisdom. The two depend upon each other; there is no need to establish a sequence.

One must now first attain samādhi, for samādhi can give rise to wisdom. Yet samādhi depends on a method, and method already includes precepts. All practices of Buddha-recitation, Esoteric Buddhism, Chan, and contemplation are methods, and all are also precepts; in the end, they are all ways of mastering the mind. The ancients said: “When the mind is brought to one place, nothing cannot be accomplished.” The Buddha taught all dharmas to liberate all minds. If I have no mind at all, what use have I for all dharmas?

Since suffering and happiness lie in the mind, it is clear that they do not lie in wife, wealth, children, and livelihood. Every household has wife and wealth; everyone has children and livelihood. Yet not every household is free from afflictions, nor is every person free from suffering. This shows that the Buddhadharma does not discard human affairs; it is simply that people lack wisdom and do not know how to manage wife, wealth, children, and livelihood properly.

Before obtaining them, one suffers from craving them; after obtaining them, one suffers from not having enough; once there is enough, one suffers from their loss. To regard all these impermanent and unreal illusory circumstances as precious treasures that will last forever—is this not confused and pitiable, perverse and laughable? Those who are truly clear and awakened neither reject nor crave wife, wealth, children, and livelihood. They acquire them according to conditions and use them according to conditions.

When they are present, do not regard them as permanent. When they are lost, understand that they were never real, and do not become dejected or cling to them. Then suffering will naturally lessen and naturally cease. The first time requires

effort; the second time is still unfamiliar; by the third time one becomes accustomed; by the fourth time it becomes a habit. After hundreds and thousands of such repetitions, it naturally disappears without one even noticing. A journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one's feet; even a short distance is hard to reach without walking. So long as people act and arouse the resolve, none will fail to succeed.

Sentient beings are called sentient beings because they are covered over by afflictions. Afflictions do not inherently exist; people give rise to afflictions and thereby hinder themselves. This comes from being deluded and unaware; therefore one must learn Buddhism. To learn Buddhism is to seek awakening, to seek clarity regarding one's own mind.

Transform this mind from darkness into light, from affliction into purity, from birth and death into nirvāṇa, from confusion into great awakening, and from attachment into freedom. Regard all things in the world with calm equanimity, without anything to which one is bound. Even upon cultivating and realizing the bodhisattva stage, one has no habitual tendencies of delight, arrogance, and the like; one is not turned by circumstances or bound by dharmas. The mind is always empty, one's vital energy always even, and one's intentions always light. One remains naturally composed: without joy or anger, yet without repression; rejoicing according to conditions, yet without lapsing into sterile quietude. This is the realm of Buddhahood, and this is what is called Buddha.

Since learning Buddhism takes gathering in the mind as its main point, everything apart from one's own mind is merely a supporting condition. Researching sūtras and treatises, reciting names, and practicing methods are not the main work; they are only subsidiary pursuits. In recent times, many study Buddhism but few attain realization. The reasons they fail to attain it are as follows:

First, they know only to seek the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. By nature they are dependent, forgetting to seek, practice, and realize for themselves.

Second, because they depend on others, they necessarily seek the highest and unsurpassed teachings and teachers, hoping for swift success, without realizing that they are in fact going astray.

Third, because they seek what is highest and unsurpassed, they give rise to all kinds of discrimination, and sectarian views arise. This matter alone can waste away one's time; one grows old in haste and accomplishes nothing.

Fourth, having wasted their time and made no progress for a long while, they then doubt people and slander the Dharma, or even retreat and cease practicing.

Fifth, they spend all day pursuing things outside themselves and do not feel the urgency of the matter. Or they make time to practice once in a while in the Buddha hall, practicing intermittently, and ultimately gain no benefit. Some even treat it as a pastime, unrelated to anything that truly matters, and thus it remains completely irrelevant to them.

Sixth, amid all activities of walking, standing, sitting, lying down, and dealings with others, when habitual tendencies arise in various forms, they simply let themselves drift and never turn back to look at their own mind. Therefore, they gain no benefit.

Seventh, they greedily collect teachings, believing that more is better, and cannot go deeply into a single gate.

Eighth, they do not understand that there is no fixed method in learning Buddhism. Every dharma has its own standpoint and cannot be forcibly made the same as another. Yet they do not follow the rules and instead give rise to views about dharmas.

Ninth, they delight in discriminating others' inner states and thereby create delusion for themselves, saying, for example, that this person has awakened and that person has become demonic. They do not realize that to declare another person awakened is no different from declaring oneself awakened, for one who has not awakened cannot determine whether another has awakened. The same applies to speaking of others as demonic. Therefore, such talk is delusion.

Tenth, good spiritual friends are difficult to encounter; or, taking hearsay as direct perception, people encounter them but do not recognize them.

Eleventh, preconceived ideas become dominant. They do not understand the Dharma's flexible and comprehensive responsiveness, and so willingly confine themselves to what is inferior and limited, not daring to take responsibility.

Twelfth, they mistakenly regard ignorance as real: afflictions are difficult to remove, bodhi belongs to the Buddha alone, and people like us have no share in it during this life.

Thirteenth, they take cultivating goodness as the completion of the work of learning Buddhism, still not knowing the ultimate and definitive meaning. They also take rebirth in the Western Pure Land as the sole hope of learning Buddhism, yet still do not understand what rebirth means. Thus, when they reach the middle of the path of practice, they cannot advance further.

Fourteenth, they mistakenly believe that seeking the Buddha can eliminate karmic offenses and gain blessings, while their own afflictions remain unchanged.

Fifteenth, they give rise to arrogance concerning themselves and suspicion and jealousy toward others. Ashamed to ask those below them, they slight beginners, unaware that they are obstructing their own path.

Sixteenth, when first beginning, they do not first understand the ultimate purpose of learning Buddhism and do not first reach a decision. Because their causal ground is not correct, they fall into blind conformity.

All the above are common faults among students. Unless they are first helped to reach a decision, the harm cannot be fully described. In learning Buddhism, we may compare ourselves to sick people seeking medicine. If someone is ill and asks a doctor for treatment, the medicine is the Dharma. Why does one remain unhealed after taking medicine for a long time? There are no more than two reasons: first, the medicine does not suit the illness; second, it is not taken in the proper way.

Likewise, when one has practiced for a long time without effect, it is nothing other than a Dharma that does not suit one's capacity, or practice that is not carried out properly. Yet responsibility for this illness lies with the teacher, who at the outset does not help the person reach a decision, does not give an appropriate method, and again does not explain the reasons for the practice.

Furthermore, practitioners themselves do not feel the urgency of the matter and act according to ordinary human feelings; thus they drift ever farther away. This is deeply painful. I have often said that no doctor is without compassion, yet incompetent doctors kill people while asking themselves and believing that they are blameless. They cannot avoid bearing responsibility for this; it may be called the karmic offense of compassion, and it is especially lamentable. As for patients who do not themselves feel the urgency of their illness, who take medicine for a long time without seeing results and do not know to reflect upon themselves—even if they have a good spiritual friend, nothing can be done for them.

When the Buddha helps people reach a decision, it is simply to enable them to break through ignorance and transcend birth and death. His method is no more than enabling them to awaken for themselves. The sūtras say, "Know your own mind as it truly is." This is what should be decided first.

Why must people awaken? What is it that one awakens to? By what does one awaken? And what, moreover, is awakening? These four questions must first be settled. First, why must one awaken? Because sentient beings are deluded; because of delusion they create karma; and because of karma they undergo all manner of suffering. This is what is meant by delusion, karma, and suffering. It is the most essential matter.

Second, what is it that one awakens to? One awakens to the original nature. The dharma-nature is originally equal, originally pure, originally at ease, originally unmoving, originally endowed with countless wondrous functions, and originally free of delusion. Having awakened to the original nature, one naturally recognizes the peril of suffering, arouses the resolve, and urgently seeks liberation from it. Third, by what does one awaken? One brings one’s own confused mind to awakening.

This is what is meant by awakening and realizing for oneself. It is not that a Buddha can bestow awakening upon me, nor can a good spiritual guide awaken on my behalf. Rather, one uses one's own deluded mind to subdue one's own deluded mind. Once awakening occurs, ignorance is shattered; then habitual tendencies must gradually be eradicated.

Fourth, what is called awakening? Awakening means recognizing the various faults present in oneself, realizing that one's original intrinsic nature is pure and equal, and further understanding how to practice from that point on. This is what is meant by right cultivation after awakening: cultivate until one is nondual with the Buddha. Whenever the mind becomes keenly alert, it necessarily comes about through causes and conditions. From this awareness, one investigates its reasons and reflects back upon its source; only then does one suddenly awaken to one's original intrinsic nature.

Through these four matters, one proceeds from awakening at the level of principle gradually into practical cultivation. From vigilant awareness one goes more deeply into fear, anxiously fearing that one may not act in time. One further realizes the insufficiency of one's own strength and thus conceives the wish to seek help from others. This is how the mind that seeks the Buddha, seeks the Dharma, and seeks a teacher arises.

If one serves as a teacher but does not first give the student clear, decisive guidance, then each of the sixteen symptoms of illness set forth earlier will manifest according to circumstances. If one muddles through, there will surely be suffering from regrets that come too late.

It is like building a house that is more than half complete. Because its foundation is unsound, the house leans and threatens to collapse. To demolish it and rebuild it, one is reluctant; yet to continue is impossible. A decision must therefore be made: demolish it. One cannot lose the greater for the sake of the lesser. If practitioners can deeply believe without doubt, the day will come when great capacities unfold. But if they are content to preserve the lesser and refuse to let go, they will forever remain at an impasse and continually waste their opportunity. Moreover, they

refuse to be humble and receptive; this is what is called sacrificing one's life for the sake of personal feelings.

Now suppose there is someone endowed with the aspirations and courage of a great person, who resolutely makes a decision, completely reverses what he has been doing, clears away all that has gone before, and begins again at the root.

Heaven will surely not disappoint one who strives with such dedication, and the Buddhas and bodhisattvas will surely take pity on such sincere hardship. Naturally, a good spiritual guide will arrive when circumstances ripen, to enlighten him, give him decisive guidance, transmit the teaching to him, and protect and keep him in mind. If he too practices sincerely and faithfully according to the Dharma, he will not mistake what he merely hears for what he sees, nor will he be obstructed by all manner of external theories and wrong views. From then on, he will make progress day by day.

Regarding the four questions listed above and how to awaken, one must settle each question through personal inquiry and direct realization. Once one has clarified and awakened, there can be no possibility of regression. Before one has reached Shanghai, however much one may hear it discussed, one will never know Shanghai as it truly is. Once one has arrived, one naturally understands and will never forget what one has seen. Once the root has been attained, one may gradually eliminate habitual tendencies, broadly form many beneficial connections, and eventually attain Buddhahood.

What is awareness? It is mind. What is awakening? It is mind. Awaken to the fact that this mind is unobtainable, and that even the mind capable of awakening is unobtainable. From the unobtainability of this one thing, penetrate through to the entire dharma realm: the four great elements, the five aggregates, the eighteen realms, the sense faculties, the body, and the material world are all unobtainable.

Unobtainable does not mean that there is nothing at all, as in annihilationism. Rather, it means that presence reveals emptiness: things originally have no inherent nature. From the outset there are no distinctions of right and wrong, good and bad; all are provisionally established by the illusory mind. Mind is originally nonexistent, and therefore all is naturally empty. Yet mind is not annihilated, and thus nothing is negated. It is neither existent nor empty; it is precisely emptiness and precisely form. Without form, emptiness cannot be revealed; without emptiness, form cannot be penetrated. To enter into nonduality is what is called great awakening.

Consider, for example, the two concepts of good and evil. Ordinary beings do not understand good and evil. Non-Buddhists know good and evil but rigidly set them in opposition. The two vehicles long too eagerly for good and take avoidance of all evil as ultimate. Bodhisattvas penetrate the wondrous functioning of good and evil and

therefore employ various skillful means. A Buddha is neither good nor evil: both natures are originally empty. In accordance with circumstances, a Buddha practices the bodhisattva path and employs various skillful means.

In these five levels of distinction, ordinary beings do not know their own minds; non-Buddhists know mind but do not see its underlying basis; and the two vehicles see mind but have not awakened to it thoroughly. None of these is called awakening. Bodhisattvas realize the mind, but their awakening is not complete. A Buddha's ocean of awakening is perfectly clear and complete. In truth, all share the one mind of a single essence, without duality or distinction.

It is like five people traveling along a road. Ordinary beings go deep into a perilous road without recognizing it. Non-Buddhists know that the perilous road cannot be entered, yet persist in taking it recklessly. The two vehicles know that they cannot go deeply into the perilous road, so they stop and do not advance. Bodhisattvas have already turned back and retraced their steps, emerging from the perilous road. Buddhas understand clearly that it is neither level nor perilous; though they enter the perilous road, they are naturally unobstructed.

Again, it is like falling into a great pit. Ordinary beings dwell in the pit without recognizing its danger, for they do not know that beyond the pit there is another heaven and earth. Non-Buddhists know that there is another heaven and earth outside the pit but cannot get out. The two vehicles sit at the edge of the pit, viewing above and below alike, abiding quietly and refusing to move. Though they do not enter the pit, they are no different from those who guard it. Bodhisattvas have already emerged from the pit and have sufficient strength to leap out, yet deliberately enter it again in order to liberate sentient beings. Buddhas leap in and leap out, unobstructed in either direction, coming and going freely, and have even forgotten the pit.

Because level ground and perilous ground are not two different things, leaping in and leaping out depend only on this mind. To leap out of the pit, one need only use the strength of one's legs; to transcend birth and death, one need only empty the mind. To the extent that the power of emptiness is attained, so too is the power of mind attained. When all is equal and unobtainable, there is no longer an inside or outside of the pit.

Without awakening, one cannot be said to practice, for such practice is also of no use. One must awaken before entering right cultivation. As a skillful means, the Buddha first teaches people to calm their unruly minds and restrain gross misconduct. Once they have learned this restraint, he gives them definitive instruction, enabling them to awaken to their own minds and unfold their original

nature. When ignorance is shattered, there is then a way to begin. It is like trying to arrange things in a dark room: it cannot be done.

One labors without accomplishment and wastes one's strength. One must first turn on the electric light; only then is there a way to proceed. To give decisive guidance first is to have one seek the lamp; to shatter ignorance is to turn on the lamp and let forth light; to arrange the things is to eliminate habitual tendencies and afflictions. Such is the sequence. Those who insist on first eliminating habitual tendencies and only afterward shattering ignorance should, if they understand the two meanings of expedient means and decisive instruction, know how to adapt their approach.

The first essential determination in learning Buddhism is to know one's own mind exactly as it is. Therefore, one cannot fail to know the characteristics of mind and intrinsic nature. Mind has illusory appearances, whereas intrinsic nature has no form or appearance. Yet because it pervades all things and can give rise to all phenomena, it is called dharma-nature. The essential nature of dharma-nature is pure and equal, unmoving and unchanging, and fully endowed with wondrous functioning.

Take water as an analogy. Water is originally still; when wind blows and stirs it, it is called a wave. Intrinsic nature is originally unmoving; when thoughts arise in response to circumstances, it is called mind. When the wind passes, the waves subside; when circumstances vanish, the mind ceases. Waves are transformations illusorily appearing from water, and mind is the shifting flow of intrinsic nature. Yet although water gives rise to waves, the substance of water is not destroyed; although intrinsic nature gives rise to the illusory mind, the essence of intrinsic nature does not shift. It is originally unborn, so how could there be appearances of arising, ceasing, coming, or going? Therefore, intrinsic nature is the essence of mind, and mind is the function of intrinsic nature.

When a person's hands and feet move and function, their temporary, moving illusory appearances can be seen, but the unchanging power stored within cannot be seen. One must not conclude that it does not exist because it cannot be seen, nor mistakenly take it to be real because it can be seen. Thus the illusory mind seems to exist, yet despite this apparent existence it is ultimately unobtainable. True nature seems absent, yet though empty it is never annihilated. All dharmic functions arise from this, and all things in the universe are established in reliance upon it. To recognize this unsurpassed Dharma treasure is to ascend the jeweled hall of one's own intrinsic luminosity.

Mind and intrinsic nature cannot forcibly be divided into two, nor can they rigidly be clung to as one. Consider a mirror as intrinsic nature: when the mirror encounters external objects, shapes and reflections appear; this is mind. Shapes and reflections

are not nonexistent, but they cannot be taken as real, for when the external objects vanish, the shapes and reflections disappear. Since they do not belong to intrinsic nature, they are illusory.

This reflected illusory mind is at times bright and at times dark; at times it is deluded, which is called ignorance, and at times awakened, which is called illumination. Yet in truth all of these are illusory. Thus brightness and darkness, delusion and awakening, are all illusory. Even the extinction of illusion is itself illusory and unobtainable. Still less should one posit illusion and non-illusion, since both are unobtainable.

Therefore, the various illusory images arising in a mirror, whether beautiful or ugly, do not truly damage the mirror, because its reflecting substance is unmoving. Likewise, the various illusory minds arising within intrinsic nature, whether ignorance or awakening, good or evil, sage or ordinary, do not truly obstruct intrinsic nature. This is because the essence of intrinsic nature is unborn, unmoving, and unchanging; because sages and ordinary beings share one essence; and because it can give rise to countless wondrous functions.

Mind is unobtainable because the illusory mind creates circumstances, and circumstances in turn give rise to the illusory mind. Since it has no inherent nature, it is unobtainable. It is like a mirror reflecting an object and producing an image: one cannot say that the image comes from the object, nor can one say that it arises from one’s own mind. Neither is possible. It is not self-produced, not produced by another, not jointly produced, and not produced without cause. When it arises, no place of arising can be found; when it ceases, likewise no place of cessation can be found. Therefore, it is said to exist yet be unobtainable.

Defilements of mind differ from bodily dirt. To remove bodily dirt, one must undergo various methods and procedures; moreover, kinds of dirt differ, and dirt has form and appearance. Removing mental defilements is not like this. Mental defilements have no form or appearance. One need only turn this thought of mind, and they are immediately let go. For example, when greed or anger is present, if one suddenly thinks of the Buddha, greed and anger immediately become nonexistent, and one's very being is pure. Although they depart quickly, they also return swiftly: in an instant greed and anger arise again. This is because habitual tendencies draw them back.

The eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind are called the six sense faculties. Externally there are the six sense objects: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, and dharmas.

When the faculties and objects interact, the six consciousnesses arise. From consciousness arises perception; from perception arises discrimination; from

discrimination arise judgments of what is favorable and adverse; from these judgments arise aversion and attachment; from aversion and attachment arise acceptance and rejection; from acceptance and rejection is fixed attachment to self; and from attachment to self consciousness and perception turn again, producing discrimination, judgments of what is favorable and adverse, aversion and attachment, acceptance and rejection, and so forth. This turns in a ceaseless cycle, without relinquishing attachment to self. This is called habitual tendencies.

The problem in all this arises from discrimination due to lack of clarity. Everything is illusory, yet people take it as real; everything is provisional, yet people take it as true. If, when encountering circumstances, one recognizes clearly what is real and what is illusory—recognizing that not only circumstances are illusory, but mind is illusory and even awareness is illusory—then one will naturally not grasp. Without grasping, there is no clinging; without clinging, there is no defilement. What one previously clung to is now shattered by wisdom. This is called liberation.

Yet one's strength may be insufficient, and at times one may fail to attend to it. But so long as one's fundamental understanding is clear, in time one will naturally have the strength to resist. Therefore, gathering in the mind is the primary key to learning Buddhism, and realizing the mind and opening wisdom should be the first essential determination.

Students who wish to eradicate habitual tendencies are certainly addressing the right task. But if they do not first realize the mind-ground and begin from the root, it is like trying to open a lock without a key or put out a fire without removing its fuel. This is the point that must now be decisively settled. In the past, a lay couple visited Master Nona, claiming that their karmic habit of sexual desire was too heavy and asking the master to bless them so as to resolve it. The master laughed and said, “There is no such method in the unsurpassed Vajrayāna.”

“You need only first realize the mind-ground. After realizing the root basis and opening prajñā, this habitual tendency will naturally be swept away,” and so forth. How profound these words are! Since Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism came eastward, the master alone was able to integrate esoteric practice with prajñā. Therefore, he alone held the Heart-of-Heart Dharma in such high regard, and his affinity with Mind-Seal practitioners grew ever deeper. Although the master has now died a martyr for his country, this was originally no burden to one of worth. Why would the master cherish and cling to this illusory body? He had merely settled a previous account.

Because students have not realized the mind-ground, they remain unable to free themselves from the habitual tendency of dependence. They suppose that, once blessed by the Buddha’s power, their karmic habit of sexual desire can be

eradicated. But if so, why would the Buddha not, in impartial compassion, liberate all sentient beings? The Buddha liberates sentient beings only by transmitting and showing them the method, enabling them to liberate themselves. It is like giving them food: one cannot eat on their behalf. As for this Dharma food, it is nothing other than gathering in the mind to open prajñā, then using prajñā to sweep away habitual tendencies, until one freely attains Buddhahood. This is what must be settled at the very outset.

The mind is a most extraordinary thing. If one understands the meaning that dharmatā is equal, then in the world there is not a single good person and not a single bad person, for good and bad have no fixed definition. Among worldly evils, none surpasses killing. Yet why is killing a robber sometimes respected and praised? Again, when an object is struck and shattered, it remains shattered forever and cannot be restored. But a person who was wrong yesterday may be right today: with but a single reform, a thief may become a sage. This shows that a person can be restored, just as rubber may temporarily stretch or contract yet ultimately returns unchanged to its original state. This is why it is called the wondrous mind. Why, then, would anyone take no pleasure in reforming?

Every evil deed, karmic obstacle, and habitual tendency is tied to the mind. If those who study Buddhism do not settle the matter from the mind, where else can they begin? More wondrous still, one uses the illusory mind to govern the illusory mind. Evils and the like have absolutely no substantial form or characteristic. Worldly people take raising a knife to kill someone and seeing blood as evil. They do not realize that, before the knife is raised, the intention to kill has already arisen and the offense is already constituted. Yet if, after killing someone, the person flees and is stirred in an instant by repentance, then only the fear of wrongdoing remains in the mind, while the intention to kill has already vanished.

Or, if one forms the intention to kill, the offense is constituted; but if, with a single turn of thought, one decides not to kill, the karmic offense of killing immediately ceases. This is what is meant by, “Lay down the butcher's knife and become a Buddha on the spot.” So long as one lets go, everything is resolved.

A person’s karmic offenses and habitual tendencies are like illusory scenes in a mirror and are very easy to dispel. Doing evil is like getting mud on one’s hands: whenever they are soiled, they may be washed. What one does not know is that evil thoughts arise only through delusion and lack of awareness. If one’s fear can never be released, then one’s evil likewise can never be released. Those who study Buddhism today are like prisoners who have been pardoned and released but refuse to leave the prison themselves.

There is no other reason: their merit is slight and their conditions shallow. For this reason, I have often urged people also to cultivate merit. The Buddha teaches people to give and employ skillful means; all these are ways of creating merit. Yet no giving or skillful means is greater than arousing a vast mind and realizing that the essence of one's own nature is nondual with the Buddha; one fails only because one's mind is not vast. Nor is there anything greater than arousing an impartial mind and realizing that the essential nature of all sentient beings is nondual with the Buddha; one fails only because one is not impartial.

Nor is there anything greater than arousing great compassion and realizing that mind, Buddha, and sentient beings alike possess the fundamental virtue of great compassion, while we human beings remain sunk in saṃsāra only because we lack great compassion. A sūtra says: "Relying on sentient beings, one arouses great compassion; relying on great compassion, one gives rise to bodhicitta; relying on bodhicitta, one attains perfect, complete awakening."

For those who study Buddhism, the proper causal ground is first to realize the mind-ground. How does one realize the mind-ground? One investigates its root, examines where the mind first arises, and then investigates where it goes. When one sees what its ultimate appearance is, one sees its illusory appearance as something that exists yet cannot be grasped. And this seeing, too, is an illusory appearance. Because it is not easy to gather in the mind, one takes up various dharmas as supporting conditions, as follows:

First is the Pure Land school. Its ultimate practice is one-pointedness of mind without distraction and a mind free from inversion.

Second is Esoteric Buddhism. Its practice and accomplishment consist in entering samādhi and thoroughly realizing true reality, as is evident from the fact that the rites of all its divisions invariably begin with purifying the three karmas, contemplating emptiness, and upholding mantras.

Third is the Dharma Characteristics School. Its purpose lies in analyzing and explaining all appearances, leading to the single statement that all dharmas have the characteristic of emptiness.

Fourth is the Chan school. Its point of entry is direct pointing to the source, seeing one's true nature in the very moment; this is the ultimate destination of all schools.

Thus it is clear that no school differs in this intent: all take settling the mind as ultimate. Skillful means have many gates, but returning to the source is not two. Gather in the mind and return to emptiness; together, one reaches perfect enlightenment. Yet all dharma gates are auxiliary work, not the primary practice. It is like sharpening a knife: the purpose is to use it for cutting. If one sharpens it but

never uses it, how is that better than not sharpening it? Moreover, without using it, one will never know whether the knife is dull or sharp.

Therefore, when cultivating in the Buddha hall, one uses various dharma gates only to hone oneself for practical use. But throughout the day and night, at no moment, in no activity, and in no thought should one fail to remain alertly aware, illuminating and observing the mind. This alone is the primary work.

If one can truly do this continually, then after a long time it matures and becomes second nature. When external circumstances appear, not the slightest thing in them is found to have value; one is not carried away by circumstances, and the mind does not wander. This is called freedom from delusion.

When one is free from delusion, each thought is empty and pure. Then there is naturally no cause of the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance; how could there be the results of such extreme evils as killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct? Even if habitual tendencies have not yet been eradicated and the three karmas arise, one will at least have a means of resisting and regulating them, and will certainly not drift about without self-mastery. Therefore, gathering in the mind is the primary work, while the various dharmas are auxiliary; seeking within oneself is primary, while seeking the Buddha is auxiliary. First realize the mind-ground, then eradicate habitual tendencies. This is right practice, and it must be settled at the very outset.

Bodhi and afflictions are nondual, though some may doubt this. When someone asked me about it, I told the person to raise a hand, then told them to lower it. I then said, “Raising and lowering are indeed two actions, but the hand itself is not two.”

Let us provisionally call raising the hand affliction and lowering it bodhi. What obstruction does either create for the hand? Therefore, if one studies Buddhism without reaching the ultimate, even studying Buddhism becomes an affliction. There is no other reason: one has not thoroughly penetrated the root, and the mind therefore remains unsettled. Thus one must speak of the method for settling the mind. When Patriarch Bodhidharma first came, he transmitted the method of settling the mind to the Second Patriarch. This was the orthodox transmission of the Buddhadharma when it first came to the Eastern Land.

For Buddhadharma is simply mind Dharma; apart from mind Dharma, nothing is Buddhadharma. For people of the highest capacity, a single phrase lays it bare: they immediately accept it and never retreat. This is called sudden awakening. When one seeks the mind and finds it utterly unobtainable, it is said, “I have already settled your mind for you.” This is direct pointing to the mind-ground, the most direct and expedient method for settling the mind.

Next is realization through verification. Persons of the highest capacity may have, through foundations cultivated in former lives, already reached the highest vehicle, though their realization is not yet complete. In this life, they encounter a good spiritual friend, who awakens them in accordance with their capacity; their ordinary cultivation is confirmed by the master, and they further engage in actual practice until they accord with it. Then, one day, they suddenly awaken completely—as when Baizhang met Mazu and, upon having his nose twisted painfully, attained accord.

Next is awakening through understanding. A Mahāyāna practitioner may already know mind Dharma and understand it only at the level of principle, without realizing it in actual experience. They must await instruction that enables awakening and entry; only when causes and conditions accord is the great matter made clear. Yet they still do not dare to settle it decisively. At the final barrier, confirmation is required. This was so when Chan Master Zhihuang met Xuance after twenty years, then again consulted the Sixth Patriarch and realized it.

Next is awakening through conditions. Some people have practiced austerities through many lives but regrettably have not realized awakening. In this life, when conditions ripen, they receive a practice suited to them and thereby awaken. Again, among recent practitioners, many have undergone arduous practice for years without yet understanding the ultimate or opening prajñā wisdom. Then they suddenly encounter Dharma Master Dayu, who teaches the formless Esoteric Vehicle of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma; from this they enter samādhi and comprehend the essential points of mind. Such people are too numerous to count. Is this not the fruition of causes and conditions accumulated over many kalpas? It is their own wholesome roots encountering the supreme Dharma conditions, which together bring about this merit and virtue.

All these alike take opening prajñā and attaining a settled mind as ultimate. Some do so through sudden awakening, others through actual practice. Capacities are neither sharp nor dull in any fixed way; times differ as earlier or later, and causes and conditions vary, so attainment is divided into slow and swift. Yet if the method of settling the mind depends entirely on the student’s own strength, it is truly not easy. Recently, people from all quarters have come to consult me. In my private view, the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is a method for directly realizing the mind-ground.

Buddhas and bodhisattvas, compassionate toward sentient beings in the degenerate age, know that among those who use their own strength to directly realize dhyāna and samādhi, very few have the requisite capacity. If the empowerment of the three mysteries is employed, joining the Buddha’s power with one’s own strength, wisdom will surely arise from samādhi and the gate of prajñā will open. This is the most stable and swift method.

If this is not explained, those who have not yet practiced will be misled by sectarian divisions, doubt others, and not dare to accept it; those already practicing will become impatient midway, doubt themselves, hesitate, and remain undecided; those who have practiced for a long time will not understand how to bring it into use, doubt the Dharma, and multiply their own views. Many are thus led astray, which is lamentable. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma has a standpoint entirely distinct from other teachings. In explaining it to people, there can be no fixed formula; the explanation must be settled in light of the listener's capacity.

Several questions—such as how to attain samādhi when the mind is restless and difficult to control—come up for discussion almost every day. I have selected the main ones and recorded them below:

First question: How can the karmas of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct be stopped? Answer: It is like putting out a fire: one must remedy it from the root. First understand cause and effect. Killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct are the results, while greed, anger, and ignorance are their causes. Yet greed, anger, and ignorance are themselves results, and unawareness is their cause. Unawareness, in turn, is the result, while failure to realize the mind-ground is its cause. Failure to realize the mind-ground is due to lacking wisdom; lacking wisdom is due to lacking samādhi; lacking samādhi and wisdom is due to ineffective practice; ineffective practice is due to a Dharma that does not suit one's capacity; and a Dharma that does not suit one's capacity is due to not first being given a decisive dharma gate for realizing the mind-ground. This is called studying Buddhism without understanding cause and effect, because one has not remedied matters from the root.

Second question: How can the Heart-of-Heart Dharma control the mind? Answer: This Dharma relies solely on the two powers of mantra and mudrā together with the power of one's own cultivation, so that the three mysteries of body, speech, and mind are accomplished. Mantra and mudrā are like an airplane, while one's own practice is like its pilot. They must work together for accomplishment to be swiftly attained.

Third question: Why can other esoteric practices not control the mind? Answer: It is not that they cannot. Every dharma is supreme and was established by the Buddha; how could one arbitrarily divide them into high and low? The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is simply a practice suited to people today. Likewise, if another practice suits someone's capacity, that practitioner must cultivate in accordance with that Dharma. There are also those who practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma for as many as three thousand sessions without seeing results. This is not the fault of the Dharma; it is because the practitioner has yet to grasp the method.

Fourth question: The practice of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma requires two hours. Sometimes the longer one sits, the more chaotic the mind becomes, and one instead fails to attain samādhi. Why is this? Answer: This Dharma takes uprooting as its main aim and therefore does not permit suppression. On the contrary, it requires one to turn up the seeds. Thus, when sitting, one may suddenly feel the mind becoming chaotic; even trivial matters from decades ago may come before one's eyes. It may seem that the longer one sits, the more chaotic the mind becomes. There is no need to fear this. This is already a time of attaining samādhi, for if one were not settled, one would not know that the mind is chaotic.

Fifth question: How should one practice in accordance with the Dharma? Answer: Simply hold firmly and sincerely to the practice, sitting for a full two hours. When all kinds of confusion and agitation arise, or when worldly affairs intrude midway and draw one away, one simply pays them no heed. Apart from keeping one's head down, maintaining the mantra, and not releasing the mudrā, one attends to nothing else.

If a surge of thoughts suddenly arises, as soon as one notices it, return to the mantra. Let heaven and earth turn upside down if they will; simply do not ask or heed them, as though they were an empty drama being played out. After getting down from the seat at the end of two hours, do not reflect further. Seeing light, seeing Buddhas, visualizing letters, visualizing the moon—all of this is forbidden. The sūtra says, "All appearances are false and illusory." Hold firmly to this meaning, and one will not be deluded by anything. If bodily reactions such as soreness or pain occur, do not concern yourself with them either. It is like a ship crossing the sea amid great waves, pitching wildly up and down: it takes the compass needle as its guide and never asks what lies ahead. This is the sole wondrous essential; with long practice, its efficacy will become apparent.

Sixth question: What is its efficacy? May one hear about it? Answer: To speak of efficacy is itself misleading. Those who constantly crave efficacy instead fail to attain samādhi. They do not know that, with time, samādhi naturally develops and efficacy naturally follows.

Seventh question: At times one suddenly grows drowsy. What does this mean? Answer: If, after practicing for an hour and a half, one becomes drowsy or inwardly agitated, this is precisely the time when one's practice is advancing; do not doubt or fear it. If one is drowsy but does not release the mudrā, and quietly continues the mantra without interruption, then it is not sleep. Never stop because of doubt.

Eighth question: What should one do when the mind is in extreme disorder and suffering becomes utterly unbearable? Answer: Give rise to joy and tell yourself: "This is precisely the time when practice is advancing, and I can use it to discipline

the mind." With a single turn of thought, there is immediate empty quiescence. Reflect also: when ordinary people die, it is like a living turtle being stripped from its shell; one cannot know how painful it is. This is all because I did not discipline my mind beforehand. Now I bring the suffering of the future into the present and eliminate it in advance; the advantage of this cannot be fully described. The frantic mind then suddenly comes to rest in an instant. Yet contemplation of emptiness must always be primary; through emptiness, samādhi is attained.

Ninth question: What does it mean to bring karmic seeds to the surface? Answer: Ordinary people's habitual tendencies lie latent at their roots. Like grass that cannot be seen on level ground, they are difficult to pull out. They must instead be allowed to grow forth before they can be uprooted; one must never merely shave them off without pulling out their roots. The Buddha instituted that bhikṣus shave their heads so that they might thereby awaken to the fact that all afflictions are like hair: merely removing them temporarily is not enough; their roots must be pulled out before this can be called ultimate. One may awaken through this analogy.

If one does not use this method, the seeds will not emerge. To suppress and restrain them is not a fundamental plan. It is also like muddy water in a cup: if one chiefly avoids stirring it, the top becomes clear while the bottom remains turbid. This may seem like progress, but it will inevitably become muddled again. One must never seek a temporary result. It is better to filter out the sand and mud; though there may be disorder for a time, the work will ultimately be complete. Forever afterward, movement and stillness will be nondual, and all will be clear water. This is why people are now advised not first to seek samādhi, but simply to practice sincerely and bring the seeds to the surface.

Tenth question: When karmic seeds and habitual tendencies are brought to the surface, how are they uprooted? Answer: While practicing in meditation, never concern yourself with uprooting them. Simply keep the mantra going without pause, keep the mudrā formed without releasing it, and let the mind be pure and empty, without heeding them. Uprooting their roots is a matter for after one leaves the seat. Throughout the twenty-four hours, there is never a moment when one should not practice. Moreover, habitual tendencies originally have no root; with a single turn, they are empty. To be able to contemplate emptiness is itself to uproot them.

Eleventh question: Can one sit in a place full of worldly disturbances? Answer: Why not? Indeed, one should sit precisely amid disorder; only then can one truly see one's strength. Those who long for pure mountains and forests have already established the dual view of movement and stillness, which is not the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. Circumstances themselves are neither disturbed nor tranquil; it is the mind that makes distinctions. If my mind is settled, what do sounds and forms matter?

Twelfth question: After leaving the meditation seat, how should one practice in daily life? Answer: Throughout the twenty-four hours, to have no miscellaneous mental activity is true diligence. Having no miscellaneous mental activity does not mean not using the mind. In matters that are pointless and unbeneficial, one should remain constantly alert. Yet interpersonal dealings and all kinds of unnecessary social obligations cannot be entirely avoided. When dealing with any matter, however, always use wisdom to observe and illuminate, clearly realizing that all things are empty in nature. Respond according to conditions, without mental attachment; then one is not defiled.

Thirteenth question: How does one remain undefiled? Answer: It does not mean avoiding everything. When engaging with things, do not cling to emptiness and deliberately display passivity; nor should you cling to existence and take delusion for reality. Respond to whatever comes. Simply keep your original nature in view, and constantly turn back to look within; this is called remaining undefiled.

What makes sentient beings sentient beings is that their minds are like oily glue: when they encounter objects, they become attached. In liberating sentient beings, the Buddha liberates only this attached mind.

Yet sentient beings are difficult to liberate. Support them in the east and they fall in the west; encountering things, they are stained by things; encountering affairs, they are stained by affairs. They are even stained by the Buddha when they encounter the Buddha, and stained by the Dharma when they encounter the Dharma. Those of the teaching schools have the habitual tendencies of the teaching schools; those of the Chan school have views about its methods. Exoteric Buddhism and Esoteric Buddhism each cling to what they regard as right. Tossed this way and that, they remain altogether in the sea of birth and death. As for what is called defilement, it certainly belongs to birth and death; but clinging to the notion of being undefiled also belongs to the Dharma-view of birth and death, because the mind lacks equanimity and has not abandoned dualistic views. But those who have truly seen their nature clearly understand that they are originally undefiled, and so naturally have no such distinctions or anxieties.

Fourteenth question: When habitual tendencies arise in daily life, how should they be stopped? Answer: When habitual tendencies arise, the only danger is failing to notice them. Once one notices them, there is none that will not turn and become empty. But when one encounters something extremely difficult to dispel, knows it clearly, yet lacks the strength to do so, there are two methods. The first is shifting and transforming: swiftly shift the mind to something else and thereby transform it. The second is assessing the result: reflect that every action must have its result. If one drifts ever deeper in this way, advancing step by step, the consequences will surely become beyond repair. One will then naturally become alert and stop.

Fifteenth question: What does no-thought mean? Answer: No-thought does not mean the complete absence of thoughts. It means that the mind is like empty space: thoughts arise, but one does not cling to them. It is like living in a high building and looking down on a busy street. People and vehicles come and go; it is not that one does not see or hear them, but they pass without remaining, and one is not attached to them in the least. It is not like a storeroom that takes things in but does not let them out.

Sixteenth question: What method removes the deepest habitual tendencies? Answer: Speaking provisionally, they must naturally be removed. Speaking ultimately, however, you should first clearly realize the mind-ground; then, without being removed, they remove themselves. It is merely a matter of time and strength. Those who forcibly remove habitual tendencies can stop them only temporarily.

It is like ladling out boiling soup to stop it from boiling. The ultimate approach, however, does not seek quick results; it removes the firewood from beneath the pot. Once the root of the fire has been cut off, the water may still boil and remain hot. Thus, although one has clearly realized the mind-ground, habitual tendencies may still remain. One must not conclude, merely because they remain, that one has not realized the mind-ground. Over time, the power of wisdom naturally becomes strong and habitual tendencies weak. Moreover, for one who truly practices, habitual tendencies readily come to the surface; they arise quickly and depart easily. This is a necessary process, and those who have not directly realized it cannot understand such a discussion.

Seventeenth question: If one does not forcibly suppress habitual tendencies, should one simply let them continue to flow? Or is there another dharma gate? Answer: This cannot be stated categorically. Clearly realizing the mind-ground and removing habitual tendencies are not two separate matters. When there is right clear awareness, habitual tendencies naturally disappear; yet they go and then return, which is why they are called habitual tendencies.

If one has truly seen one’s nature, the mind has become equal and no longer holds dualistic views. Regarding one’s own remaining habits, one not only does not eliminate them, but may even deliberately go against them. For example, as long as one does not tire of rich and sweet foods, the habit will not leave; one deliberately tastes them every day until aversion arises.

But when doing this, such a person differs from others. Such a person will certainly not let it pass lightly, but will test their own strength: comparing it with the past, they ask themselves how their greed, attachment, and grasping now compare with before. Thus the power of diligence grows stronger day by day. But for those whose fundamental nature has not yet been realized, remember never to speak carelessly.

Do not idly discuss prajñā with them. This is a common failing among those with Chan-school habits: they mistakenly take this to be equanimity and suppose that everyone can use expedient means, without realizing how greatly inexpedient this is.

Eighteenth question: How should practitioners deal with relations between men and women? Answer: Sexual attraction is itself a habit from the past, the most firm and difficult-to-extract root of birth and death. Unless desire and attachment are cut off, it is absolutely difficult to enter the Way. Yet practitioners fear desire without speaking of cutting it off; they speak only of restraining it, not of transforming it. This is why desire and attachment are never eliminated.

Practitioners must train the mind so that when they say stop, it stops, and when they say cut off, it cuts off. When their strength is sufficient, it may seem as though there is no strength or effort at all; this does not mean that effort has been abandoned. The ancients said that disciplining the mind is like reining in a horse at a cliff's edge. When one reaches the point where stopping seems utterly impossible, yet can stop abruptly, what tremendous strength that is. Therefore, the initial practice is to apply the word "forbearance" constantly when matters arise.

But after the matter has passed, put aside the word "forbearance"; do not remain bound by the Dharma. In ordinary life, constantly apply the word "transform." Its wondrous principle lies in one's own awakening and includes such methods as contemplating emptiness and turning the thought. It cannot be given to another as a clever technique. This is the functioning of prajñā; with time, it naturally becomes fully familiar.

In matters of desire and attachment, it is most difficult to cut off thoughts abruptly. If one can show one's practice at such a time, willingly transform them so that they become empty, then liberation from segmented birth and death is not far off. Yet one must still use prajñā to sweep away residual habits before there can be some assurance. Lay practitioners differ from bhikṣus: do not suppress them, but do not let them run unchecked either. This is not in itself an evil matter; one should understand it and not cling rigidly.

Nineteenth question: How do bhikṣus and lay practitioners differ in cultivation? Answer: Bhikṣus and lay practitioners have different circumstances. Therefore, for bhikṣus the precept of celibacy comes first, while for lay practitioners the precept against killing is most important. In terms of shutting oneself away for pure self-cultivation, bhikṣus are more suited; in terms of testing oneself, tempering oneself, and removing habitual tendencies, lay practitioners have the advantage. Suppose someone is ill and cannot tolerate exposure to wind, and is then cured by a physician. If that person never encounters the wind again, the cure cannot be

tested. But bhikṣus have no further opportunity to encounter the wind. Therefore, this final barrier is extremely difficult to pass through.

Twentieth question: How can one avoid delusion? Answer: Those of the highest capacities directly realize the source of mind; originally there are no stages. Yet one may provisionally establish stages without harm. Practitioners first train in the emptiness of circumstances, so that outwardly they are not deluded by circumstances. Next, they train in the emptiness of mind, so that inwardly they are not deluded by views. At this point the root has been attained, but past habits still remain. One must therefore constantly employ prajñā to sweep them away. This is called being free from delusion.

Twenty-first question: How can one realize samādhi? Answer: To remain undeluded is to take hold of nothing that arises. This is called right reception, or right samādhi. By going deeply into a single dharma gate, giving rise to function from essence, and opening prajñā, one can enter realization and see true reality.

Twenty-second question: How can one see true reality? Answer: All appearances are false and illusory. If one sees all appearances as non-appearances, one sees true reality. By going deeply into a single dharma gate and bringing forth the wondrous functioning of prajñā, one clearly realizes that all existing things are equal in their fundamental essence and entirely arise from conditions. This is true reality. The sūtra says, “True reality is itself non-appearance.” To contemplate it closely with the power of wisdom and realize it as empty is called seeing true reality.

Twenty-third question: After realizing samādhi and seeing true reality directly, is this immediately called attaining Buddhahood? Answer: Yes. The meaning of attaining Buddhahood lies in awakening. Worldly people do not understand what attaining Buddhahood means; they think that one who attains Buddhahood must be like Amitābha Buddha or Śākyamuni Buddha.

They do not know that a tree’s flowering and fruiting also proceed in stages: first the seed is planted, then it sprouts, then it becomes a tree, and then it produces flowers and fruit. The fruit, too, grows from small to large and from raw to ripe, and must await its time. Buddhadharma has no mark of time: to be able to plant the seed already counts as accomplishment. When fruit has appeared, though it may be small and unripe, it cannot be called non-fruit.

If a person realizes samādhi and has already manifested the dharmakāya (Dharma body), this is becoming a Buddha in the dharmakāya. Yet if habitual tendencies have not been removed, one remains covered by various hindrances; spiritual functions have not unfolded, and the requisite conditions are not yet complete. One must wait for the time to ripen before the sambhogakāya (reward body) and nirmāṇakāya (manifestation body) can become complete, as they did for the Buddhas of the past.

For those in Esoteric Buddhism who attain Buddhahood in this very life, the dharmakāya is first manifested in this life. When fundamental ignorance is initially broken through, this is called ascending to the Buddha-stage.

Question Twenty-Four: In studying Buddhism, how exactly should one begin the work? Answer: One must not study Buddhism by relying solely on intellectual understanding while neglecting actual practice. Although one cannot dispense with deliberate effort, one must not become attached to it. Therefore, when beginning, one should first establish one's resolve at the causal stage: do not be too fierce at the outset, do not become lax midway, and do not give rise to doubt at the end.

If there is any attainment, never become pleased with yourself and give rise to arrogance. One's aspiration alone should be vast: with boundless courageous resolve, undertake the truth that one's own dharma-nature is nondual with the Buddha. This is the first gate. Practice honestly, penetrate deeply into one method, neither hurried nor slow, and never turn back despite a hundred setbacks. Then one will naturally become profound, refined, and meticulous. This is the second gate.

When the great matter has become clear and one has entered nonduality, one should emphasize cultivation and nurture, eliminating impatience and haste. As one's practice matures to perfection, its hidden light will naturally manifest, and one will respond harmoniously in every circumstance. This is the third gate. Therefore, studying Buddhism is easy, but undertaking it is difficult; undertaking it is easy, but practicing honestly is difficult; practicing honestly is easy, but nurturing the Way is difficult. Only by not relying on one's strengths, and constantly recognizing one's shortcomings, can one advance daily in the Way and surely never regress.

Yet undertaking this is not the same as self-importance; practicing honestly is not the same as rigid attachment; and nurturing the Way is not the same as merely observing rules. Consider a precious vessel: first comes the selection of materials, in which purity and excellence of quality are primary; second comes carving, in which fine workmanship is prized; third comes polishing until it is lustrous; fourth comes burying it in the earth, in order to remove its fiery energy. Unless it is stored away and nurtured for many years, its precious radiance will not manifest. Studying Buddhism is the same.

Therefore, if even the slightest trace of a view of dharmas accumulates within the mind, one cannot help displaying it, and arrogance arises without one's noticing it. How is this different from climbing a mountain while looking up at the sky and disregarding one's footing? Everywhere are pits of birth and death—how dangerous that is! One should pay the closest attention to this passage.

Question Twenty-Five: When studying recorded sayings or answering koans, one often fails to accord with the occasion. What should one do? Answer: This too is

being carried away by circumstances and not knowing how to cast them off. One first harbors a competitive mind and a mind bent on gaining; those skilled in literary composition further possess literary habits. All this belongs to birth and death. Therefore, whether one accords or does not accord does not depend on the other party's koan, but on one's inner realization. If it is so, then everything is so; if it is not so, then nothing is so.

If one has thoroughly penetrated to the root, then even without studying recorded sayings, everywhere is a recorded saying; even without answering koans, everywhere is a koan. Why borrow from others and make it one's own? What belongs to others belongs to others and may not be one's own. If one understands, one is originally complete; it has nothing to do with whether oneself or another accords or fails to accord.

Therefore, Chan has Chan sicknesses, and Esoteric Buddhism has esoteric habits. In cultivating the Pure Land, one must absolutely avoid a deathly air, for dying and then attaining rebirth is not, in itself, ultimate attainment. In practicing the Chan school, one must absolutely avoid a showy air. Once one becomes showy, one is so delighted that one approaches madness; once mad, one belittles others and falls into arrogance. This is not true Chan meditation.

In esoteric practice, one must absolutely avoid a dharma air, for esoteric Dharma is a temporary expedient, not like a Daoist catching demons and never letting go of talisman and ritual sword, taking these to be ultimate. If one becomes attached to dharmas, one sees everything else as contrary to the Dharma and merely gives rise to affliction. What, then, could be meant by the purity of the three mysteries? This is not ultimate either. I deeply hope that fellow students will constantly attend to their own habitual tendencies. Do not have such airs; nor should you have a fiery temper that makes others unable to approach you. Nor should you have an icy air, binding yourselves in dry quiescence like cold cicadas. Constantly examine your ordinary habitual tendencies, and you will naturally come into accord.

Question Twenty-Six: Can one use the recorded sayings of the Chan school as a method of practice? Answer: The fundamental purpose of studying Buddhism is to remove clinging views. Sentient beings' habitual tendency is to be carried away as soon as they encounter an object, having no mastery of themselves and drifting through birth and death. This is the root. Therefore, one must train this mind not to be swept along in the flow. Thus, throughout the twenty-four hours, do not allow the mind to become mixed and scattered; in every circumstance, turn back and look to the original nature.

The Chan-school method first enables a person to awaken and realize the original nature. Once one has awakened, one is then tested. The teacher catches them off

guard with a question. If one can maintain awareness, one can even catch a hidden arrow; if one cannot maintain awareness, one misses what is right in front of them. If asked, “What is the Buddha?” one will surely become attached to “Buddha,” or perhaps think of evading the question by saying what is not the Buddha, not realizing that one is still attached to “Buddha.”

For one who has truly seen one’s nature, nothing can tie them down. When a hidden arrow comes, one may catch it or evade it; one turns freely and naturally, for there is no fixed dharma. Therefore, koans should be studied after realizing the mind, using them to test and train the mind-ground. It is not by means of koans alone that one can illuminate the mind-ground. In recent times, some have shut themselves away and mechanically studied koans, yet in the end have failed to grasp the essential point.

Some have already clarified the mind-ground and delight in Chan absorption, only to become bound by the Dharma. Some rigidly cling to koans as Dharma, not knowing that sounds, speech, and affairs in every place, even crude popular sayings and every action, are all true reality, and thus give rise to all kinds of discrimination. Therefore, Dharma has no fixed Dharma; what accords with the recipient is supreme. Meaning has no fixed meaning; skillful use brings attainment.

Using Esoteric Buddhism to integrate and elucidate the essentials of Chan, directly realizing the mind-field; using prajñā to sweep away Chan sicknesses and return to nonduality; whether speaking of teachings or of Chan, one is unstained by either habit; whether speaking of the exoteric or the esoteric, one fully integrates them all. As for opening up such a vast and subtle dharma gate, unprecedented throughout the ages, only my revered teacher, Patriarch Dayu, has done so. The only one able to recognize this principle and praise it repeatedly was Guru Nona.

Only in recent times have people gradually come to understand that the initial decisive point in studying Buddhism lies solely in realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature. To open prajñā, one must first realize the mind-field. Even the Heart-of-Heart Dharma does not necessarily suit every capacity or lend itself to practice by everyone. But for those of superior faculties, who possess wisdom but have no way to open it, or who have painfully cultivated the various schools yet still find no way out, nothing is more direct and expedient than practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma.

After realizing samādhi and seeing true reality, the gate of prajñā opens; one may then use koans as verification. It is like playing chess: one must first understand the rules of chess before studying game records and thereby knowing their marvels. Yet flexible functioning lies beyond the game records and cannot be transmitted through instructional rules.

Question Twenty-Seven: Why are there people who have practiced the Heart-of-Heart Dharma for two or three thousand meditation sessions but still have no functioning? Answer: There are five reasons. First, they are habituated to sectarian views and do not understand that all dharmas interpenetrate. Second, they have entered samādhi without knowing it themselves; they have essence but do not understand its function. Third, they rely on the Buddha and do not understand their own mind. Fourth, they rigidly cling to meditative stability and do not understand the functioning of wisdom; once off the meditation cushion, they abandon inquiry altogether. Fifth, they leave their teacher too early and therefore have no one to supervise and exhort them.

Question Twenty-Eight: Why is it that some who practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma and have already opened prajñā suddenly become unrestrained in mind and lose their self-mastery? Answer: When prajñā first opens, all kinds of views inevitably arise, and they suffer from having no good spiritual friend to supervise them afterward. If they can sweep away each arising as it arises, settle the matter decisively, transform their views, and enter wondrous functioning, then no hindrances will arise. It is not the arising of views that creates hindrances; rather, one becomes attached to views and thereby obstructs oneself. There is no other reason: one is limited by what one knows, does not proceed further, and stops by taking oneself to have reached the ultimate. Know that after realizing the mind, one must apply oneself to practice all the more and must not relax for even a moment.

Question Twenty-Nine: Why can Esoteric Buddhism bring attainment in this very life? Answer: It is because capacities and conditions come together. Such a person's wholesome roots have already matured, so they dare to undertake it and accept it in faith without doubt. In addition, through the power of mantra and mudrā empowerment, they may quickly attain accomplishment. It is not the case that everyone can attain accomplishment in this very life.

For a human being to encounter the Buddha occurs only once in several million years. Among ten million people, perhaps not even one can enter the Mahāyāna; among ten million who enter the Mahāyāna, perhaps not even one can enter its definitive meaning; and among ten million who enter the Mahāyāna's definitive meaning, perhaps not even one can cultivate and realize it. Of sixty years of human life, half is spent in sleep, leaving only thirty years.

Of those thirty years, childhood, old age, and illness take away another half, leaving only fifteen years. Of those fifteen years, the hindrances of worldly affairs and the waste of diversions leave only seven or eight years. If one is not earnestly resolved, one will grow old in haste. How can one not be afraid?

Question Thirty: Please explain the essential instructions for practice in greater detail. Is there any concise and essential dharma gate? Answer: Dharma is originally without dharma; what is there to say? Yet, having no alternative, I will briefly set forth approximately seven points:

(I) Establish the purpose. The purpose is to seek and cultivate for oneself, remove one's own suffering and afflictions, open one's own wisdom, and become a Buddha oneself. Seeking the Buddha is only like asking directions or consulting a physician; walking the road and taking the medicine still depend on oneself. Therefore, textual research into Buddhist teachings is only like a map or a prescription; it is unrelated to one's actual illness. Those who study Buddhism learn to be nondual with the Buddha, equally free from afflictions, pure and at ease; they do not seek to turn themselves into some other Buddha.

Furthermore, the purpose is to cut off all suffering and therefore seek ultimate happiness. Ultimate happiness is attained only by opening wisdom; wisdom is sought through meditative stability; meditative stability is attained through sitting; and sitting depends on a method. Once the purpose has been established, one will not doubt or retreat midway, and attainment in this life will certainly be possible. Whether you practice Pure Land, the Chan school, or Esoteric Buddhism, you must share this purpose and this aim.

(II) Clarify the meaning of practice. First, clarify the original nature: the original nature needs no cultivation. Because one has mistakenly fallen into illness, restoring the original nature is called cultivation; otherwise, it would be called construction, not repair. Second, cultivating the mind differs from repairing an object; it should be called restoration, for it means restoring the original nature.

The repair of an object depends on others, but restoring the mind still depends upon one's own mind. One uses the deluded mind to restore the deluded mind, until luminosity and freedom are attained. Third, although cultivating the mind depends on Dharma, the teaching Dharma is used only temporarily. Choosing, rejecting, giving, and taking are in one's own hands. Take realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature as the essence, and bring forth all wondrous dharmas as the function.

Fourth, cultivation should emphasize practice in action. In walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, one must never be without vigilant awareness. Cultivation in the Buddha hall is called seated practice; seated practice occupies only a time, whereas practice is to be carried on at all times.

Fifth, the first gate of cultivation is to practice until realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature. After seeing one's nature, one can bring the wondrous functioning of prajñā into play, and only then can habitual tendencies be removed. This is the

second gate: first break through ignorance, then remove habitual tendencies. In the Chan and Esoteric schools, one seeks the cause through the fruition; this is the sole method for a fundamental resolution and differs from other schools. Sixth, use prajñā and vigilant awareness to observe oneself, and contemplate all things in the world as equal. This is a vast mind.

Contemplate that one's own fundamental essence is nondual with the Buddha. This is right cultivation. Seventh, regardless of the school, all culminate in returning to the Pure Land: one may recite Amitābha Buddha to purify one's land, or practice Chan or Esoteric Buddhism to purify one's land. Only after realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature does one enter right cultivation; otherwise, one labors without result and ultimately regresses. In the Pure Land school, the stage of nonretrogression is called avaivartika; in the Chan school, it is called breaking through in Chan inquiry; in Esoteric Buddhism, it is called realizing the siddhi of samādhi.

(III) Seek the true Dharma. All Buddhadharma is originally without a distinction between false and true. Yet there is absolutely no single Dharma that can be universally applied and suit everyone's capacities. Therefore, whether Chan, Pure Land, or Esoteric Buddhism, a Dharma that suits the recipient is true Dharma. If a person should practice the Pure Land but is made to study Chan, this is poison. If a person should practice Esoteric Buddhism but is restricted to the Pure Land, this too is poison.

Therefore, the responsibility lies with the teacher, and the teacher must bear the karmic consequence of falling into Avīci hell. The Buddha liberates sentient beings precisely by removing attachment. If one instead teaches them to become attached, preventing them from being lively and free, one can hardly evade blame. It is like treating an illness: to rigidly adhere to a single method, considering it cautious and safe, can cause harm through delay. This must be understood. Moreover, in seeking a teacher, one must not act according to personal sentiment. If a medicine does not suit the illness, one should promptly change the treatment.

For example, if one has practiced Pure Land for many years without seeing results, one may practice Esoteric Buddhism. After realizing samādhi, one may return to Pure Land practice, and then success will certainly be assured. Only recently have I myself come to believe that I have some confidence in practicing Pure Land; therefore, I dare to offer this sincere advice.

(IV) Guard Against Various Ills. First, do not torment the body in practice. Anything that damages or ruins the body is not Buddhadharma. The Buddha's primary aim is to attain great freedom; one ascends to the Land of Utmost Bliss. If you wish to undergo ascetic practices, why not enter hell to practice? You should understand

that ascetic practice is meant to strengthen one's resolve, so that one does not turn back despite a hundred setbacks, and to guard against laziness and laxity.

People of the world often regard poor clothing and poor food as suffering, not knowing that those without wisdom, whose minds run wild and have lost their mastery, are the most miserable people in the world. Those who study Buddhism should begin by attaining samādhi and wisdom; there is no second method.

Second, do not practice out of resentment. The purpose of practice is liberation and freedom. If one practices out of resentment, the root of anger will be difficult to uproot. This resentment must therefore be understood and released, allowing the mind to become natural and unforced. Only by attaining samādhi, opening wisdom, and understanding emptiness can one enter the ground of joy. Third, do not practice blindly. Blind practice is the most common fault among people. Those who have not realized the mind and seen their true nature are all practicing blindly. Therefore, the first essential in learning Buddhism is to open wisdom.

Only after understanding is there right cultivation. Fourth, do not cultivate by suppression. Many who cultivate the mind seek a dead, fixed samādhi, forcibly suppressing deluded thoughts so that they will not arise. This may lead to a dangerous backlash later on; these are all the faults of suppressive cultivation. First, one does not think a single thought, but merely sits rigidly, fixing the mind. A certain association has transmitted such a method; this is called indeterminate emptiness. Second, one spends the whole day in dhyāna, forcefully restraining one's thoughts and believing that one has attained samādhi.

Forcibly practicing forbearance without contemplating emptiness will, over time, produce illness; this is the third. A vegetarian diet and observance of the precepts will not last if they arise from social pressure rather than one's own vows. One then resents others, and the mind cannot remain pure; this is the fourth. Non-Buddhists rigidly cling to essence, vital energy, and spirit; when death approaches, they cannot disperse their accumulated practice and may even become deranged; this is the fifth. All these may show results for a time, but their harmful consequences emerge later.

Recently, there have been cases of abdominal distension so severe as to be near-fatal, and even of suicide. These fall into this category. Having planted such causes, yet wishing to obtain the fruition of Ultimate Bliss—is this not deeply pitiful? Fifth, do not practice on a petty scale. The aim of cultivation is to attain Buddhahood. If one willingly settles for what is inferior and limited, one is not fit for great accomplishment and can never succeed. Therefore, one should make great vows and cultivate great practices. To seek only to develop wisdom and attain Buddhahood in this very life is a great vow.

I shall liberate all sentient beings through wisdom: this is a great practice. Sixth, do not practice greedily. Do not seek every Dharma you encounter, bow to every teacher you see, or, having obtained one authentic Dharma, fail to go deeply into that single gate. Do not let the mind be fickle. Seventh, exercise self-restraint. This too has seven points: first, do not be arrogant; second, do not become self-satisfied and self-righteous; third, do not become vexed or resentful; fourth, do not be impatient; fifth, do not be lazy; sixth, do not assess the inner states of others; seventh, do not first seek supernormal powers. These are all faults that may arise during the period of practice. The deeper one's practice becomes, the more habitual tendencies emerge; one must guard against them. You may read my Records of the Yihai Lectures (1935) and study it carefully.

(V) Attend Diligently to Eight Essentials. First, practice comprehensively. This means that one's mind-capacity should be vast; then one's understanding of principle will naturally be comprehensive, and one will no longer hold views of the superiority or inferiority of sectarian gates. Second, practice earnestly. If one is keenly and urgently alert, progress will naturally be swift, and one will surely attain the ultimate in this very life. Third, practice through vows. This means that vow-power must be primary; one's vows should be upright, great, and practical. Fourth, practice exclusively.

This means that, having obtained an authentic Dharma, one should enter deeply and single-mindedly. From one gate, one may enter the universal gate and attain completeness. Fifth, practice flexibly. Single-mindedness differs from stubborn rigidity. The mind should be lively and flexible; then one attains freedom. Moreover, the Buddha opened many dharma gates, so one must not cling to a single one. Methods should change according to circumstances, though the essential aim never changes. Sixth, practice in pairs.

This means: first, oneself and the Buddha form a pair; in seeking the Buddha, one must also seek oneself. Second, in household practice, one may receive the support of one's spouse or companion. Third, in cultivating wisdom, one should also cultivate merit and virtue; in making vows, one must also put those vows into practice. Fourth, for those who keep a vegetarian diet, keeping the mind pure matters even more than keeping a vegetarian diet: do not look at the faults of others. All these are paired practices; thereby one may attain completeness, and merit and virtue may more readily be perfected. Seventh, put the teachings into practice.

This means that one's practice must be real. Only oneself knows whether one is cold or warm; one must not deceive oneself. Therefore, actual practice is primary. Actual practice means the conduct of the mind, not outward chanting and bowing. Eighth, cultivate and nurture. This means that, having awakened to the mind-ground and gained something through practice, one must make cultivation and nurturing primary, like jade buried in the earth.

(VI) Clarify the Process. There is fundamentally no fixed method in the process of cultivation, but several points are most important: A. Obtain an authentic Dharma—that is, a Dharma suited to one's own capacity. Whether Esoteric Buddhism, Chan, reciting the Buddha's name, or contemplation of forms, all are simply means of purifying the land of one's own intrinsic nature. B. Practice in accordance with the Dharma. Along the way, never mix in one's own views; then one will naturally attain samādhi.

C. Develop prajñā. This means great wisdom, which arises from samādhi. When samādhi and wisdom are united, this itself is discipline; this is called fully possessing the ten precepts. D. Realize the mind and see one's true nature. Once the mind-ground is clear, one's intrinsic nature naturally becomes evident. Form and emptiness are nondual, and one will then no longer be deluded.

E. Once the mind is no longer deluded, one may then eliminate habitual tendencies: first, realize objects as empty; second, realize the mind as empty (the coarse level); third, realize dharmas as empty (the subtle level); fourth, empty even emptiness (the extremely subtle level). The foregoing means first developing the sixth supernormal power, the exhaustion of outflows, which is called the Way-power; this is attaining the essence. F. Develop the five supernormal powers. This means bringing forth function. One must never seek them first; only after realizing the mind will they naturally unfold. If one rejoices over slight signs of attainment, that joy becomes a demon. If one seeks these before attaining the Way-power, they are called demonic powers; this is a great error.

(VII) Instructions on Essential Formulas. First, ordinary beings and Buddhas are not two in their fundamental essence. It is only because ordinary beings do not understand cause and effect that awakening comes later, at the ground of fruition; some remain unaware from beginning to end.

As soon as there is awakening, one has reached the other shore. Therefore, one should employ a one-character formula: A ( ). When something arises in the mind, this is the stirring of thought at the causal stage. One should stay alert and recognize the thought at once: "If I now enter into such a cause, I shall certainly receive such a result in the future." One will then be fearful and not enter into it. After a long time, this becomes thoroughly familiar, and one will not mistakenly enter into it.

The character A ( ) signifies vigilant awareness; it is seeing clearly; it is transformation; it is emptiness; it is freedom from defilement; it is Pure Land. Second, hold this mind as though you were on a great public thoroughfare: clearly see and hear all the myriad forms and colors, yet let them pass without leaving any trace. They do not defile you. This is the Buddha's realm.

Third, when encountering anything, simply respond according to conditions. Distinguish clearly between good and evil, yet do not give rise to views of self. Constantly struggle against your own temperament: emotional attachment is self-love, so turn from it and loosen it; views are attachment to self, so understand them and empty them. Over time, you will naturally become free and at ease. Fourth, distinguish what is weighty from what is light.

This means that, among all worldly matters, however great they may be, none outweighs a single death. Yet ten million deaths do not outweigh one act of practice, and ten million acts of practice do not outweigh one awakening. When awakened, the mind is empty. This is the highest merit and virtue; its relative weight, benefit, and harm cannot be compared. You should know that all suffering arises solely from lack of awakening, while no bliss surpasses realizing the mind. Fifth, do not forget—though at times you may forget.

What if you do not forget, yet lack the strength to transform it? There are two formulas: first, think in advance of frightening events that may happen in the future; second, recite a mantra, whereby one may immediately awaken and transform. All worthy ones who truly wish to apply themselves should not forget to practice each day. With every thought abiding in awakening, every thought abides in the Buddha. Practice and illuminate at every moment, combining practice with illumination. If you continue this without interruption for half a year, and dedicate the merit to all sentient beings, you will certainly realize samādhi, see true reality, and all attain Buddhahood. Take care!