Questions and Answers

Master Yuanyin

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Preface

The Buddhadharma offers immeasurable dharma gates that guide practitioners to turn away from sensory entanglement and accord with awakening, realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature. From awakening, they undertake cultivation, clear away accumulated habitual tendencies, transcend birth and death, and accomplish bodhi. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is a form of formless esoteric practice that emerged in the 1920s.

This Dharma was first transmitted by Acharya Dayu, honored as the First Patriarch. It was subsequently transmitted to Master Wang Xianglu and then to Master Yuanyin, the lay practitioner Li Zhongding, who are honored as the Second and Third Patriarchs, respectively. Its ritual is simple and its practice accessible. Through the correspondence of the three mysteries, the sense faculties and their objects fall away, and practitioners enter the samādhi of intrinsic nature, characterized by

formlessness, non-abiding, and no-thought. It is a distinctive, advanced method of formless esoteric practice.

Master Yuanyin entered Esoteric Buddhism by way of Chan. Deeply moved by great compassion, he extensively benefited living beings, bestowing empowerment and transmitting this Dharma on the basis of the secret ritual text in the Buddhist canon, The Buddha-Heart Sūtra, Also Corresponding to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī (two fascicles, translated in the Tang dynasty by Bodhiruci). His students are found throughout mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as in the United States, Japan, Singapore, and other countries.

Although Master Yuanyin has now passed away peacefully at the age of ninety-six, demonstrating freedom in departing this life, his students wish to revisit his teachings and commemorate his great virtue. They therefore plan to publish Questions and Answers, a collection of correspondence and conversations gathered from various places, compiled into a volume, and personally corrected and finalized by the Master.

The collection provides detailed guidance on methods of cultivation and realization, the essentials of awakening to the mind, and especially practice after awakening: safeguarding realization and eliminating habitual tendencies. It reflects the Master's compassion, earnestness, and vow to benefit sentient beings widely. This book may be regarded as a companion volume to Essentials of Buddhist Practice and Realization.

The Master always taught according to his listeners' capacities, prescribing medicine to suit the illness and guiding students through skillful means. May readers avoid clinging to words or becoming trapped in verbal explanations. May they understand the wider implications of each teaching, release attachments and bonds, and proceed directly toward bodhi. I respectfully offer these brief words on the background to this publication, in the hope that practitioners everywhere may encourage one another.

Xu Hengzhi

March 25, 2000

Main Text

Buddhist Doctrine

(I) Basic Buddhist Knowledge

Question 1: What is a non-Buddhist path?

Answer: To posit dharmas outside the mind is a non-Buddhist path. Those who do not accept the Buddha's teachings and instead follow heterodox practices, letting their minds wander outside the Way, are therefore called followers of non-Buddhist paths. Ultimately speaking, even arhats are on a non-Buddhist path, because they still have dharmas to attain and have not eliminated attachment to dharmas.

Question 2: What is communion through response to spiritual resonance?

Answer: It is a matter of the practitioner's invocation and the response it elicits. Buddha-recitation and mantra recitation constitute the invocation; the blessings bestowed on the practitioner by Buddhas and bodhisattvas constitute the response. When the two form an unbroken whole, this is communion through the Way.

Question 3: What does "neither identical nor separate" mean?

Answer: "Not identical" means that they are not the same; "not separate" means that apart from it, there is nothing. This refers to the nonduality of nature and appearance, and to form and emptiness being no different.

Question 4: What are the body within the body and the body outside the body?

Answer: The body within the body is Buddha-nature, the true body. After recognizing one's intrinsic nature, one must protect it at all times. When the six sense faculties are no longer moved by circumstances and have become pure, our consciousness can emerge; it need not wait until death to do so. The body that emerges is called the body outside the body, namely the mind-born body. It is still an illusory body, belonging to manas consciousness, and it may still undergo changes after emerging.

The first is called the mind-born body of the blissful experience of samādhi and depends on one's skill in seated meditation. At this stage, one cannot send it forth at will; one must enter samādhi to do so, and cannot send it forth during activity. Beyond the fifth bhūmi, one can manifest three such bodies. From the eighth bhūmi onward, it is the mind-born body arising together with the various kinds without deliberate activity. One can freely manifest as animals, plants, mountains, rivers, the great earth, and all other things.

If one has not recognized one's intrinsic nature, then even if one produces a yang spirit, one still remains subject to birth and death. Only after Patriarch Lü Chunyang later met Patriarch Huanglong did he fully awaken, saying: "Since seeing Huanglong, I have regretted that all my former efforts were in vain." Daoism has things to which it remains attached and can dissolve them into emptiness only at the end; qigong has even more objects of attachment. Therefore, neither can transcend birth and

death. Daoism and qigong take the refinement of essence, qi, and spirit as their basis, whereas Buddhadharma takes bodhicitta as its foundation and realizes the Way through diligent cultivation of samādhi and wisdom and the accumulation of merit and virtue. One is the substance of the conditioned; the other is the virtue of non-contrivance. Thus they cannot be spoken of in the same breath.

Question 5: What is no-thought?

Answer: No-thought does not mean suppressing thoughts so that they do not arise, thereby resembling a dead person. Rather, when thoughts arise, do not follow them, and do not linger on thought after thought. Even while doing all kinds of things, leave not the slightest trace in the mind and have no attachment whatsoever.

Question 6: What does it mean to apply the mind without abiding?

Answer: Buddhadharma is not negative or world-weary; rather, it actively engages with the world. Therefore, disciples of the Buddha should take the lead among the public in undertaking all kinds of demanding work and must not evade reality. While working, they should act in response to conditions, without retaining the slightest notion of merit. When there is not a single thing in the mind—when it is empty and open, as though one had done nothing at all—this is applying the mind without abiding.

Question 7: What does undefiled mean?

Answer: Cultivation proceeds from the defiled to the undefiled. Undefiled means that all your deluded thoughts, attachments, and notions of merit have been completely drained away. When there is no goodness, no evil, no joy, and no affliction left to leak out, that is undefiled. So long as there is even a little joy or affliction, one is still defiled.

You now have deluded mind, deluded thoughts, and deluded notions. Quickly let them go; do not follow them, but dissolve them all away. When there is nothing left to leak out, this is called undefiled. Therefore, let go of everything and do not cling to anything. Upon realizing the undefiled, the ten directions are completely luminous, the Way and its powers are fully present, and one accomplishes the wondrous virtue of fearlessness.

Question 8: What is acceptance of the dharma of the unborn?

Answer: When true wisdom abides unmoved in the principle and substance of true reality, this is called acceptance of the dharma of the unborn. Our Buddha-nature is fundamentally neither arising nor ceasing. Without birth, where could there be death? Acceptance means abiding unmoved; it is the power of samādhi. Even in the most painful circumstances, one no longer feels pain; even in the womb of a cow or

a mare, one does not suffer. This is the power of the great acceptance of intrinsic nature: the dharmakāya (Dharma body) is neither arising nor ceasing.

All phenomenal appearances are illusory. If you do not accept them, there is no suffering; if you accept them, there is suffering. When one who endures suffering has no suffering to endure, there is likewise no mind that can be moved. Acceptance of the dharma of the unborn can be realized only through strength. Though one may travel through the six realms, it is still the unborn; it is not that the unborn means merely sitting in a Pure Land outside the realms.

We now say that at the point where thought ceases, the great capacity that can arise with clear, distinct knowing is our Buddha-nature. If you acknowledge it, without the slightest doubt or wavering, this is called the dharma of the unborn. Going further, even this dharma of the unborn is unobtainable; only then is it called acceptance of the dharma of the unborn. Acceptance of the dharma of the unborn is the natural state in which a practitioner realizes intrinsic nature and no longer undergoes arising and ceasing. At that point, one has realized the Way.

Question 9: What is the subtle continuous stream?

Answer: It refers to subtle deluded thoughts—the “intention” among the five universal mental factors of the Dharma Characteristics School—which flow without ceasing like water. Ordinarily, people cannot perceive them because they flow so quickly. One must enter vajra-like samādhi in order to see their movement.

Question 10: What are view, samādhi, and conduct?

Answer: View is seeing one’s true nature, in which emptiness and compassion are nondual. Not clinging to appearances is great samādhi, empty and luminous, without reliance. Conduct refers to actions that liberate sentient beings without clinging to the appearance of liberating them. Intrinsic nature illuminates perfectly, and the six perfections are all practiced.

Question 11: Is the practice of leaving no trace in any circumstance the proper path of cultivation?

Answer: This practice of leaving no trace is indeed the proper path of cultivation. Yet within non-abiding, one must still fully manifest the wondrous functioning of great compassion and reveal immeasurable merit and virtue.

Question 12: What books should those of us who practice this Dharma read?

Answer: Before undertaking a practice, one may read any books of Exoteric Buddhism. The emphasis, however, should be on books that clarify right view, develop bodhicitta and compassionate vows, and establish correct conduct of body

and mind. After your teacher has transmitted the practice to you, you should read the sūtras, treatises, and other reference books related to that practice.

Question 13: What does Avalokiteśvara mean?

Answer: It means contemplating oneself without wavering from the original ground. This self is not the self of the physical body; clear, numinous knowing is the self. Yet one must not abide even in this clear, numinous knowing.

Question 14: What does it mean to arouse a sense of doubt?

Answer: It means to make you die with no place to be buried.

Question 15: What is it that one awakens to?

Answer: Even the Buddhas of the three times do not recognize it! Do you understand? In answers within the Chan school, one must avoid discursive explanation; the meaning must lie beyond the words. People today have faculties that are too dull, and it is not easy to awaken through cultivating Chan meditation. Only combined Pure Land and Esoteric practice seems comparatively suitable. This is truly unavoidable. Yet when one encounters aspirants with the requisite affinity, one may also accept one or two and teach them.

Question 16: What is the Heart-of-Heart Dharma?

Answer: Its full name is “the heart at the center of the heart”: the mind in which the false mind, the true mind, and both false and true mind are all unobtainable—that is, the wondrous mind realized in awakening. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is the essence of Dzogchen (Great Perfection), the center of the center: the unsurpassed Dharma that uses the false mind to open the true mind and fully reveal the wondrous mind.

Question 17: Does the practice of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma speak of the provisions for attaining Buddhahood? If so, what do they refer to?

Answer: The provisions for attaining Buddhahood are: (1) seated meditation and entering samādhi, to remove obscurations and open wisdom; and (2) doing abundant good deeds, to accumulate blessings and virtue. A Buddha is honored as complete in the two accumulations, for both wisdom and blessings and virtue are fully perfected.

Question 18: What is a yin spirit?

Answer: Others cannot see you, but you yourself know.

Question 19: What is Esoteric Buddhism?

Answer: Esoteric Buddhism is the Dharma of opening the secret treasury; it is practiced through the empowerment of the three mysteries. The empowerment of the three mysteries means receiving empowerment through the body, speech, and mind of the yidam. Keeping the body still, forming mudrās with the hands, and sitting cross-legged is the mystery of body. Continually reciting mantras is the mystery of speech. Not thinking or reflecting, but quietly listening to the sound of one's own mantra-recitation, is the mystery of mind. To open the secret treasury through formless esoteric practice and see one's intrinsic nature is genuine Esoteric Buddhism.

Question 20: Why must Esoteric Buddhism receive empowerment?

Answer: Empowerment is a ceremony. It can eliminate your karmic obstacles, open the brahma aperture, and give you the seed of bodhi. After receiving empowerment, you can obtain blessings through practice. Thus, after empowerment, one may often have diarrhea or vomit; this is the power of empowerment. In Esoteric Buddhism, one may practice only after receiving empowerment.

Question 21: What is direct perception?

Answer: Direct perception is the appearance of things as they are, without discrimination. It is like a camera taking a photograph: it captures an image without discriminating. The first five consciousnesses are the wisdom of accomplishing what is to be done; they operate through direct perception. The problem arises when the sixth consciousness intervenes: "This is Zhang San; that is Li Si. Zhang San treats me well; Li Si treats me badly." This is inferential cognition. In our practice, we must not discriminate. Consciousness should not follow the first five consciousnesses, nor should it turn with inner image-objects. Free from all dualities, the total reality manifests perfectly and direct cognition is clear and distinct; this is the state of genuine direct perception.

Question 22: Where do conditions come from?

Answer: Conditions are evoked by karma created in past lives. Karmic influence gives rise to conditions; when the mind moves, there are conditions. Conditions are also the wondrous capacity of intrinsic nature. The arising of great compassion and the adornment of Buddha-lands all manifest from the causes and conditions of bodhi.

Question 23: What is the relationship between Buddha-nature and awakened nature?

Answer: Buddha-nature is awakened nature. What is Buddha-nature? It is the basis for attaining Buddhahood. There is also dharma-nature, which is the basis of all

things. Together, these three are our one numinous true nature, also called the One True Dharma Realm. It is the truest and most precious great treasure, the basis of all things.

Question 24: The Diamond Sūtra says, “All noble and holy beings differ by means of the unconditioned dharma.” How can noble beings differ? What are these differences?

Answer: Noble beings have stages: the four noble classes and the six ordinary classes. Arhats, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas are all noble beings—is this not a difference? In addition, there are differences in the arising of vows, compassion, wisdom, skillful means, and so forth; only thus do they become great functions that benefit sentient beings.

Question 25: What are the essential points of Buddha-recitation in true reality?

Answer: Do not cling to appearances; contemplate your intrinsic nature. Inwardly observe where thoughts arise. Not following them is called mindfulness of the Buddha of true reality.

Question 26: Will one still regress after reaching Tuṣita Heaven? Is attaining Buddhahood there faster than in the Western Pure Land?

Answer: There is no regression; both are states of non-retrogression. As for whether one attains Buddhahood quickly or slowly, it depends entirely on one’s own practice. Śākyamuni Buddha and Ānanda practiced together, yet Śākyamuni Buddha had long since attained Buddhahood while Ānanda had not yet awakened. Wherever one is, it depends on the degree of diligence one brings to practice.

Question 27: Regarding liberating sentient beings, before one has realized one’s original nature, may one reduce external involvements, practice the Dharma with peace of mind, and focus primarily on self-liberation?

Answer: Yes!

Question 28: What circumstances constitute indeterminate emptiness?

Answer: When not a single thought arises and one knows nothing at all, that is indeterminate emptiness.

Question 29: Bodhisattva means “an awakened sentient being.” How should this be understood?

Answer: Awakening means awakening through and breaking through your emotional views and attachments. All sentient beings are beings with feelings. These

feelings are the worst: feeling is attachment, and attachment gives rise to water; water flows downward, and thus birth and death cannot be transcended. Therefore, we must break through these emotional views of attachment and desire. Having awakened oneself, one must also awaken others, helping them likewise to break through their emotional views and attachments.

Master Hanshan said: “With the single phrase ‘Amitābha Buddha,’ one must cut off one’s own emotional views and attachments before one can be reborn in the West.” If emotional attachment is heavy, one cannot be reborn in the Western Pure Land. Moreover, awakening is bodhi, right awakening, while sentient beings are beings with feelings. A bodhisattva has realized awakening for oneself and, with a compassionate heart, awakens all sentient beings; hence the name “awakened sentient being.”

Question 30: What does “the ground where dharmatā is exhausted” mean? How does heart esotericism explain attainment in this very body?

Answer: “The ground where dharmatā is exhausted” means cultivating to the final point, where not only can no dharma be obtained, but even so-called dharmatā cannot be obtained; not only can spiritual powers not be obtained, but even Buddha cannot be obtained. Only then is there attainment in this very body.

Question 31: Does the meaning of the Middle Way have a real characteristic?

Answer: No. Neither true nor false can be obtained. The meaning of the Middle Way is neither to discard the provisional nor to cling to the true. One abides in neither true nor false, neither grasping nor rejecting.

Question 32: Someone asked Taixu, “If a snake is cut into two, in which half is the Buddha-nature?”

Answer: Buddha-nature is everywhere.

Question 33: Is it good for us to read too many Buddhist scriptures?

Answer: Reading too many is like opening a general store; one then accumulates too much conceptual knowledge. Therefore, our master said not to read books during the hundred meditation sessions, lest they disturb the one-pointed mind of meditation. When one has too many views and opinions, it is not easy to attain samādhi.

Question 34: What should one do if one cannot attain Buddhahood in this life?

Answer: One may be reborn in the Pure Land, or one may return and take human rebirth again. One must make great vows. The power of vows is inconceivable:

sincerely and earnestly vow to attain Buddhahood and liberate sentient beings. The World-Honored One vowed to liberate sentient beings in the Sahā world of the five turbidities, liberating sentient beings in the places of greatest suffering.

Question 35: Is cause and effect also a provisional appearance arising through conditions?

Answer: Of course! Only the Buddha has transcended cause and effect; even great bodhisattvas cannot escape the circle of cause and effect.

Question 36: Does Buddhist activity in a dream refer to such things as those who have not seen their true nature worshiping the Buddha, reciting sūtras, and performing meritorious deeds?

Answer: Expounding the Dharma and liberating sentient beings are also Buddhist activities in a dream.

Question 37: How should students apply themselves in their studies? What should they do during examinations?

Answer: When the teacher is lecturing, if you listen clearly, retain it in your mind, and understand it, that is application. If, while studying, you think about other matters and fail to hear what the teacher says, then cannot answer examination questions, that is failure to apply it. Do not merely memorize by rote; you must understand. “Once the meaning is grasped, forget the words; then one is intimate with the Way’s meaning.” Do not become trapped beneath the words.

Question 38: What is the key to practice?

Answer: Do not become attached to the miraculous or mysterious. Recognize that the luminous knowing in which not a single thought arises, yet everything is clear and distinct, is your own intrinsic nature. With ordinary mind, handle all affairs while finding not a single thing obtainable.

Question 39: The principle is so simple when explained, yet in practice we always lose our way. Why?

Answer: The Buddhadharma is originally this simple; there is nothing mysterious or complicated about it. But habitual tendencies accumulated over many lives cannot be removed in a single day. Since these accumulated habits were not amassed in only one lifetime, removing them likewise requires sustained, diligent practice and training. Practitioners need only remain aware at all times, reducing and reducing them again; in due course, their practice will naturally come to fruition, and the day of complete realization will arrive.

Question 40: How can one attain realization swiftly?

Answer: All sentient beings are originally Buddhas. What further attainment do you seek? Seek nothing and cling to nothing. Simply cease deluded thoughts and do not seek the true; naturally, you will return home and sit securely.

Question 41: It is said that when the central channel and the left and right channels are opened, one has attained the sambhogakāya (reward body). Is there such a teaching?

Answer: This seems to be a view of non-Buddhist or deviant paths. Our physical body is a body resulting from karma, not the Buddha's sambhogakāya (reward body). To work on this physical body is a grave error. If you practice in this way, even by the time Maitreya Buddha descends into the world, you will still be unable to attain Buddhahood.

Question 42: Venerable Milarepa had already reached the state in which "practice is a great deluded thought, and not practicing is also a great deluded thought." Yet he grew weary of responding to donors and wished to practice in the snowy mountains. Why? Were his habitual tendencies not yet exhausted?

Answer: In fact, all that could be said had already been said, yet people still asked him to expound the Dharma. So he spoke a teaching of no teaching: when you are in the snowy mountains, where no one is present and there is nothing to say, look—what is it? Do you understand?

Question 43: Recently, I have found it difficult to generate reverence for all Buddhadharma with form. Even the visible world is illusory; how can the invisible world inspire absolute faith?

Answer: Although appearances are illusory, this does not mean that they have no function. Thus it is said: neither empty nor existent; existence itself is emptiness, and emptiness itself is existence. One must abide in neither extreme. The sky is vast and worlds are numerous; even modern science cannot yet fathom their extent. Only the Buddha-eye is clear and pure, seeing everything distinctly. Simply practice the Buddhadharma with one-pointedness. When the sense faculties and their objects fall away, the so-called invisible worlds will naturally be seen.

Question 44: How can Buddhism be revitalized?

Answer: There are many who cling to appearances and few who abide nowhere; many who believe superstitiously and few who have wise faith; many who seek the Buddha and few who diligently practice. Many monastics perform Buddhist rites and hurry through sūtra and repentance services, while very few genuinely exert

themselves in cultivation. This is regrettable, and so Buddhism has declined. If everyone practices diligently and well, Buddhism will have hope.

Question 45: Before my master goes abroad, I would like to come with several fellow practitioners to pay you a visit and receive your instruction. Would that be possible?

Answer: Abiding nowhere, free and at ease—this is great spiritual functioning. The essence of the Buddhadharma is wholly contained within this. Any further words are words of Māra. Did not Chan Master Yunmen say, “This very seeing and hearing are not seeing and hearing; no other sounds or forms can be presented to you”? What more is there to say? Why make a fruitless journey back and forth and waste your energy? Remain peacefully at home instead.

Question 46: If the mind does not move, will the brain become dull?

Answer: No. On the contrary, the mind responds more quickly. An unmoving mind does not mean that the mind cannot function. It means not clinging to illusory appearances or being swayed by them. Knowing that all phenomena are illusory, one remains unmoved and responds immediately to whatever occurs, with greater sensitivity. Excessive deluded thinking, by contrast, makes one slow to respond. We must skillfully employ right mindfulness in our activities; otherwise, how could we accomplish anything? While acting, however, the mind does not abide in appearances. We respond according to conditions, free of distracting thoughts, with complete clarity.

Question 47: At times I use knowledge found in Buddhist scriptures to assess my own condition. Is this appropriate?

Answer: It is useful. You may compare your own speech and conduct with the principles in the scriptures, examining what you have done incorrectly. The purpose of morning and evening services in monasteries is to teach us how to conduct ourselves and understand how to practice. Evening service means comparing oneself with the sūtra text and examining whether one’s conduct that day was correct; morning service reminds one to conduct oneself throughout the day according to what the sūtras teach.

Question 48: The Mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra says, “In the Dharma-ending age, it is rare for even one person to attain the Way.” What does attaining the Way mean here?

Answer: It means resolving segmented birth and death, cutting off the afflictions of thought, realizing the unborn, transcending saṃsāra, and abiding permanently. Sentient beings in the Dharma-ending age have heavy obscurations, shallow wisdom, and deeply rooted bad habits, so this is very difficult to achieve.

Question 49: How should one understand non-thought as the principle?

Answer: In ‘no-thought,’ ‘no’ means the absence of all deluded thoughts and discriminations, while ‘thought’ means mindfulness of suchness (tathatā) and awakened nature. Mindfulness of suchness (tathatā) is mindfulness of one’s intrinsic nature. Not a single thought arises, yet awareness is clear and distinct. At every moment, remain on this original ground and safeguard it, seeing your true nature continuously. This is genuine practice. Our practice is flexible and wonderfully skillful, not rigid.

Question 50: If one must empty everything everywhere, will one fall into emptiness?

Answer: The emptiness spoken of in the Buddhadharma means that all things are unobtainable; it does not mean that there are no things at all. This is true emptiness and wondrous presence. Emptiness means emptying the illusory thought that clings to deluded appearances. It does not mean that wondrous functioning does not arise. Existence is revealed through mind; though there is existence, it is not truly existent, and therefore there is nothing to which one can cling. Some people speak of emptiness at every turn, yet their minds constantly cling to existence. That will not do. Even if one can truly “empty out all that is taken to exist,” if one cannot manifest the wondrous functioning of great compassion, then one is precisely “reifying nonexistence” and falling to the side of empty nonexistence.

Question 51: After someone has recited the Amitābha Heart Mantra for one thousand sessions, may they then recite Amitābha Buddha?

Answer: The Amitābha Heart Mantra is Amitābha Buddha. A heart mantra is the power of a Buddha’s or bodhisattva’s mind; its power is great, and seven recitations of the mantra are equivalent to a thousand recitations of the Buddha’s name. Of course, one should also recite Amitābha Buddha’s name often. For in addition to entering deeply into Amitābha Buddha’s dharma-realm mind-essence, one must manifest Amitābha’s ocean of compassionate vows and skillful means of deliverance, so that the merit and virtue of benefiting oneself and others may be brought to perfect fruition. Thus, the heart mantra is the wondrous capacity of the Buddha’s mind-essence, while the Buddha’s name is the outward manifestation of the Buddha’s compassionate vows. Only when inner and outer are consistent, and essence and function are nondual, can the merits of principle and phenomena of the Pure Land be perfectly fulfilled.

Question 52: After attaining Buddhahood, can one still become deluded?

Answer: No. The Buddhist scriptures liken it to gold extracted from ore: it is no longer mixed with mud, sand, and rock. Sentient beings are like gold still within ore. It is not that there is no gold, but that it is mixed with sand and stones, and so they are deluded by phenomena. When cultivation has utterly eradicated ignorance, it is

like pure gold from which the sand and stones have been completely removed. One will no longer become deluded.

Question 53: Why should we make vows?

Answer: Vows are the mother of success in all undertakings. Vows enable things to be accomplished. Therefore, in cultivation one must make great vows: resolve to attain Buddhahood and liberate sentient beings; fear neither hardship nor suffering; advance courageously and diligently; and never retreat from one's original resolve, whatever setbacks one encounters. If people have no vows, they will be unwilling to cultivate when they encounter difficulties. The first mudrā of our Heart-of-Heart Dharma is the Bodhicitta Mudrā; one must make the great vow to attain Buddhahood. To attain Buddhahood, one must rely on sentient beings. A Buddha is honored as one complete in merit and virtue and wisdom. Without great vows, and without undertaking the work of liberating sentient beings, where could merit and virtue come from?

Question 54: I truly feel that the sentient beings around me are aware of my existence. Does a Buddha feel this?

Answer: A Buddha's perfect enlightenment shines everywhere, and perfect realization universally benefits all. If a Buddha had such a feeling, he would not be a Buddha. It is a grave mistake to measure the Buddha's mind by your ordinary being's mind!

Question 55: What is the difference between the Tuṣita Pure Land and the Western Pure Land?

Answer: They are the same. The Tuṣita Pure Land is the Pure Land of our Sahā world. Śākyamuni Buddha descended from Tuṣita Heaven, and in the future Maitreya Buddha will also descend from Tuṣita Heaven. Moreover, all future Buddhas will descend from Tuṣita Heaven. Our present kalpa is the Fortunate Kalpa, in which a thousand Buddhas will appear in the world. Śākyamuni Buddha is the fourth Buddha, and another nine hundred and ninety-six Buddhas will appear in the world.

All Buddhas descend from the Inner Court of Tuṣita. Therefore, many great patriarchs of the Chan school ascend to the Inner Court of Tuṣita. Neither the West nor the East lies outside our intrinsic nature; the Western Pure Land and the Tuṣita Pure Land are neither two nor different.

Question 56: Does the Land of Ultimate Bliss exist?

Answer: It does. But it does not exist as something substantial; it is true emptiness yet wondrous presence. The Heart Sūtra says: "Form is emptiness; emptiness is

form.” Form and emptiness are nondual and must not be grasped. Amitābha Buddha will also relinquish his position, and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva will succeed him. That land will be even better than the present Land of Ultimate Bliss, because Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva’s merit and virtue are great. He attained Buddhahood long ago, but manifests in the form of a bodhisattva in order to liberate sentient beings. Yet he too will relinquish his position, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva will succeed him. Therefore, the Diamond Sūtra says: “All conditioned appearances are illusory.”

Question 57: Is The Ten Essentials of the Pure Land important for those who cultivate the Pure Land path?

Answer: The Ten Essentials of the Pure Land is indeed an important text for Pure Land cultivation. Unfortunately, many people today do not value it. They seek only convenience, saying that even distracted Buddha-recitation can bring rebirth in the West. Consequently, when the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month arrives, they inevitably become flustered and confused, unable to be reborn in the West.

Question 58: If there are no deluded thoughts in my mind, how is that different from the Western Pure Land?

Answer: In terms of mind-essence, there is no difference. For as one’s mind becomes pure, so the Buddha-land becomes pure. But some people make grand claims while remaining unwilling to empty their minds. When circumstances arise, they still cling to appearances. Once one clings to appearances, it is not the Pure Land. Understanding the principle is useless if one’s conduct does not accord with it. If one clings to appearances and is reborn in the West, one can only be reborn in the Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages.

There are four different lands in the West. First, if one single-mindedly exerts oneself in Buddha-recitation but does not know that all things are illusory manifestations, taking them as truly existent, one is reborn in the Pure Land of phenomenal appearances and also enjoys the magnificence of the Land of Ultimate Bliss. Second, if one’s mind is empty and non-abiding, one realizes the correct samādhi of the unborn and eliminates the delusions of views and thought, one enters the Land of Expedient Means with Residue.

Third, if one, with vast bodhicitta and compassionate vows, universally practices the six pāramitās and myriad conducts, suddenly empties the four marks, and manifests the wondrous fruition of true reward, one is reborn in the Land of True Reward and Adornment. Fourth, if one’s fruition and virtues are perfected to the utmost, one perfectly realizes the three kāyas, perfectly illumines the four wisdoms, and fully abides in quiescent light, one is reborn in the Land of Eternal Quiescent Light. If one

merely does not give rise to deluded thoughts, but lacks the virtues of the Pure Land, one remains far from the true Pure Land!

Question 59: What are the precepts?

Answer: Precepts restrain your mind from moving deludedly, making it easier to enter samādhi. Therefore, the most important thing is the precepts of the mind. When the mind is unmoved by circumstances and remains undefiled and unattached amid all circumstances, this is the foundation of all precepts. Then, from the wondrous mind that does not move, one gives rise to the compassionate skillful means of benefiting sentient beings, embracing, helping, and aiding them everywhere. Only then can one fully possess the merit and virtue of all precepts.

Question 60: Are wholesome actions mainly a skillful means for counteracting one's former habits of selfishness and self-interest, so as to attain a state of no-self?

Answer: Wholesome actions are indeed very important, but they are not the most important thing. The main thing is to develop wisdom. A "Buddha" is one who is awakened and does not cling to appearances. If one does not develop wisdom and merely performs good deeds, at most one becomes a person who enjoys blessings. When those blessings are exhausted, one must still fall into hell and remains unable to be liberated from birth and death. But if, after realizing the mind's nature, one performs all wholesome actions that benefit living beings with bodhicitta, then all such wholesome actions can become favorable conditions for progress on the path.

Question 61: Many people in the world do not believe in Buddhism and even ridicule Buddhist practitioners. Is the vow to liberate all sentient beings therefore too difficult or unrealistic? Should we liberate only sentient beings with whom we have affinities?

Answer: One's vows should be broad; one must not discriminate between those with affinities and those without, or between those close and those distant. As for whether they can be liberated, that depends on their causes and conditions. Even the Buddha cannot liberate sentient beings without affinities!

Question 62: To liberate sentient beings, must one first awaken and possess spiritual powers? Otherwise, one cannot speak of liberating people, for they will not believe you. But if one attends only to one's own practice and does not liberate others, one will be criticized as a self-liberating adherent of the Lesser Vehicle. How should this view be regarded?

Answer: Your view is mistaken. Your present practice is precisely for the sake of liberating others; it is not cultivation undertaken merely to seek happiness for yourself. This is the Mahāyāna Dharma of a bodhisattva's heart. Conversely, if one

seeks only to escape the sea of suffering oneself and does not care for others, that is the Dharma of the Lesser Vehicle. Moreover, liberating others does not depend on spiritual powers; it depends on having a clear and correct Dharma eye, so that one does not lead people onto mistaken paths.

If one were to liberate others by means of spiritual powers, then non-Buddhist practitioners and demon kings also possess spiritual powers. Can they all liberate people? You are all attached to spiritual powers in your practice; this is a grave mistake! You must know that attaining Buddhahood does not depend on spiritual powers, but on developing prajñā!

Question 63: Master, is the essence understood through awakening at the level of principle the same as the essence known through direct realization?

Answer: Yes! Although the essence is no different, their functioning in circumstances differs. Awakening at the level of principle is merely intellectual understanding; when circumstances arise, one fails. Those who have realized through direct experience, however, are not confused when circumstances arise and remain unmoved before objects.

Question 64: What is the difference between correct samādhi and ordinary sleep?

Answer: When your power of samādhi becomes deep, even while asleep you will remain clearly and distinctly aware, rather than dull and muddled.

Question 65: What is the wondrous functioning of true nature?

Answer: To do things without clinging to appearances, without giving rise to a second thought, and to act as though one had not acted—this is the wondrous functioning of true nature. Even dressing, eating, receiving guests, seeing guests off, and so forth are all the full and great functioning of one's intrinsic nature.

Question 66: I now understand that all things are transformations of Buddha-nature. Yet I still feel suffering, especially the physical pain of illness. When I encounter material obstacles, I also cannot remain self-mastered.

Answer: You are still attached to appearances; your mind has not yet become empty. Moreover, your power of samādhi is very weak. You should sit in meditation more and cultivate the power of samādhi. Intellectual understanding is deluded consciousness and is of no use. You must empty your body, mind, and world; only then will it do. Truly safeguard the mind so that it does not turn with circumstances. Even while walking, you will let go: there is no "I" walking, no road, no cars, yet you will still arrive at your destination. When you truly practice, you will also let go in dreams. Awakening at the level of principle is not enough; you must awaken through direct realization. You must penetrate through, and you must practice diligently.

Question 67: For those who genuinely cultivate, is it better to know less and hold fewer views? Is it enough simply to rely on a good spiritual teacher and one or two scriptures, without extensively studying sūtras and treatises, and to practice Chan meditation and Buddha-recitation sincerely, thereby certainly accomplishing the great matter? Is this correct?

Answer: Practicing the Dharma does not mean refraining from studying sūtras and treatises. How can one practice without understanding the principles? This statement is meant to prevent people from becoming attached to words, splitting hairs over them, and neglecting actual practice, thereby delaying their cultivation. If, after thoroughly mastering the teachings and principles, one lets everything go, no longer clings to the wording, and practices earnestly and practically, that is best.

Question 68: Master, please speak about the mind-born body.

Answer: Everyone can project a mind-born body; it arises from manas consciousness. When the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind above obstruct it, it cannot emerge. At present, our six sense faculties are impure. We let our thoughts run wildly, cling to appearances when we see them, and thus obstruct it. When you become pure to a certain degree, it will emerge on its own. Those who practice qigong well may also project it once their minds have become pure. But they can only project one, and cannot yet make it emerge whenever they wish. It can emerge when one enters samādhi, but not when one is outside samādhi.

Question 69: Before seeing one's true nature, can one exercise functioning?

Answer: All functioning is the functioning of our Buddha-nature; otherwise, how could we speak and hear? This is functioning! Not abiding in appearances while functioning is wondrous functioning. It does not mean sitting there motionless and performing no function. One must be adaptable, carry out one's tasks conscientiously without clinging to appearances, and this is functioning.

Question 70: What is the difference between the intermediate-state body and the mind-born body?

Answer: The two are different. The intermediate-state body is the subtle body that exists after the former body has died and before the later body has formed—that is, before one has entered the womb. The mind-born body is not possessed by everyone; only those with a certain degree of cultivation possess it. It is a bodhisattva body that takes birth at will in order to liberate sentient beings. There are three kinds of mind-born body: the mind-born body of the blissful experience of samādhi, the mind-born body that realizes the intrinsic nature of dharmas, and the mind-born body arising together with the various kinds without deliberate activity.

Question 71: What is the difference between the soul and Buddha-nature?

Answer: The soul is the union of Buddha-nature and ignorance. If you have not recognized your original nature and are attached to appearances, that is the soul. Discriminating thoughts and clinging defilements are the soul. Hun and po also differ. Some speak of three hun and seven po—that is, three parts soul and seven parts po. Hun is yang energy, and po is yin energy. Human beings possess both yin and yang, with yin at one extreme and yang at the other.

In ordinary beings, the luminous aspect accounts for only three parts, while the dark aspect accounts for seven. Therefore, one must dissolve the dark aspect and the habitual tendencies of attachment. Patriarch Chunyang was called Chunyang, “Pure Yang,” because all yin energy had been completely eliminated. Attachment to appearances prevents one from leaving the three realms. Even attachment to the yang spirit still entails birth and death; one must not cling to anything at all.

Question 72: An equal enlightenment bodhisattva still has one portion of the ignorance characterized by the appearance of birth that has not yet been overcome. How, then, can we ordinary beings practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma for two or three years, overcome ignorance, and remain within the six realms to liberate sentient beings?

Answer: Not everyone who practices the Heart-of-Heart Dharma can completely overcome ignorance, remain within the six realms, and liberate sentient beings. It depends on the depth of each person’s realization. One may be reborn in the Pure Land according to one’s own vows and thereby bring the matter to completion, or remain in the world with sentient beings in order to liberate them.

Question 73: To what extent must one cultivate before one can transmit the Dharma?

Answer: Only when a practitioner has genuinely awakened and realized the Way is one qualified to transmit the Dharma. “If you wish to know the road through the mountains, you must ask one who has traveled it.” If you have not traveled it, do not know the route, and how can you recklessly transmit it to others? During practice, doubts require someone’s guidance. It is like a traveler at a crossroads who needs to be told which way to turn. If you have not traveled that road yourself, how can you blindly direct others? Would that not be the blind leading the blind, all going together toward hell?

Question 74: Do not fear that the mind may die; fear only that it may not come alive. If the mind is first made completely dead, can it come alive again?

Answer: For the mind to die completely means that your attachments die; it does not mean that its wondrous functioning dies. During practice, one should also take care to exercise in moderation. When your mind has truly died completely with respect to things and no longer clings to them, its spiritual functioning immediately manifests in full.

Question 75: All phenomena are empty; only Buddha-nature is not empty. Does this not make Buddha-nature and the myriad things into two separate things?

Answer: "The myriad things are empty, while Buddha-nature is not empty" is said to those new to Buddhism. "All dharmas are Buddha-nature" is said to those who have awakened. The two must not be confused.

Question 76: "Until the hells are empty, I vow not to become a Buddha." Has Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva become a Buddha?

Answer: Vowing not to become a Buddha means vowing not to assume the rank of Buddha. If Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva were not qualified to be a Buddha, how could he go to the hells to liberate sentient beings? How could he guide bodhisattvas throughout the ten directions to become Buddhas? He possesses the qualifications of a Buddha but does not assume the Buddha rank. In fact, from Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva's perspective, the hells are originally empty. The Heart Sūtra speaks of the empty characteristics of all dharmas. Moreover, only when there is no Buddha to attain does one truly become a Buddha!

Question 77: "Each dharma abides in its own dharma position; the worldly appearances are ever-abiding." How should this be understood?

Answer: Worldly dharmas are like mulberry fields turning into seas and seas into mulberry fields: they change in an instant and do not endure forever. Our bodies, too, do not endure forever.

Su Dongpo stated this very clearly in two lines from his "Former Ode on the Red Cliffs": "Do you also understand water and the moon? That which passes is like this, yet it has never truly gone away. …" Look at the water and the moon. The water rushes on, yet although it flows, it has not diminished.

Likewise, although the moon waxes and wanes, it neither increases nor decreases. This tells us that phenomenal appearances are just thus—is this not ever-abiding? "Each dharma abides in its own dharma position" means that all phenomenal appearances are inseparable from true nature. True nature is ever-abiding, and worldly appearances are also ever-abiding. The world merely changes through causes and conditions; all are illusory appearances.

Question 78: At first, one sees mountains as mountains and water as water. Going further, one sees mountains as not mountains and water as not water. Later, one again sees mountains as mountains and water as water. How should this be understood?

Answer: Seeing mountains as not mountains and water as not water occurs when one is practicing with true earnestness: there is nothing seen, and one clings to nothing. Turning back, one realizes, “Oh, mountains are simply mountains, and water is simply water.” Things are naturally thus; there is nothing mysterious about them. Then one follows conditions freely, allowing things to function unobstructedly. If one insists that mountains are not mountains and water is not water, that is annihilationism. Mountains and water are manifestations of original nature; all material appearances are transformations of our Buddha-nature and are all wondrous functioning. Thus, one naturally does not cling to appearances.

Question 79: Is the stirring of thoughts wondrous functioning?

Answer: Yes, the stirring of thoughts is all wondrous functioning. More specifically, when thoughts arise without attachment to appearances, that is wondrous functioning; when thoughts arise with attachment to appearances, they are deluded thoughts. “Precisely when the mind is at work, there is precisely no mind at work; when there is no mind, it is precisely at work; ever at work, it is precisely absent.” This is wondrous functioning. Even when the mind is at work, there is no mind that can be put to work. One must be “ever at work, yet precisely absent.” When thoughts arise without attachment to appearances, that is the Ocean-Seal radiating light.

Question 80: At Gaomin Monastery, Venerable Xuyun could see through walls and saw someone outside the room relieving himself. Can this be called awakening?

Answer: This is not awakening; it is a state of the aggregate of form. One must not cling to it, for clinging to it leads to demonic influence. In his autobiography, Venerable Xuyun wrote: “The root of doubt suddenly broke off; I rejoiced as never before.” These eight characters describe the moment when a teacup fell to the ground and the root of doubt suddenly broke off.

Question 81: Do images appear during the experience of realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature?

Answer: There are no images and no thing, yet it is not the appearance of annihilation. It is utterly clear and distinct. This clear spiritual knowing is our Original Face. After understanding this, take heed: you have not yet arrived home. This is precisely the time to apply effort and protect it at every moment. You may use the Buddha’s name or a mantra to protect it.

Chan Master Dahui Gao used the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī of our Heart-of-Heart Dharma to protect himself. Chan masters all recite mantras. Master Hanshan stated this very clearly: Chan masters throughout the ages secretly upheld mantras, and no school can be separated from Esoteric Buddhism.

Question 82: Everything we say and do, including my writing this letter now, is the wondrous functioning of original nature. Original nature itself is “neither arising nor ceasing, neither increasing nor decreasing, neither defiled nor pure.” Yet it is unlike earth, wood, grass, or stone; it is a spiritually knowing awareness, inherently complete in every person. Awakening to this is seeing one’s true nature. Is this correct?

Answer: No. This is intellectual understanding, not seeing one’s true nature. Such understanding proves ineffective when circumstances arise. To see one’s true nature and realize the Way, one must first experience body, mind, and world dissolving into emptiness. After awakening to the principle, one must still be able to meet actual circumstances without obstruction. If one cannot do so, it does not count as seeing one’s true nature. Even if one can, abiding in empty luminosity without bringing forth the wondrous functioning of great compassion is still not genuine seeing of one’s true nature.

Question 83: I understand that, during meditation, I should follow the teacher’s instruction to recite in the mind and hear with the ears, and undertake as many additional sessions as possible. Off the cushion, I should observe the mind. Knowing that walking, standing, sitting, lying down, Buddha-recitation, mantra recitation, and so forth are all functions of intrinsic nature, I should allow the true mind to remain manifest as consistently as possible. Is this correct?

Answer: Yes, and no. It is correct in that you must diligently apply effort in cultivation and must not be careless. It is not correct in the phrase, “let the true mind manifest as constantly as possible,” because the true mind is never hidden; it radiates light before your very face at every moment. Since you already know that all movements and functions are the wondrous functioning of the true mind, is it not constantly present already? Why speak of “letting the true mind manifest as constantly as possible”?

Question 84: After seeing one’s true nature, is the most diligent practice to avoid losing sight of the original at every moment?

Answer: No! Original nature cannot be lost. It is only that you are attached to appearances and deluded by circumstances, just as the sun is obscured and does not appear when covered by dark clouds. Diligent practice consists only in continuous and seamless safeguarding. When applying effort, be like troops attacking the enemy, pressing forward without hesitation; when not applying effort,

let everything go and regard it as though nothing were happening. This is called true diligence.

Question 85: Not losing sight of the original means applying effort to awareness. When doing things, know that they are the wondrous functioning of original nature; when there is nothing to do, spiritually knowing awareness has not diminished. Then will one naturally accomplish the great Way through time and conditions?

Answer: No! The ancients said, “Simply exhaust ordinary feelings; do not seek any saintly understanding.” If you are constantly attached to spiritually knowing awareness, then you are abiding in something. You must not cling to any appearance; instead, function in accordance with conditions. One must not cling even to spiritually knowing awareness. Applying effort to awareness is an even greater mistake.

Question 86: To be in accord with intrinsic nature at every moment is to be in accord with the master. If one practices in accordance with the Dharma, the master and the Buddha are at one’s side. Is this understanding correct?

Answer: Yes!

Question 87: One must come to no attainment, with everything utterly unobtainable. Yet does not a state of emptiness with awareness still remain? If this too were swept away, would that not be annihilation?

Answer: This numinous awareness is not to be swept away; rather, one must not abide in it. Because there is no abiding, there is neither a subject that is aware nor an object of awareness; thus one comes to no attainment. If a state of awareness is still held onto, it is already not it—how, then, can you speak of emptiness?

Question 88: Although this formless nature-essence is without appearances, one can experience it when no thoughts arise. Is this so?

Answer: No! One must not only experience it when no thoughts arise, but also amid functions and phenomenal appearances. For functions and phenomenal appearances are all manifestations of intrinsic nature. Appearance is precisely nature, and nature is precisely appearance; they cannot be separated. If one experiences it only when no thoughts arise, would one not fall into a pool of stagnant water?

Question 89: In verses on awakening, ancient Chan masters wrote: “It is now precisely me; I am not it now.” They also wrote: “When spring arrives, fragrant flowers flourish everywhere; mountains, rivers, and the great earth are the Tathāgata.” Are these not annotations on the nonduality of emptiness and presence?

Answer: One cannot treat these statements as saying the same thing. In the preceding verse, “I am not it now,” one must clearly distinguish host and guest; one must not vaguely and indiscriminately take it to mean nonduality. When realizing the essence, not a single thing is established; but when function arises, each and every thing appears without abiding. The union of realizing the essence and arousing its function is precisely “the mountains, rivers, and great earth are the Tathāgata.” Realizing the essence does not mean remaining motionless at the level of suchness (tathatā), as though lifeless there; rather, it is lively wondrous functioning—responding to things in accordance with conditions, without abiding anywhere.

(II) On Chan and Esoteric Buddhism

Question 90: Since Buddha-nature does not lie in cultivation, why is there any need to practice a Dharma method? Would it not be better to turn the light back upon oneself at every moment in daily life, especially when afflictions arise and one cannot get through them?

Answer: Because you still have ignorance: when situations arise, you cling to appearances and cannot be at ease. Therefore, you must cultivate. Cultivation does not cultivate Buddha-nature; it eliminates the habitual tendencies of ignorance. If you can constantly gather yourself in samādhi at all times and in all places, without being turned by circumstances, that is cultivation. When cultivation reaches complete maturity, even samādhi cannot be obtained; only then is there no further need for cultivation.

Question 91: The Heart Sūtra says, “No ignorance, and also no ending of ignorance.” “No ignorance” means that ignorance has already been shattered; “also no ending of ignorance” means that even the absence of ignorance is not established. These two statements should already represent the highest Buddhahood. Why, then, are they included within the twelve links of dependent origination?

Answer: To speak of no ending of ignorance is precisely to erase the traces of awakening, remove attachment to dharmas, return to nonattainment, and enter the Mahāyāna Buddha stage.

Question 92: I believe that the deluded mind has no location, whereas the true mind has a location.

Answer: That is incorrect. The deluded mind clings to objects, and therefore has a location. The true mind contains no thing and is everywhere; therefore, it has no location.

Question 93: Does wisdom unfold all at once or gradually? What is differentiated wisdom? How does realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature relate to the

unfolding of great wisdom?

Answer: Minor awakenings are countless; great awakenings number eighteen or nineteen. Awakening proceeds from the small to the great and finally becomes thorough. Yet there is no fixed pattern, nor must it always proceed gradually. Differentiated wisdom is contrasted with fundamental wisdom; it is wisdom in its functioning. After attaining fundamental wisdom, one puts it to work in liberating sentient beings, wears away one's own habitual tendencies, and develops spiritual powers. Teaching different methods according to sentient beings' different capacities is the wondrous wisdom that liberates them.

Question 94: After realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature, do the seeds stored in the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) stir more intensely?

Answer: The stirring of seeds occurs throughout the process of cultivation. Once awakening is thorough, they no longer stir. That is why I tell you not to be content with a small attainment. Gradually clear away habitual tendencies in your encounters with circumstances, eliminating these defiled seeds completely and thereby reaching thorough awakening.

Question 95: What should one do when the mind, having died, comes alive again?

Answer: It is unavoidable. The patriarchal master says in the Song of Liberation: "How many times it lives, how many times it dies—throughout past and present, it has only been thus." If it has not died through and through once, there must be a great death; otherwise, the mind will stir again. When we practice the Dharma, we pass through the course of "seventeen or eighteen great awakenings and countless minor awakenings."

Question 96: Once a person initially sees their true nature, have their heels touched the ground? If one continues along this path, must there later be a great turning around? Is that correct?

Answer: Initial awakening concerns only the outskirts of the dharmakāya (Dharma body); the road to realizing the Way is still long, and one must proceed diligently. Beyond this are the proper position of the dharmakāya (Dharma body) and going beyond the dharmakāya (Dharma body). What is the proper position of the dharmakāya (Dharma body)? It is when, after being tempered to a certain degree, one's habitual defilements have dissolved, one can liberate others freely, and spiritual powers manifest. So long as defilements in the mind have not been eliminated, spiritual powers cannot manifest. It is not enough for the mind not to move merely because one forcibly suppresses it; it must naturally remain unmoving, without the slightest attachment to appearances or pursuit of anything.

Question 97: When a thought arises and one does not follow it, has one reached the proper position of the dharmakāya (Dharma body)?

Answer: When thoughts arise and one does not follow them, one has achieved a small measure of success and can attain mastery over taking rebirth. But this does not count as the proper position of the dharmakāya (Dharma body). One must certainly cut off delusions of thought in order to reach that position. Even after reaching the proper position of the dharmakāya (Dharma body), one must go further and leave that position behind; attachment to that position will not do. Chan practitioners say, “When the bright moon is directly overhead, one is still a man beneath the steps.” One must meet when the moon has set; only then is the whole being completely bright.

Question 98: Why continue sitting in meditation after seeing one’s true nature?

Answer: There is no fixed rule. If habitual tendencies of attachment still remain and one’s strength of samādhi is insufficient, so that one cannot preserve realization, then one must sit in meditation to increase the power of samādhi and pass through the second barrier. (Some say, “When I sit in meditation, I feel that I have more deluded thoughts than usual.” It is not that sitting in meditation has increased your deluded thoughts; rather, once you sit, you can see them. When you do not sit, it is like a basin of muddy water: the silt cannot be seen. After you sit and the water becomes still, you can see the silt.)

Question 99: Chan Master Shenhui said that the single word “knowing” is the gateway to all wonders. Yet other patriarchal masters said it is the gateway to all calamities. How should this be understood?

Answer: Quite so. Who is it that is able to know? Once you know your intrinsic nature, is this not the gateway to all wonders? When the great golden-winged garuḍa flies ten thousand miles, it relies entirely on the small force of pushing off from the ground beneath its feet. Our cultivation relies entirely on this “knowing.” But later people become attached to this “knowing,” and it becomes a fixed rut; that too is wrong. Therefore, the patriarchal masters say that it is the gateway to all calamities. What one says depends on the time; no Dharma is fixed Dharma.

Question 100: After realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature, may one practice Tögal ("direct crossing" or "leap-over") within Dzogchen (Great Perfection)?

Answer: Dzogchen (Great Perfection) has two stages: (1) Trekchö (cutting through), which means ‘cutting through at once’; and (2) Tögal ("direct crossing" or "leap-over"), sudden transcendence, in which the body transforms into a rainbow body. This requires living in the mountains and practicing in retreat. You young people

often aspire to what lies beyond your present capacity. After seeing your true nature, can you go further and continue practicing diligently and arduously?

Question 101: Intrinsic nature is unborn and undying; it is an unmoving essence. How should this be understood?

Answer: It neither comes nor goes, and so it is called an unmoving essence. It has no birth and death, no location, yet it can manifest according to conditions. If a certain person can be liberated only through the manifestation of a male body, then a male body is manifested to liberate that person; if another can be liberated through a female body, then a female body is manifested to liberate that person. It transforms and manifests according to conditions. Once one has truly realized the Way, one can even enter the womb of a cow or a mare, yet intrinsic nature undergoes no change.

Question 102: After a period of reflection, this disciple has gained a deeper understanding of realizing one's true nature. Formerly, I thought that once awakening occurred, the great matter was finished, and that removing habitual tendencies was merely a secondary process. Now I truly understand that seeing one's true nature only just cuts off delusions of views; at most, it achieves understanding at the level of principle.

Habitual tendencies still remain. When circumstances arise, the mind will still be stirred as before, and one cannot get through them. To truly transcend birth and death, one must continue striving and must never relax in the slightest. Only after the delusions of thought, dust-like delusions, and delusions of ignorance have all been shattered is the great matter complete. If one thinks that one has already transcended birth and death, one is deceiving oneself; one cannot deceive King Yama.

Answer: What you say in your letter is quite correct. Seeing one's true nature involves a distinction between awakening and realization. Those who have genuinely opened up and directly seen their intrinsic nature have only cut off delusions of views, not delusions of thought; therefore, birth and death have not yet been transcended. After awakening, one must continue to apply oneself, cutting off all delusions of thought in order to be liberated from segmented birth and death. One must further advance ever higher, shattering dust-like delusions and delusions of ignorance, before one is liberated from transformational birth and death. It is not the case that a single awakening can transcend birth and death. People nowadays are often impatient and restless. They think that opening a little conceptual understanding is seeing one's true nature, and they no longer apply themselves to practice. This is utterly absurd!

Question 103: How should "the end is equal to the beginning" be understood?

Answer: It means that after finally realizing the Way, one is the same as before one first studied Buddhism. At the beginning of Buddhist practice, one undergoes rebirth in the six realms; in the end, one also undergoes rebirth in the six realms. But one is not drawn along by karmic obstacles; it is brought about by great vows. One liberates sentient beings in the six realms without attachment to circumstances. It appears the same outwardly, but its substance is different.

When one first studies Buddhism, one suffers in the six realms. Later, one recognizes that these states are illusory; once one no longer clings to appearances, one no longer suffers. Not being bound by any feeling is the proper experience called samādhi. In fact, there is originally no birth and death; coming and going are all illusory appearances. Moreover, the Way seen at the time of first arousing the resolve and the fruition realized at the end are completely identical. Therefore, the Avataṃsaka Sūtra says, "When one first arouses the resolve, one immediately accomplishes perfect awakening." This shows how important fundamental wisdom at the initial seeing of the Way is for final accomplishment.

Question 104: In this latter Dharma age, heart esotericism has reappeared like the red sun high in the sky, supremely excellent beyond compare.

Answer: The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is the essential core of Esoteric Buddhism. Only people of great capacity can practice it.

Question 105: Since respectfully reading your writings, I have gained a correct understanding of the Dharma taught by the Buddha. Buddhadharma does not rely on understanding alone; one must also practice personally, with one's feet firmly on the ground.

Answer: Very good. Having gained right understanding, you should practice tirelessly, seeking direct realization of the Original Face. Understanding without proper cultivation is like talking about food: it does not satisfy hunger.

Question 106: Our Heart-of-Heart Dharma relies on the blessings of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Does this not mean that there is a Buddha outside the mind?

Answer: Buddhas do exist. Śākyamuni Buddha, Amitābha Buddha, Maitreya Buddha, Dīpaṃkara Buddha, and so on all exist. Yet the thousand Buddhas and ten thousand Buddhas share one body; there is one dharmakāya (Dharma body). Those who study Buddhism must attain the nonduality of principle and phenomena, and of self and others.

Question 107: Some say that beginning with the sixth consciousness makes practice and attainment easier, whereas beginning with the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) leads to attainment only for those of superior capacity. Is this correct?

Answer: This is completely wrong! Beginning with the sixth consciousness makes it difficult to overturn the stronghold of deluded consciousness, and success is hard to achieve. Beginning with the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) makes it easier to overturn that stronghold, producing twice the result with half the effort. Some in the Pure Land school fail to recognize the strengths of other schools. They even tell people that distracted Buddha-recitation can bring rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Who knows how many people they have harmed?

In practicing the Dharma, we do not necessarily have to practice several methods. According to one's preference, one should choose a method suited to oneself and practice it with single-minded dedication. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is a great Dharma that integrates Chan, Pure Land, and Esoteric Buddhism. The scriptures say that by practicing the fourth mudrā, one may attain rebirth in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss at the time of death, or may be reborn according to conditions in any of the Pure Lands in the ten directions. From this it can be seen that practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is itself practicing Pure Land, and one may attain rebirth in the highest of the highest grades.

Question 108: At what stage may one establish a heart-esotericism practice center and propagate the Dharma?

Answer: Practice diligently. When you can move freely in all directions, remain undeluded when encountering circumstances, and be unbound by favorable or adverse conditions, you will naturally open a practice center for heart esotericism and be able to spread the sacred teachings widely.

Question 109: Must we beginners first dissolve body and mind into emptiness, first dismantling "being" and then dismantling "emptiness"?

Answer: In practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, simply practice. When the time comes, it will suddenly burst open: body, mind, and world will all dissolve into emptiness, and even emptiness cannot be grasped. But you must not seek such a bursting open. That deluded thought itself obscures it.

Question 110: Please explain the meaning of "All appearances are illusory."

Answer: "All appearances are illusory" means that shadows are all unreal. Our Buddha-nature does not even have a shadow; it is without appearances. Instead, turn back and recognize that the shadows are the wondrous functioning arising from one's own Buddha-nature. If you cannot turn back in this way and instead take the shadows as real, you will be in trouble.

For example, this house, chairs, tables, and other things are all our shadows. Clinging to them brings trouble. Yet even shadows have wondrous functioning: a

house shelters us from wind and cold; clothing covers and warms us; a table serves for work and meals. Is this not wondrous functioning? Do not cling to these things; chasing shadows leads us astray.

Shadows are the wondrous functioning arising within the mind; they are all manifestations and transformations within our minds. This does not mean that there are no shadows. The mind is alive, not dead, and it can give rise to wondrous functioning.

We possess in full the dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya; it is not that there is only the dharmakāya. The dharmakāya is the essence, and it must give rise to all phenomena and all wondrous functioning. If it could not give rise to phenomena or function, it would be worthless. Meditation is not sitting there motionless like a corpse. What use would that be? Therefore, one must give rise to all wondrous functioning.

But one must recognize the essence. If you do not recognize what the essence is, how can you give rise to function? Clinging to appearances is no small matter: it creates karma and birth and death. Once you understand the fundamental essence capable of giving rise to every kind of wondrous functioning, you no longer cling to appearances, and it no longer creates karma of birth and death. Deluded about the essence and clinging to appearances, one creates karma of birth and death. This is an incontrovertible principle. Moreover, appearances are produced by nature. Appearances are illusory, yet they do not depart from one's intrinsic nature. Thus, seeing appearances is seeing nature; nature and appearances are nondual; the wholly deluded is itself true. The crucial point is not to adhere to circumstances or cling to appearances. If one can think without abiding, and function without attachment, this is the dharma gate of liberation.

Question 111: Why is it said that "the physical eye cannot see the Way"? And why is it also said that "the physical eye can see the Way"?

Answer: When we first see the Way, the physical eye cannot see the Way, because the dharmakāya (Dharma body) is without appearances. How could the physical eye see the Way? It is the dharma eye of the mind-ground: one uses the eye of no eye, the eye of wisdom, to realize it. Conversely, that the physical eye can see the Way means seeing appearances: all appearances are manifestations and transformations within our minds.

When the physical eye sees the Way, it is complete, and one can give rise to function from the essence. Essence, appearance, and function—the dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya—are all present. It is not merely the dharmakāya, without the sambhogakāya and nirmāṇakāya. At the beginning, one cannot say that the physical eye sees the Way; one can only say that the dharma eye of the mind-

ground sees the Way, while the physical eye cannot. Conversely, when the physical eye sees the Way, it is complete: essence, appearance, and function are all present.

There is nothing to grasp and nothing to reject. There is nothing to grasp, for all are shadows and cannot be obtained. There is nothing to reject, for all are transformations within one's own mind and cannot be cast off. This is the perfection taught in Buddhism. At first, one can only explain it this way: the essence of the dharmakāya (Dharma body) is without appearances, and to see any appearance is incorrect. Conversely, one must manifest all kinds of appearances and give rise to all kinds of wondrous functioning.

Question 112: The Diamond Sūtra says, "No appearance of person, no appearance of self." Who speaks, and who hears?

Answer: It means only that there are no appearances; it does not mean that there is no speaking or no hearing. If everything were absent, one would fall into annihilationist emptiness. The ever-abiding true mind is without appearances, like empty space. Because space is empty, it can contain all things. The dharmakāya (Dharma body) is like empty space, but one must not abide in the appearance of emptiness; once one abides there, one has a point of attachment. It is the same in teaching the Dharma: once there is knowledge, views, and discrimination, there is a point of attachment. Thus, in the end, "no speaking and no hearing" is used to dismantle attachment to words, returning to formless, flexible, wondrous functioning.

Question 113: Master Hanshan said, "Birth and death, day and night; water flows and flowers fall. Today I finally believe that the nostrils point downward." Please explain.

Answer: It means that today one has understood one's fundamental task. Formerly, one was deluded by dreamlike and illusory matters such as birth and death, day and night, water flowing, and flowers falling. Today, how fortunate one is to have directly realized the Original Face: without expending the slightest effort, it is simply the natural scenery before one. The fundamental task is originally just so, without the slightest strangeness or marvel. There is no need to exert oneself in searching or seeking. Therefore, one need only let everything go. The more forcefully one strives, the further one is from it; the more relaxed, the better.

Question 114: Hold firmly to a single huatou (critical phrase), investigating it morning and evening. Keep your feet firmly on the ground and make every step sound, until the iron tree blooms and beans burst from cold ashes. Only then will you believe that extraordinary things occur within the Chan school. Even so, one needs versatile methods to establish the realm beyond all boundaries, and the discerning eye of a true master. What are these versatile methods?

Answer: First, thoroughly understand both the Chan school and the teachings. Second, know the essential subtleties of the methods and traditions established by the various schools. Third, know the capacities of those who come from different places to seek instruction. Fourth, teach each person, as appropriate, a huatou (critical phrase) suited to their investigation.

Question 115: If one does not follow the thread of the words, is that not answering beside the point?

Answer: The pivotal responses of the Chan school must chiefly avoid attachment. They are like a gourd floating on water: press it and it turns. This is called a "turning phrase"; it is not answering beside the point.

Not following the thread of the words means answering the question directly while not clinging to appearances. For example, if someone asks, "How many stories does the pagoda at Jinshan Monastery in your Zhenjiang have?" (Someone answers, "Seven stories," but the teacher does not approve.) You must answer apart from the pagoda while still addressing the question. How should you answer? You may make a circle sign and ask in return, "How many stories does this have?" When your practice has reached maturity, you will answer naturally.

Question 116: You once wrote an article entitled Key Questions Concerning Rebirth in the Western Pure Land. An article in Guangdong Buddhism expressed a different view. Please tell us your opinion.

Answer: I have already read that article. Its meaning is: "The standards you propose are so high that they frighten people away from practicing in the Pure Land school. Are you not harming others?" In fact, I have not denied rebirth while carrying karma. Many people misunderstand this, thinking that rebirth in the Western Pure Land is possible without diligent practice, merely by drifting along carelessly.

Can one really get there that way? Master Lianchi said, "Many recite the Buddha's name, but few are reborn in the West," because their Buddha-recitation lacks earnestness. My article does not deny rebirth while carrying karma; rather, it urges everyone to practice diligently and attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction. The Amitābha Sūtra says, "If, for one day, two days, or even seven days, one attains one-pointedness of mind without distraction, one may then be reborn in that land."

I have seen many people who lack practice. At the time of death, they cannot bring up the Buddha's name and fall into a coma. Others say, "I am in such pain that I am dying—how can I recite the Buddha's name?!" How, then, can they be reborn while carrying karma? Therefore, one must see the central point: one must make one's practice continuous and undivided.

One-pointedness of mind without distraction is not difficult. One need only continuously and seamlessly recite “Amitābha Buddha” inwardly at all times. When encountering the finest circumstances, do not become joyful; when encountering the worst and most afflictive circumstances, do not become troubled. Continue to recite the Buddha’s name with one-pointedness, and let the mind remain unmoved.

This requirement is not high. Rebirth while carrying karma is correct. To put it more strongly, even an equal enlightenment bodhisattva still has karma. This is because an equal enlightenment bodhisattva still has one portion of ignorance concerning the arising characteristic. Ignorance is the cause of creating karma; it is only when there is ignorance that karma is created. Master Ouyi also said that one must have “faith, vows, and practice.” This means that one must work on genuine faith and earnest vows.

With “faith and vows” alone but without “practice,” one cannot attain accomplishment. It is like a tripod with three legs: none can be lacking. “Practice” encompasses faith and vows. “Not practicing” means empty faith and empty vows, not genuine faith and earnest vows. Without doing the work of practice, how can one be reborn while carrying karma? That is what truly harms people. Once one’s view is correct, the stage one reaches in practice determines differences in the grades of rebirth. This is naturally vastly different from those who do not undertake the practice of one-pointedness.

Question 117: Please discuss the relationship between mind and circumstances. What are internal and external circumstances?

Answer: Circumstances are the illusory realm produced by our thoughts. When a thought arises, a shadow arises. Mind is circumstances, and circumstances are mind. Without mind, one sees without seeing and hears without hearing; then there are no circumstances. If one can indeed dissolve both mind and circumstances completely, that is good. “Mind and circumstances suddenly dissolve” means that mind and circumstances both vanish at once.

During meditation, the one who recites and that which is recited both fall away, and neither mind nor circumstances remain. Internal circumstances are our body-mind world and thoughts; external circumstances are mountains, rivers, earth, and land. Only then does one understand form and emptiness, and realize that these are manifestations of our own intrinsic nature. This is what learning Buddhism means.

Question 118: At times I naturally let go into emptiness, without thoughts, and my mind is very clear. At times I can also naturally let go into emptiness while walking, but in a moment it is gone and is not stable.

Answer: Naturally letting go into emptiness is very good. If nothing is present, let it be so. Let non-abiding occur naturally; otherwise, you fall into lifeless samādhi.

Question 119: After entering samādhi, is it impossible to awaken again?

Answer: No. At present, you cannot yet remain unable to awaken, because your samādhi will not last long. To remain in samādhi for a long time, one must pass through cessation of feeling and perception several times; this cannot be accomplished all at once. At the beginning, even cessation of feeling and perception does not last very long—at most one or two days.

Gradually, it can be extended—to a week, ten or more days, half a month, or a month. After that, one may suddenly remain in samādhi for a long time, but not for many years all at once; that is impossible. Some people greatly admire those who can remain in samādhi for years, hundreds of years, or even thousands of years. But one should know that cessation of feeling and perception is not good; it is dead samādhi.

This is called dead water that harbors no dragons: it gives rise to no wondrous functioning and is useless. Great samādhi is alive and dynamic; amid circumstances, it can function greatly without clinging to them. Non-abiding alone is great samādhi; it alone is true samādhi. One must remain in samādhi at every moment. Great samādhi has neither entry nor exit. Any entering or emerging from samādhi is not true samādhi. There is a Chan koan about a woman who entered samādhi before Śākyamuni Buddha.

Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva came and, seeing her, said, “Oh dear, this woman is behaving improperly. How can she enter samādhi before the Buddha?” He wanted to draw her out of samādhi. He snapped his fingers at her, but she did not emerge from samādhi. He then raised her to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, but she did not emerge from samādhi. He then sent her down to the eighteenth level of hell, but still she did not emerge from samādhi. Śākyamuni Buddha said, “Below, there is a Bodhisattva Wangming who can bring her out of samādhi.”

Just as he spoke, Bodhisattva Wangming arrived from below. This bodhisattva also snapped his fingers before the woman, and she immediately emerged from samādhi. Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva is the teacher of the seven Buddhas, so why could he not bring her out of samādhi, whereas Bodhisattva Wangming could? Some say it was a matter of affinity. That is irrelevant. The point is that one must not give rise to views.

Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva gave rise to a clinging view: “How can this woman enter samādhi before the Buddha?” This clinging view must not arise. Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva represents great wisdom, and great wisdom cannot give rise to clinging

views. This is what the story illustrates. What does Wangming mean? Wang means that nothing can be obtained. That is, all cleverness and wisdom are unobtainable. Therefore, without these clinging views, a single snap of the fingers brings her out of samādhi. Thus, you must get rid of your cleverness. Laozi said, “Smash your intellect.” This means emptying out your worldly knowledge and clever eloquence. When the mind is utterly empty, one can realize the great Way.

Cultivation Practice

(I) Practice on the Meditation Cushion

Question 1: When practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, may an additional session be shorter than two hours?

Answer: Additional sessions are very necessary, but they must not be shorter than two hours.

Question 2: When meditating in cold weather, should one cover one’s head? May one keep one’s eyes open?

Answer: Do not cover the head. When it is cold, you may cover up to the back of the head, and the whole body should be covered. The eyes may be slightly open and cast downward; if you cannot keep them open, then close them.

Question 3: Can one sit in meditation when in a bad mood?

Answer: Do not sit when you are in a bad mood; suppressing it may cause liver illness. First go for a walk to dispel the unpleasant mood. Once you are calm and composed, sit down to meditate.

Question 4: During a two-hour meditation session, may one change the position of one’s legs?

Answer: It is best not to change your legs. Moving about will affect entry into samādhi: just when you are about to enter samādhi, changing your legs will bring you out of it. But if the pain is severe and prevents you from entering samādhi, so that the mind cannot settle, then you may change your legs. Whether you use a half-lotus, full-lotus, or comfortable cross-legged position, do what is comfortable. Leg pain is a hurdle; once you pass it, things will improve. Some people press their legs with stones—they have all endured hardship. Once the pain has been endured, it will pass.

Question 5: When first practicing this Dharma, may one sit two sessions a day?

Answer: It is better to sit one session. Often, if two sessions feel too painful, one may become afraid to practice or stop practicing altogether. Practice requires long-term resolve and diligent effort.

Question 6: May one meditate at midnight?

Answer: As long as you have slept well and have sufficient energy, you may meditate. If your energy is insufficient, wait until you have slept well before meditating. Midnight is a good time; it is precisely when mind and spirit commune, and meditation is also a communion of mind and spirit. During our seven-day retreats, we begin sitting at midnight.

Question 7: After practicing, I feel tightness in my chest. How can I avoid this?

Answer: Pay attention to three points:

(1) Raise the mudrā close to the chest, but do not let the arms rest against the chest.

(2) If you need to belch, let yourself belch; if you need to pass gas, let yourself do so; if you need to yawn, let yourself yawn. Do not hold it in. Let the breath be natural.

(3) Bending the body forward will cause great fatigue. Sleep well before meditating.

Question 8: To practice this Dharma until thorough awakening, is the figure of one thousand sessions merely a provisional way of speaking?

Answer: Some people attain thorough awakening after one thousand sessions. But others sit in meditation, reciting the mantra with their mouths while not reciting it with their minds; this is not in accordance with the Dharma, so what use is it? I have repeatedly told everyone: mentally recite and listen with your ears. After leaving the cushion, maintain contemplation and watch where thoughts arise. Practice depends on oneself: “The master leads one to the gate; cultivation depends on the individual.”

Question 9: Which direction should one face when meditating?

Answer: Any direction is fine. Do not become attached to appearances.

Question 10: Sometimes when traveling on business, I cannot light incense, do not have a yellow cloth, and cannot practice. What should I do?

Answer: It does not matter if you do not light incense, but you must form the mudrā. If you have no yellow cloth, a clean handkerchief or towel will also do. Practice must not be interrupted; only then can the work continue without a break.

Question 11: When I previously practiced one hundred sessions, my mind seemed rather scattered and my practice was not in accordance with the Dharma. Should I

begin again from the start now?

Answer: No. As long as you now practice in accordance with the Dharma, that is enough. You must mentally recite and listen with your ears. When deluded thoughts arise, neither grasp nor reject them; do not attend to them.

Question 12: When meditating in hot weather, is it all right not to cover the legs?

Answer: No. The knee joints must not be exposed to drafts; if wind enters them, it may cause arthritis.

Question 13: May one meditate in an air-conditioned room?

Answer: When the weather is hot, it is fine to meditate in an air-conditioned room. But do not set the temperature too low, and do not let the air conditioner blow directly on the body. In summer, early morning is the best time for meditation.

Question 14: When I meditate at home, I cannot continue after three hours, but at a monastery I can sit longer. Why is this?

Answer: You should sit precisely in places where you cannot sit for long; you need to train yourself. Being unable to continue sitting means that the mind has stirred. Do not crave quiet places. Train yourself to be able to sit anywhere; there is no difference between places.

Question 15: We are very busy with work and cannot possibly practice eight hours a day. What should we do?

Answer: Ensure that you practice two hours every day. When you have free time, such as on Saturdays and Sundays, you may practice eight hours in a day.

Question 16: When sitting, should one use the half-lotus or full-lotus position?

Answer: Either is fine. A comfortable cross-legged position is also acceptable. In that position, raise the buttocks slightly with a cushion to prevent the body from leaning backward. For women, the half-lotus is preferable. Do not sit on a chair; sitting with the feet dangling is not good.

Question 17: After receiving empowerment, must we persist in practicing every day?

Answer: Yes. This empowerment is not merely an empowerment for making a connection; it is an empowerment that transmits the Dharma. Therefore, assess yourself: if you have no time to practice, then do not receive the empowerment.

Question 18: Must those who practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma also perform full prostrations and recite the Vajrasattva Heart Mantra and the Hundred-Syllable

Mantra to repent of and eliminate karmic obstacles? Must they also seek instruction in Dzogchen (Great Perfection)?

Answer: Those who practice heart esotericism need not perform full prostrations or recite the Hundred-Syllable Mantra, because the second mudrā can already eliminate all karmic obstacles. Heart esotericism is Dzogchen (Great Perfection).

Question 19: May I soon attain accomplishment and be able to share a little of the master's responsibility for benefiting sentient beings!

Answer: With such an aspiration, Dharma-protecting bodhisattvas will naturally protect you at all times.

Question 20: In the heat of summer, some fellow practitioners meditate in the Buddha hall bare-chested, wearing only underwear. Is this in accordance with the Dharma? Is it acceptable to wear an undershirt?

Answer: This is not in accordance with the Dharma. One should wear a short-sleeved undershirt and completely cover the knees.

Question 21: In the half-lotus position, which leg is better placed on top?

Answer: Either is the same. Generally speaking, with the right leg on top it is called the demon-subduing seat; with the left leg on top, it is called the auspicious seat.

Question 22: Why is it best not to drink water before meditating?

Answer: Because you may need to urinate before completing two hours of sitting.

Question 23: After meditating for nearly two hours and reciting the mantra one thousand times, if I wish to continue sitting, may I stop reciting the mantra?

Answer: If you continue sitting, you must continue reciting the mantra. Mantra recitation is a precious means for eliminating deluded thoughts. Only when your deluded thoughts no longer move and the deluded mind no longer functions can recitation naturally cease.

Question 24: Is there any difference between practicing in the morning and practicing at night?

Answer: There is no difference. However, when practicing at night, one is easily drowsy because of fatigue from the day's work. When sitting in the morning, after a night's rest, one is full of energy, is not drowsy, and can more easily enter samādhi.

Question 25: The most important thing in practice is not to interrupt it. If special circumstances require one to stop for a day or two, will this have a serious effect?

Answer: It is best not to interrupt it. Practice is like rowing upstream: if you do not advance, you fall back. Thus, stopping for one day may mean losing the progress of three days.

Question 26: When practicing the sixth mudrā, my hands sometimes involuntarily come together. What is the cause?

Answer: First, the wrists may not be held firmly together, causing the upper fingers to close. Second, you may not be sufficiently alert and may be becoming somewhat drowsy.

Question 27: This winter, I have decided to undertake four seven-day retreats. Please give instructions on the specific schedule for a seven-day retreat.

Answer: For the first two sessions, practice the fourth mudrā; for the final session, practice the second mudrā. Each session lasts four hours, with three sessions a day, for a total of twelve hours. On the seventh day, practice only the fourth mudrā. Each session lasts six hours, for a total of eighteen hours.

The schedule is as follows:

First six days: 12 hours, 24:00–4:00

6:00–10:00

12:00–16:00

Seventh day: 18 hours, 24:00–6:00

8:00–14:00

16:00–22:00

Question 28: Generally, one sits an hour after eating. If one intentionally eats less, may one sit sooner?

Answer: One hour is not a long time to wait; otherwise, stomach illness may easily arise.

Question 29: My lower back feels sore and distended, repeatedly affecting my meditation. What should I do?

Answer: Be patient, and sit until the qi channels become unobstructed.

Question 30: Meditation has gradually become calmer and more even, and my contemplation has become more continuous and seamless. Yet my habitual

tendencies are still strong, and I still sometimes lose awareness. Should I intensify my meditation practice?

Answer: Increasing meditation strengthens samādhi; it is indeed an essential means of not being moved by circumstances.

Question 31: I have recently been sleeping better, so my husband and I have been sitting two sessions a day for almost ten days. I feel very tired. May I continue with an additional session each day?

Answer: If the body is not tired, you may sit two sessions. Sit with stability; it can only be beneficial and will not cause insomnia. Moreover, being able to enter samādhi for one hour is equivalent to seven hours of sleep, leaving one exceptionally refreshed.

Question 32: About forty minutes after beginning practice, I feel pain in my right back and continuously belch, which affects my mantra recitation.

Answer: Pain in the right back indicates that the qi channels are obstructed; it will heal once this passes. Belching expels stale air and purifies the inside of the body. This is a good thing and requires no medical treatment.

Question 33: After practicing the second mudrā, I had diarrhea more than ten times over five days. Is this normal?

Answer: It is normal; it is the expulsion of all impurities.

Question 34: Since studying Buddhism, I have always enjoyed reading sūtras and Buddhist books. If I do not read them, I feel at a loss. How should I remedy this, Master?

Answer: You may recite mantras or the Buddha's name; these can nourish and calm the mind. Having nothing to do is precisely the manifestation of the true mind; the moment a feeling of barren quiescence arises, it is deluded emotion. Reciting mantras and the Buddha's name are both ways of roaming in the Tathāgata's ocean of quiescent extinction. Though you recite mantras and the Buddha's name, do not entertain the thought that you are reciting mantras or the Buddha's name. Whatever mantra you recite and whichever Buddha you invoke, there is nothing wrong with it.

Question 35: What is a good place for practice?

Answer: People all like to run about—running here and there. If this place is no good, they go there; if that place is no good, they come here. It is all a mess. In fact, every place is good; it is only your mind that is not good. Once your mind is truly pure, every place is good.

Question 36: A fellow practitioner learned that I was adding an additional session and came to advise me not to become attached to dharmas. He criticized me for thinking that there is a dharma to practice and a Way to realize.

Answer: This is all nonsense. Tell them to search their own hearts and ask whether they have already reached the point of no practice and no realization. If they are still stirred by circumstances, what are they talking about when they speak of attachment to dharmas? Before the boat has reached the other shore, to leave the boat is to drown! Such people are muddleheaded and talk nonsense. Without attainment, they claim attainment; without realization, they claim realization. They boast and exaggerate, mislead others, and harm their wisdom-life. It would be strange indeed if they did not fall into hell! In truth, cultivating the Way is a great undertaking that extends over a long time. How can one practice only a few sessions and then stop practicing?

Question 37: Mahāyāna Buddhism teaches seeking above and liberating below, universally saving sentient beings. Yet I now feel increasingly indifferent, and that resolve seems ever less urgent.

Answer: Without Great Vows, how can one accomplish great things? Your resolve is not earnest, so you lack vigor in practice. You should quickly correct this!

Question 38: When adverse conditions arise, should one avoid them or try facing them?

Answer: To avoid them is not the mark of a capable practitioner; one should deal with them according to one's strength. My former teacher, Mr. Xianglu, said: "If you wish to cultivate the supreme vehicle, the dusts and toils of the world are your provisions; when enemies all arrive together, they adorn this place of practice."

Question 39: In his songs, the venerable Milarepa repeatedly emphasized renunciation and meditative contemplation in the mountains. Is this what modern young people, though they study Buddhism, have continually lacked, so that their practice always has the air of scratching an itch through a boot or skimming the surface like a dragonfly?

Answer: Modern people's minds are mostly restless and impetuous. They truly should meditate more and strengthen their meditative stability. Only when they remain unmoved amid every circumstance will there be even a small measure of correspondence. They must never talk boastfully, speaking of what they cannot do, thereby misleading both others and themselves.

Question 40: I have practiced this Dharma for more than a year. Although I have gained some understanding in principle, I have not yet had direct realization of the

state in which body and mind fall away. Master, without direct realization, is one's ability to remain unmoved by circumstances very weak? Is direct realization difficult? Does it depend mainly on seated meditation and Dharma practice?

Answer: Practice involves more than seated meditation. You must also train amid actual circumstances without being swayed by them; only then does practice become effective. If your meditative stability is insufficient for this training, you must sit more to strengthen it. This method facilitates direct realization of original nature.

Question 41: When disputes over right and wrong arise, should one explain oneself or simply ignore them?

Answer: Those who truly apply themselves do not engage in disputes over right and wrong.

Question 42: Sometimes, as I sit there, things that do not move seem to be moving. What is happening?

Answer: It is your mind that is moving.

Question 43: May one recite mantras in daily life?

Answer: Yes. You may recite while walking, and also while lying down to sleep. Recite until you fall asleep. Once the recitation becomes familiar, you will be reciting mantras even in your dreams. You may even recite while relieving yourself, but do not do so aloud.

Question 44: Why must one meditate in order to realize samādhi?

Answer: Because even when someone tells you or points it out to you, you do not believe or understand. Even if you understand the principle, your meditative stability is insufficient; when circumstances arise, you still follow after them. Therefore, you must meditate in order to realize samādhi. After Chan Master Yuexia awakened through Chan inquiry, he felt that his mind was still stirring. His teacher, Elder Monk Yekai, had him enter retreat for three years. Only after emerging from retreat three years later was he truly ready.

Master Yinguang also entered retreat several times. After Chan Master Xuyun awakened through meditation at Gaomin Monastery, he too entered retreat in the Zhongnan Mountains. After Elder Monk Laiguo awakened through meditation at Jinshan Monastery, he likewise went into retreat in the Zhongnan Mountains. Several modern masters applied themselves in this way.

Question 45: When I meditate, there are no thoughts. Does this mean that I lack wisdom?

Answer: Being able to know that you have no thoughts is itself wisdom. Having no thoughts is very good; this is meditative stability. But if, when there are no thoughts, you do not know it and are merely muddled, then there is no wisdom. Within samādhi, one must be clearly aware.

Question 46: What is the difference between the Heart-of-Heart Dharma and the Lotus Mudrā?

Answer: Single-minded practice of the Lotus Mudrā can also lead to realization of the Way. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is somewhat faster than the Lotus Mudrā because its meditation sessions are longer and it has six mudrās. Our internal organs are closely related to the hands. Once the mudrās are formed, the five viscera and six entrails are properly settled; when the mantra wheel is blown, the channels and vital energies are more readily opened. Once the channels and vital energies are opened, it is easier to transform body and mind into emptiness and see one's true nature.

Question 47: I am now practicing the Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra every day. I respectfully beg the compassionate instruction of the guru.

Answer: Devoted practice of the Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra is very good. So long as you can let go of everything, commit yourself wholeheartedly, and penetrate deeply into one gate, you can attain accomplishment through any dharma gate. Otherwise, if your calculating mind does not die, or if you practice one method today and another tomorrow, then even by the time Maitreya Buddha descends into the world, there will still be no day of success.

Question 48: While practicing the Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra, may I recite Maitreya Bodhisattva's mantra?

Answer: Yes. You may also recite the Extended Rebirth Mantra.

Question 49: Is it good to recite the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī at the time of death?

Answer: The Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī has few characters and is convenient to recite. One may go to whichever Pure Land one wishes to be reborn in.

Question 50: I formerly recited the Extended Rebirth Mantra. May I now change to reciting Maitreya Bodhisattva's mantra?

Answer: Yes. Those who vow to follow Maitreya Buddha when he descends at the three assemblies beneath the Dragon Flower Tree in order to liberate sentient beings may recite Maitreya Bodhisattva's mantra. Each follows their own vows; there is no compulsion whatsoever.

Question 51: Every day I persist in performing the morning and evening services and reciting the Buddha's name. In my daily activities—walking, standing, sitting, and lying down—I train myself to bring up the Buddha's name diligently, silently reciting it whenever I remember.

Answer: This method of Buddha-recitation is very good. Deluded thoughts can indeed be eliminated for a time. So long as you continue struggling with them without interruption, they will gradually decrease from many to few, and then suddenly cease. You will become continuous and undivided with Amitābha Buddha.

Question 52: I have always practiced Buddha-recitation by upholding the name. Although I have now received the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, I am still unwilling to abandon the Buddha-recitation dharma gate. If, in addition to Buddha-recitation, I add one daily session of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma as an auxiliary practice, would that become a mixed practice?

Answer: Those who single-mindedly practice the Pure Land dharma gate need not practice the teachings of other schools. But in addition to Buddha-recitation, it is best to recite the Extended Rebirth Mantra.

Question 53: When reciting the Buddha's name, deluded thoughts still outnumber my recitation of the name. Thus I know that even honest Buddha-recitation is not easy.

Answer: Take note: when thoughts arise, do not fear them and do not suppress them. Simply ignore them and bring up the Buddha-recitation; the deluded thoughts will naturally dissolve away.

Question 54: What is the difference between the Extended Rebirth Mantra and the Rebirth Mantra?

Answer: Both mantras may be recited. Regarding the Extended Rebirth Mantra, see the twelfth section, "Direct Guidance on Buddha-Recitation in the Samādhi of the Precious King," in the eighth essential of The Ten Essentials of the Pure Land. It is explained very clearly there.

Question 55: Those who practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma can help treat their friends' illnesses, but I have not yet begun this practice. My friend is undergoing surgery in the hospital. How should I help him?

Answer: You may recite the Medicine Buddha's heart mantra to bless him. This mantra appears in the Medicine Buddha Sūtra. It would be even better for your friend to recite it himself and pray for the blessings of the Medicine Buddha.

Question 56: Mantras are the mind-Dharma of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Sincere recitation is most important, while pronunciation is secondary. I have become accustomed to reciting a certain mantra, but my pronunciation is inaccurate. Should I change it?

Answer: Do not change it. It is fine once you have become accustomed to reciting it.

Question 57: After completing one session, if I still have time but less than two hours, is there a convenient practice I can do?

Answer: You may practice the expedient samādhi mudrā. Place your right hand over your left hand, with the thumb touching the middle finger, and continue reciting the same mantra. After reciting it several dozen times, you may stop reciting and simply watch your thoughts. But you must not use this method as a substitute for a full meditation session.

Question 58: After a lay practitioner has recited the Cundī Mantra one million times, how should that person practice?

Answer: Most people who recite the Cundī Mantra do so because they seek something. What does this lay practitioner seek? Has it now been fulfilled? If it has been fulfilled, the practitioner should use the mantra to seal the mind, empty the mind completely, no longer give rise to deluded thoughts, and realize entry into the Tathāgata's ground. In this way, the original intent of Cundī Bodhisattva—"First entice them with desires, then lead them into the Buddha's wisdom"—is fulfilled. Without forming the mudrā, the efficacy is not great; one should additionally form the hand mudrā. Off the meditation cushion, during walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, one must also maintain continuous vajra recitation of the mantra.

Question 59: When I now recite the Four Refuges, the prayer text, and mantras, I imitate the guru's pronunciation. I have suddenly become aware that this seems to involve attachment to appearances. Is that so?

Answer: Do not give rise to this deluded thought. You must understand that all dharmas are expedient methods, but one must not become attached to them. Yet in order to attain non-abiding and non-contrivance, one must first restrain the deluded mind in one place; only afterward can what one abides in and what one does be dissolved away.

Question 60: Esoteric Buddhism emphasizes lineage transmission and reverence for the guru. In mantra recitation, one imitates the guru's tone, rhythm, and manner as closely as possible, thereby receiving the guru's blessings imperceptibly, swiftly eliminating karmic obstacles, and settling body and mind. Since heart esotericism is a form of formless esoteric practice, does it have this requirement?

Answer: One may do so. In any case, one must practice with wholehearted concentration in order to accord with it. Accurate mantra pronunciation brings powerful and swift responses.

Question 61: The Complete Works of Wang Xianglu states: “In mantra recitation, accurate pronunciation is the primary principle. Whenever one receives a mantra, after reciting it until one is somewhat familiar with it, one should ask the empowerment master to correct its tones and cadences. There are methods concerning emphasis and lightness, divisions and continuity within its words and phrases; each must be carefully studied. It is not enough merely to resemble the sound; one must also capture the spirit. With familiarity, it becomes natural.” Does “not merely resembling the sound, but also capturing the spirit” mean that one should recite as nearly as possible in the voice, tone, and cadence of the transmitting guru?

Answer: Capturing the spirit means that the mind is empty and non-abiding, and that the mood arises naturally.

Question 62: May the Śūraṅgama Mantra be recited at any time?

Answer: It may be recited at any time.

Question 63: When practicing the Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī, it is easy to enter samādhi, but when practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, I strongly feel karmic seeds being stirred up.

Answer: Your ease in entering samādhi through the Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī is due to your practice of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. Because you have practiced the Heart-of-Heart Dharma for a long time and seek to enter samādhi, you do not become settled. Because you have practiced the Great Wish-Fulfilling practice for only a short time and have no seeking, you let go of body and mind and therefore enter samādhi easily.

Question 64: Several times while practicing the Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī, I have experienced the following: my entire body feels as though it were pressed beneath a huge stone, and the pressure changes along with the mantra recitation.

Answer: Reciting mantras can eliminate obstacles, so the “stone” changes. In any case, disregard everything and empty the mind; only then can you realize the Way.

Question 65: What mantras are good for assisting the deceased?

Answer: You may recite the Mantra of Liberation Through Hearing, the Great Secret Mantra of Original Awakening, the Vajra Mantra of the Six Realms, the Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Mantra, and the Great Light Mantra. These are the most important

mantras. It is extremely important to recite them during the intermediate-state phase; recite them often, for their efficacy is great.

You may prepare “vajra sand” as follows: take a box of sand, wash and dry it in the sun. Thread a needle with red silk, insert the needle into the sand, hold the end of the red thread at the base of the ring finger of your left hand, form the vajra-fist mudrā, direct your right hand toward the sand, and recite [the mantra] 108,000 times. This sand can then deliver all deceased spirits. Even if one has been dead for many years and has already fallen into the three lower realms, sprinkling it over their corpse or ashes from the feet toward the head can enable rebirth in the heavenly realms. There is then no need to recite other mantras.

Question 66: When first lying down to sleep, is it better to recite a mantra or to practice contemplation?

Answer: Mantra recitation is better. Recite the mantra until you fall asleep. If you contemplate thoughts too closely, it will instead be difficult to fall asleep.

Question 67: Is there any difference between observing the mind and reciting mantras?

Answer: Observing the mind is equivalent to reciting mantras. Observing the mind is self-power; reciting mantras is other-power.

Question 68: Is it not good to practice only in the mountains?

Answer: Practicing in the mountains is not bad. It is fine to train there for a period of time, but one cannot rely entirely on living in the mountains; one must also train in the city. If one practices only in the mountains, the mind becomes confused again upon seeing the city. To remain hidden in a great city is true concealment. Daoists also say: “Lesser reclusion is in the mountains; greater reclusion is in the marketplace.”

Arhats are distinguished as first-, second-, third-, and fourth-fruit arhats. A first-fruit arhat may remain wholly unmoved in the forests and mountains, but upon reaching the city, the mind is stirred. When a second-fruit arhat reaches the city, as soon as a prior thought stirs, the following thought immediately recognizes it. Training in the forests and mountains also has its benefits: first practice emptiness, then come to the city to train.

Question 69: Because of my work, I can practice only one meditation session a day. Is that all right?

Answer: It is enough to maintain contemplation after leaving the meditation cushion. If you do not contemplate well, practicing two sessions is of no use. If you

can maintain contemplation, you will certainly attain accomplishment.

Question 70: I feel that my practice keeps going around in circles at the same level and cannot advance.

Answer: Do not be anxious; anxiety spoils things. There is no advancing or declining—Buddha-nature is originally unmoving. Let go. Attend to the cultivation, without concerning yourself with the harvest. Insisting on a result spoils things; striving to force progress only obstructs it.

Question 71: Can someone who has not practiced the Heart-of-Heart Dharma read One Hundred Cases on Realizing the Essence and Applying Its Function?

Answer: Anyone practicing the Mind-Ground Dharma Gate, or indeed anyone wholeheartedly seeking to transcend birth and death and leave saṃsāra, may read it.

Question 72: The Jewel Garland Collection on Accomplishing the Supreme Path says: “Do not single-mindedly abandon desire, because sensual pleasure can nourish and augment realization and experience.” How can sensual pleasure have such an effect?

Answer: It is meant to give rise to a joyful mind and a positive feeling, so that you may practice with still greater courage and diligence. But if you cling to it and do not let it go, you will again enter demonic states or be unable to leave the desire realm.

Question 73: After practicing heart esotericism for one thousand sessions, should one stop sitting in meditation or continue?

Answer: This question has been addressed many times. Whether to sit or not depends on whether you have realized the Way. Until you are undeluded when encountering circumstances, you must continue to practice well. If, during practice, you can reach the point where not a single thought arises while knowing remains clear, and with one glance thoroughly recognize the Original Face, then it is all right not to sit. The principal work is tempering oneself amid phenomena—the so-called beginning of practice after awakening.

Question 74: What should I do if I have not broken through after one thousand sessions?

Answer: If you truly achieve inward listening to the mind during meditation and continuous and seamless contemplation after leaving the cushion, you will certainly break through between three hundred and five hundred sessions. Many people break through after only one hundred sessions; the power of this Dharma is very great. If you have not broken through after one thousand sessions, that is not good.

What should you do? Start again from the beginning. On the cushion, practice samādhi according to the Dharma; off the cushion, practice wisdom through contemplation.

Question 75: I have affinities with several lamas and have taken refuge with several gurus. They have transmitted various teachings to me, and I practice them all. Is this too mixed? Venerable one, what should I do?

Answer: It is indeed too mixed. You should concentrate on practicing one Dharma: choose the one you like best and penetrate deeply through a single gate. Dharma is medicine. When one is ill, one takes medicine; if one takes every kind of medicine, the illness will not easily be cured. Prescribe the medicine according to the illness, and one medicine will suffice. It is also like digging a well: you dig two or three feet here and find no water, then change to another place. Digging here and there, you still do not find water. You should choose a Dharma that accords with you and practice it.

Question 76: This disciple believes that Esoteric Dharma is transmitted in a single lineage and should not be mixed in practice. Mixed practice is like two people, each able to run swiftly, being tied together while running; they are thereby bound.

Answer: Correct! Since you understand this clearly, you will not be deceived again.

Question 77: Although it is said that when the water arrives, the channel forms, time waits for no one. Please instruct us how to apply ourselves during the limited years that remain.

Answer: Train amid circumstances. Abide nowhere in anything; be unbound by favorable and adverse circumstances; move freely in every direction. Then you can come and go freely, transform at will, and be liberated from segmented birth and death. Otherwise, recite Maitreya Bodhisattva's mantra or the Extended Rebirth Mantra more often, and you can be reborn in the Pure Land. What is there to worry about?

Question 78: Can my husband and son undertake retreat together?

Answer: For retreat, first, one must truly be able to remain in retreat, with the mind genuinely settled. Second, someone must serve as retreat attendant. Do not harm a child; forcing things can cause problems.

Question 79: Must a nine-session retreat be undertaken only after a seven-day retreat?

Answer: Not necessarily. On the fifteenth day of a lunar month with thirty days, one may undertake nine sessions over eighteen hours, using the fourth mudrā.

Question 80: On the fifth day of a seven-day retreat, a vast white emptiness appeared during meditation. There was nothing, and there was no self, yet I was very clear within. I asked myself, “What is this? Could this truly be the manifestation of intrinsic nature?” I even moved my head, but I found it too ordinary. Once a doubtful thought arose, I could not recognize or grasp it.

Answer: This is the luminosity of your intrinsic nature. Amidst that in which there is nothing, recognize who it is that knows there is nothing, and the great matter is settled. If this is not intrinsic nature, what is it? Do not miss this excellent opportunity! The moment you moved your head, you were deluded by its shadow! It is originally an utterly ordinary matter, yet also a matter that shakes heaven and earth. It is regrettable that you did not recognize it sufficiently. You say you cannot grasp it: knowing has nothing to know, so what is there to grasp?

Question 81: After returning from the seven-day retreat, my state of mind feels much more placid. Yet I still cling to certain matters; my strength is not yet sufficient, and it is difficult to cut them off at once.

Answer: Life is like a dream; everything is flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water. What is there to cling to or be stained by?

Question 82: Sometimes, while silently reciting the Buddha’s name, I feel as though a recitation device inside me is playing automatically, and I cannot dismiss it. Deliberately taking up the Buddha’s name does not seem right, but neither does leaving it alone. I neither welcome nor dislike it. What should I do?

Answer: Do not listen to it; simply recite yourself. Otherwise, you may recite aloud. In any case, do not listen to any sounds within; honestly recite the Buddha’s name yourself, or else you will go astray and enter demonic states. If you can neither like nor dislike it, treating it as though nothing were happening, there is no obstruction.

Question 83: What does it mean when Buddha-recitation reaches the point that “outwardly it ceases, but inwardly it does not cease”?

Answer: The outward sound ceases, but inwardly the recitation continues.

Question 84: While sitting in meditation and investigating a huatou (critical phrase), I recite, “Who is reciting the Buddha’s name?” After a while, I become hazy and muddled, hear only a voice saying, “It is I,” and then there is a buzzing sound in my head. After that, I cannot continue reciting.

Answer: It is not a matter of reciting; rather, you must quietly investigate who it is that recites the Buddha’s name. This is investigation! “It is I” is a reflection of the sixth consciousness; it is deluded thought, not true wisdom. Therefore, your body and mind cannot dissolve into emptiness.

Question 85: Does meditative absorption mean simply sitting in meditation?

Answer: Dhyāna and samādhi do not necessarily mean sitting in meditation. When we are not deluded by circumstances, that is dhyāna and samādhi; it is not merely sitting there without moving. Sitting motionlessly is dead-tree Chan. Walking, standing, sitting, and lying down are all Chan. The Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment puts it well: “Knowing illusion is itself liberation; no expedient means are needed. Liberation from illusion is itself awakening; there are no gradual stages.”

“All bodhisattvas and sentient beings in the latter age who cultivate accordingly can thus forever leave behind all illusions.” When we know that everything is an illusory appearance, unobtainable, we no longer cling to it. Like the moon in water, we do not try to scoop it up. Freedom from illusion is great dhyāna and samādhi. This is what is meant by “no expedient means are needed.”

Question 86: I have practiced heart esotericism for more than two years and have gained a great deal. Many things that I formerly feared or loved have suddenly ceased to be problems, which has delighted me beyond expectation. Thus I have developed great faith in my master and in heart esotericism.

Answer: This is indeed a great gain. We practice in order to transcend birth and death and leave the cycle of rebirth. We fail to transcend birth and death because the mind arises in response to circumstances and clings without letting go. Now that you can fear nothing and love nothing, birth and death have no foothold in this very thought.

Question 87: I believe that in practicing “heart esotericism,” first, one receives the Buddha’s blessing; second, one practices according to the requirements, neither hurrying nor slackening, letting everything go, with the mind reciting and the ears listening. In this way, one naturally receives the empowerment of the three mysteries and will not go astray.

Answer: Yes. In practice, one must neither hurry nor slacken, but practice according to the Dharma and advance steadily. Yet when the time is ripe, one must intensify one’s seated meditation. One cannot always remain as before, practicing listlessly and without vigorous effort. Therefore, after one hundred meditation sessions, if one has ample time and energy, one should undertake a seven-day retreat or sit nine sessions, in order to bring one’s fruition to completion.

Question 88: Esoteric Buddhism teaches the practice of guru yoga. How are correspondence and continuity achieved in heart esotericism?

Answer: What we practice is formless esoteric practice. Abiding nowhere, with no form to be obtained—this is the greatest correspondence. Throughout the twenty-

four hours, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, one is always and everywhere thus; this is continuity. Going further, even this state of continuity cannot be obtained, and even the continuity that can be seen cannot be obtained. Only then is it true continuity.

Question 89: Since receiving the mind Dharma last year, the lines on my palms have changed. Why is this?

Answer: Such minor changes amount to nothing. What is needed is for quantitative change to become qualitative change—for a great transformation to occur!

Question 90: Into how many stages is practice generally divided?

Answer: In practice, one must pay close attention. The first step is for body, mind, and world all to dissolve into emptiness. Only when samādhi and wisdom are both complete can one directly see one's intrinsic nature. Without this first step, the subsequent work cannot be accomplished. The second step is to safeguard this Buddha-nature: safeguard it from adhering to circumstances and from following them. Once this safeguarding has matured, do not safeguard it any longer; one must forget even the safeguarding.

The third step is to let it function freely. It is like a child who has grown up and no longer needs adults to watch over him; he can stand on his own. In the end, even "letting be" is absent. Buddha-nature is originally thus; the work is done layer by layer. Do we arrive home as soon as we awaken and see our nature? No. Do not be confused: that is only the beginning.

The Sixth Patriarch was able to realize the Way merely by hearing someone recite the Diamond Sūtra. Though his faculties were so excellent, after realizing the Way with the Fifth Patriarch, he still had to conceal himself among a band of hunters for fifteen years, tempering himself through circumstances. This means that although we have seen our nature, the habitual tendencies accumulated over countless lives and eons remain. Our clinging habits remain, and the mind can still be stirred.

Therefore, after awakening, one must begin cultivation. One must certainly eliminate the delusions of thought—delusion arising when the mind responds to circumstances, as well as greed, anger, ignorance, and the like. Only then will it do; only then can one transcend birth and death. Can we simply be finished the moment we realize the Way? No. Chan Master Zhaozhou also had exceptionally good faculties, yet after realizing the Way he still safeguarded his realization for forty years.

He put it plainly: "For forty years, apart from the two daily meals of gruel and rice, this old monk has never used the mind in a distracted way." Thus the Chan teaching

of the three barriers is not hypothetical; it refers to actual attainment in practice. Seeing one's intrinsic nature is the first barrier: the initial breakthrough into the fundamental matter. To advance to the second barrier requires safeguarding realization. When this has matured to the point where even deliberate safeguarding falls away, one passes through the second barrier.

At that time, one does not rejoice at favorable circumstances or become afflicted by unfavorable ones. Unconstrained by favorable or adverse circumstances, one is free and at ease. This is passing beyond the second barrier. Yet after passing beyond it, one must still advance further, for there remains the final barrier. This means practicing until one reaches complete non-contrivance: even when great spiritual powers and great luminosity manifest, illuminating the worlds of the ten directions, one abides nowhere.

Although great spiritual powers may manifest in their entirety, one does not conceive of them as spiritual powers; all is unobtainable. Thus it is said that the journey itself is home, and home itself is the journey; one can enter Buddhahood and one can also enter the demonic. When one truly arrives home, the end is no different from the beginning. At the beginning, one knows nothing; at the end, great wisdom appears as foolishness, likewise as though one knew nothing.

There is no clinging to any knowing or to any wondrous exercise of spiritual powers —not even the slightest attachment. When the mind is truly empty and pure, rebirth in the six realms is itself freedom from birth and death, and freedom from birth and death is itself rebirth in the six realms. Hell and heavenly palaces are alike; there is no longer any discriminating attachment. One may freely enter even the animal realm. This is entirely natural, without the slightest forcing.

If one cannot do this, one should instead arouse the resolve to be reborn in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Only when one's practice reaches the final impenetrable barrier does one attain the ultimate consummation of the dharma realm, able to go anywhere. Practice diligently. This cannot be accomplished all at once.

Question 91: Please instruct us on knowing and practicing in cultivation.

Answer: Knowing without practicing is equivalent to not knowing; practicing without knowing—is that not blind action? In fact, knowing and practicing are simultaneous; knowing and practicing are nondual. If you do not know but go ahead and practice, eventually you will suddenly penetrate it all, understand, and truly know. If one knows but does not practice, that knowing is very shallow.

Without practice, knowledge that is merely conceptual understanding is not true knowledge. Only through practice can one attain true knowledge. An honest person

may not understand many principles, but can wholeheartedly recite, “Amitābha Buddha! Amitābha Buddha! …” With the mind reciting and the ears listening, when the practice matures, the divisions of before and after are cut off. Suddenly, everything is penetrated, the mind is utterly empty and pure, and he understands.

Therefore, among Pure Land practitioners, the more simple-minded, the better. The ancients said, “Only the highest wisdom and the lowest simplicity are unchanging.” The most simple-minded person is willing to practice and can steadfastly recite Amitābha Buddha, Amitābha Buddha . . .; thus, he can attain samādhi. Clever people are unwilling to practice. Having understood only a little principle, they consider themselves right and are unwilling to recite wholeheartedly. This is not good.

If you do not practice, you cannot reach this point and cannot truly understand. It is like eating: once you have eaten something, you naturally know its flavor. If you have not eaten it, you cannot know its taste by thinking about it all day.

Therefore, it does not matter if you do not yet know this truth. As long as you practice single-mindedly, you can reach this point and naturally penetrate it. All thoughts and ideas arise from this mind: “Nothing does not flow forth from this dharma realm; nothing does not return to this dharma realm.”

Whether reciting the Buddha’s name or a mantra, let the mind recite and the ears listen, wholeheartedly, until everything disappears and there remains a clear and vivid awareness. At that moment, turning back, one suddenly understands: “Oh! This is the wondrous functioning of our true mind; this is true knowledge.” Merely understanding a few principles without practicing or directly realizing them is useless when circumstances arise: one becomes confused, not knowing that the situation is false and empty, but taking it as real.

Question 92: How does the Dharma Characteristics School indicate the stages of practice?

Answer: The Dharma Characteristics School puts it very plainly: one who has only initially awakened has reached merely the first stage of the dharma realm, the Joyous Ground, the rank of a first-bhūmi bodhisattva; ten bhūmis still lie ahead. Therefore, one must temper oneself through circumstances, diligently safeguard one’s realization, and practice without becoming lax. Some people think that once they have awakened, nothing matters anymore: they begin drinking alcohol, smoking, eating meat, and letting themselves drift.

Have they truly reached that stage? No; this is reckless behavior. They remain far from final consummation. We must take heed: when one has truly awakened, one remains thus and unmoved in the face of all circumstances. If one is still moved, it will not do.

To determine whether one has truly awakened, ask yourself: “When circumstances arise, is my mind still stirred? Can I get through affairs without obstruction?” If circumstances arise and the mind is still stirred, if one follows circumstances, then one has not awakened. If you have truly realized the Way, you know that all these are false appearances and unobtainable. Only when you can remain unmoved and abide nowhere in all things have you truly awakened.

Therefore, even upon reaching the first stage of the dharma realm, the Joyous Ground, the innate attachments to self and dharmas remain and must be removed. Before one becomes an eighth-bhūmi bodhisattva, one may regress if one does not practice. Many people nowadays are simply muddleheaded: they sit a little today and stop tomorrow; they practice today, then go out to amuse themselves tomorrow, running about everywhere.

How can this do? It cannot! Therefore, do not forget to practice. Do not become lax in the slightest. Only when one has truly practiced until there is no practice to be done can one let go. Only at the eighth bhūmi can a bodhisattva eliminate innate attachment to self; only at the tenth bhūmi can a bodhisattva eliminate innate attachment to dharmas. The Dharma Characteristics School states this very plainly. “Contemplation becomes perfectly bright and illuminates the great thousandfold world.” After reaching the tenth bhūmi, one perfectly illuminates everything; the worlds of the ten directions are within one’s mind. Practice diligently. One cannot arrive home in a single step; practice requires patience, perseverance, and long-term resolve.

(II) Responses and Experiences During Meditation

Question 93: While meditating, the mudrā formed by my hands suddenly came apart. What is happening?

Answer: It is a vibration of qi. Your body has not yet dissolved into emptiness. Do not worry; simply form the mudrā again. When qi becomes abundant, this sensation can occur. It may even feel as though your head is about to burst. Do not be afraid, and do not clutch your head; you will not die. Our Buddha-nature never dies. But as soon as a thought arises, it will no longer feel as though it is bursting, and the sensation will recede.

Therefore, when such transformations occur and you see any adverse states—such as fierce Dharma protectors, wrathful forms of Buddhas, vajra deities, or ferocious wild animals—do not be afraid. Nor should you pay attention when you see favorable states, such as Buddhas or bodhisattvas appearing before you. Sometimes, when we sit well in meditation, a Buddha may come to bless us, but we must not seek this. For example, a Buddha comes and offers you a treasure. The moment you reach out to receive it, it explodes. With one explosion, your entire

world of body and mind is blown empty; in that instant, you directly recognize and personally see your original nature. This is the Buddha's blessing.

Question 94: While meditating, it feels as though a great wind is blowing me upward and I am about to fly away.

Answer: Then fly. Let everything follow conditions; it does not matter. Do not be afraid—you will not fall, nor will you fall to your death. Your physical body is not floating away; it is your consciousness that is floating, while your body remains where it is.

Question 95: If one can see scenes of the six realms, is this because one has not yet realized emptiness? Does it affect one's practice?

Answer: If you do not abide in appearances, there is no obstruction.

Question 96: This disciple deeply feels that his karmic obstacles are heavy, so he practices the second mudrā every day. Sometimes, after an hour and a half, the pain becomes unbearable and his legs are covered in sweat; at other times, his whole body becomes very hot, especially the palms of his hands.

Answer: Pain itself eliminates karmic obstacles; when the obstacles are eliminated, the pain will cease. Sweating and bodily heat are the power of the Dharma; they are all good signs. Do not doubt. Press forward diligently, and you will attain ease and freedom.

Question 97: At present, while practicing the second mudrā, I experience breathlessness and shortness of breath. It feels as if all the breath is rushing straight into my head, and in an instant my whole mind becomes clear and keen.

Answer: This is the experience of pure qi rising and opening the qi channels in the head. Pay no attention to any phenomenon that occurs during meditation. Simply recite the mantra single-mindedly and let everything unfold naturally; there will certainly be no deviation. The greatest taboo is attachment to appearances and fear.

Question 98: Yesterday, while practicing the second mudrā, I repeatedly experienced breathlessness and a feeling of oppression in the chest. It seemed as though the breath were being drawn straight upward, as if this breath were about to cease.

Answer: When one truly enters samādhi, the breath does cease. Do not be afraid.

Question 99: It is said that the second mudrā of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma can lead to tummo samādhi. How is it practiced?

Answer: Tummo samādhi is visualization of one's own true fire rising; it is a visualization practice. If you practice heart esotericism and enter deeply into dhyāna, how could your true fire fail to arise?!

Question 100: Please instruct me on the benefits of practicing the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth mudrās, and on how they should be arranged. May one form the mudrā and meditate at any time, without being restricted to beginning one's meditation session at a fixed time?

Answer: Ordinarily, practice the second and fourth mudrās more often. When your mind is unsettled, add practice of the third mudrā. For treating illness, practice the second mudrā. If you are treating someone else's illness but cannot go to them yourself, practice the third mudrā and ask the Dharma protectors to treat them on your behalf. When demonic obstacles are severe, practice the fifth mudrā. When you need to understand various languages, practice the sixth mudrā. The time need not be fixed, but you must practice for a full two hours. Sit more often and deepen your meditative stability; only then can you remain unstained when encountering circumstances.

Question 101: When mental demons are severe, one practices the fifth mudrā. What does it mean for mental demons to be severe?

Answer: You have misunderstood! The fifth mudrā is not practiced to overcome mental demons, but to overcome external demons. Mental demons refer to the stirring of the mind—that is, the agitated arising of lustful thoughts. You must recite the "Śūraṅgama Mantra Heart" to counteract them.

Question 102: When self and others are both empty, and even mudrās and mantras are absent, do mudrās and mantras still have any effect? Are they too illusory?

Answer: Mudrās and mantras are like a boat for crossing a river. Once you have reached the other shore, why remain in the boat instead of going ashore? Thus they are said to be illusory. Yet because they have great effect, they are also said to be real. Once you have reached the other shore, you must let them go and not cling to them. Therefore, the Buddhadharma is neither empty nor existent: it is the Middle Way, in which there is nothing to abide in or cling to.

Question 103: Sometimes, when I am preparing to sit in meditation at four or five in the morning, fearful phenomena arise. In fact, there is nothing there, but I am afraid. It is as though some grotesque or snarling thing beside me were mocking me. Sometimes, just after I lie down, when I am half asleep and half awake, there is again nothing there, but I am afraid. This also occurs when I sleep, but not while I am sitting in meditation.

Answer: Fear is your inferior habitual tendency of clinging to life and fearing death. You must know that the physical body is an illusory appearance and that birth and death are provisionally existent. The dharmakāya (Dharma body) Buddha-nature has endured from ancient times to the present; it neither arises nor ceases and has no birth or death. If you truly awaken thoroughly to this principle, what is there left to fear?

Question 104: At five in the morning, in a state between sleeping and waking, I often see light, starry skies, high mountains, and a sun in a silent sky. Later, perhaps because I became attached to these appearances, I slept restlessly at night and saw ghostly shadows before the window, which terrified me greatly. Sometimes dark ignorance presses down upon my head, frightening me awake; at other times, I feel as though someone has slapped my mouth while I sleep, so I leap up in extreme fright and wildly wave my hands about.

Answer: This is caused by your practice of a form-based method and your attachment to appearances. Now contemplate everything as empty and do not abide in appearances; then all illusory images will vanish. Practice heart esotericism devoutly, and external demons will not invade. You will sleep peacefully and fully realize great awakening.

Question 105: During a seven-day retreat, I am always unable to sit steadily, and I have many deluded thoughts. My practice during meditation is very poor, which leaves me lacking confidence. I always feel that I am progressing more slowly than others.

Answer: Not forgetting your practice amid a hundred pressing affairs, and even making time for a seven-day retreat—this shows the very highest capacity. So long as you strive diligently onward, you will certainly realize the fruit of the Way. Being able to sit for four hours is samādhi; otherwise, you would be unable to remain seated. As for having many deluded thoughts, that is habitual conditioning. So long as you continue to struggle against them without cease, the final victory will certainly be yours.

Question 106: During meditation, I sometimes involuntarily speak many languages that I do not understand or chant numerous sūtra passages, accompanied by various hand gestures and mudrās that continuously change on their own. After rising from meditation, I feel exceptionally refreshed and energetic.

Answer: Do not pay attention to any phenomenon occurring in samādhi, whether good or bad. These are all illusory images of the sixth consciousness, not real things. You must never become attached to them; otherwise, you may easily enter a demonic path.

Question 107: Sometimes during meditation, the mantra I am reciting ceases without my noticing, yet my hands remain in mudrā. My knowing is clear and distinct, and there are no deluded thoughts. In such a situation, should I stop reciting the mantra, continue sitting, and cease attaching to the appearance of time?

Answer: If you know that your hands remain in mudrā, it shows that the body has not dissolved into emptiness and that deluded knowing has not ceased. If thoughts had truly ceased at this point—that is, the preceding thought had ended and the following thought had not yet arisen—neither the world of body and mind nor anything else could be found. Where then would there be a mudrā or a mantra? Naturally, there would be no need to recite the mantra further. If you have not dissolved into emptiness, you must still recite the mantra. If you truly cannot bring it up, you may refrain from reciting, but you must maintain contemplation—that is, observe this right mindfulness in which no thought arises. When the time is ripe, you will naturally dissolve into emptiness. At that point, what appearance of time could there still be?

Question 108: Once during meditation, sorrow suddenly welled up from within, and tears poured forth like a spring. Then I began chanting sūtra passages aloud. Why did this happen?

Answer: Chanting sūtra passages and having sorrow arise from within occur because the power of the Dharma has penetrated deeply into the field of the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna), causing wholesome roots from past karma to manifest. Once all this has passed, it is finished; do not cling to it or refuse to let it go.

Question 109: This disciple has practiced for a year and a half without interruption. During the hundred meditation sessions, I dreamed that one hand was holding a firecracker. After it exploded, there was nothing at all. Not recognizing what this was, I only recited the Buddha's name and returned from it. I failed to live up to the profound grace of the Buddhas' and bodhisattvas' blessings.

Answer: This is the best possible news; it was precisely the blessing of Buddha-power. After the great explosion, everything was empty, yet luminous knowing remained clear and distinct. This luminous knowing is your Original Face. It was calling upon you to see your own true nature!

Question 110: A fellow practitioner, while practicing, felt that he had fallen into a very deep and dark place. He became afraid and stopped.

Answer: This is beginningless ignorance. He should not be afraid. Tell him simply to continue practicing steadfastly.

Question 111: While meditating, after ten or so minutes I can no longer bring up the mantra, but the mudrā has not come apart. What is happening?

Answer: You are sitting in samādhi. Is it important to remain sitting in samādhi? At the beginning, it is not a problem, and it feels very comfortable. But if you sit in it too much, you will become attached to it. Then do not remain sitting there; emerge from samādhi. When the mantra cannot be recited and there are no deluded thoughts, ask yourself: "What is this?" This stirs the spiritual capacity, and then you will see your true nature.

Question 112: After entering samādhi, one does not know it oneself. If one knows one has entered samādhi, then it is not genuine samādhi. Is that correct?

Answer: Correct.

Question 113: I have practiced the Heart-of-Heart Dharma for exactly nine months without interruption. At present, during the latter half hour of meditation, my legs hurt somewhat, but it is not a problem. I think this may be related to the appearance of time. I often feel that I have recited the mantra for only a few minutes, but when I become fully alert, half an hour or even more than an hour has often passed.

I do not know whether I have been continually reciting the mantra or not, but my mudrā has never come apart and I remain sitting upright. Sometimes my back becomes hot both during and outside meditation; recently, my lower abdomen and stomach have also begun to feel hot. Please instruct me on what I should do from now on.

Answer: This proves that you have entered samādhi. Thus, in a flash, several hours pass; the mantra drops away, yet the mudrā does not come apart. The heat in your body is caused by the internal qi being stirred up. Do not pay attention to it. Eat more vegetables and fruits that reduce internal heat.

Question 114: I meditated from midnight until five in the morning, without the slightest sign of drowsiness.

Answer: This is very good; it is a positive sign of entering deeply into dhyāna.

Question 115: When I meditate, there is a period during which I know nothing at all. What is the reason for this?

Answer: There are two possibilities: (1) drowsiness, and (2) an indeterminate state. In the latter, it is as though one were dead and knew nothing at all. When drowsiness occurs, rouse your spirit and recite the mantra aloud to dispel the demon of sleep. In an indeterminate state, bring up the question: "Who is this?!" Your luminous knowing must be clear and distinct.

Question 116: After I have sat for an hour, I no longer know anything, and my legs no longer hurt.

Answer: If you know that there is nothing, this is spiritual knowing, though it still contains a degree of drowsy absorption. If you do not even know that there is nothing, then you have fallen into an indeterminate state; you must then take up the mantra.

Question 117: Recently, while sitting, several times the mantra I was reciting ceased, and inwardly there was no body or mind, outwardly no world; yet everything was clearly distinct, and not a single thought arose. I immediately accepted this: I had directly realized my Original Face.

Answer: Very good.

Question 118: What is the difference between drowsiness, drowsy absorption, and proper samādhi?

Answer: Drowsiness means that one has fallen asleep: the hands drop, and the mudrā comes apart. In drowsy absorption, the head is slightly lowered, but the hands do not drop and the mudrā does not come apart. One is as if dazed or asleep, yet remains aware and feels muddled. In proper samādhi, however, there is no feeling of muddlement; everything is perfectly clear, and there are no thoughts. When one first enters samādhi, one cannot hear any sounds at all. When samādhi deepens, spiritual powers will manifest, and one can even hear the sound of an ant crawling. There is a process from drowsy absorption to proper samādhi: gradually one becomes clear. After prolonged drowsiness, it may sometimes turn into proper samādhi.

Question 119: What should one do if one enters samādhi and cannot come out?

Answer: That will not happen. One will not immediately reach the cessation of feeling and perception; if one reaches that cessation, one may sit for several days at a time. It is also very easy to emerge from samādhi: strike a small chime beside the ear, and one will come out. If there is no chime, use a metal vessel, since metal produces a sharp sound. This kind of samādhi is harmful; it is caused by forcibly suppressing thoughts so that they do not arise during practice.

There was a lay practitioner who ordinarily practiced by suppressing thoughts. One day, he entered samādhi in a temple. Others thought that he had died and buried him. One needs samādhi, but not dead samādhi. True samādhi is not allowing the mind to move in response to circumstances.

Question 120: I have completed more than 400 meditation sessions. Since the beginning of winter, overwhelming drowsiness has come over me during morning

sittings; out of ten sessions, only three are clear and awake.

Answer: The methods for counteracting drowsiness are extremely simple: (1) Get sufficient sleep. (2) Do not eat or drink before meditating in the early morning. (3) Exercise more. (4) When you become sleepy, immediately open your eyes wide and recite the mantra aloud. But take note: if you have entered samādhi, there is no need to do this. (5) Do not become overly fatigued during the day. Then drowsiness will not arise.

Question 121: I have been practicing for more than six months, but I still have many wandering thoughts while sitting. How should I counteract them?

Answer: When meditating, be wholeheartedly committed and think of nothing at all. When thoughts arise, ignore them and let them arise and cease on their own. Simply recite the mantra with focused attention, listening intently to the sound of the mantra being mentally recited; wandering thoughts will naturally subside.

Question 122: In recent weeks, as soon as I sit down, I naturally enter a brief state without thoughts, and body and mind also feel comfortable. Yet wisdom does not open. Why is this?

Answer: What wisdom do you want to open? Do you mean knowing another person's mental activity, or information about the past and future? That would be mistaken. Opening wisdom means recognizing one's intrinsic nature, not being carried along by circumstances, and abiding nowhere while remaining free and at ease.

Question 123: Recently, I have often experienced the reciprocal effect of the physical on the mental. After the mind becomes empty, does the physical body also change?

Answer: Yes. As the mind changes, the body also changes.

Question 124: The sensations and experiences of meditation are extremely unstable; meditating by day feels different from meditating at night. Is it time to overcome this obstacle?

Answer: This is a matter of habit. Those accustomed to meditating in the morning will feel uncomfortable if they switch to meditating at night, and vice versa. It is not that one time is inherently better or worse than another. If you regularly alternate the times at which you sit, they will become balanced and no different. Moreover, when facing favorable and adverse circumstances, one must respond with an ordinary mind. Do not become delighted in favorable circumstances or alarmed and vexed in adverse ones. This is something practitioners should heed.

Question 125: How can one prevent meditation sickness during practice?

Answer: What meditation sickness is there? So long as you ignore all favorable and adverse experiences, attend only to reciting the mantra, and dissolve them into emptiness, there will be no obstruction. With regard to all circumstances, neither grasping nor rejecting is the best way to remove attachment and dispel delusion. Do not seek samādhi or awakening, much less the manifestation of spiritual powers; then there will naturally be no meditation sickness. Let all other physical and mental changes take their natural course. Do not deliberately try to induce or suppress physical or mental changes.

Question 126: Sometimes, while meditating in practice, as soon as I think single-mindedly of a Buddha, bodhisattva, or the master, a soft, cool, tingling sensation spreads throughout my body. At times my skin seems to break out in goosebumps.

Answer: This is a response to the mind's thoughts. Do not become attached to it; simply treat it as though nothing has happened.

Question 127: After opening up, when off the cushion, I have a feeling as though I might weep, yet do not actually weep. What is the reason for this?

Answer: After opening to your original nature, you feel as though you have lost your parents. It is truly not easy, in this evil age of the Dharma's decline, to attain such a result through wholehearted practice. I hope you will never be content with a little attainment. Press forward courageously and diligently, diligently remove your habitual tendencies, and you may hope to fully realize Buddhahood.

Question 128: At the beginning of meditation, I place my attention on reciting the mantra. After sitting for a while, this thought of mantra recitation sometimes seems to be beside my ears, sometimes at the dantian in the lower abdomen, and sometimes beside the nostrils. All this arises spontaneously, without my noticing, yet the mental recitation of the mantra does not cease.

Answer: Listen single-mindedly to the soundless sound of the mantra as your mind recites it. Do not concern yourself with where it is; let everything take its natural course. When the mind becomes empty through recitation, the mind that recites and the mantra being recited both fall away at once; body, mind, and world all dissolve into emptiness, and true nature then appears before you.

Question 129: While meditating, a field of white light suddenly appears, with a luminous point within it. What is this?

Answer: Do not concern yourself with it. In this practice, we discourage seeking lights or visions of Buddhas, lest you become attached to appearances. In Esoteric Buddhism, that white light is the luminosity of intrinsic nature, and the luminous point is the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna). Yet this remains consciousness; one

must break through it to see one's true nature. Pay no attention to it, and do not become complacent, thinking, 'I have white light and a luminous point.' Taking pride in this is attachment to appearances.

Question 130: When I meditate and recite the mantra, I feel that there are two layers. The upper layer is flowing thoughts, and the lower layer is the sound of mantra recitation. If I take up the mantra, then the upper layer becomes the mantra recitation, while the lower layer becomes a dense black fog. After a while, miscellaneous thoughts return, and the mantra recitation again becomes the lower layer.

Answer: The dense black fog is ignorance. You must take up the mantra and break through ignorance.

Question 131: When I meditate, I see things to which I am attached—unclean things. I know that I should change, but when I encounter specific situations, I still repeatedly become attached to them. How should I practice so as not to become attached?

Answer: Observe! When you see that you have become attached again, you must immediately let it go. You must be quick; being slow will not do. Through observation, you can see the unclean things. Attachment to phenomena means that you have not let go and that your strength is insufficient. If you can observe but cannot release, you must sternly rebuke yourself and quickly let go, or quickly recite the mantra and use it to dissolve them.

Therefore, you must cultivate strength at every moment. If your strength is insufficient, meditate more. More meditation can develop the power of samādhi. Once you have the power of samādhi, a single awareness dissolves everything into emptiness. Everything is false. Once the mind has utterly died, it no longer moves. If it has not utterly died, you still cannot pull yourself free and remain trapped within it.

Question 132: Should experiences that arise during practice not be spoken of to others?

Answer: The reason they should not be discussed is that they may cause others to become attached and pursue such experiences. They may think, "Why have I not had such an experience?" Their minds become disturbed, and they cannot enter samādhi. Moreover, fundamentally there is nothing at all: do not abide in appearances, for nothing can be obtained. Experiences do occur; they are like the scenery we see while traveling by train from Shanghai to Zhenjiang. But if we do not abide in appearances, they simply pass by.

Question 133: Sometimes after practicing, there is a buzzing sound in the ears. Why?

Answer: It is good that it rings. This is a prelude to a breakthrough. Do not pay attention to it; the channels are being opened.

Question 134: When the mind is disturbed during meditation and cannot attain samādhi, how should one counteract this?

Answer: The problems in practice today are generally all the same: the mind is disturbed, wandering thoughts are numerous—so numerous that one cannot remain seated and wants to get off the cushion. This is very common. The reason is that the mind is chaotic and unsettled. People do not know that everything in this world is a false appearance; they cling to this world and refuse to let go, and so their minds become very disturbed.

You must understand that nothing in this world can be obtained; all is like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, or a shadow. Then the deluded mind will not move so much, and you can sit with wholehearted resolve. At the very least, coarse wandering thoughts will cease moving.

Do not inwardly cling to and calculate matters at home or work in society. Do not remain attached to anything. Then, when you sit, you will naturally be steady, peaceful, and calm. At that time, thoughts arising from within may still come; when they do, ignore them and let them arise and cease on their own.

Simply recite the mantra with focused attention, listening intently to the sound of the mantra being mentally recited. You must hear it clearly and distinctly; then wandering thoughts will naturally not be so numerous. When wandering thoughts no longer move, you will be very steady, comfortable, and joyful. In fact, meditation becomes very comfortable and joyful as one progresses.

Some people pursue this joy: “Joy, come quickly!” But once you pursue it, things become worse. With such a heavy deluded mind, how can you attain samādhi? Therefore, do not pursue it. Let everything go, meditate with a settled mind, let the mind recite and the ears hear; only then can you enter samādhi. Even upon reaching this state of ease and joy, do not become attached to that ease and joy. Attachment to it again spoils things, for then there is abiding. If you abide within it, you cannot break free. Because there is pleasure to be gained, the mind moves; inevitably, you fall into a fixed pattern.

Question 135: Once, after meditating, I went to sleep and felt my body begin to grow larger—enormously large. I wanted to break free quickly, but as soon as a thought arose, there was nothing at all.

Answer: Ha-ha! Do not heed it, and it will burst apart. Do not entertain thoughts or questions. Sometimes you become larger and larger—enormously large; sometimes smaller and smaller—extremely small. Both are fine. If no thought arises, you break free; once a deluded thought arises, it will not work. That is why I tell you not to get down immediately after meditation. Rest for a while and lean back on the bed; good news may then come. While meditating, you are still seeking to enter samādhi quickly or awaken quickly. But after getting down from the cushion, you seek nothing at all, and then the good news comes. Yet you must not wait for good news!

Question 136: A few days ago, as I lay down on the bed, empty space suddenly shattered, and in an instant body and mind were lost. The force of this opening was extremely powerful. Sometimes this state also arises when I listen to recordings, but I have not become attached to it. In my ordinary practice of turning the light inward, whenever a thought arises, I cut it off with the word “Peh!”

Answer: If you practice in this way, you will certainly attain complete fulfillment in the future.

Question 137: During the first hundred meditation sessions, the state in which “everything dissolves into emptiness, and only a numinous knowing remains” appeared repeatedly; it still often appears after the hundred sessions. After mixing practices, my mind becomes confused and unsettled.

Answer: You attained this fine state after not much meditation. You are truly fortunate. Mixing practices is a great taboo in cultivation; you must never make this mistake again.

Question 138: At night, when I sleep, I cannot remain master of myself. What should I do?

Answer: When your daytime practice reaches a certain level, you will also be able to practice at night. Those who practice Buddha-recitation will recite “Amitābha Buddha” even in their sleep, and those who uphold mantras will continue to recite mantras even in their sleep. To be master of yourself in dreams, you must first be master of yourself during the day. Dreaming is a state of half-unconsciousness; at death, one is completely unconscious. Therefore, you must practice with earnest urgency.

Question 139: In a dream, I felt that my body had disappeared. I immediately knew to remind myself, “Who is it that is clearly aware at this moment?” Yet good news never came. I only heard a kind of mixed noise running from my head to my feet, until I awoke.

Answer: That very thought is good news. Let go of that thought, and you are home.

Question 140: Before going to sleep, I recited a mantra. As I recited, I fell asleep and felt that a little person had gone out. I was fully aware of it and also felt pleased. So I said, “Come back!” The little person came back, and I resumed reciting the mantra. Before long, with a “boom!” it went out again. I thought it would not do for it to keep going out, so I said, “Come back!” The little person obediently returned. Please instruct me, Master.

Answer: That was not a true mind-born body, but an illusory image produced by the sixth consciousness. Even if one can project a mind-born body, it does not mean that one has awakened. For one has not yet clearly realized one’s intrinsic nature and is still attached to appearances. Such things may occur in our practice. In the past, Patriarch Poshan practiced at Tiantong Monastery in Ningbo. He was still very young and fond of mischief.

While meditating, his mind-born body went out to steal someone else’s ducks. After he was discovered, Chan Master Miyun Wujue said, “You have gained playful spiritual powers, but you have not even dreamed of the Buddhadharma.” Patriarch Poshān had thought that he had realized the Way. At this point, he knelt and asked his master for instruction. Chan Master Miyun Wujue told him to investigate, “Who was I before my parents were born?” Later, he awakened.

Appearances arise dependently; they are formed through causes and conditions. Without Buddha-nature, appearances could not manifest. Those who have clearly realized their intrinsic nature do not cling to anything at all. If you become attached to spiritual powers and display them, you will be on the path to becoming a demon. Master Liangshan said, “Spiritual powers cannot be sought; even if sought, they cannot be obtained; and if obtained, they cannot be used.” Therefore, one must keep one’s abilities unobtrusive and refrain from displaying them.

Question 141: If married sexual relations are not discontinued, will it be difficult to open up to one’s original nature through meditation practice?

Answer: How can one put it? If conjugal sexual desire is not discontinued, how can one open up to one’s original nature? But if one can respond to it without stirring the mind, that is another matter.

Question 142: Recently, sexual desire has arisen intensely. I hope that Master will instruct me on how to eliminate this mind quickly.

Answer: Do not worry. This is the stirring of seeds. Seeds of sexual desire stored deep in the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) cannot be exhausted without repeatedly surfacing. All the great patriarchs of the past underwent this stirring of seeds. That is why they all privately maintained recitation of the heart mantra of the Śūraṅgama Mantra.

Question 143: As for eliminating sexual desire, I have no problem with contemplation after getting down from the cushion or with reciting the heart of the Śūraṅgama Mantra. But recently I have continually dreamed of such things.

Answer: This occurs because contemplation after getting down from the cushion and the prajñā fire of the practice performed on the cushion inwardly permeate you, causing the seeds to surge and churn. Thus these phenomena arise in dreams. You must practice more. If, during the day, you do not stir thoughts of men and women at all, then at night you will naturally remain clear and awake, and such dream-images will cease.

Question 144: On the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month this year, I engaged in sexual activity. At the time, I did not know that it was a precept day, and only discovered this afterward. I feel deeply ashamed: ashamed before my guru and the compassionate blessings and protection of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas; ashamed before sentient beings; and ashamed that I had not let go of all illusory things and had missed a good opportunity.

Answer: Ah, my good child! Everyone has sexual desire. Especially when one's practice deepens, the seeds of sexual desire surge up, and one feels distressed. Since you have told me the truth, I shall teach you a method for dissolving it.

Question 145: This disciple's sexual desire is intense. Following my honored teacher's instructions, I have used two methods to counter it: first, contemplation of impurity; second, dispersal and redirection. Yet in the course of applying these remedies, I sometimes lapse. I know that I should repent, but I cannot arouse a mind of repentance. I do not know what to do. I ask my honored teacher for instruction.

Answer: Intense sexual desire is unavoidable for young men and women alike. But if you can clear the mind and sit quietly, using the mind to influence the body, it can gradually be eliminated. If this is truly impossible, you may also marry. Learning Buddhism differs according to the individual; there is no need to force yourself.

Question 146: This disciple knows that one cannot become a Buddha without eliminating sexual desire. At present, my sexual desire is very slight.

Answer: It is good that you know this. How old are you now? Has your sexual desire truly become slight? Do your private parts still become erect at night?

Question 147: When I meditate diligently and my vital essence and energy are abundant, the desires in my mind also become stronger.

Answer: Poor child! In this desire realm, all sentient beings have very strong sexual desire; that is why they cannot end birth and death. You are only a young man of

twenty-four. How could sexual desire fail to stir? But as we study Buddhism and cultivate the Way, we must deeply understand that this is the root of birth and death. Unless sexual desire is cut off, one can never become a Buddha.

When vital energy is abundant and sexual desire is strong, the mind is not pure. How can one enter samādhi? There are therefore two ways of dealing with this. One is to understand deeply the dangers of sexual desire, fear it as one would snakes and scorpions, and not dare let the mind stir. Meditate carefully and enter deeply into dhyāna, thereby dissolving sexual desire into emptiness. The other is that, if sexual desire is truly too intense, one may as well marry first.

But you must continue to meditate carefully and diligently, increasing the power of samādhi. Use the mind to dispel bodily needs and dissolve sexual desire into emptiness. If practitioners of the Way meditate and practice well, each time a married couple has sexual relations, sexual desire will grow lighter; before they reach their thirties or forties, sexual desire will vanish completely. The patriarchs of Tibet's White, Flower, and Black schools all did this. But you must absolutely not indulge your desires!

In short, everyone has sexual desire; it depends on how one removes it. If one's resolve for the Way is strong and one practices meditation diligently, using the power of the mind to dissolve bodily demands, sexual desire will be unable to raise its head. This is how I dissolved my own sexual desire, and I hope that you can do the same. If you cannot, I hope that during marital relations you can dissolve and cut off sexual desire, and realize the great Way. My good child, never become immersed in sexual desire!!!

Question 148: After returning from Shanghai, while practicing the four mudrās, I experienced the stirring of subtle seeds of emotional and sexual attachment during meditation, but they have now disappeared. (Master's comment: Have they truly disappeared?) Only after entering deeply into dhyāna do I occasionally see people and events that I encountered in the past. (Master's comment: Do not let them linger in your mind.

) I feel that as my practice advances, I occasionally experience a trace of sexual desire. (Master's comment: If your practice has advanced, is there still sexual desire?) But at such times I know it and immediately dissolve it. (Master's comment: Being able to dissolve it means that you have truly advanced.) At times I do not dream, nor do thoughts of sexual desire stir during sleep, yet without being aware of it I have nocturnal emissions (for approximately a month).

Answer: Seminal leakage is a great taboo in practice. You are still young, and emotional and sexual desire has not yet been purified, so nocturnal emission is unavoidable. I will now teach you a method to secure the gate of seminal essence.

Do it once each morning and evening. First, exhale the turbid air in your chest and abdomen through your mouth. Then close your mouth, contract the anus, and inhale through the nose. After inhaling fully, hold the breath without exhaling or inhaling; then exhale and relax the anus.

Let the length of the breath retention be natural; do not force it. The movements should be slow—the slower, the better. Do this thirty times. While doing it, do not entertain sexual thoughts, or it will not easily be effective. If you feel tightness in the chest, do four or five repetitions, then stop to rest or walk about. After several minutes, continue.

Question 149: After practicing the method for securing seminal essence that you taught for one month, should I continue practicing it? How long should the thirty repetitions take?

Answer: It is best to continue, because your mind is not yet firm. The duration depends on your own lung capacity and the length of time you can hold your breath; it cannot be the same for everyone. Nor should you force yourself to hold your breath. You must proceed gradually and slowly—the slower, the better.

Question 150: During meditation, I feel lightness and ease, with no thoughts, and feel that body and mind dissolve into emptiness. Sometimes I only feel that time passes very quickly, with a very subtle clear, ever-present knowing, but it cannot shine forth brightly, like the instant before falling asleep. Is this sinking into emptiness and annihilation? Is feeling comfortable falling into a fixed pattern?

Answer: When body and mind dissolve into emptiness, it is not that there is no awareness; rather, there remains a subtle, clear knowing. This is not falling into empty annihilation. Feeling comfortable without abiding in that feeling is not falling into a fixed pattern either. Only if one abides in the comfort and delights in it tirelessly does one fall into a fixed pattern.

Question 151: I have a stomach ailment. When I meditate, I feel bloated and uncomfortable in my stomach.

Answer: There are two possible causes. First, your sitting posture is incorrect: your waist is bent over and pressing on that area. Second, you are holding the mantra too tightly. Recite the mantra as though it were there and not there, and the qi will no longer become bloated. Since you have a stomach ailment, you should not sit for long periods; instead, recite the Great Compassion Mantra more. When you are ill, you may practice while leaning against a sofa, or sit for a shorter time. Resume your regular practice once you have recovered.

Keep the mudrā at a 45-degree angle to the body, relaxed, and do not let it droop. While recuperating, do not practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, because that practice requires two hours. While recuperating, recite the Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra instead; the time may be shorter, which is more convenient.

Question 152: When meditating, my head feels swollen. Is that good?

Answer: Yes. It means the qi is moving, but it has not yet passed through. Once it has passed through, the swelling will cease. After the swelling comes pain; once the pain has passed, it will break through. Sometimes your head may make cracking sounds. This is all qi moving.

Question 153: When I meditate, I encounter obstructions in the qi channels.

Answer: You practiced qigong in the past, did you not? Many people who practice qigong have this obstruction. You must forget about qi. When qi arises, pay no attention to it. Buddhism differs from qigong: Buddhism cultivates the mind-ground, whereas qigong is attached to the body. You should become empty and pure; qi is only a byproduct. Blood is transported by qi; if qi does not move, blood will not circulate through the vessels. When reciting the mantra, simply listen to the mantra and do not attend to the qi. If you attend to the qi, deviations will arise. Let it move on its own, however it wishes to move. Do not control or direct it with your conscious mind.

Question 154: During meditation, when I cannot bring forth the mantra, my mind becomes very pure. Suddenly, there is a flash of light before me, and then it disappears again, like the sun emerging briefly from behind the clouds. At times it is like a flash of lightning, and my whole body feels as though it were bound by something.

Answer: That momentary brightness means that your mind has opened a slight fissure, like a lotus flower opening just a little and emitting a little light. This is the luminosity of your true nature. Feeling as though something is binding you indicates that you practiced in a previous life but did not see your true nature. Had you seen your true nature, this would not happen. Some people feel as though they are boring into a dark hole and cannot get out; this too is a sensation arising from practice in a previous life that did not break through.

Question 155: Sometimes, while meditating, I experience an extremely strong feeling of bliss. If it lasts a long time, it arouses sexual desire. How should this be handled?

Answer: Do not abide in that bliss. In meditative absorption there may be three conditions—emptiness, bliss, and luminosity—but one must not abide in any of

them. If you abide in bliss, you cannot leave the desire realm. Let go of the feeling of bliss and pay no attention to it. Emptiness belongs to the formless realm, bliss to the desire realm, and luminosity to the form realm. Once there is any abiding, one cannot leave the three realms.

Question 156: Sometimes during meditation, I perceive things like flowers, so numerous that they are beyond count.

Answer: Those flowers are the light of your true nature, transformations of the sixth consciousness. Pay no attention to either good or bad appearances. You must not become attached to appearances; otherwise, possessing entities may enter your body.

Question 157: One day while meditating, qi suddenly surged upward. Sometimes, after awakening from sleep in the morning, my head makes a sound like a balloon bursting.

Answer: There is no need for concern. During meditation, pure qi rises and turbid qi descends; the qi channels are being opened, and changes naturally occur in the body. But do not abide in this qi or pay attention to it. Then it will not become swollen and stuck there. Think of the centers of the soles of your feet, and the qi can be led downward.

Question 158: At a time of extreme quietude during meditation, a sheet of light suddenly flashed forth. I split into two people: one was reciting the mantra, while the other went out to attend to social affairs. Knowing it to be an illusion, I awoke, and the one who had gone out merged with the one reciting the mantra.

Answer: Knowing an illusion to be an illusion, you depart from it and will not fall into deviation. If you took it to be real, you would enter demonic states.

Question 159: Once, when I had been meditating for nearly two hours, my whole person seemed to melt and dissolve.

Answer: When one enters samādhi through practice, there is a feeling of dissolving into emptiness. This is because all things are illusory appearances, sustained entirely by body and mind, and one must not mistake the delusory for something truly existent. Therefore, once the deluded mind dissolves, the illusory appearances no longer exist.

Question 160: During meditation, I strongly wish to dissolve my body into emptiness, yet I repeatedly fail to do so.

Answer: Having this wish itself is attachment to appearances. You should not cling to it.

Question 161: At a time of extreme quietude during meditation, a sheet of light suddenly flashed forth. It was not very bright. At such times, I recite the mantra with the mind attending and the ears listening, without becoming attached to this.

Answer: Continue diligently and make progress. Especially after leaving the meditation cushion, diligently maintain contemplation and do not cling to any state whatsoever. Once the six sense faculties are purified, you will emit great radiance, illuminating the ten directions.

Question 162: Once, during my morning practice of the fourth mudrā, my mind was very pure. Above the space between my eyebrows, there was a ball of light the size of a ping-pong ball, shining brightly. The feeling at that time was difficult to express in words.

Answer: “When the mind is still, light arises.” This is precisely the luminosity of your true nature. Because the mind is pure, it opens through slightly, and a faint radiance appears. Do not become attached to it or rejoice over it. Practice with even greater diligence.

Question 163: Once, while practicing the second mudrā, I suddenly felt that someone was holding a pure-water vase and pouring its water down from the crown of my head. It felt as though the water flowed throughout my entire body, and in an instant I entered samādhi.

Answer: Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva has come to confer empowerment upon you. But do not become attached to appearances; attachment to appearances leads to demonic states.

Question 164: During the last seven-day retreat, the Master gave teachings, and I understood them very clearly. Others see lights and states, but I see nothing. The Master said that this was best. But I thought he was merely encouraging me, and that I still had not attained the state he described: “Having nothing at all is the best state.”

Answer: If you understand that the pure light of mind in a single thought is the dharmakāya (Dharma body) Buddha, you are a person of great wisdom. Not seeing lights or visions really is best; this is not merely encouragement. The dharmakāya (Dharma body) is formless: there is only numinous knowing free of thoughts. Therefore, having nothing appear is best.

Question 165: When I enter samādhi, I seem to emit light like a mirror, and everything disappears. Is this attachment to appearances?

Answer: This is the light of your own true nature; it is not attachment to appearances. Our Buddha-nature emits light like a mirror. We cannot see it because

attachment and afflictions obscure this luminosity. When your mind is settled, your true nature naturally emits light. The luminosity of our true nature is the same as the light of Amitābha Buddha; it can brightly illuminate the great thousandfold world.

Question 166: In samādhi, I saw a tall figure resembling a Buddha or bodhisattva, seated cross-legged with large, thick legs. Beneath the seat, a naked infant climbed laboriously and repeatedly upward, grasping the large legs with both hands. At the same time, I felt very tired.

Answer: That large figure is yourself. The arduous, repeated climbing reflects the difficult course of eliminating habitual tendencies.

Question 167: Can one hear external sounds while in samādhi?

Answer: In genuine samādhi, external sounds cannot be heard. If you can still hear sounds, you have not entered samādhi. In genuine samādhi there is no seeing and no hearing, but this is not an absence of awareness. There is clear, distinct awareness without attachment to seeing or hearing. Seeing things or hearing sounds means that one has not entered samādhi, or has entered it only partially.

In samādhi, even if you walk along a busy street, you will not hear the sounds of vehicles, yet you will still walk as usual. When practice reaches this level, spiritual powers are about to manifest. You will be able to hear even very faint sounds: the sound of ants crawling, and even the sound of rain falling in worlds in other directions. When functioning arises, all can be heard. Therefore, the Sixth Patriarch said, “Without departing from the conditions of seeing and hearing, one transcends them and ascends to the Buddha-ground.” Use them fully, yet let the mind remain entirely unattached.

Question 168: After I sit down to meditate, sometimes I cannot bring up the mantra. As soon as I try to bring it up, I feel as though I lack the strength to do so. What is the reason?

Answer: Regarding mantra recitation, some people now say that reciting a mantra adds another task and is troublesome, so it is better to let go of the mantra and not recite it. This is a serious error. In practice, one should be wholehearted while seated in meditation and maintain continuous and seamless contemplation after leaving the meditation cushion. It must be this way. You must understand that the mantra is a tool for sweeping away our deluded thoughts.

If you do not wish to recite the mantra and dislike it, that itself is a deluded thought. It means that your mind is disordered. If you do not recite the mantra, you are thinking of greed, anger, and ignorance. You cannot manage not to give rise to

thoughts. The mind moves about in disorder: if it is not this, then it is that; it is chaotic beyond measure. Thus Chan patriarchs said, “Before one affair is over, another has already arrived”: one concern follows another without end.

If you do not use the tool of the mantra to transform deluded thoughts, how can those thoughts ever come to rest? If there truly were no deluded thoughts, body, mind, and world would all be empty, and nothing would remain. Since you have not yet become empty, and body, mind, world, and states still remain, deluded thoughts are still present.

To find mantra recitation troublesome is truly confused! If you continue in this way, you will never be free of it in the future. Practice diligently. Bring up the mantra until it can no longer be brought up; only then has it been transformed away. The mantra must fall away without your noticing it; only that is genuine non-recitation. Intentionally not reciting it will not do.

When the mantra naturally falls away, there are two possibilities. One is that you have fallen asleep. You drift off in a daze, and of course you are no longer reciting it; this will not do. The other is that you have entered samādhi. The deluded mind no longer moves, and the mind that recites the mantra is no more. When the mind that can recite and the mantra that is recited both fall away at once, one sees one’s true nature.

If you have fallen asleep or become drowsy, what use is that? There is a way to test for drowsiness: see whether our mudrā has drooped or come apart. If the mudrā droops or comes apart and the mantra cannot be recited, then you are asleep, and it is of no use. When one truly enters samādhi, the mudrā neither droops nor comes apart; even when the body dissolves into emptiness, the mudrā still neither droops nor comes apart.

That is true entry into samādhi. If you refrain from reciting because you find it troublesome, quickly rouse yourself and resume recitation. If you are drowsy, quickly form the mudrā, open your eyes, and recite the mantra aloud to dispel the demon of sleep. After driving away the sleep demon, resume reciting the mantra softly.

Question 169: Sometimes I feel very tired from reciting the mantra and cannot continue. Should I still recite under such circumstances?

Answer: In such circumstances, you should still recite. Do not be too tense; relax a little. If you are very tired and cannot recite, your mind is not clear and pure. After entering samādhi, you will not be tired but will feel very relaxed, as though your body were about to fly.

Question 170: What does it mean when, through diligent practice, one experiences states?

Answer: The master countered with a question: “What states do you have?”

×× was speechless. (The master’s single question cut off all further words.)

After a long while, ×× answered, “I have no particular states.” (Yet there remained a mind seeking profundity and a mind of grasping and rejecting.)

The master prompted him: “Putting on clothes and eating, working and studying, your wife and children, the mountains, rivers, and earth—are these not all your states?!”

×× immediately gained insight. —Questions and Answers of Master Yuanyin

Question 171: When I am not working, I can still observe my thoughts. When I am working, however, they run wild like unbridled horses. What should I do?

Answer: When you are working and the mind becomes scattered, shout, “Stop!” Take one minute, then resume your work. Whenever you forget to maintain awareness, shout, “Stop!” Stopping for a moment will not interfere with your work. It is best to shout “Stop!” dozens of times each day. Once contemplation has become familiar, that will be sufficient.

Question 172: Nowadays, I sometimes no longer seem to have the mind of contemplation that I had before. What is the reason for this?

Answer: Previously, your contemplation was still unfamiliar, so you had to apply your mind to sustain it. Now that it has become more familiar, you no longer need to exert yourself to sustain it. If you often forget, however, you should still make some effort to sustain it; you must adjust it skillfully. It is like our recitation of the mantra: when it is unfamiliar, one must recite it attentively and clearly. Once it becomes familiar, if one is inattentive, one becomes slack—the mouth recites, but the mind does not.

Once you become slack, it is not easy to enter samādhi; the body will not dissolve into emptiness, and the mantra becomes separated from thought, allowing thoughts to flow on. Therefore, when reciting the mantra, listen to it clearly and gather in your thoughts. It does not matter if you recite slowly; when the time comes, they will naturally fall away. Do not entertain the deluded thought, “I want to dissolve into emptiness.” Then you will naturally enter samādhi.

Question 173: Sometimes, while sitting in meditation and maintaining contemplation, I have something to do, but there is a force that prevents me from

moving, so I remain seated there.

Answer: This means that your contemplation has acquired a certain power of meditative stability. But when something needs to be done, you should still do it. Be lively and responsive; do not become rigidly fixed there, so that a single movement makes you leave samādhi. It is good to have less worldly sentimentality, but matters still need to be attended to.

Question 174: After meditation, I feel extremely light and at ease, unaware of having a body. My eyesight has also improved, and I feel qi surging upward at the baihui point on the crown of my head.

Answer: Pay no attention to any changes; let them take their natural course, and there will be no deviation. During practice, the physical body naturally undergoes changes, but they must not be pursued.

(III) The Stirring of Karmic Seeds, Contemplation Off the Meditation Cushion, Realizing One's True Nature, and Safeguarding Realization

Question 175: When practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, what should one do when karmic seeds stir up with great intensity and become unbearable?

Answer: Do not be afraid. You need only recite the mantra aloud, and the seeds will dissolve away. After hundreds and thousands of such upheavals, you will be able to directly realize immovability.

Question 176: Sometimes karmic seeds stir violently during meditation; sometimes an entire session is very empty and clear; and sometimes there is an indescribable oppression and discomfort in the mind. Why is this?

Answer: The seeds cannot be completely eliminated all at once. You must continually temper yourself amid circumstances, so you must not become careless or proud. Until your practice has reached the point of fruition, there will inevitably be fluctuations and reversals. Therefore, you must strive diligently and not become lax!

Question 177: If I continually practice the fourth mudrā, can I completely clear away the seeds?

Answer: No. You must also temper yourself amid circumstances. However, seated meditation and Dharma practice can help you see through circumstances. Seated meditation cultivates samādhi, while tempering oneself amid circumstances cultivates wisdom. It is best to cultivate samādhi and wisdom together.

Question 178: After practicing for a certain period, I repeatedly experience a feeling as though my heart were being cut by knives, along with irritability and anxiety. How should this be treated?

Answer: The seeds in ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) are stirring, which is why you have these sensations. Practice is not always smooth sailing. If you patiently make your way through this turbulent stage, a fresh prospect will open up, like another village appearing beyond dark willows and bright flowers. When you feel distressed, reciting the mantra aloud will also make it easier to get through the difficulty.

Question 179: In my practice, physical weakness and mental irritation often cause me to advance and retreat. Should I persist in adding meditation sessions?

Answer: This cannot be avoided. Before your practice reaches the ground of immovability, the afflictive phenomenon of advancing and retreating will always occur, because the seeds in the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) are activated and stirred up by the fire of prajñā. When the seeds stir, it is very uncomfortable. You feel as though you are retreating: you cannot stand, sit, or sleep comfortably.

At such times, you must hold fast and not be frightened; you must see through it. In fact, this is progress. You may add practice of the third mudrā and recite the mantra aloud. But if you truly feel that your body cannot endure it, you should also relax somewhat and reduce the duration of your meditation. Practice is like rowing upstream: if you do not advance, you retreat. You must seize the time and practice diligently!

Question 180: During the few days before each menstrual period, I clearly feel that my mental strength is insufficient. Unlike usual, I cannot sustain contemplation and want to go outside. This time, I even wanted to speak of others' faults. I clearly knew that I should not be this way, yet I could not control myself and was instead turned by external circumstances. I am truly ashamed and have failed to live up to the master's teachings.

Answer: This is a physiological reaction; do not worry about it. Just go outside for a walk and clear your mind. When women reach menopause, physiological reactions are especially strong. This is particularly so for those who practice diligently, because their seeds stir intensely and they are even less able to maintain mastery. Once this phase has passed, it will not matter. Contemplation should be neither too loose nor too tight; do not make it overly tight.

Question 181: After meditation, I feel that I do not sleep very well, and I also have dreams.

Answer: Just do not sleep too heavily. Dreaming means that the seeds are stirring; it is a good thing.

Question 182: How should the stirring of karmic seeds be subdued?

Answer: Studying and practicing the Buddhadharma is not always smooth sailing. Until one's practice is complete, there will be reversals and repetitions; it proceeds wave after wave in this way. You must urge yourself not to follow the deluded thoughts stirred up by the seeds. Therefore, the great Chan masters of the past all recited the heart mantra of the Śūraṅgama Mantra, using it to subdue these seeds.

The worst seed is sexual desire. It is the deepest root of birth and death; once this root is cut, all is well. If the seeds are stirring intensely, do not meditate; simply recite the mantra. You may also go out to clear your mind, and then return to meditation once it has passed. There are too many seeds in our ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna), so even after realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature, one still cannot yet transcend birth and death.

Many people who have realized the mind and seen their true nature still make mistakes, because seeds lie latent within them. When they encounter conditions, the seeds manifest in activity and emerge. Therefore, you must understand this principle and temper yourself amid circumstances, wearing the seeds away completely.

Question 183: I have practiced this Dharma for six months now and respectfully ask the master for instruction on several questions. After meditating for a period, I become irritable. My mind is agitated and confused, and I am prone to anger involuntarily; afterward, I deeply regret it. This irritability has occurred several times and caused me to stop meditating twice, for a total of five days. It seems that I can never get past this hurdle. During the last session or two, I have also felt somewhat irritable while meditating. How should I deal with this?

Answer: This is caused by an unsettled mind and the stirring of karmic seeds. At such times, you may recite the mantra aloud to pass this hurdle. You must never stop meditating and cease practice.

Question 184: Although I have added meditation sessions, my afflictions do not seem to have diminished much. Moreover, I often feel oppressed and gloomy, weary of others and resentful of myself. Is this because I have been sitting too long?

Answer: Meditation should be a pleasure, free of afflictions. Instead, you feel desperately distressed; things have gone in the opposite direction. You seem to need a change: spend some time outdoors enjoying the scenery, then return to meditation. Talk more with trusted friends; a heart-to-heart conversation is also a

useful way to restore balance. Prescribe medicine to suit the illness: there is no single fixed method.

In short, when practicing diligently in meditation, your state of mind should be calm, settled, and comfortable, without afflictions. Even if the seeds are stirring and you feel at a loss as to whether to advance or retreat, reciting the mantra aloud for a while will enable you to remain safe and at ease. Your "weariness of others and resentment of yourself" arise because habitual tendencies of narrow-mindedness have resurfaced. Quickly rebuke yourself and let go of all these improper bad habits.

Question 185: Recently I encountered some adverse conditions that made my deluded thoughts fly about in anger. I am sick of it all and want to move away quickly to the Pure Land. Although I understand that all dharmas are illusory, I still have hopes and fears.

Answer: Alas! To become a Buddha is not to seek comfort and happiness, but not to fear hardship. For a Buddha enters the world to liberate sentient beings; a Buddha does not become weary of the world and flee from it. The Buddha is the Honored One Complete in the Two Accumulations. If you do not endure hardship, how can you accumulate merit and virtue? Without merit and virtue, how can you become a Buddha, much less transcend the six realms? Therefore, if you wish to leave suffering behind, you must not fear suffering. Only by tempering yourself amid hardship can you completely eliminate attachment and restore the luminosity of your original nature.

Question 186: I once argued with someone over a trivial matter. I knew at the time that it was wrong, but could not restrain myself. This came from my narrow-mindedness and concern for saving face, both serious obstacles in Dharma practice. What should I do?

Answer: Your contemplation is not yet effective. Everyone has habitual tendencies involving concern for saving face, but this is most foolish: for the sake of an insubstantial reputation, we drag ourselves into birth and death. What should you do? Let go of it at once.

Question 187: Should one not be too anxious about eliminating habitual tendencies? Being anxious is itself a habitual tendency.

Answer: Correct! Do not be anxious. If your mind is empty, will there still be unwholesome behavior? To speak of counteracting them is already to fall into an inferior approach. When the mind stirs, simply say, "Pah!" and that is all.

Question 188: As long as one keeps the mind empty and pure at all times, and practices "when thoughts arise, do not follow them," that is enough. In fact, there is

no such thing as “habitual tendencies,” is there?

Answer: Habitual tendencies consist in clinging to circumstances and being turned by them. If you can refrain from being turned by circumstances, habitual tendencies will naturally be eliminated.

Question 189: After realizing one’s original nature, the most difficult thing is to eliminate habitual tendencies. I had always thought that I could let go of fame and gain, but when I heard that I could take the graduate-school entrance examination free of charge, my mind stirred. For several days, as soon as I sat down to meditate, I was troubled by the thought, “Should I go or not?”

Answer: This is called “failing to cut off what should be cut off, and thereby suffering from its confusion.” All states are like flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water; they cannot be grasped. We simply play amid them, neither clinging to them nor abandoning them. It is all right not to do it; what is there to be unable to let go of? To study Buddhism, one must be free and at ease: sit when it is time to sit, walk when it is time to walk, utterly without constraint. Only then is there nonobstruction.

Question 190: What should one do when one sometimes cannot help becoming angry?

Answer: When anger arises, recite the mantra. When thoughts arise, do not abide in them; when thoughts arise, do not cling to them.

Question 191: I have practiced this Dharma for about a hundred meditation sessions. Because my karmic habits are deeply rooted, my meditative stability is still very poor. Yet I feel that I have made progress: inwardly I am much more settled and calm than before.

Answer: That is not bad. Your efforts will not have been in vain. Moreover, since you are practicing such a great Dharma, how could there be no progress at all? Do not be impatient in your practice; you must persist patiently before there can be accomplishment. Our habitual tendencies accumulated over innumerable lives and kalpas are deeply rooted; they cannot be eliminated in a short time so that one directly realizes the Buddha Way. Apply yourself diligently!

Question 192: If one practices the Dharma with sincerity, then when wisdom opens, will karmic obstacles be eliminated? Yet since arousing the resolve is primary in practicing the Dharma, one cannot help being concerned about this. I respectfully ask for your instruction.

Answer: If you truly practice the Dharma with sincerity and dissolve deluded thoughts into emptiness, then when even the mind is absent, what obstacles could

there be? So-called obstacles are all mischief made by the deluded mind. If you truly resolve to study Buddhism, you will naturally be able to practice the Dharma sincerely. Above all, avoid empty talk, arrogance, and self-conceit.

Question 193: In my present practice, I take steady and prudent progress as my principle. After meditation, I pay attention to diet and sufficient rest, considering these helpful supports. Does this amount to attachment to the body?

Answer: In practicing the Dharma, one should naturally take care of the physical body. This is what is meant by using the provisional to cultivate the true. How could it be considered attachment to the body?

Question 194: This week I feel that my obstacles are heavy. I have been practicing the second mudrā every day and plan to continue for one or two weeks. Is that acceptable?

Answer: Yes. More important is to understand what "heavy obstacles" means. "Obstacles" are not some thing that you can take out and look at. Thus, obstacles are illusory; it is still the mind—it is the mind clinging to appearances. The mind has still not died completely. When the mind has died completely, there will be strength.

Therefore, the woman Āntizhe asked Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, "Knowing clearly that birth and death are fundamentally empty, why do I nevertheless undergo the cycle of birth and death?" Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva said, "Your strength is not yet sufficient." Where does this strength come from? The key is that the mind must die completely. If you truly know that everything in this world is false and empty, then strength will naturally arise.

But if the mind is not pure, has not died completely, and has not truly known that this intrinsic nature is neither defiled nor pure, neither arising nor ceasing, then it will not do. Thus, one's understanding at the level of principle is still insufficient. The Chan school says: only after a great death can there be a great life. If you do not die thoroughly, or are half dead and half alive, it will not do! Therefore, we must never cling to appearances.

Question 195: How should one safeguard it?

Answer: Awakening is not difficult, but safeguarding it is not easy. If you do not safeguard it, you will follow your thoughts; scattered thoughts will fly about, and all kinds of confused matters will arise. Therefore, you must safeguard it continuously and seamlessly in order to extinguish deluded habitual tendencies. But safeguarding awareness must not become rigid, much less attached. With just one moment of awareness, bring yourself back—that is enough. This is "when thoughts arise, do not follow them."

External affairs are all like flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water. The Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment says, “Knowing these to be flowers in empty space, there is then no cycling through rebirth.” Dependent arising is empty in nature. Know that everything is false, and do not follow deluded thoughts. Let everything accord with conditions: if the causes and conditions are thus, then act accordingly. Go ahead and do things, yet do not let the mind stir in the least; do everything for sentient beings without letting the mind cling.

If you can practice in this way at all times, then within only a few years, “the skin will all fall away, leaving only one reality exposed.” You will then radiate great light, and spiritual powers will manifest. Yet you must not cling to spiritual powers either. After recognizing the original nature, one has not yet returned to the source. When you follow thoughts, you must be like a cowherd, striking the ox with a whip.

Which patriarch did not practice in this way? When practice of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma brings a breakthrough and we see intrinsic nature, it is no different from the state in which not a single thought arises and knowing is clear and distinct. Yet direct realization must actually occur: ‘Ah! There is nothing at all, yet knowing is clear and distinct.’ Awakening can be readily approached, but safeguarding it continuously and seamlessly is not the work of a day or two.

After Chan Master Jia Shan awakened under Chan Master Chuanzi, he immediately went into the mountains to safeguard his realization for eighteen years. After recognizing one’s intrinsic nature, sitting in meditation is different from sitting before one has recognized it. After recognition, sitting in meditation is safeguarding it. When thoughts arise, do not heed them. In walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, safeguard it at every moment; safeguard yourself from clinging to appearances.

Question 196: During meditation, settle the mind and practice the Dharma; off the cushion, maintain continuous and seamless contemplation, allowing intrinsic nature to remain manifest at all times. If one continues in this way, awakening will naturally occur when the time and conditions are ripe. Is this understanding correct?

Answer: This understanding is correct.

Question 197: How should the latter half of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma be practiced?

Answer: Observe where thoughts arise. Do not turn with thoughts, and do not let the mind be stirred when differentiated circumstances appear before you. This is the Chan school’s practice of safeguarding one’s intrinsic nature. By practicing in this way, one can also be liberated from birth and death.

Question 198: Regarding “the mind recites and the ears hear,” I feel that if I attend both to “the ears hearing” and to “the mind reciting,” the mind easily becomes confused. What, ultimately, should I do?

Answer: Hearing with the ears is the nature that is capable of hearing; it does not mean attending to the physical ears. Thus, when the ears hear the mind reciting the sound of the mantra, deluded thoughts do not arise.

Question 199: The purpose of practicing the Dharma is to realize the mind and see one’s true nature. After seeing one’s true nature, one can understand the true aspect of all dharmas and thus no longer become confused and inverted, creating karma and undergoing karmic retribution. The key to practice is that the mind recites and the ears hear, without regard for any bodily sensations. Simply recite the mantra with complete clarity; in the end, dissolve even the mantra, and only solitary numinous knowing and awareness remain. Yet one must not cling even to that. Is this correct?

Answer: Yes. When deluded thoughts dissolve into emptiness, the mantra can no longer be recited. At that very moment, the sense faculties and their objects suddenly fall away, the world dissolves into emptiness, and true nature immediately appears before you.

Question 200: Does “when thoughts arise, do not follow them” amount to suppressing thoughts?

Answer: No.

Question 201: When I first met the master, I felt that I was originally a Buddha. Thus, in the instant of a single clap, I understood that my intrinsic nature is originally empty. But after some time, afflictions arose again.

Answer: Alas. Recite the mantra aloud to redirect them.

Question 202: When thoughts arise, I unconsciously try to suppress them. Is that right?

Answer: You must not suppress thoughts. Let them function freely, but do not be turned by them and do not heed them. This is called, “The green mountains originally do not move; let the white clouds come and go.” The problem is not that thoughts arise, but that you follow them. It is not a matter of suppressing thoughts so that they do not arise; rather, do not linger in any thought. This is no-thought. As the Sixth Patriarch said, “No-thought means, amid thoughts, to be free from thoughts.”

One moves from inferential cognition to direct cognition. Inferential cognition involves knowing and discrimination, whereas in direct cognition the mind remains unmoved. This differs somewhat from a mirror reflecting objects. A mirror reflects objects without distinguishing good from bad, but we know good and bad, beauty and ugliness, while the mind remains unmoved. When one's practice reaches this point, it is sufficient. But one must see one's true nature; without seeing it, this cannot be accomplished. Thus, it is very difficult to practice in a lively and vital way.

Question 203: Please instruct us on "when thoughts arise, do not follow them" and "no discrimination whatsoever."

Answer: "When thoughts arise, do not follow them" does not mean that you should become a fool who cannot even distinguish good from bad or right from wrong. It means knowing without abiding or clinging; this is the first stage of practice. The second stage is "no discrimination whatsoever." This means being skilled at distinguishing the myriad objective phenomena while remaining unmoved in the highest truth. That is, one knows right and wrong, long and short, gain and loss, but the mind does not move and is neither influenced nor defiled by anything.

Question 204: When I contemplate after meditation, sometimes not a single thought arises. But after a while I forget, and once I forget, I follow deluded thoughts.

Answer: When not a single thought arises during correct contemplation, the numinous knowing that knows this absence of thought is intrinsic nature itself. If you forget after a while, quickly bring yourself back and do not be turned by thoughts.

Question 205: Ordinarily I know that I should not cling to appearances, but when something happens, I forget.

Answer: What use is that? This is because you understand only a little principle but have not genuinely cultivated it. You should quickly correct this: practice diligently, meditate more, and engage in continuous and seamless contemplation.

Question 206: Please speak about "contemplating at all times."

Answer: We have an immense number of thoughts; in a single instant, there can be many thoughts. This is because there are so many seeds stored in our ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna)—both good and bad. For example, when we see a banana, if we use only eye consciousness and not discriminating consciousness, a banana is simply a banana. The eyes are like a camera.

If we use discriminating consciousness, then upon seeing a banana we think, "This is a banana. It is delicious. This one is large; that one is small." Thus, once discriminating consciousness is employed, a discriminating mind arises. The ear

faculty is the same. When consciousness follows along, information from the sixth consciousness is passed to manas consciousness, which then passes it to the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna), where seeds are formed. Therefore, we must maintain contemplation at all times. Contemplation means knowing the moment a thought stirs and not paying attention to it; one must contemplate the place from which thoughts arise.

Question 207: Does “abiding and safeguarding” mean regularly bringing this clear, aware, numinous, and still state of no-thought into accord with circumstances encountered in human affairs, guarding and protecting it? Or, as soon as a thought arises, should one swiftly turn the light inward and empty it, thereby according with emptiness?

Answer: Correct! When responding to circumstances and engaging with things, there is only the thought appropriate to the matter at hand, with no second thought. Afterward, leave no thought behind, as though nothing had been done. This is the practice of non-abiding and non-attachment.

Question 208: When hearing sounds, should one merely hear the question, “Who is hearing the sound?” At times there seems to be a state close to thoughtlessness and empty clarity, yet with awareness; but then it turns and is lost again. Should one take responsibility for the first? How should one take responsibility for it?

Answer: Asking ‘Who hears the sound?’ is a practice for before awakening. Once you have realized that the one who hears is your own true master, there is no need to ask. Simply safeguard this recognition without abiding in sounds. There is still less need to add a thought of affirming it; doing so is like putting another head on top of your own.

Question 209: When deluded thoughts are flowing, I often turn the light inward and contemplate the empty luminosity in the interval between “the preceding thought has ceased” and “the following thought has not yet arisen.” Is this good?

Answer: No. Where deluded thoughts cease is itself the empty luminosity of intrinsic nature; there is no need to give rise to another thought in order to contemplate it.

Question 210: Because I am busy with work, my power of contemplation is sometimes insufficient. I therefore use the Dzogchen (Great Perfection) method of “cutting” off thoughts several dozen times a day. In the midst of confusion, this seems to give me somewhat greater mastery than before.

Answer: This simple Chan method is most suitable for busy people. If you can practice it several dozen times every day, then as the days pass and your practice

deepens, it will naturally become continuous and undivided without your even noticing it, and you will return home to sit securely.

Question 211: The off-cushion method of “cutting” off thoughts is to shout “Cut!” when one is busy or when the mind has wandered outward and become scattered.

Answer: You do not necessarily have to shout “Cut!” The moment you become aware, that is enough.

Question 212: Off the cushion, I seldom forget to safeguard realization; it is the same whether I am working or resting. Sometimes, when I think of the holy name of Avalokiteśvara or Amitābha Buddha, Buddha-recitation automatically sounds in my ears. Even popular songs do the same. What should I do?

Answer: Pay no attention to any of these sounds in your ears; let them arise and cease on their own.

Question 213: Sometimes I do not notice a thought until I reach its tail end.

Answer: This means that awareness comes too late and your strength is insufficient. You should attend to the huatou (critical phrase): as soon as a thought comes, empty it. If you see it only after the thought has gone around in a circle, then you are looking at the tail of the huatou (critical phrase). Therefore, Chan practitioners say, “Do not fear the arising of thoughts; fear only that awareness comes too late.” The benefit of contemplation is that you know as soon as a thought comes. When circumstances arise, sometimes awareness is before them and sometimes after them. Favorable circumstances are not easily noticed, whereas adverse circumstances are more easily noticed.

Question 214: The discussion of contemplation in the Dharma Gate of Correct Prajñā Contemplation requires one to begin contemplation from the region of the heart, without grasping or rejecting it, in order to avoid illnesses such as high blood pressure caused when certain practitioners concentrate excessively in the head. Is this correct?

Answer: To contemplate the mind is to contemplate the place from which thoughts arise, without following them as they wander. The moment a thought arises, become aware of it; once aware, it is empty. Do not fix yourself on the region of the heart or the head, nor on the dantian or beneath the feet. In mantra recitation, one merely has the mind recite and the ears hear. Do not fix on any location. Tension and relaxation must be adjusted at all times; do not be too tense or too loose.

Question 215: In off-cushion contemplation, one should be clearly aware. I should know clearly what thoughts I have given rise to, correct?

Answer: You should know when a thought arises, but you must not follow it. Do not retain that thought in memory. The moment a thought arises, become aware of it; once aware, it is empty, like drawing on water.

Question 216: How does one contemplate the mind?

Answer: Mind is simply thought. When a thought comes, dissolve it; do not follow it. At first, one dissolves deluded thoughts through mantra recitation: when you see a thought, the thought is gone. When the power of samādhi has strengthened to a certain degree, thoughts dissolve by themselves when they arise, without needing to be dissolved, until there is stillness yet constant illumination, and illumination yet constant stillness. Clear and distinct awareness is illumination; not moving is stillness. When wondrous functioning arises—when responding to circumstances and engaging with things—thoughts arise. When not responding to circumstances, there are no thoughts. This is the best Chan method. Contemplating the mind is the fundamental dharma gate of Buddhism.

Question 217: “Contemplating with Ease” means neither clinging to nor neglecting any matter or thing; everything is simply natural. Like wild geese passing through the vast sky without leaving a trace, one should honestly live from day to day in accordance with circumstances. Is this understanding correct? In addition, my husband and I will begin a seven-day retreat on January 27.

Answer: Your understanding is entirely correct! Simply live honestly from day to day in accordance with circumstances. As it is said, “According with conditions, exhaust old karma; do not create new misfortune.” It is also the ordinary mind of a carefree person of the Way, beyond learning and contrivance: “When hungry, eat; when tired, sleep.”

The two of you are truly admirable! You have awakened at the level of principle, yet you do not neglect actual cultivation. In this bitterly cold season, you still remember to apply yourselves in a seven-day retreat. In the future, you will surely realize the great Way and perfect bodhi.

Question 218: I still do not understand how to begin off-cushion contemplation. At present, there seem to be three ways of beginning contemplation. Please instruct me. (1) Directly contemplate deluded thoughts without grasping or rejecting them. (2) Contemplate the place from which thoughts arise; as soon as a thought arises, become aware of it and do not follow it in grasping at conditions and wandering. (3) Contemplate all things as being like dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows—as impermanent and illusory—and stay far from craving and attachment.

Answer: The first two appear to be two methods, but in fact they are one. For if you can become aware the moment a thought arises, you are directly contemplating

deluded thoughts; otherwise, you could not become aware when a thought arises. Not turning with thoughts is not grasping: when a thought comes, simply do not turn with it. This does not mean suppressing it so that it does not arise, nor does it mean disliking it and casting it aside. Thus, the two are one method. The third is very good. Apart from working with deluded thoughts, one should contemplate circumstances in this way as well.

Question 219: If a disciple uses the third method above, does this accord with the teacher's requirements?

Answer: If you contemplate only circumstances and not the thoughts of the mind, you will follow the flow of thoughts. Deluded thoughts continue to flow even when you are not facing circumstances; as the saying goes, "The thief in one's own house is hard to guard against." It is not the case that, when you are not facing circumstances, not a single thought arises. Thus, it is still of no use. You must contemplate both.

Question 220: Some people say that not abiding in thought after thought is a stage in practice. Yet according to the Master's instruction, not abiding in thought after thought is the great function and great application of intrinsic nature. Please offer further guidance.

Answer: If there is still a thought of "not abiding in thought after thought," then it is not ultimate and must still be dissolved. The "not abiding in thought after thought" of which I speak is functioning: "This very moment is empty," so there is no need deliberately to dissolve anything with the mind.

Question 221: In "illumination yet constant stillness, stillness yet constant illumination," do thoughts ultimately arise or not arise?

Answer: Illumination is functioning; it is not abiding in thought after thought. There is no thought that can be thought and no arising that can arise. Things manifest naturally as they are and respond naturally to circumstances.

Question 222: Is this numinous knowing what we ordinarily safeguard?

Answer: Correct. Safeguard this numinous knowing, not emptiness; do not guard and hold on to a state of emptiness. When thoughts come, do not pay attention to them. Not paying attention to them is numinous knowing.

Question 223: Must we also be clearly aware when doing things?

Answer: Yes! When we recite mantras and hear them with complete clarity, that too is clear and distinct awareness. If the mantra is not clear, it is not so. It is not that there is some separate clear and distinct awareness apart from this. At a certain

point—“Pop!”—there is a release. At the moment of release, there is still clear and distinct awareness, yet nothing at all remains; only the one true nature appears before you.

Question 224: The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch says: “Good friends! There are also those who teach people to sit and watch the mind, contemplating stillness, remaining unmoving and giving rise to nothing. They take this as their practice from then on. Deluded people do not understand and become attached to this, thereby becoming deranged. There are many such people. To teach in this manner is a great error.” How are these two points not contradictory?

Answer: “Watching the mind and contemplating stillness, remaining unmoving and giving rise to nothing” means suppressing thoughts so that they do not arise; therefore, it is a great error. What I now call contemplation means watching the place from which deluded thoughts arise and not following them, not suppressing thoughts so that they do not arise. Thus, they are different and there is no contradiction.

Question 225: Ordinary practice is nothing other than extinguishing delusion and revealing truth. Yet the Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment says: “Good sons, all bodhisattvas and sentient beings of the degenerate age should, at all times, not give rise to deluded thoughts; yet with regard to deluded mind, they should not seek to extinguish it.” This seems to leave one unable to gain a hold. Therefore, in ordinary contemplation and in quietly sitting to contemplate the mind, I always feel that neither side is right. I cannot determine a specific method, and I fear both the arising of thoughts and the error of suppressing them.

Answer: I tell you to contemplate the mind and not follow thoughts; this is not giving rise to deluded thoughts. Ordinarily, do not deliberately generate thoughts or grasp outwardly at conditions; but when deluded thoughts arise, do not cling to them either. The moment a thought arises, become aware of it. Do not pursue it or suppress it. Simply know it clearly and distinctly, without giving rise to discrimination. This is the method of practice meant by “yet, with regard to deluded mind, do not seek to extinguish it.”

Question 226: After getting up from the cushion, when the mind arises in response to circumstances and is turned by those circumstances, how should one practice?

Answer: After you come down from the meditation cushion, you must maintain continuous contemplation at all times. This is even more difficult, because people all chase after circumstances. Just after coming down from the cushion, you still retain a meditative state and know to watch yourself and not move about heedlessly. But once you become caught up and entangled in affairs, you forget contemplation,

chase after circumstances, and become as confused and disorderly as when you were not meditating. This is not good.

Therefore, when we are on the meditation cushion, we must wholeheartedly keep the mind on the mantra while listening with the ears. After coming down from the cushion, we must maintain continuous and seamless contemplation and not forget it. Yet when confronted by circumstances, we easily forget. As soon as we chat with a few friends or begin doing something, we immediately become confused. When thoughts arise, quickly draw them back and watch yourself.

You must certainly do this work; otherwise, you cannot enter the path. When the practice has matured and contemplation has become familiar, you should no longer contemplate. To continue contemplating then would be superfluous. At the outset, one must apply “contemplation”; but when one has progressed to the end, one should no longer “contemplate.” Only by forgetting the word “contemplation” can one advance, and only then can the practice rise to ever higher levels.

Going a step further, even “forgetting” is no longer present. Then the practice passes from the conditioned into non-contrivance. Practice must gradually enter non-contrivance from the conditioned. Non-contrivance cannot be achieved all at once. At the beginning, one must contemplate deliberately—that is, apply oneself consciously to practice. Later, when one practices without conscious effort, no practice whatsoever remains; this is a further step.

Question 227: Someone believes that the contemplation after coming down from the meditation cushion in the Heart-of-Heart Dharma has not been clearly explained, whereas the contemplation transmitted by Chan teachers from Taiwan provides a point of entry. He believes that contemplation means that all phenomena are equal and that no discrimination arises. Whatever one does, one must be clearly aware and overlook no detail. In contemplation, one understands immediately and does not let any thought linger. If anything lingers, there is some lack of clarity; this is deluded mind.

Answer: Has it really not been explained clearly? If someone who has just begun to observe the mind is clearly aware of every external matter, that is observing objects, not observing the mind. One who observes the mind knows that circumstances are inherently illusory and does not let the mind follow circumstances; knows that the mind is inherently empty and does not abide in mind. When both mind and circumstances are empty, there is no thought in that very moment.

When there is precisely no thought, one does not cling even to no-thought; and when a thought arises, one does not fall into having thought. Both being and nonbeing disappear, and in that very moment there is numinous awareness. Yet the nature of this numinous awareness is neither mind nor circumstance; in its entirety,

it is empty. Precisely when it is empty, it is also clearly distinct; in its entirety, it is provisional.

Emptiness and provisional existence are nondual, with no further discrimination, grasping, or rejecting. At precisely this time, true contemplation is vividly present. Is this not contemplation in accordance with reality? Must one, as this person says, retain the taste of food in one's mind or store the sexual pleasure of intercourse in one's mind and brain for a long time before it counts as contemplation? If that is contemplation, it is merely the contemplation of Māra, contemplation that leads one to hell.

Moreover, speaking of this contemplation is already superfluous; it merely encumbers practitioners. Everyone is originally a Buddha. One need only awaken: when not a single thought arises, that clear and distinct awareness is each person's Buddha-nature. When thoughts arise, that is wondrous functioning. There is no need to contemplate emptiness; this alone is the true Dharma of Chan.

This person tells everyone not to overlook any detail. Is that "not giving rise to discrimination"? Is that not attachment to appearances? To savor the taste of food and sexual pleasure, and even to experience how food passes through the throat, esophagus, intestines, and stomach—is that "letting go at once"? He both demands that no thought linger and tells people to develop and expand thoughts of sexual desire throughout every part of the body and all aspects of daily life. Is that not slapping his own face? Māra's teaching is full of such contradictions.

Question 228: Someone says in various places that a certain person has awakened. Is what he says correct?

Answer: Intellectual understanding is not awakening. To understand a little doctrine and then declare that someone has awakened and need no longer apply themselves to practice is a grave error. Awakening at the level of principle is useless if, when one encounters circumstances, one still cannot see through them. Like a fly that sees blood and immediately lands on it, one's mind is stirred as soon as one encounters circumstances.

If that were so, Patriarch Linji would have needed to say only one phrase; why did he speak of three phrases? The Chan school also speaks of matters beside the dharmakāya (Dharma body), the proper position of the dharmakāya (Dharma body), and that which is beyond the dharmakāya (Dharma body). In the past, people had deep roots; a single indication enabled them to understand, after which they continuously and seamlessly safeguarded it without relaxing. Modern people cannot safeguard it and instead chase after circumstances.

His error lies in what follows: he tells people not to apply themselves to practice and not to meditate. One should safeguard [realization] continuously and seamlessly; the practice must rise to ever higher levels, and experiential realization must increase. Recognizing one's intrinsic nature is the first step; continuous and seamless safeguarding is the second; leaving behind safeguarding is the third. Since safeguarding too is attachment, forgetting safeguarding is not easy. One must even forget forgetting; that is the fourth step.

I told him long ago not to be satisfied with small attainments, but to be careful and diligent and practice well. I asked him several questions, and he could not answer any of them. Chan Master Yongming Yanshou's Records of the Source-Mirror says that there are ten criteria for verifying awakening. The first is that one can understand all recorded sayings and sūtra passages at a glance; he cannot do this.

Question 229: When one is always in contemplation, coarse deluded thoughts do not arise. When subtle deluded thoughts arise, should one refrain from following their flow and instead see them clearly?

Answer: Contemplation is still an unnecessary extra step, though it may certainly be discussed in connection with practice. In the end, however, there is no practice to be done.

Question 230: When meditating and reciting a mantra, there is no need for the body to dissolve into emptiness. One need only recognize this clear and distinct awareness; is that seeing one's true nature?

Answer: This is merely intellectual understanding, not direct realization.

Question: If one relies solely on intellectual understanding and takes that which can hear and write to be one's true nature, does that count as seeing one's true nature?

Answer: This is all intellectual understanding, not direct realization of original nature.

Question 231: I believe that before a practitioner breaks through the mass of doubt, or while gathering the mind into oneness, they may encounter a great adept who directly points out the source of mind in response to the occasion. With an "Oh!" the sense faculties and their objects fall away, and one enters the realm of direct perception. Is this genuine seeing of one's true nature?

Answer: If the sense faculties and their objects truly fall away and awareness remains clear and undimmed, then it is certainly genuine seeing of one's true nature.

Question 232: When practicing the Dharma and reciting a mantra, subject and object both vanish, empty space shatters, body and mind dissolve into emptiness,

and awareness remains clear and distinct. Arising and ceasing have ceased, and quiescence manifests before one. Only upon having such an experience does one see one's true nature and know how to safeguard it.

Answer: Correct!

Question 233: If one understands in principle that dependent arising is empty in nature and that form and emptiness are nondual, but mind and circumstances have not dissolved, has one seen one's true nature?

Answer: One has not seen one's true nature.

Question 234: Which kind of seeing one's true nature should be taken as the standard?

Answer: Of course, direct realization of original nature is what matters.

Question 235: When someone sees their true nature, must the sense faculties and their objects completely fall away? Must there always be an explosion?

Answer: When the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is practiced to a certain point, the sense faculties and their objects will fall away. But it is not exactly the same for everyone; for some, it is not an explosion. In fact, the point where a thought ceases is that very state, though the strength differs, while the intrinsic nature realized is the same. When there is no thought, body, mind, and world all disappear, yet awareness remains. This numinous knowing is the intrinsic nature. When the practice matures, one naturally arrives there.

Question 236: When one breaks free, can one still hear sounds from the external world?

Answer: There is no difference between entering samādhi and breaking free. At this time there are no sounds, no time, nothing at all—only one absolute true nature. Once we have attained this practice, one can then manifest spiritual powers. For example, with the supernormal power of hearing, one can hear even the sound of rain falling in worlds beyond this one.

Question 237: Must everyone experience an explosion? Does the explosion make a sound?

Answer: Each person's physical constitution, capacities, and habitual tendencies differ; it is not all the same. One must not seek an explosion, much less wait for one. Some people's explosions make a sound, while others do not. So long as subject and object fall away, that is sufficient.

(IV) Other Matters

Question 238: In 1993, this disciple practiced the “Lotus Mudrā.” In 1994, while meditating together with my son (he was eight at the time; when he was five, he had displayed clairvoyant and remote-viewing abilities), he happened to see that my body was enveloped in a layer of yellow light. Above my head was a Buddha’s head, and above it was a yellow halo.

A few days later, a horizontal band of green light appeared on my forehead above my eyebrows, with three Buddhas seated upon it. A few days later, the Buddha images disappeared, and the halo around my body changed. At first there was yellow and purple light; eventually it became a layer of red flames enveloping my body. As time passed, the flames became ever redder, the light extended farther and farther, and when it reached about three inches, it stabilized. I do not understand what this is; please instruct me, Master.

Answer: The light and Buddhas that appear on your body and above your head are all manifestations of your intrinsic nature. Do not be startled or become attached to them; simply advance naturally to ever higher levels. With even slight attachment, there is a risk of becoming possessed by demons. Be cautious! Be cautious!

Question 239: I have now practiced the Dharma for exactly one month, and on the cushion I have experienced a sense of ease and lightness. Sometimes, as I sit, there are no legs, no hands, and no body; it is as though I were in empty space, with only the sound of the mantra naturally flowing forth. At such times, there is not the slightest stray thought; I merely watch the mantra quietly. Sometimes on the cushion I become hazy, and the mantra seems to be alternately stopping and continuing. Before I know it, the time is up. Basically, I can enter samādhi in every session.

Answer: It is best when the entire body disappears. When there is truly no thought, the mantra too falls away and disappears. This is truly excellent! You must go a step further and sit until body, mind, world, and even empty space all disappear together, while numinous knowing remains undimmed. Only then is it seeing one’s true nature.

Question 240: I generally meditate in the latter half of the night. After sitting, I recite the Sui Xin Mantra as I fall asleep. Sometimes, just after lying down and beginning to recite the mantra, I become dazed for a moment and feel my body rise into the air and travel about everywhere. In the past, I could see the blue sky and stars; recently, I have been able to see villages on the ground. Once, I deliberately checked the time: from rising into the air until becoming fully awake again, it was about fifteen minutes. Such experiences generally occur once every ten days or half month. Is this the emergence of the yin body?

Answer: This is the spirit wandering in the great void, but you must not become attached to it. Excessive attachment can lead to demonic deviation.

Question 241: On another occasion, after finishing meditation and just lying down, I heard a buzzing sound in my head, as though it were circling around inside my head. It lasted about six or seven seconds. Does this mean that the channels and vital energy have opened?

Answer: Yes! At such a time, do not move; let it continue sounding. Suddenly there may be an explosion, and the entire world of body and mind will vanish. Then the pristine Buddha-nature will manifest before you.

Question 242: Under the Master's care, through practicing the "mind Dharma" and reading the scriptures, I feel that I have suddenly understood. In fact, those who have awakened are clear and lucid at every moment. (Master's comment: Quite right!) Only by practicing in this way does one have a direction and avoid becoming lost.

The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says, "When seeing sees seeing, that seeing is not true seeing," and "The path of words is cut off, and the sphere of mental activity is extinguished." Whatever is expressed in words is not it. In fact, the "original" is that which exists before a thought stirs. Master's comment: Exactly. You understand it; that is seeing your true nature.

The Master's comment continues: Yet when circumstances arise, you are still unable to resolve them. You must never be content with a little, thinking that because you have seen your true nature, everything is finished and there is no need to continue applying effort. That would be mistaken. You must intensify your efforts and diligently cultivate amid circumstances, eliminating the attachments and deluded habits accumulated over many lives and eons. Do not rejoice when good things happen, and do not become annoyed when bad things happen. You must also eliminate the subtle continuous stream completely; only then does it count as ultimate attainment.

The Master's comment concludes: I hope you will strive diligently. That clear and lucid awareness inherently contains all phenomena; it is both true emptiness and wondrous presence. Now, both on and off the meditation cushion, I feel that I have already awakened to the original. (Master's comment: Yes! Very good!) Yet I fear making the mistake of claiming attainment without having attained it and thereby harming myself. I ask the Master to verify this for me and point out the way through my confusion.

Answer: Your realization after seeing your true nature is not mistaken; I am delighted and gratified. You have practiced diligently for only fifteen months and

have already realized such a state. This shows that you have good faculties, that you have been willing to strive diligently, and that you have wholeheartedly aspired upward; hence these results. At the same time, it demonstrates that the practice of heart esotericism is profound and excellent, and that the power of the Buddha's blessings is especially great; that is why the results have come so quickly.

Question 243: Since beginning this practice, through the Master's teachings and blessings, as well as my own efforts, I feel that I have progressed greatly compared with before. I am deeply grateful to the Master and to my Dharma brothers and sisters who have helped me in my cultivation.

Since beginning the practice, I have generally sat in meditation during the latter half of the night. After getting off the cushion and lying down, I recite the mantra that accords with the mind (ordinarily, I generally recite mantras), and I often dream at night of flying through the air. Recently, after one session, just as I lay down, I became somewhat dazed and felt that I was walking naked beside a clear river, as though playing in the water. I stepped on a thumbtack and was startled.

When I walked forward again, I bumped into another thumbtack on a wall and was startled once more. At that instant of alarm, the world of body and mind, the river, the wall, and everything else all disappeared. Only a point of clear spiritual awareness remained. This was my true nature manifesting before me! I accepted it directly in that moment.

After a thought stirred, a field of blue appeared, though it was unlike the blue sky. At that time, nothing else remained; there was only blue. Later I found my body again and began flying through the air. Master, I have resolved that in this life I will certainly attain accomplishment. No matter how difficult or arduous the path of practice may be, I can overcome it. Please hold me to strict standards, so that it may benefit this disciple's cultivation.

Answer: You are practicing very well. Everything is empty, and only clear spiritual awareness remains; this is your Original Face. That you can see it is indeed the result of abundant blessings and roots of virtue accumulated through Dharma practice over many lives. It is not easy.

Protect it well, and continue applying effort. Temper yourself amid circumstances and completely eliminate all afflictions of the five desires—wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep. Only then can it be considered complete. Never be content with a little, thinking that seeing your true nature and realizing the Way brings the matter to an end. That would mislead you and prevent you from attaining Buddhahood. You should know that, even after the great matter has been clarified, there still remains the work of being "as though mourning one's parents."

Question 244: Whenever I think of the Master, a powerful force of blessing suffuses my entire body, and my body and mind become peaceful and secure. Now that I have encountered an enlightened teacher, tears stream down my face and I weep. I deeply feel how fortunate I am to have encountered such a beneficent teacher in this life. The Master's kindness can never be repaid in a lifetime!

Answer: This is your own blessing; it has nothing to do with me!

Question 245: I deeply feel that I have a profound affinity with the Master. Before awakening, I once went to Shanghai. During a half-hour subway ride, for no known reason, sorrow welled up within me and tears streamed down my face. Only after getting off the train did they stop. It was as though I were going to see a relative whom I had not seen for many years. What affinity from a previous life could have produced such a response?

Answer: That you were able to awaken is your own blessing, but you must not be content with a little. You must protect your realization well and continue applying effort. Only when the subtle continuous stream has been completely eliminated may you stop. You and I have a supremely excellent affinity. In the presence of Śākyamuni Buddha, we once served the Buddha together; therefore you have this response.

Question 246: I have studied Buddhism for about ten years. Although I previously attained meditative stability, I took many detours. Had I not encountered this beneficent teacher and practiced the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, I truly do not know where I would have gone. In the future, I will certainly repay the Master's great kindness by spreading the Dharma.

Answer: That is exactly as it should be.

Question 247: During my first session of the first mudrā, my breathing ceased for several minutes. Then my whole body felt as though it were on fire; it was unbearably hot, and I perspired all over. Is this the inner-heat samādhi spoken of in Esoteric Buddhism?

Answer: Yes! Let it occur naturally as well; do not pay attention to it. Then you can advance ever higher without adverse effects.

Question 248: Yesterday, while practicing the fourth mudrā, I could not bring up the mantra, and my breathing ceased. Outdoor scenes appeared before me—the road and houses were all distinctly clear. Then my mind stirred, and I emerged from samādhi. What should I do at such a time?

Answer: Let them appear; do not concern yourself with them. This is a state of the aggregate of form, not spiritual powers.

Question 249: On the eighth day of practice, I could not bring up the mantra, and both body and mind were empty. I felt a subtle force causing my mind to emerge from samādhi. Is this the subtle continuous stream, or the aggregate of formations among the five aggregates?

Answer: This is the aggregate of formations.

Question 250: While on the cushion, I can rarely bring up the mantra. Thoughts seldom arise, and when a thought arises, I immediately become aware of it; once aware of it, it immediately becomes empty. During the first half of the month, while practicing the second mudrā, I saw many Dharma-protecting benevolent deities and heavenly kings, the Immovable Wisdom King and Vajra Secret Traces of Esoteric Buddhism, as well as Wei Tuo Bodhisattva. While practicing the third mudrā, after my breathing ceased, a force suddenly seemed to burst through the Brahmā aperture at the crown of my head and fly upward. I became frightened and emerged from samādhi. What should I do if this occurs again? What if I rush out?

Answer: Do not be frightened. This is a change in the vital energy and blood. The sensation of something rushing out occurs because qi has opened the Brahmā aperture; it is not the spirit leaving the body. When the spirit leaves the body, a great light will appear, and there will be a great resounding noise at the back of the head. Even if the spirit leaves the body, do not be afraid. When it first does so, do not go far; walk slowly about the room, and it will soon reunite with the body.

Question 251: At about two o'clock one night, while I was sleeping, I suddenly felt a great wind blowing across my face, roaring loudly. I was frightened, and my body seemed to be bound by something invisible, so that I could not move. After a while, I opened my eyes, and the space between my eyebrows was throbbing violently. Rising, I reflected: The body is illusory; nothing can obstruct my practice.

That night, after lying down, I remained in samādhi throughout the night, clearly aware. During the day I worked as usual, maintaining the practice of safeguarding realization. This continued for three days and nights without sleep, yet I felt no drowsiness. Later, the experience recurred intermittently over about ten days. Master, were the nighttime experiences disturbances caused by celestial demons? I no longer remain clearly aware throughout the night. Is this because I eat too much, or is there another reason?

Answer: Do not indulge in wild thoughts. What celestial demons could be causing disturbance? These are all mistaken perceptions brought about by your fear. Might this not instead have been Dharma-protecting deities awakening you from drowsiness, so that you might enter samādhi alert and awake? In practice, it is best to remain alert and wakeful without sleeping. The reason it can no longer reappear is that your mind has gradually become attached to states and confused. Quickly let

go of body and mind, and the pure state may reappear; but do not abide in attachment to that state.

Question 252: Once during meditation, I saw the yidam, Thousand-Armed and Thousand-Eyed Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, extend a hand to touch the crown of my head. I immediately felt great pleasure throughout my body. Many heavenly flowers fell down. The appearance of the yidam I saw differed from the usual image, and the entire body seemed to be clad in golden armor.

Answer: Never become attached to appearances; beware of demonic deviation.

Question 253: Recently, during meditation, I have often been within a field of light, bright as day, with body and mind peaceful and at ease. Is this the samādhi of light? Must I still bring up the mantra at such a time?

Answer: When you enter deeply into this samādhi, neither body nor mind can be found. What mantra would there be to recite?

Question 254: Several times after sitting down, I entered samādhi before finishing the Four Refuges Mantra. When I opened my eyes, more than an hour had already passed, after which I formed the mudrā and recited the mantra. Is this in accordance with the Dharma?

Answer: Yes. You may also lengthen the time spent reciting the mantra afterward.

Question 255: For almost the entire session, I am in light and without thoughts. When moving about after getting off the cushion, I feel that the Buddha and the Master are truly most compassionate. Cundī, Avalokiteśvara, counting the breath, Buddha-recitation, mantra recitation, illusory visualization, contemplation of mind, white-bone contemplation, Great Compassion, and countless other samādhis all interpenetrate. All methods of study and practice are preliminary expedient means; in the end, they all must flow into the great ocean of perfect enlightenment. Not a single dharma is established, yet not a single dharma is abandoned. The Tripiṭaka and twelve divisions of the teachings are also expedient means. The Buddha, the Master, and all Buddhas and bodhisattvas are truly most compassionate toward us lost children.

Answer: Well said! You truly are a seed of the Way for Dharma practice. Continue practicing well, and never be content with a little. In the future, you will certainly perfect the noble fruition.

Question 256: My ability to safeguard [awareness] has progressed compared with before. At times I remain clearly aware even while sleeping; I can also maintain it while riding a motorcycle, and it is the same on and off the cushion. Sometimes it safeguards itself without my deliberately safeguarding it. Occasionally I lose it for a

moment, but awareness quickly arises again. Today I began the first session of the second round. My meditative stability is incomparably stronger than before; during the first session, the breath ceased for several minutes. A few days ago, while practicing the sixth mudrā, in two sessions both body and mind became empty, and the cessation lasted for more than an hour.

Answer: Very good. Continue to apply yourself diligently; do not become lax or neglectful. When you remain unstained amid circumstances, do not follow thoughts when they arise, and the subtle continuous stream dissolves away, you will have arrived home.

Question 257: Off the cushion, I have not dared to be careless, and I have maintained it very well. Since returning from Shanghai, I have not lost it while eating or working. On the one occasion when I did lose it, it quickly returned. Sometimes, even without deliberately maintaining it, I remain within it. At times I experience my ears as able to substitute for my eyes, and my eyes as able to substitute for my ears. Is this correct?

Answer: Yes. But you must not become attached to it.

Question 258: In meditative absorption, I made the following vows:

(1) The suffering of sentient beings is my suffering. Their difficulties are my difficulties.

(2) Any māras and retinues of māras, human or nonhuman, who obstruct my cultivation and entry into right samādhi: when I attain Buddhahood, I shall liberate them first.

(3) Any humans or nonhumans who bear resentment or hatred toward me, harm me, trouble me, envy me, or kill me: I shall liberate them all.

(4) Of all sentient beings—those born from moisture, eggs, transformation, or womb; humans and nonhumans, devas and asuras—I shall attain Buddhahood only after they have all attained Buddhahood. If even one sentient being has not attained Buddhahood, I vow not to attain perfect awakening.

(5) After I attain Buddhahood, the world I establish will be incomparably wondrous, freely transforming according to wish, with immeasurable life span and complete in all immeasurable and boundless merits and virtues. All who dwell there will be liberated beings.

Master, was it somewhat rash for me to make such vows? Yet I made them from the great compassion that arose in meditative absorption, without the slightest trace of emotional attachment or discriminating views.

Answer: Having such profound aspirations and great vows, if you can carry them out conscientiously and diligently, you will certainly attain Buddhahood in the future.

Question 259: When I explain the Dharma to others, I receive the same unsurpassed joy as they do. Moreover, when teaching the Dharma, I see the causes and effects of worldly and supramundane dharmas with complete clarity. Any matter whatsoever can accord with the Buddhadharma, because everything is Buddhadharma. Sometimes my body and mind are so joyful that, upon seeing anyone, I wish to prostrate to these future Buddhas.

I have practiced the Heart-of-Heart Dharma for nearly a year. My experiences have increased; I eat very little, yet have gained twenty jin in weight. My complexion is rosier and more lustrous than before. When you see me, Master, I fear you may not recognize me.

Answer: To have a disciple like this—how could I adequately express my joy and consolation!

Question 260: I received Master's letter. Again, there have been several days when I did not sleep throughout the night and remained vividly clear. I have resolved to act in accordance with my vows: only benefiting others can truly benefit oneself.

Answer: Correct!

Question 261: At times I can know the workings of others' minds, the state of their cultivation, and roughly a little about their past causes and future results. At times I can also know in advance what is about to happen. What should I do? Should I discard these abilities or develop them?

Answer: Let these conditions develop naturally, but do not become complacent. Still less should you cling to them as spiritual powers and show them off to others.

Question 262: It has been nearly a month since I returned from Shanghai and resumed the practice. My meditative stability is incomparably stronger than before; the power and speed of this Dharma cannot be compared with those of other methods. In addition, I have a request: may the guru transmit the Tögal practice to me someday?

Answer: To practice Tögal, you must withdraw from ordinary work and undertake intensive retreat practice. Can you do that? You must also have pure mountains, waters, and forests. Do you have such a good place where you are?

Question 263: The ancients forgot their very bodies for the sake of the Dharma. I am willing to follow their example. How long does it take to practice Tögal? And regarding retreat, must I remain with the guru?

Answer: There is no fixed length of time for retreat practice of Tögal; it depends on whether your effort is diligent and earnest. In short, one must practice until the physical body is completely transformed into rainbow light before it counts as accomplishment. There is no need to practice together with the teacher.

Question 264: In the future, I still wish to practice Tögal, whatever the cost. Master, will you transmit this practice to me in the future? To what degree must one practice before being able to practice Tögal?

Answer: At present, the four elements of my physical body are out of balance, and I cannot transmit the Dharma. When you have truly realized the third gate of the Chan school, Tögal will naturally be included within it.

Question 265: While walking, several sentences came to mind. Please correct me, Master: All formless merits and virtues of the Buddhadharma arise from great compassion. Only great compassion based on oneness of self and others enables one to be free of self and dharmas, to attain liberation and ease, and truly to benefit others. Great compassion arises from the nonduality of self and others; only through nonduality can there be oneness in substance.

Answer: Correct!

Question 266: At times I visualize it in this way: the guru, the yidam, and I are one body.

Answer: Do not abide in appearances.

Question 267: My quiet cultivation during the first lunar month went very well, and I gained much from it. I have several questions for Master to answer.

(1) On the first day, I sat in meditation for twelve hours. I entered empty samādhi; qi surged to the crown, and there was scatteredness in the form of subtle thoughts. Afterward, I took care to reduce my food intake and repent. I entered luminous thought-free awareness, in which both body and mind vanished, for two hours. For most of that day, I was in the warmth stage, and my body was very hot.

Answer: This was not time wasted. Very good!

(2) On the second day, I was still within the warmth stage and empty luminosity, and compassionate feeling arose. During the third session, while in empty luminosity, distant scenes appeared before me, including familiar fellow practitioners, for approximately two hours.

Answer: Be careful; do not become attached to appearances!

(3) On the third day, Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Avalokiteśvara appeared before me as an illusory appearance. The scenes I saw included the Buddha teaching the Dharma, emperors, palaces, monastics, crowds, and high mountains. All these scenes appeared naturally, like television images. That morning, while resting from four to six, I fell into a drowsy sleep after eating, lost awareness, and entered a dream state. After getting up to meditate, drowsiness arose. Its fundamental cause was greed for food. In the following session, I entered luminous thought-free awareness for more than an hour, and illusory appearances arose in profusion.

Answer: Your habitual tendency to become attached to appearances is very deep; it is a serious illness.

(4) Before sitting, I made this vow: “May sentient beings in the six realms soon be liberated; may the afflictions of birth and death be utterly shattered without doubt.” As the meditation approached two hours, my genitals became erect for several minutes. They then returned to normal, and body and mind were peaceful and pure.

Answer: The seeds of sexual desire have not yet been purified; you entered a state of mild drowsiness.

(5) On the fourth and fifth days, I paid attention to my diet and ate one meal a day. Things gradually improved. My energy was abundant, and two hours of sleep restored my strength; while sleeping, I remained clearly aware. In sleep, a voice, neither distant nor near, said: “Seek your own mind, and you can become a Buddha.”

Answer: Pay it no heed.

(6) On the sixth day, while sleeping, I remained clearly aware and recited the sacred name of Avalokiteśvara for a long time. The whole of empty space was filled with the sound of the sacred name. Later I entered a dream state and took the state to be real. Suddenly, my whole body felt as though an electric current were passing through it, and I was frightened. An invisible force made my body unable to move, but afterward there was no problem. What should I do if this happens again?

Answer: Simply pay no heed to anything. The sensation of an electric current passing through you is a phenomenon of the physical body being transformed into qi.

(7) On the seventh day, after sitting, I entered the realm of true reality. Both body and mind were empty; the ten directions were perfectly bright. It truly did not fall within any direction and was beyond words. I remained for as long as four hours in a boundless great light treasury. Later, with my eyes open, my own treasury of light

merged into countless boundless treasuries, lights reflecting one another and illuminating one another without obstruction.

Answer: The great light treasury is you, and you are the great light treasury. It is not that you are within the great light treasury. If a treasury of light seems to enclose you, then it is not it. However vast and complete this light treasury may be, you must not become attached to it. You must dissolve it away; only when you are not attached in the slightest is it right.

(8) From the eighth day through the following dozen or so days, I was generally within empty luminosity. At times subtle seeds surged forth. Great luminosity appeared every day, for varying lengths of time. During the final few days, I did not eat, but only drank water. There was no discrimination on or off the cushion; at every moment I remained in awareness. At times even awareness was emptied away; originally, I was already within awareness.

On the fifteenth day, I entered great luminosity for several hours, without forming mudrās or reciting mantras. There was truly no self and no dharmas, and it did not fall within any direction. It was beyond words. The ten directions were perfectly bright; numinous light shone alone, far transcending the sense faculties and their objects. When I left retreat, no matter could sway original suchness (tathatā). Truly: “Sentient and insentient alike are the broad, long tongue; sound and silence alike are the wondrous sound of the heavenly drum.” Master, does this mean that coarse thoughts have been subdued?

Answer: They are subtle thoughts. The seeds of extremely subtle thoughts are deeply stored in the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna), and you must further temper yourself amid circumstances. Then go on to eliminate the innate attachment to self and attachment to dharmas. Beginning as a bodhisattva on the first bhūmi, one gradually advances through the second, third, and subsequent bhūmis to become an eighth-bhūmi bodhisattva. Only by eliminating innate attachment to self does one become liberated from segmented birth and death. Going a step further, one eliminates attachment to dharmas and becomes liberated from transformational birth and death. Only then can one be said to have ultimately subdued the great afflictions and eliminated the extremely subtle ignorance —“intention”—thereby transforming the pure consciousness of the ninth consciousness into the immaculate consciousness of the tenth consciousness and attaining Buddhahood.

(9) I now sit one session each day. Great luminosity appears almost every day, for varying lengths of time. At times there is neither observation nor awareness; at times I remain within awareness.

Answer: Do not become attached to appearances. Luminosity itself is an appearance: do not cling to it, but do not lose awareness. You must train until this is thoroughly familiar before you can enter quiescent awareness.

Question 268: Off the meditation cushion, everything is clear and calm, and within this there is only a lucid, unmistakable spiritual knowing. I feel that my attitude toward people and things has changed, and I handle problems with greater flexibility than before. When circumstances arise, I can also turn the light inward to reflect on my true nature and respond according to conditions.

Answer: Very good, but do not abide in this spiritual knowing.

Question 269: Since the eighth day of the second lunar month, I have suddenly felt incomparably pure within, without any thoughts of craving or attachment. When practicing in the evening, I seem unable to recall the events, people, and things encountered during the day, as though nothing had happened.

Answer: Do not try to remember. Let it remain pure, relinquish everything, and dissolve body, mind, and world into emptiness; only then can you realize the mind and see your true nature.

Question 270: My contemplation has become continuous and undivided, and at times I enter a state of quiescent illumination. In walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, I basically do not stray, but remain throughout the day in the state of direct awareness. After a seven-day retreat following the New Year, there was a period of half a month in which this continuity was unbroken; afterward it recurred several times. Recently it has become relatively stable. When I sit down, even before forming the mudrā and reciting the mantra, I already enter samādhi peacefully.

Answer: Has your practice truly become continuous and undivided? When favorable or adverse circumstances arise, does your mind still stir? If the mind still gives rise to even the subtlest movements, then it has not yet become continuous and undivided.

Question 271: When I was young, I often experienced the state of direct awareness, but did not know what it was. Now that the Master has corrected and confirmed me, I do not dare be the least bit careless, for fear of losing it again. At present, in walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, I can basically maintain it. Several conditions are intermingled:

(1) The phenomenon of the ox eating grass is difficult to encounter even once in several days.

(2) Most of the time, the ox obediently follows along.

(3) For a very brief time, I am in this condition: the ox disappears, and I seem dazed and foolish, as though I do not even realize that I am practicing. Everything is bland, as though without any flavor. Is this the phenomenon of “letting be”?

Answer: This is very good! When practice reaches its culmination, everything is as plain as water, yet inwardly there is lucid, unmistakable knowing.

(4) At times there is not the slightest memory; at times causes and effects appear distinctly before me; and at times, while another person is speaking, I already know that person's level, the source of their attachments, and how they may be remedied.

Answer: Do not abide in these things.

(5) I can basically answer questions about the Buddhadharma, but there are some Chan koans that I still cannot penetrate completely.

Answer: Your practice has not yet reached home. Continue practicing and you will attain it. You must abide nowhere at all and not become self-satisfied. Practice has no end.

Question 272: In ordinary contemplation, I basically do not stray. Sometimes, without deliberately contemplating, I am already within contemplation. Since I deeply know that all circumstances are originally empty and quiescent, there is no need to eliminate them. Does this mean that I have entered the process of quiescent illumination?

Answer: Yes!

Question 273: I have become bolder. Formerly I was afraid of encountering problems, but now I am not afraid of them; one cannot live in the world without having things happen.

Answer: Incorrect! What things are there? If there are things, you are already mistaken. In affairs, have no clinging mind; within mind, retain no affair. That is correct.

Question 274: During meditation, I spend most of the time in a state of no thoughts, no mantra, no body, and no mind. When subtle thoughts arise, I cut them off with the single word “awareness.” Is this acceptable?

Answer: Yes.

Question 275: Off the meditation cushion, I am much more stable than before and can maintain it. At times even the thought of safeguarding it is gone. Yet in adverse circumstances, I occasionally forget to safeguard it.

Answer: Practice is like this: there is progress and retreat. When it has truly become completely mature, you will no longer lose it.

Question 276: The stage of safeguarding is a process of removing habitual tendencies. When does one move into the stage of letting be?

Answer: You must wait until you do not stray at all amid circumstances—until neither favorable nor adverse conditions can bind you, and you are free and at ease in every direction. Once this is truly achieved, there is no need to make a transition; spontaneous functioning will naturally be carefree and at ease.

Question 277: In my off-cushion safeguarding, I occasionally still stray. Half a month ago, my child burned his face, but even then I did not lose my meditative stability and was still able to care for him properly. I feel that the more I am in adverse circumstances, the more wisdom can grow; and that the people who treat me the worst are precisely those who help me practice.

Answer: Correct! All adverse circumstances are supportive conditions that help you advance. But do not conceive of adversity and favorability, nor think of people as good or bad; simply accord with conditions and respond. Before practice has reached its ultimate stage, there will inevitably be times of straying. So long as you become aware as soon as it arises and do not drift along with it, lost and unable to return, there is no harm. With time, as your practice grows, there will be no more straying, and it will become continuous and undivided.

Question 278: Since my wife returned from seeing you, she has been very diligent. A few nights ago, after completing the fourth mudrā, she entered samādhi while reciting the mantra, and there was no body. After getting off the cushion, this state continued until she went to bed. We sleep in separate rooms, and her mind was utterly pure and calm. She felt a burst of sound coming from the ten directions around her body, like firecrackers, as though it were about to blow apart her head and abdomen. She became frightened and thought that she must have died. The sound continued for half an hour, after which she fell asleep.

Answer: This is a good state brought about by the Buddha's empowering blessing, allowing body, mind, and world all to be blasted into emptiness, so that one sees one's true nature then and there. If it happens again, do not be frightened. Let it occur naturally, and you will be able to see your true nature through emptiness.

Question 279: I have some good news to tell the Master. A week after I returned from Shanghai, my wife lost 600 yuan. I explained the Dharma of impermanence to her and told her that she must truly see through the affairs of the world. That afternoon, while at the hair salon, she directly realized ultimate reality for nearly half an hour, and did not lose it even while working.

Since she began practicing the Lotus Mudrā a month ago, her resolve for the Way has grown. Every day she persists in sitting meditation for more than an hour. We have slept in separate rooms for a long time and seldom have marital relations. We deeply feel the suffering of sexual desire and have resolved to eliminate it. She says, "All the benefits I have received depend entirely on the Master's blessing." We deeply feel that we have an affinity with the Master. She has now completely changed. She asked me to inquire of the Master: What karmic affinity did we have in our previous lives that has brought about the karmic result of this life?

Answer: In your previous lives, you were both practitioners. You fell in love and became husband and wife. In this life you have met again and are practicing together again. If you do not practice diligently and bring birth and death to an end, you will have failed the causes established in your previous lives.

Question 280: I have a six-year-old boy. Perhaps because he has been influenced by us, he does not eat any food containing meat. When we meditate, he sometimes sits with us for a while, and he says that he too believes in the Buddha. I now read no sūtras or books at all, focusing single-mindedly on safeguarding realization. Is this correct? May I explain the Dharma to others? Or should I concentrate exclusively on dhyāna and avoid involvement in worldly affairs?

Answer: Your child has also come to practice, so you should raise him well. Safeguarding realization single-mindedly does not hinder reading sūtras and books. Explaining the Dharma to others and encouraging them to study Buddhism are good things and should be done more often. Not being deluded when encountering circumstances is great dhyāna.

Question 281: The three members of our family are doing well, but at times the thought of leaving home arises. I feel that, being busy all day making a living, it would be better to dedicate body and mind to Buddhism.

Answer: If such a thought arises, then your mind is not empty. How can you realize the Way? If the mind were truly empty, you would be busy all day without feeling busy. Your whole family is practicing—is that not already leaving home? What further leaving home is there? After all is said and done, you are still very attached to appearances. How did Layman Pang's entire family practice?!

Question 282: During meditation, body and mind are empty and quiescent. Yet at times, in a single instant, I feel that there are countless extremely subtle thoughts, seemingly connected with the flow of blood and the beating of the heart. Must the heart stop beating before these subtle thoughts can be eliminated?

Answer: This is the appearance of the aggregate of consciousness. The thoughts are extremely subtle and flow very quickly, so they are not easily noticed ordinarily; only

by entering deeply into dhyāna can one become aware of them. In practice, one must cut off this subtle continuous stream of consciousness.

Related to Practice

Question 1: Why can those who practice phowa leave only at the time of death, rather than earlier?

Answer: One should not leave before it is time to leave. To leave while the body is healthy is equivalent to suicide. There are millions upon millions of tiny creatures in the human body; they too are sentient beings. To leave while the body is healthy is equivalent to killing them. Before the time of death, these lives within the body die first; only then do you leave.

Question 2: I have recently moved into a new house. Its feng shui is unfavorable, and strange occurrences often take place.

Answer: The remedy is quite simple: recite the Great Light Mantra. Walk around the house while reciting it, and recite it many times. First recite it outside the house, then inside the house. You should form mudrās while reciting.

Question 3: Nowadays, people are cremated three days after death. Since their consciousness has not yet departed, anger arises when they are burned, and most consequently fall into unfavorable places. If they are kept in a funeral home, they must be refrigerated, and the deceased may likewise develop anger because of the cold. Is there any way to spare everyone this distress?

Answer: The deeper a cultivator’s practice, the more slowly they depart. Ordinary people generally depart within three days. Where possible, place the body in a small coffin and seal it, then cremate it after the seven sevens have passed.

Question 4: At what point in practice will one no longer be deluded by the barrier of the womb?

Answer: When the subtle continuous stream has been exhausted, there is no longer delusion caused by the barrier of the womb.

Question 5: What are unidentified flying objects?

Answer: They belong to devas, who are even more intelligent than we are. The extraterrestrials reported in newspapers belong to devas in the desire realm.

Question 6: If someone is unconscious at the time of death, will their destination be unfavorable?

Answer: Unconsciousness is not very good. Someone beside them should call out, “Do not fall asleep; wake up, wake up!” Would calling to them annoy them? No, it would not, but do not touch them. Our rebirth mantra whispered into the ear is very useful.

Question 7: When assisting someone’s rebirth through recitation, where should those doing the reciting sit?

Answer: Do not sit above the person’s head, because their consciousness must leave through the top of the head. You may sit on either side.

Question 8: What is the reason that a physical body does not decay?

Answer: The person has entered samādhi. The true fire of samādhi burns away the bacteria within the body, so it does not decay. There are many bacteria in the human body, and they too are sentient beings. To liberate sentient beings, one should first liberate the sentient beings within one’s own body.

Question 9: What is the condition of the intermediate-state body?

Answer: Once the physical body has decayed but the subsequent womb has not yet formed, the intervening period is called the intermediate state. The intermediate-state body lasts at most forty-nine days. There is one transformation every seven days, and each successive seven-day period is lower than the preceding one; therefore, the earlier liberation is performed, the better. Those reborn in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss have no intermediate-state body: as soon as the breath ceases, they are reborn there.

The same is true of rebirth in heaven, and those who fall into hell likewise have no intermediate-state body. Those reborn in other realms do have an intermediate-state body. Drawn by karmic force, it enters the corresponding realm and takes rebirth. Therefore, we must apply ourselves diligently in ordinary times. When all obscurations have been eliminated and great radiance shines forth, do not turn with thoughts. Even if there is an intermediate state, it cannot bind you, nor can karmic force pull you along.

When demons, yakṣas, or tigers pursue you from behind, if you know that they are all false, you will not be afraid. While living in the world, you must train yourself: when thoughts arise, do not follow them; when circumstances come, remain unmoved. This brings great benefit. In this way, one can attain mastery over taking rebirth.

Question 10: After death, if one does not enter a womb, can one avoid revolving within the six realms?

Answer: No. Can you refrain from entering a womb? The moment the mind stirs, you enter a womb. There was a cultivator who projected his yang-spirit and saw a plump, fair-skinned woman beneath a large tree. His mind stirred, and he went to embrace her. In fact, she was a sow about to give birth to piglets. Because of his karmic force, he saw her as a plump, fair-skinned woman. At that moment, he heard someone say, “My sow has given birth to piglets.”

When he looked, he had become a piglet. He quickly rammed himself against a wall and died. “Whoosh!” He flew back again. Habitual tendencies cause the mind to stir, so you must train yourself now. The Sixth Patriarch still went among hunters to train himself, and Chan Master Huike, the Second Patriarch, also went to taverns, teahouses, and brothels to temper his mind. Therefore, everyone must clearly discern the path and press forward courageously. Most important is to recognize one’s true nature, practice diligently until habitual tendencies are worn away, and advance upward from the first bhūmi, the second bhūmi, and so on, removing those habitual tendencies.

Question 11: Does the intermediate-state body possess Buddha-nature?

Answer: Could there be an intermediate-state body apart from Buddha-nature? Apart from Buddha-nature, there is nothing at all. The intermediate-state body is an illusory body transformed by manas consciousness. Can manas consciousness be apart from Buddha-nature?

Question 12: Where does one’s intrinsic nature go after death?

Answer: It turns according to karma. Whatever karma you create determines where you go. Wholesome karma takes you to wholesome places; evil karma takes you to evil places. Now that you are practicing the Dharma, do not go elsewhere.

Patriarch Dayu was compassionate: he told us that those wishing to go to the Inner Court of Tuṣita should recite Maitreya Bodhisattva’s mantra, while those wishing to go to the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss should recite the Extended Rebirth Mantra, thus giving you a destination. Originally, there is no destination, for Buddha-nature is everywhere. Why, then, is there a destination? Because of attachment to appearances, because of clinging, because the mind has not become empty and pure. Buddha-nature has no image and requires no place; once one clings to appearances, one needs a place.

Question 13: Some lay practitioners use the sūtras they recite as “sūtra certificates,” while others perform Buddhist rites in people’s homes for a fee, making it their profession.

Answer: “Sūtra certificates” are truly superstition. Some practitioners do not understand the true principle and use them to collect money. Worse still, without having recited any sūtras, they make red dots on yellow paper and sell it as sūtra certificates, deceiving both themselves and others. They care only for present enjoyment and ignore the future suffering of karmic retribution in hell. How exceedingly foolish they are!

Question 14: Some Buddhist ritual activities do not interest me, whereas I am interested in activities involving the expounding of sūtras and Dharma teachings. Is this discriminating mind?

Answer: Practitioners should choose what is wholesome and act accordingly.

Question 15: My sexual desire has now clearly diminished. At times, for the sake of marital affection, I reluctantly comply; yet I can observe the mind without stirring and am merely going through the motions. I do not know what effect this has on my practice.

Answer: Sexual desire is the root of birth and death and, still more, a great obstacle to cultivating the Way. Without cutting off sexual desire, one can never realize the Way! If you have truly understood this point, then it is genuine; otherwise, it is all empty talk, entirely without practical meaning. When you comply with your wife, can you truly keep your mind unmoved? You must be careful!

Question 16: Can one who has seen one’s true nature and awakened still marry?

Answer: Would someone who has truly awakened still wish to marry?! Anyone who wishes to marry has certainly never awakened! Sexual desire is the root of birth and death. How could one who has truly awakened engage in such defiling acts with a woman?

Question 17: If lay practitioners become ill while practicing the Dharma and meditating at home, what should they do?

Answer: It depends on the illness and on whether one is able to practice. If your physical strength is insufficient, do not practice; do not force yourself. If illness arises just when you ought to apply yourself diligently, this indicates heavy karmic obstacles. You may lie in bed and observe the mind or recite mantras.

Question 18: I have a son who relies on others for eating, drinking, urinating, and defecating. Yet whenever anyone comes near, he grabs their hair, and he also has convulsions. He has been kept under control with medication. Some people advise me to stop treating him and let nature take its course, but I cannot bear to do so. I truly do not know what to do.

Answer: There is truly no good solution. If he is ill, he cannot simply go untreated; you can only endure a little more. You may pray for the blessings of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, that he may quickly relinquish this karmic retribution and be reborn in the heavenly realms.

Question 19: Recently I often feel that there is much suffering in the world, and my work and affairs are busy. Perhaps this is because I owed others in former lives. Yet my physical obstacles have not been eliminated, and whenever I am troubled by illness and pain, I think of leaving home to cultivate the Way.

Answer: Having many affairs is precisely an opportunity to train yourself to transform and exhaust deluded habitual tendencies. If you truly respond to affairs without a clinging mind, you will certainly not feel fatigued. Leaving home means leaving the confines of entanglement in deluded thoughts; it does not mean leaving one's family. If the mind is not pure, then even after leaving one's family, there will be endless trouble in the monastery. If you can practice the Dharma diligently, you will certainly attain accomplishment in the future.

Question 20: During illness and pain, I sometimes feel great suffering. My eyes are often filled with tears, and my mind has no direction. I truly wish to go to Shanghai to pay respects to you, Elder, and personally receive your guidance, so that I may be freed from suffering and attain understanding and awakening.

Answer: Do not seek here and there. Recite the Buddha's name single-mindedly. Seek the Buddha's blessings and seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land. When reciting the Buddha's name, sit in meditation and use vajra recitation, with the breath and mind mutually dependent; do not recite aloud. Take good care of your body, do not engage in sexual intercourse excessively, and follow medical advice and take medicine.

Question 21: Bodily pains are appearing one after another. How should I further break through delusive illusions?

Answer: That which knows the pain is precisely the master. The master that knows the pain does not itself suffer pain. Simply observe this illusory body that suffers pain, and there is nothing to be concerned about.

Question 22: I have heard that in former times some students practicing other Dharma gates became insane, vomited blood, or developed other illnesses because their practice was too urgent and forceful or their methods improper. What is the reason for this?

Answer: Insanity results when one first becomes attached to extraordinary states, and those states later turn into frightening adverse states. Vomiting blood results

from leaning one's back against a chair or wall, or from practicing too forcefully, causing fiery energy to rise upward.

Question 23: You compassionately told me by telephone that my headaches may eventually lead to conditions such as "senile dementia." What karmic cause from former lives has produced this, and what method should I now use to resolve it?

Answer: There are many causes of headaches. An imbalance of the four elements in the body may be a contributing condition, but the principal cause is past karma. Yet all is empty, like flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water—unobtainable. Sentient beings, however, are foolish and deluded, taking what is false for what is real. Karmic obstacles are originally empty, yet they cling to karmic obstacles as real; there is originally no undergoing of retribution, yet they take retribution as real. Thus causes and effects become entangled in an endless cycle, and affliction and pain never cease. Now that you have a headache, practice the Dharma one-pointedly and do not take it as pain. When the mind is empty and the qi flows freely, the pain will be relieved. Why, then, should you fear senile dementia?!

Question 24: A doctor has diagnosed me with colitis. The cause, upon investigation, is obstruction in the flow of qi and emotional tension. Is this obstruction in the flow of qi related to my sitting posture in meditation? How should I regulate my tense emotions? May I temporarily refrain from practicing the fourth mudrā and concentrate exclusively on the second mudrā? If I use the power of mantras to treat illness, how many times should I practice each day? If I recite the Great Compassion Mantra over a cup of water for someone else, will it affect me? I respectfully request the master's instruction.

Answer: (1) You may practice only the second mudrā. (2) Let go of everything, and your emotions will no longer be tense. (3) Practice twice daily. (4) You may use mantra water to treat others' illnesses; it will not harm you.

Question 25: When using a healing mantra to treat illness, should one use vajra recitation? How long should one rub the afflicted area? Should this be combined with taking medicine?

Answer: Recite it often in ordinary times; when treating illness, do so with sincere reverence. Do not use vajra recitation when reciting the mantra; recite it in a soft voice. Rub the affected area 108 or 120 times. Medicine may also be taken.

Question 26: If one lets go of everything and concerns oneself with nothing, even neglecting one's children, people will say that one is selfish.

Answer: We must fulfill our responsibility to educate our children. Some children simply will not listen to their parents; what use is worrying? Things must be done,

but the mind must not cling to them, nor should one become flustered. “Give rise to the mind without abiding anywhere.” Once, a lay practitioner from Ningbo was meditating in deep samādhi when someone ran in and told him, “Your child has fallen into the water!” He ignored it. That was wrong. One must fulfill one's human responsibilities; otherwise, it will not do.

Question 27: Here there is someone who practices Daoist qigong and claims to have seen his true nature. By “nature,” he means the “elixir” within the abdomen. Is that correct?

Answer: Forming the elixir amounts, at most, to producing a yang spirit. The yang spirit is still consciousness; it is not the fundamental essence. As Patriarch Huanglong said: “Even after a million kalpas, one still falls into emptiness and perishes.” What benefit is there in that!

Question 28: The Life of Milarepa says that spiritual powers manifest at the final stage of practice. Does this indicate realization of the Way?

Answer: You are once again attached to spiritual powers. At that stage, spiritual powers naturally manifest. Spiritual powers are not cultivated; they are inherently complete. They cannot function because the mind is impure. Spiritual powers acquired through techniques are unreliable. If you seek spiritual powers, ghosts, spirits, and demons will come to possess you. The patriarchs repeatedly said: spiritual powers cannot be sought; what is obtained by seeking is not genuine, but possession.

Question 29: This disciple resolves to practice the Dharma diligently, so as not to disappoint the master's kindness or the immense kindness of the compassionate blessings of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas!

Answer: This is the most crucial point. If you do not practice the Dharma diligently, then even if you speak brilliantly enough to make flowers fall from the heavens, it will be of no use at the critical juncture of birth and death.

When practicing the Dharma, never become attached to spiritual powers. Spiritual powers are inherently possessed by everyone, but greed, anger, and ignorance stir within us; we seek outwardly, grasp at illusory images, and obscure the luminosity of our intrinsic nature, so that it cannot function. Now, simply quiet the frenzied mind and eliminate the deluded thoughts, inverted views, and attachments of greed, anger, and ignorance. Then spiritual powers will naturally manifest.

Therefore, Master Yongjia cried out: “If you attain the root, do not worry about the branches!” Spiritual powers cannot be sought; even if sought, they cannot be obtained. Even if one obtains them, they are false, not inherently possessed spiritual

powers. The Mahāvairocana Sūtra clearly states: “One must first attain penetration of the Way—the power of the exhaustion of the outflows; then the five spiritual powers will naturally be obtained without seeking.” This shows that practicing the Dharma in pursuit of spiritual powers is a grave error indeed.

Yet among those who practice the Dharma today, one hundred percent seek spiritual powers and thereby enter a wrong path. This not only wastes energy and money, but also carries the danger of falling into demonic states. It is truly not worthwhile. I hope you will suddenly awaken and cease following in others' footsteps in seeking spiritual powers.

Question 30: Recently, some Buddhist disciples have switched from the Buddha-recitation Dharma gate to the “Wish-Fulfilling Vajra Practice.” It is said to originate in the Dzogchen (Great Perfection) Heart-Essence of the highest class of Unsurpassed Yoga Tantra in Esoteric Buddhism. Yet its practitioners claim that they quickly “perfect the Dharma-nature,” after which the power of the practice gives rise to such phenomena as “external practices” and “internal adjustment.” What is going on?

Answer: I do not know the source of this practice, so it would be inappropriate to comment rashly. In any case, “To expound Dharma apart from mind is to expound the teachings of demons!” This is an irrefutable truth, beyond dispute. Nowadays ghosts, monsters, and demons are rising everywhere, all claiming to teach the highest Buddhadharma. But in fact, they are merely manipulating consciousness and playing with ghostly powers.

Question 31: If there are poisonous creatures in one's room, such as scorpions and centipedes, how should one deal with them?

Answer: Generally, if you leave them alone, they will not sting you.

Question 32: Are the Venerable Masters Xuyun and Laiguo now in Tuṣita Heaven? Will they come down again?

Answer: When there is an affinity, they will come down. If there is an affinity today, they will come down today. After coming down, they can also return there; they are very free.

Question 33: Master, what were we like in our past lives, and what are our capacities?

Answer: Your present family, social position, and financial circumstances clearly tell you what your past was like. If you are now able to have faith in Buddhism, then you possess wholesome roots. Especially if you are able to encounter the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, you possess unsurpassed wholesome roots; this shows that you were also

practicing diligently in past lives. Do not ask others whether your capacities are good or poor; ask yourself.

If you do not fear hardship and practice diligently and vigorously, you have superior capacities. If you fear hardship and do not apply yourself, you do not have good capacities. All sentient beings possess Buddha-nature, exactly as the Buddha does, without lacking the slightest bit. It is only because we are deluded that we must awaken quickly.

Question 34: I beseech my gracious teacher to give me a few words of instruction to serve as a personal maxim.

Answer: With the mind empty and non-abiding, let things function naturally and roam at ease. Simply exhaust ordinary feelings; do not seek holy understanding.

Question 35: From my inner thoughts to my outward conduct, whatever may be wrong, I hope that Master will criticize me severely. Otherwise, when will an ordinary person such as I, with deep obstacles and shallow wisdom, be able to directly realize bodhi?

Answer: Is bodhi not right before you, yet you still fail to recognize it? Who is asking this question? If it is not bodhi, what is it?!

Question 36: I hope to receive a photograph of the master, as a supportive condition for the spiritual progress of one as foolish as I.

Answer: Learning Buddhism and spiritual practice are matters of the mind and conduct; one must not seek after physical appearances. If you wish to contemplate a form, you may contemplate the great bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara or Amitābha Buddha.

Question 37: Do perceptive spiritual teachers also have favorites? Do they especially value, favor, and bless disciples with whom they have particularly strong affinities?

Answer: Amitābha Buddha! There should fundamentally be no favoritism. All sentient beings equally possess Buddha-nature and are therefore equal without distinction. Yet because past capacities differ slightly and past affinities may be deeper or shallower, others may unconsciously perceive slight differences in how they are treated. This is entirely due to people's inferior discriminating views; it is truly unavoidable.

When we practice the Dharma, so long as the mind is empty and we do not discriminate between those close to us and those distant from us, the mind is free of hindrance, practice progresses easily, and accomplishment in the Way is possible.

Otherwise, disputes over self and others, right and wrong, will proliferate; this brings no benefit to practice, and realization of the Way will be without hope.

Question 38: A Dharma brother said that our being able to draw near to the master and receive the great Heart Esotericism Dharma for practice is due to the extraordinary affinity that, 2,500 years ago, we listened to the Dharma together with the master in the presence of Venerable Wenfo and served the Buddha. Is this why we have such a wonderful affinity today?

Answer: Since you already know that you had an excellent affinity in past lives, why speak of all these details? Is this not attachment to appearances? You must know that all things are empty and without self-nature. Why speak of the three divisions of time—past, present, and future—or of east, west, south, north, and center?!!!

Question 39: My journey from qigong to Buddhist practice was a long one. Firmly convinced that there is a clear and luminous path to understanding the universe and human life, I resolved to study and practice the true Dharma.

Answer: Having such an understanding is also the result of deeply planted wholesome roots from past lives.

Question 40: Some disciples have practiced for quite a long time but have achieved little. The reasons are no more than three: (1) they do not uphold the precepts, from the five precepts through the bodhisattva precepts; (2) they do not eat vegetarian food; and (3) they do not cut off lustful thoughts and conduct. They speak loftily of holy realms, yet their habitual tendencies remain strong. Over time, they lose their aspiration for the Way or turn to other practices.

Answer: Yes! Such people lack the blessings to practice this Dharma and cannot realize the Way. This is karma they have brought upon themselves!

Question 41: How should one release living beings?

Answer: First give them refuge, saying to them: “Your karmic obstacles are heavy, so I will first recite the Three Refuges for you.” You may recite the mantras mentioned in the Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State practice. The three most important are the Six-Realms Vajra Mantra, the Mantra of Liberation Through Hearing, and the Great Secret Mantra of Primordial Awareness. In addition, there are the Great Light Mantra and the Extensive Rebirth Mantra. Recite these mantras often; each mantra should be recited at least 108 times.

Question 42: Should one eat dinner?

Answer: It is not very good to forgo dinner entirely. You may eat a little; if you do not wish to eat, you may also refrain from eating. But if you feel hungry, it will not do to

force yourself not to eat. Some people meditate well at night and find that eating makes them prone to drowsiness, so they do not eat dinner. In a Chan hall, people may become hungry easily at night during Chan practice, so everyone may also be allowed to eat a little. Realization of the Way does not depend on going hungry.

Question 43: What effect does diet have on practicing the Dharma?

Answer: The body cannot do without nourishment, but that does not mean you should eat meat and fish. Eating meat and fish involves killing living beings and is not in keeping with great compassion. In fact, a vegetarian diet contains all necessary nutrition, and that is sufficient. But eat a variety of vegetables rather than only one kind; you may also drink some milk. There is no need to eat fish or meat. We have been vegetarians for many years—isn't our health quite good?

Question 44: We took Venerable Master Hsuan Hua of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas as our teacher. Now that we wish to study the Heart-of-Heart Dharma and receive empowerment from another master, is there any conflict?

Answer: There is no conflict. I myself have taken several teachers. My first teacher was the Elder Master Xingci of the Tiantai school. Later, I took a Chan teacher, as well as the patriarch Elder Master Yingci of the Huayan school. After studying Esoteric Buddhism, I took Guru Gonga, Mr. Wang Xianglu, and the lay elder Fan Gunong of the Dharma Characteristics School as teachers. There is no problem. Our Dharma is Chan, so there is no need for concern.

Question 45: Must one be vegetarian when cultivating the mind Dharma?

Answer: We advocate vegetarianism. Some people are accustomed to eating meat and may find it difficult to become vegetarian all at once; they may continue eating it for a while. Once you practice the Dharma diligently and reach the point at which your vital energy and blood are transformed, you will not eat meat even if someone tells you to. Therefore, it is best not to eat it.

Question 46: How should one repent?

Answer: In the past, we have all created karma unknowingly. Sin arises from the mind; repent with the mind itself. When the mind is empty and pure, that is true repentance.

Question 47: This disciple has dull and deluded faculties and has once harbored many doubts about the Revered Master. My karmic offenses are indeed grave. I hope that, out of compassion, Master will scold me and eliminate my karmic obstacles.

Answer: In cultivating the Way, nothing is more harmful than doubt. Without sufficient power of faith, one cannot accomplish anything, and cultivating the Way is even more hopeless. You must repent at once. Otherwise, not only will you be unable to realize the Way, but you will also incur grave karmic obstacles and suffer evil consequences. Be careful!

Question 48: How should one deal with the various obstacles that arise in daily life?

Answer: These are all tests of your power of samādhi and favorable supporting conditions for realizing the Way. Do not be afraid. Everything is created by the mind; when the mind is empty, obstacles vanish. If the mind clings to appearances, obstacles can never be eliminated. Stirring the mind creates karma, so whenever the mind stirs, repent. When the mind is empty and pure, all is well.

Question 49: How can Buddhist practitioners establish good interpersonal relationships?

Answer: If, through practicing the Dharma, the mind is empty, how could one's interpersonal relationships fail to be good? Poor interpersonal relationships arise because one clings and will not let go, and because one's subjective views are too strong.

Question 50: Before thorough awakening, how should one respond to conditions and interact with others?

Answer: Do not abide in anything. Do not let the mind turn with circumstances—that is it.

Question 51: Before thorough awakening, should one refrain from involvement in everything, and only after the powers of samādhi and wisdom are sufficient respond to conditions and benefit beings, tempering the mind through circumstances?

Answer: No! You must now temper the mind through circumstances, increasing the powers of samādhi and wisdom in the process.

Excerpts from Letters

(I) Letters from Disciples and the Master’s Comments

1. I am a young teacher. Through various causes and conditions, I encountered the Buddhadharma and came to love it. Its influence marked a turning point in my life. Not long ago, at Lingyan Mountain, I took refuge in the Three Jewels and became a lay disciple.

Master's comment: "This is due to your deeply planted roots of goodness. How greatly to be rejoiced!"

Yet my karmic obstacles are profound. My faith, vows, and practice are impure and lack strength. It is as though I were covered by layer upon layer of dense dark clouds, unable to see the light. Although I recite the Buddha's name and chant sutras, I find it difficult to gain any true benefit. In daily life and in my dealings with others, deluded thoughts arise in profusion and unwholesome karma continues without cease. Nor have I had the good fortune to meet a spiritual friend; unable to find a way out, my faith gradually rises and falls with external circumstances. Yet I am truly unwilling simply to drift with the current, and the anguish in my heart is beyond words.

Master's comment: "To recognize one's faults and correct them is the greatest good. This is because your Buddha-recitation lacks urgency and sincerity. You should sit in meditation every morning and evening, for at least one hour each time, gradually increasing the duration. While sitting, assume the lotus posture and form the Amitābha meditation mudrā with your hands. Do not use prayer beads. Recite the Buddha's name in accordance with the breath: once on the in-breath and once on the out-breath.

Quietly listen with the ear faculty to the soundless sound of the Buddha's name arising from your heart. Do not recite aloud. Gather the mind faculty firmly, and you will gradually enter samādhi. After rising from meditation, you must continue to observe at all times: whenever a thought arises, immediately become aware of it, and do not follow it in grasping and wandering. Once your practice has deepened over a long time, the deluded mind will no longer arise, the dark clouds will disperse, and you will feel light, peaceful, and at ease. Though you may labor diligently all day, you will feel no burden."

Not long ago, I had the good fortune to read your "Brief Discussion of Realizing the Mind and Seeing One's True Nature" in Chan magazine. Although I was for the moment unable to comprehend its essential meaning, I deeply believed that you are a rare spiritual friend in this present age, one of lofty virtue and profound realization. Like a drowning person who has encountered a rescuer, I was overjoyed. I had long wished to write to you, but fearing that my heart was not sincere enough, I delayed and dared not put pen to paper. Today I have finally summoned the courage to beg you compassionately to point out a clear path for me."

Master's comment: "In this Dharma-ending age, the Buddha-recitation Dharma gate is the simplest and most convenient. You need only follow the method stated above: sit in meditation and recite the Buddha's name every day. Both on and off the cushion, you must let everything go. Once an affair has passed, leave no trace of it,

like drawing on water: as soon as the stroke is made, the water's surface bears no mark. If you can truly practice in this way, signs of samādhi will certainly appear within three months. I hope you will strive diligently. In your spare time, read widely in the various sutras and treatises."

2. Revered Master, I have not wept like this for ten years. I dare not imagine what state I would have fallen into without your teachings. Only with you—the master whom I trust in my heart—do I feel safe, secure, and happy. How I wish that I could do something for you; how I wish that I could personally attend upon you!

Master's comment: "Though far apart, we are close; though near at hand, we may be distant. Our forms and shadows have never been apart!"

3. I have had the good fortune to receive the Heart-of-Heart Dharma directly from you, revered Master; how blessed I am! In this Dharma-ending age, you have made this unsurpassed great Dharma public in order to liberate sentient beings widely. Its merit and virtue are immeasurable!"

Master's comment: "To have the affinity to practice this great Dharma is indeed unsurpassed merit and virtue."

My journey from qigong to entering Dharma practice was indeed a long one. During more than ten years of qigong practice and in the course of ordinary life, I deeply sensed the inconceivability of the universe, the world, and the inner substance of the human body. Thus I came firmly to believe that there is another clear and luminous path to understanding the universe and human life, and I resolved to study and practice the true Dharma.

Master's comment: "Such understanding is due to deeply planted roots of goodness from past lives."

Thereafter, I worked tirelessly, overcame difficulties, and sought out renowned teachers and great adepts. I have practiced the Avalokiteśvara Dharma gate, the Buddha-recitation Dharma gate, the practice of phowa, and other methods."

Master's comment: "There are not two roads for returning to the source, though there are many expedient gates."

After reading Essentials of Buddhist Practice and Realization, I deeply regretted not having encountered it earlier. Every word and sentence in the book reveals your precious words of personal practice and direct realization, as well as the compassionate heart of a Buddha or patriarch who liberates sentient beings."

Master's comment: "You and I have an affinity; that is why you have this feeling."

Especially in this Dharma-ending age, the reemergence of heart esotericism is like a red sun in the sky, supremely marvelous beyond compare. I therefore immediately set out for Shanghai to meet you and request the Dharma."

Master's comment: "The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is the essential core of Esoteric Buddhism. Only those of great capacity can practice it."

(II) The Master's Replies

4. Recently I heard that some people are giving blind instruction, believing that once one recognizes the great function capable of speaking, hearing, walking, and acting, that is awakening, and there is no further need for practice. They do not realize that recognizing this great function as one's Original Face is merely intellectual understanding; it remains a vast distance from realized awakening. Awakening at the level of principle counts only as conceptual understanding. When circumstances arise, it immediately flies away; it offers not the slightest strength, and at the brink of birth and death one cannot exercise even a little mastery. In the Chan school this is called: "One phrase that seems to fit becomes a post that tethers the donkey for ten thousand ages." Can one who truly wishes to transcend birth and death fail to be cautious?!

Unable to bear seeing students everywhere misled onto wrong paths by such blind guidance, abandoning Dharma practice and failing to transcend birth and death, I raise my voice in urgent warning. Unless, through practice, both body and mind within and the world without have completely vanished, while clear, ever-present knowing remains, it does not count as seeing one's true nature. Even when one has reached this point, habitual tendencies remain; one still cannot stop practicing. One must continue to practice vigorously, increasing the power of samādhi and completing the work of safeguarding realization. Only then may one realize bodhi together with others and not have passed through this life in vain.

5. Fellow practitioners in Shanghai pooled funds to print a number of copies of an esoteric Buddhist treasury, The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State, written by Guru Padmasambhava. This is an essential Dharma for helping Buddhist disciples who did not practice well during life to attain liberation after death. Guru Padmasambhava's compassion was most earnest: pitying Buddhist disciples who lacked strength in practice and could not transcend birth and death, he again assists them at the time of death so that they may attain liberation. How profound was his solicitude! How fortunate we are to have obtained this!

Give one copy to a fellow practitioner whom you encounter who truly practices—do not distribute them indiscriminately, for there are not many copies—so as to help that person attain liberation and form a good affinity. This is an opportunity for the

fellow practitioners in Shanghai and your fellow practitioners there to form good affinities widely. Please treasure it and handle it properly. Never be careless or waste it.

6. In practicing the Buddhadharma, what is important is to penetrate deeply into one gate; one must not practice in a miscellaneous way. The great Heart-of-Heart Dharma is the highest essential teaching of Esoteric Buddhism and cannot be mentioned in the same breath as Tibet's form-based esoteric practices. Why, after practicing such a profound essential teaching, did you listen to the irresponsible talk of others, change to another Dharma gate, and take a needless detour?

Fortunately, you knew to return and resume heart esotericism, and you have again recovered the luminous state of samādhi. Do not again practice other dharmas indiscriminately. Practice heart esotericism single-mindedly and steadfastly, and you will perfectly accomplish the fruit of sagehood.

You say that because you violated the precept against sexual misconduct, your practice has suffered a setback. That is so. Sexual misconduct is the foremost of all evils. No matter how good one's practice may be, once one commits sexual misconduct, one's practice greatly declines; even those who have developed spiritual powers will lose them if they commit sexual misconduct.

How old are you this year, that you are still so impulsive? Was your violation of the sexual precept intercourse with your own wife, or with a third party? You must explain this clearly so that I may help remedy the matter for you.

7. I have received your letter. You have made great progress, which is most gratifying and worthy of congratulations. The book Liberation in the Intermediate State is indeed an esoteric Buddhist treasury. It teaches those of us who have not attained liberation during life to attain liberation and Buddhahood at the time of death. Without great blessings, how could one encounter it? That you treasure it and give it to others with care accords deeply with my wishes.

You have moved into a new home, and everything has met your wishes; your favorable affinities are excellent. I hope you will protect your own spirit still better, diligently remove old habitual tendencies, and thereby emit great light, perfectly realize the sambhogakāya and nirmāṇakāya, and fully accomplish Buddhahood.

8. The questions in your letter are answered below:

When the mind is empty, circumstances recede. All states are originally empty and quiescent; only because the deluded mind grasps at conditions do all kinds of illusory appearances arise. When the conditioning mind ceases, illusory states likewise cease of themselves. Thus, when you were in the mountains and your mind

was empty and non-abiding, the mountain scenery and woods all vanished together without remainder. Yet when illusory states cease, “the aware nature remains clear and distinct; it is not like wood or stone.”

This is the realized state described in the Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment: “When even the extinction of illusion is extinguished, the non-illusory is not extinguished.” Having seen this, you should carefully safeguard it yourself. Keep the mind empty at all times, and do not follow circumstances. Whenever a thought arises, immediately cut it off and do not allow it to continue. Nurture this diligently in this way, and within a few years it will reach complete maturity. For retreat, first, the mind must be empty and at ease; otherwise, the pent-up distress will become unbearable. Second, there must be a quiet retreat room. Third, there must be provisions. Fourth, there must be someone to attend the retreat. Fifth, there must be a guiding teacher. The benefit is that one can more quickly become continuous and undivided.

9. The various points asked about in your letter are answered item by item below:

(1) While you were lying quietly, deluded thoughts did not move. Through the prajñā influence of your usual Dharma practice, your inner mind opened and emitted an explosive sound. At the moment of the explosion, body and mind were altogether unobtainable, yet right mindfulness was clear and distinct, not like wood or stone. What is this? Direct your full attention to this. Once you recognize it firmly, that is seeing one’s true nature. If you abandon this and seek elsewhere, there will be nowhere to find the Buddha.

(2) “Empty space shatters, and the great earth sinks into stillness” refers to the very moment of the great explosion: not only is body and mind no longer seen within, and the world no longer seen without, but even empty space no longer exists.

(3) The sixth consciousness is in the brain; manas consciousness is in the blood vessels connecting the heart and lungs; and the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) is in the pericardium. The sixth consciousness governs thought and discrimination; manas consciousness constantly examines and deliberates upon a self; and the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) stores seeds.

(4) Awareness means vigilance. Whenever a thought arises, immediately become aware of it; do not run after deluded thoughts. Observation means watching. Use right mindfulness to watch deluded thoughts; the moment a deluded thought arises, become aware of it and do not follow it. Illumination is like sunlight or a bright lamp shining clearly: without deliberate observation, it naturally illuminates everything, clear and distinct without clinging to any appearance.

10. You say that when you go away from home, your practice is interrupted. This is because you regard practice as a fixed form, thinking that practice means only

forming mudrās and reciting mantras while seated, and that walking and working after rising from meditation are not practice. This is a great mistake! You must know that true practice lies in the everyday activities and functions of life off the cushion.

We should respond to circumstances and engage with things. Amid tension and busyness, although the body, hands, head, eyes, and so forth are all at work, the mind should remain unmoved, not turning with things, but simply responding with clear awareness—without gain or loss, anger or attachment. Only when the mind remains empty all day long is this true practice. If, even momentarily, one loses this awareness and something arises in the mind, that is an interruption; otherwise, it is not called an interruption.

When practice is fully mature, one must sweep away even the traces of awakening and break out of every fixed pattern: no awakening, no attainment; no Buddha, no sentient beings. Nothing is taken as existent, yet wondrous functioning is inexhaustible; nothing is attained, yet spiritual powers are immeasurable. Only this is the vast, boundless, profound, and wondrous samādhi.

In our practice, we must first begin by awakening to our own original mind and seeing our own true nature. Then maintain continuous and seamless contemplation, allowing not the slightest view of dharmas, things, or Buddhas to remain in the mind. Remain empty and without reliance throughout the day; according to circumstances, dress and eat, and wear away completely the habitual tendencies cultivated over countless kalpas. Then great light will naturally shine forth, illuminating the worlds in all ten directions without remainder. There is truly no need to practice any rainbow-body method.

If this rainbow-body method is practiced improperly—that is, before the mind has been completely emptied—not only will the body fail to transform into light, but deviations may also arise, and the eyes may even go blind. You all have cataracts, and practicing with light can more easily worsen them and lead to blindness. Therefore, I advise you to follow the methods of the Chan school. The progressive approach of awakening, safeguarding realization, and bringing realization to full completion is comparatively safer and more reliable.

You say that during practice you have no particular sensations and always feel calm and ordinary. This is the best feeling. For whenever there is some mysterious or extraordinary state, it is all fantasy within your own mind. There should not be the slightest state at all; then, suddenly, inner body and mind and the outer world are all simultaneously transformed into emptiness. At precisely such a time, spiritual awareness is clear and ever-present: there is no knower or known, no thinker or thought. This is your Original Face.

You also say that your practice cannot become continuous and undivided. This is because your practice has not yet become fully mature. So long as you continue tempering yourself unceasingly amid all circumstances, before long it will naturally come to fruition. Your practice now already has a considerable foundation. Continue to cultivate diligently, and I think that before long the bottom will drop out of the bucket. I hope you will apply yourself diligently.

11. When, during meditation, body, mind, and world are transformed into emptiness while spiritual knowing remains clear and ever-present, this is precisely the true nature appearing before you. Sometimes there is not clear, conscious knowing, yet it is unlike dozing off. This is knowing without knowing, in which one does not abide in awareness; it too is a good sign. Just do not fall into an indeterminate state.

It is not true that you have accomplished nothing; you have already realized the Original Face. Continue training amid circumstances, dissolving old habitual tendencies into emptiness and remaining unmoved by favorable or adverse conditions. You can then radiate greater light, manifest spiritual powers, and transform the physical body into the luminous sambhogakāya (reward body). But do not pursue this. When the conditions are ripe, it will occur naturally. At that point, manifesting a mind-born body at will will not be difficult. Apply yourself diligently.

12. You should gather once a week at a fellow practitioner's home to discuss and learn from one another, encouraging each other to progress. Especially in the height of summer, it is truly rare and commendable that you can continue your practice without interruption.

All states are originally illusory and nonexistent; they are accumulated and manifested through the restless stirring of our deluded minds. If the mind does not move, illusory states vanish of themselves. Thus the ancients said, “When deluded thoughts are exhausted, the illusory body dissolves.” This is indeed no falsehood. When you raise up right mindfulness, the deluded mind does not move; when the deluded mind does not move, deluded states vanish of themselves.

Therefore, all people and things appear dull and motionless. Conversely, once the deluded mind arises, all deluded states arise again. At such a time, if even right mindfulness falls away—that is, if there is no such thing as right mindfulness or deluded thought, for both are unobtainable—then even the shadows of all external objects are unobtainable. That is, even the dull shadows of sense objects are unobtainable. I hope that fellow practitioners will strive diligently onward and be assiduous in awakening and contemplation; then the day of reaching home will not be far off.

All Mahāyāna sūtras may be read. If you have at hand the Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment, Heart Sūtra, Diamond Sūtra, Śūraṅgama Sūtra, Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra,

Lotus Sūtra, Avataṃsaka Sūtra, and the Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch discussed last time, these are all essential sūtras for practitioners and may be studied one by one in detail.

13. A seven-day retreat must wait until the weather is somewhat cooler. It is still too early now; beginning in the tenth lunar month would be most appropriate. One person says that he has received no news and therefore does not wish to undertake a seven-day retreat; another says that he has already received news and therefore has no need for one. Both misunderstand the meaning of a seven-day retreat.

Having received no news is precisely why one should undertake a seven-day retreat. Once the seventh consciousness is brought to death, good news will naturally come. If the seventh consciousness is at full strength, how can there be good news unless one undertakes focused practice to put it to death? Having received good news makes a seven-day retreat even more necessary: only when the seventh consciousness has died completely can the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) turn around and bring forth great capacity and great functioning. How can one be satisfied with so little and think that, having received news, one need not undertake a seven-day retreat? If the deluded mind of the seventh consciousness has not died completely, how can habitual tendencies be brought to an end?

When the inner mind churns, this is the sign that the seeds of the deluded mind have been stirred by the fire of prajñā and are about to break free, though they have not yet done so. At this time, be patient and composed; do not panic. When it becomes hard to endure, recite the mantra aloud. Never leave your seat because your mind is troubled and confused, thereby abandoning the effort halfway.

The purpose of a seven-day retreat is to put the seventh consciousness to death. As this seventh consciousness is about to die, it naturally struggles desperately; thus your inner mind churns, becoming confused and distressed. If you do not seize this moment to exert yourself and put it to death, then with the slightest indulgence all your former effort will be lost. Therefore, giving up and leaving your seat at this time is a grave error. Whenever you encounter this condition in the future, you must endure it and continue sitting. Once the seventh consciousness dies, a magnificent prospect will appear before your eyes.

You may undertake a seven-day retreat in your own room. No ritual is necessary, because this is formless esoteric practice.

Sometimes meditation feels comfortable and relaxed; at other times it is agitated and unsettled. This is an inevitable phenomenon when practice has not yet come to full maturity. Because the consciousness-mind has not died completely, there is bound to be resistance, and so conditions may rise or fall. In short, do not rejoice when things are good or grieve when they are bad. Simply continue sitting with the

mind in non-abiding. When your mind becomes truly empty and pure, you will naturally enjoy ease and comfort, free from worry and vexation.

“All things are originally at ease; people alone trouble themselves!” It is also said, “Each dharma abides in its own dharma position; none intrudes upon another.” All things originally do not disturb us; it is only because our own deluded minds move chaotically, grasp at objects, and cling to appearances that afflictions multiply. When you watch television, if your mind becomes empty, you are not disturbed by what appears before you. At that time, your body and mind do not interfere with the television.

This is why I teach you to maintain aware contemplation at all times. You now know how to apply it, and I am greatly gratified. You must further intensify your practice, so that your practice remains the same at every time and in every place and you are not disturbed by circumstances. Thereafter, let go even of aware contemplation, while the mind remains empty as if freshly washed; when even emptiness is unobtainable, then you may let go.

14. What is called “the present moment” is the time when all deluded thoughts have ceased and everything is clearly known. This clear knowing is the Buddha-nature of the person concerned.

In walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, you must attend to “the present moment.” Do not turn with thoughts or run after circumstances.

To remain unmoved and undiscriminating when encountering circumstances is the realm of direct perception. The intrinsic nature that is clear and distinct is the essence, not the function. Seeing forms and hearing sounds without clinging or attachment is the function. The two must not be confused.

15. After you enter meditation, if body and hands are transformed into emptiness, this is good news. Who is it that knows that body and hands have become empty? You should focus your attention here. At such a time, it is not that there is no awareness; it is only that deluded thoughts have ceased. If you hear a sound and awaken with a start, who is it that hears the sound? Clearly, this is neither sleep nor falling into an indeterminate state. If you were drowsing, the mudrā would already have loosened and you would not remain sitting upright; if you were in an indeterminate state, how could you hear a sound and awaken?

When truly entering samādhi, there should be nothing at all. If any state appears, pay it no attention, and all illusory states will naturally vanish. If you are within a state, muddled and unable to govern yourself, then you have entered a dream state. You must raise your spirit, open your eyes, and recite the mantra aloud to disperse

the demon of sleep and gather yourself into right samādhi. I hope you will diligently exert yourself and not enter a wrong path.

The wondrous contemplation in which the three mysteries correspond differs somewhat from Mr. So-and-so's method of contemplating the mind. In the contemplation of the three mysteries, the three emptinesses of body (inner emptiness), mind (secret emptiness), and outer world (outer emptiness) correspond; it is a Dharma gate of seeing one's true nature and safeguarding realization. Mr. So-and-so's contemplation of mind, however, is a Dharma gate of seeking the mind before seeing one's true nature, and therefore differs from it. Although the latter can observe where deluded thoughts arise and immediately transform them into emptiness, the practitioner does not know what the true mind is. In the former method, the practitioner already knows the true mind and no longer gives rise to doubt; this is the difference.

16. If you can contemplate at all times, preserve what is original, and not drift with circumstances, this is true diligent practice. Conversely, although one may meditate and recite the Buddha's name every day, if after leaving the cushion one immediately forgets the purpose of it all, allowing deluded thoughts to move chaotically and following the flow of circumstances, that is merely superficial practice and brings little actual benefit.

Whatever states arise during meditation, whether pleasant or unpleasant, do not cling to them. Once the mind stirs and a thought arises, it is deluded awareness. Once deluded awareness arises, even the best state cannot be maintained, for the thought of wishing to preserve it is itself the deluded mind.

When, in sitting meditation, body, mind, and world are all empty, yet there is clear and distinct knowing—what is this? This is your Original Face. Having seen this empty, pure, luminous, formless face, will you still cling to the false appearances of the worldly realm? Going further, preserve it at all times and in all places; do not let it give rise to mind and drift with circumstances. Then this state of emptiness, purity, and luminosity will be continually present.

You ask why this state appears so rarely. It is because through many lives and countless kalpas you have become accustomed to attachment, and the habitual tendencies of ignorance are deep and heavy. Although you may have broken through them at one stroke and seen what is original, the roots of those deep habitual defilements still remain. Therefore, you must go further and preserve it at all times and in all places. As soon as a thought arises, you must remove it, not allowing it to wander through arising and ceasing. Eliminate bit by bit these habitual defilements of clinging to appearances, and the great work will be accomplished and

the fruit of sagehood realized. This point is extremely important. I hope you will remember it well and practice diligently to preserve it!

Do not cling to luminosity. Simply empty your mind; when the mind is pure, luminosity will naturally arise. Your true nature is a body of luminosity. The reason you now have little luminosity is that your mind is not pure. If the mind is truly attached to nothing and does not seek luminosity, luminosity will naturally shine forth greatly.

True samādhi is to remain undeluded when encountering circumstances. What use is a dead samādhi?

Forgetting is not a bad thing. Whatever we do is as though we had not done it. Why should we keep remembering it so anxiously? An ancient worthy said, “Though eating all year long, one has never bitten a single grain of rice.” This teaches us that the mind must remain empty and non-abiding.

17. I shall now answer the questions raised in your letter:

At times you may become deluded, but if you remain diligently vigilant and continually temper yourself amid circumstances, you will be able to dissolve deluded feelings. As for the intermediate state, it depends entirely on the depth of your practice in this life. If you can remain undeluded now, you will also be able to remain master of yourself in the intermediate state; if you cannot remain master of yourself now, you will become confused in the intermediate state. At that time, you can only ask Dharma friends to help remind you and awaken you from your deluded dream, so that you may attain liberation.

When practicing the Mind-Following Dhāraṇī, your right hand must not rest on your thigh. If you truly cannot raise it high, you may hold it slightly lower, against the area between your chest and abdomen. You may also recite the mantra without forming the mudrā, though its efficacy will be somewhat weaker. You may practice in this way.

18. If you can see your own body while resting after meditation, your spirit has suddenly left the body. After meditation, the mind is settled. During sitting, by contrast, deluded thoughts such as wanting to enter samādhi or realize the Way still keep the seventh consciousness tightly confined, preventing it from moving freely in and out. When you rest afterward, the mind lets go of everything; once that confinement is lifted, the seventh consciousness can leave the body and roam. This is why I teach you to let go of everything while meditating, think of nothing, seek nothing, and let things take their natural course. Then you can enter samādhi peacefully, awaken, and realize the Way.

Eating meat dishes in your dream was a reflection of your daughter urging you to eat meat. You were able to eat without finding it tasty, without craving food or becoming attached to eating. This is vegetarian eating. What is called eating vegetarian food means having no demand to eat; it does not lie in eating or not eating.

As for undertaking retreat, it may be simple or elaborate, according to your own choice of practice. Retreat means closing one's door and not going out, applying oneself diligently to practice at home. Some sit in meditation all day, speak to no one, and eat only one meal. Some alternate sitting and walking meditation, read scriptures, and do not speak. Others may also speak a little. In short, it means firmly closing the gate of one's own consciousness, not allowing it to move about chaotically, in order to realize bodhi completely as soon as possible.

19. It is a cause for joy and congratulations that so-and-so has gone abroad to propagate the Dharma. Those Dharma brothers and sisters who do not understand him have not opened the dharma eye and do not recognize the True Person.

Now that you have received this person's guidance and gained some awakening, how fortunate you are! But you must never be content with a little, imagining that you have arrived home and have nothing more to do. You must be diligent and conscientious, strive to temper yourself amid circumstances, diligently remove habitual tendencies, and eliminate the stream of consciousness driven by present karma before you may let go. Otherwise, you will fall into delusion after awakening and have practiced in vain. Would that not be regrettable?

I am advanced in years and do not wish to go out. I only intend to rest and recuperate peacefully. I hope you will practice diligently and not abandon your efforts halfway.

20. The practice you have devised differs from mine, so much as I would like to help, I am unable to do so. What can be done?

Since you are so devoted to qigong, why not take a qigong teacher as your master to help you advance, so that you may avoid entering a wrong path? Without the guidance of a renowned teacher, qigong practice will inevitably involve such deviations as obstruction, blockage, and stagnation. Not only will it fail to benefit the physical body, but it may also harm one's life.

Qigong practice cultivates the physical body but does not reach the “true self.” It is like knowing only how to decorate a house, without knowing how to care for the master who lives within it. Thus, however good one's skill may be, one still cannot transcend birth and death. What I devote myself to is the master within, while also

attending to the house. Therefore, my practice differs from yours, and I have no way to help you advance. I ask for your understanding.

21. The practice of cultivators of the Way has, broadly speaking, three levels of depth:

(1) As soon as deluded thoughts arise, one becomes aware of them and does not follow them in their wandering back and forth. At the time of death, even if there is an intermediate state, one can still act freely in whatever direction one chooses. Those who are not aware need not be discussed.

(2) When, at all times and in all places, both love and aversion have vanished, one can transform freely.

(3) When joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, together with the subtle continuous stream, have ceased entirely, one proceeds in step with a fruition Buddha and attains ultimate freedom.

You should assess for yourself which of these three stages you are in. Strive onward, and you will naturally attain ultimate freedom.

22. For seven consecutive meditation sessions, you may either complete them all at once or divide them over seven days, sitting once a day for two hours each time. Completing them all at once is more effective.

It is very good that so-and-so aspires to propagate Esoteric Buddhism. All the Dharma brothers and sisters—not you alone—should join their hearts and efforts to help him carry out the Way. I do not know whether the other colleagues, apart from you, are willing to contribute their efforts. May the Buddhas and bodhisattvas bestow their blessings and help you establish the practice center smoothly.

23. What you say in your letter is quite right. There is no benefit in speaking exhaustively to those who never believe; it is better to remain silent.

Teaching the Dharma in dreams and even serving as abbot of a Buddhist monastery are signs of great future accomplishment. This is a cause for joy and congratulations.

Where there is birth, there must be death; this is a natural law. Therefore, one must strive diligently to leap beyond the confines of birth and death, so that this life will not have been lived in vain.

24. Explosions during practice are quite ordinary. When practice reaches a certain stage, the movement of qi erupts, like water boiling in a furnace and overflowing with a sound; there is no need to be alarmed or astonished. As for the dangling cords on the lampshade outside moving, and your wife hearing the sound of a stool

falling, this was because the vibrations affected external objects and because her breath was connected with yours.

When practice reaches a considerable level, sounds from external objects may also trigger an explosion, in which the universe, body, and mind fall away, and thereby allowing one to see one's original nature thoroughly.

When you sit down to meditate, you must let go of everything. Do not give rise to thoughts or think of principles or affairs. Let the spirit leave the body and roam through space; as for me, I neither see nor hear. When the great explosion occurs, body, mind, and world are all exploded away together. When not a single thing is established and even emptiness cannot be clung to, suddenly concentrate your full attention and inquire: Who is it that knows that not a single thing is established? At this critical moment, when a single hair can bear a thousand pounds, the opportunity vanishes in an instant. If at that point you see through it at a glance, the work of a lifetime of Dharma practice is complete, and you will be free and at ease.

It cannot be said that you have not practiced diligently, but your error lies in dwelling on theories and events. Thus, at the time of the great explosion, you were unable to explode body, mind, and world into emptiness all at once. Moreover, opening your eyes to look at external objects was still attachment to appearances; therefore, you missed the good opportunity and were unable to see your true nature thoroughly. I hope you will apply yourself diligently and continue your practice—practice as before, and, amid activity and engagement, never forget continuous contemplation. Then news will naturally come. Take heart! Take heart!

25. When those of lesser capacity and inferior wisdom hear the Buddha expound the supreme vehicle, they cannot help but be frightened and alarmed. Thus, five thousand people left their seats at the Lotus Dharma assembly. When students hear that all sentient beings are like the patterned Buddha and dare to accept this without the slightest doubt or hesitation, they must have planted wholesome roots before not merely one or two Buddhas...

26. When a certain master comes to Wenzhou, it is naturally the duty of students to pay homage, visit, seek instruction, and request verification of realization. But if one's footing is not yet secure and one rises and falls along with him, one will go far astray.

Studying Buddhism and awakening to the Way are not easy matters. Therefore, Chan practitioners diligently persevere without slackening, often for twenty or thirty years, before they find an entry point. If people today practice only intermittently, then even after several hundred years, I fear they will still find no gate of entry.

Now, relying on the compassionate power of the Buddha, we need not exert very great effort before easily gaining a temporary resting place. We deeply feel the vastness of the Buddha's grace, which is ultimately difficult to repay. Yet although truth may be realized suddenly, and awakening to the nature of this numinous knowing is itself the dharmakāya (Dharma body), no different from the Buddha, deluded habits accumulated through many lives have already become ingrained. To cleanse joy, anger, sorrow, pleasure, and the subtle continuous stream so completely that no defilement remains is not something that can be accomplished in a day or two.

One must remain aware for a long time, reducing and reducing again. Just as, when the wind suddenly ceases, the waves gradually subside, one must neither be too hasty nor allow the slightest negligence. At all times, recognize the empty, quiescent essence; do not take the physical body as yourself. Remain clearly aware in the mind of numinous knowing; do not take deluded thoughts as yourself. Whenever deluded thoughts arise, do not follow them. Only when the mind of love and aversion has been extinguished will one no longer undergo segmented birth and death. I hope you will strive diligently and never be content with a little, so as not to fail this life. That would indeed be most fortunate.

27. Having read your letter, I am greatly gratified. During meditation, you discovered so many beautiful and ugly states, yet none stirred your mind: you did not rejoice in the good or detest the bad. This is truly rare and praiseworthy. What is lacking is only one sound of “”. It suddenly breaks with a snap and bursts apart with a bang: inwardly, body and mind; outwardly, the world—all explode at once. All appearances and non-appearances, appearances that are neither existent nor nonexistent, and neither-nonexistent appearances, are all unobtainable. When even the unobtainable is unobtainable, the Original Face stands clearly revealed before you, and the work of a lifetime of study and practice is complete.

As for luminosity, it is inherently possessed by one's intrinsic nature. Worldly people cannot reveal it because of deluded thoughts, attachments, inversions, and afflictions. Now, through practice, the mind has become quiet and a small opening has appeared in the deluded mind, so you have seen a little luminosity; it is not the complete manifestation of the whole. At this point, you must not become attached to it, but must continue striving forward. If you stop there even slightly, it will become an obstacle of light and you will be unable to see your true nature. This is the delusive light at the gateway of light and shadow. Only after all appearances have been shattered and one's true nature has been thoroughly seen is true light revealed. At that time, although radiant luminosity shines forth with complete clarity, one does not take it as an appearance of light, for all appearances are illusory and delusive, leaving nothing to grasp or cling to.

After leaving meditation, be just as you are while seated: respond to circumstances and deal with things without grasping or rejecting. While doing things, “in affairs, have no clinging mind”; after affairs are finished, “within mind, retain no affair.” An ancient worthy said: “All year long one eats meals, yet has never bitten a single grain of rice; all year long one wears clothes, yet has never hung a single strand of silk upon oneself.” This is what it means. If there is even the slightest stopping or lingering attachment, see through it at once and do not allow yourself to abide in it. This is the practice of herding the ox. When the wild ox's nature has died, with nowhere left for it to run, even observation is no longer needed. All day long, one simply “eats when hungry and sleeps when tired”—a person of the Way with nothing to do.

The fact that, amid activity and engagement, you feel composed and tranquil, far removed from burning afflictions, while your compassionate heart increases day by day, is because the power of the Way is growing in stillness. You are not far from seeing your true nature. I hope you will strive forward still more diligently; splendid and resplendent scenery awaits you not far down the road.

28. I am immensely gratified to know that you do not shrink from hardship and courageously shoulder the heavy responsibility of propagating the Dharma.

If students wish to eliminate the subtle, dust-like delusions, they will find it exceedingly difficult to fulfill this wish without tempering themselves through liberating sentient beings. The subtle attachments to the personal self and the dharma-self cannot be eliminated without long-term tempering together with sentient beings. Moreover, when explaining the Dharma to others, one will often suddenly become clear, as though aided by spiritual powers, gaining new insight into questions and deepening one's understanding. This too is the fine matter of benefiting others while benefiting oneself.

As for your remark that some Buddhists are selfish, wishing to attain realization for themselves and live a few years longer, such a mindset is not to be endorsed. That is indeed so. All sentient beings are originally beyond birth and death, so what is meant by living longer or less long? Originally, all are Buddhas, so what attainment or failure could there be? Such are the words of the deluded; one who has realized the Way would never speak thus.

It is very good for everyone to gather once a month on the first day of the lunar month for discussion. I am quite at ease having you take the lead and preside. I hope you will not fear difficulties and will apply yourself diligently.

29. If the mind is truly non-abiding, it radiates great light even in dreams. When the final breath ceases, although the physical body breaks down, the mind’s intrinsic

luminosity is fully revealed. This is your luminous sambhogakāya (reward body). Once this body is perfected, you transcend saṃsāra.

30. First, when not a single thought arises, there are no appearances at all. When functioning begins, one responds and acts in accordance with conditions; this does not mean becoming a fool or an idiot. You should remain in samādhi at all times, rather than entering samādhi for a while and then emerging from it. That is not right samādhi. While seated, recite the mantra as though you were not reciting it; off the cushion, respond to circumstances and handle affairs as though nothing were happening. You have not yet properly safeguarded realization, so how could this be spontaneous functioning? It is correct to eliminate sexual desire completely.

31. In the Chan school, one must arouse a sense of doubt before there is any prospect of awakening. This sense of doubt is not doubt about the Buddhadharma; it is doubt aroused regarding the huatou (critical phrase) under investigation. For example: “Before your parents were born, what was your Original Face?” The student raises doubt over this question, hoping to cut off deluded feelings and uncover the original nature. This has nothing to do with Esoteric practice.

There are three difficulties in cultivation: (1) recognizing one’s intrinsic nature and holding fast to it; (2) after recognizing it, safeguarding realization without forgetting it (after recognition, one must carefully protect it and diligently eliminate habitual tendencies); and (3) not rigidly clinging to safeguarding realization (practitioners often, because they diligently protect it, die in emptiness and cannot function. Therefore, one must be non-abiding on the one hand and respond to conditions in functioning on the other).

“When deluded thoughts suddenly dissolve, only then does one understand form and emptiness.

To recognize the Original Face, look amid green mountains and white clouds.”

The “Original Face” is nowhere else. Simply let the mind rest and examine what the state is when not a single thought arises, when there is no mind that can be called mind and no thought that can be called thought. Is this not your Original Face? This is a critical moment, gone in the slightest instant. If you pause and wait to ponder it, you will already be deluded by its shadow.

In truth, this directly present state in which there is no thought is precisely the Original Face that everyone seeks to see. The trouble is that people do not recognize it: because it is neither mysterious nor extraordinary, they lightly let it slip by and readily seek elsewhere. Thus they waste their time in vain and never see the Way. How regrettable!

The method of following closely after each thought can be used in all dharma gates. By means of it, deluded thoughts can be gathered in and prevented from running on, allowing one to enter dhyāna.

As for the relationship between mantra recitation and breathing, let it proceed naturally, without deliberately regulating it.

The alternation of good and bad states during meditation is due to the mind's instability. Before one's practice has reached maturity, fluctuations are unavoidable. Especially when one is about to make progress, the stirring up of karmic seeds can be uncomfortable. Therefore, great masters of the school would all recite mantras at such times, seeking the blessings of Buddhas and bodhisattvas to eliminate these hindrances.

For practice to advance ever higher in strength, the following points require attention: (1) sit in meditation punctually every day, without interruption; (2) let go of everything, as if you were a great dead person; (3) when reciting the mantra, recite it in the mind and hear it with the ears, clearly distinguishing every syllable; the slightest indistinctness is a deluded thought; (4) when a deluded thought arises, see it and do not follow it.

Neither suppress it nor indulge it. Simply bring up the mantra and dissolve it thereby. (5) Do not seek samādhi, awakening, or the manifestation of spiritual powers. The moment there is something sought, it is a deluded thought, and one will instead be unable to enter samādhi. (6) Continuous contemplation is most important. After leaving the cushion, carry the meditative state from the cushion into activity.

Attend to all affairs without allowing the mind to move, as if someone else were doing them. Respond to conditions in functioning without clinging. This is what the Diamond Sūtra means by: "Give rise to this mind without abiding anywhere." "Respond" means responding to the myriad conditions without abiding anywhere; then the true mind of quiescent extinction vividly appears before you.

Your letter asks, "What if I cannot undergo the great death?" This is only because attachment is strong. All forms and appearances are flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water; there is nothing to grasp and nothing to seek. Fix your attention only on this: Who is it that can see all appearances and manifest all images? Apply effort here; let appearances perish and see your true nature. As for "when nothing is sought, the Way is naturally ever-present," this does not refer to the state of safeguarding realization after awakening. It means that, to awaken and see one's own intrinsic nature, one must seek nothing; only then will the great Way naturally appear before one.

A proverb says, “Aim for the highest, and you may attain only the middle.” In our practice, we must indeed set our sights high rather than low; this does not count as attachment. “Nothing in the world is too difficult for a determined person.” If we do our utmost and persevere through every setback, nothing is beyond accomplishment. Moreover, we are originally Buddhas; only through deluded attachment to forms and appearances have we seemingly lost what was inherently ours. If we turn the light inward at every moment and are not drawn away by external circumstances, why should we fear that we cannot recover our Original Face?

As for “the nonduality of things and self,” learning Buddhism and cultivating the Way are not matters to be gained by reckless ventures or lucky chances. Yet they are not so difficult as to be unattainable. So long as we have the spirit to fear no hardship or danger, to enter directly, and to press courageously forward, we will certainly attain realization.

The bewildering circumstances of sound, form, wealth, profit, and the like unfold in dazzling profusion. They seem like countless armies of Māra surrounding people on every side, so that they cannot help being stirred by them and linger there, forgetting to return.

But if one can recognize that all such objective circumstances are flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water—unobtainable and not to be sought—then, by letting go once and for all, one need expend no effort. At once one returns home and sits securely, free and at ease, enjoying peace. The Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment says: “Know them to be empty flowers, and there is no further turning in saṃsāra.” It also says: “Knowing illusion, one is freed from it; no expedient means are required. Freed from illusion, one is awakened; there are no gradual stages.”

How difficult, then, can cultivation of the Way be? As Laywoman Pang said: “Easy, easy, easy—the meaning of the Patriarch’s coming from the West is atop every blade of grass!” Yet because accumulated habitual tendencies run deep, they cannot be ended all at once. Therefore, one must maintain continuous and seamless contemplation at all times and in all places, struggle against deluded habits of attachment to appearances, and eliminate the stream of consciousness driven by present karma before one can abide in peace. At the outset, lapses in awareness and attachment to circumstances and feelings are unavoidable.

But so long as you heighten your vigilance and continue the struggle without slackening, with the mind of one treading on thin ice, you will gradually become fully proficient. Amid all circumstances, do not forget aware contemplation. Then advance from contemplation to quiescent illumination; advance further until even

the traces of quiescent illumination dissolve. There is then no question of contemplating or not contemplating; all day long one is as if foolish and dull, and the benefit is inexhaustible. Please make every effort!

Your letter says, “I understand the principle, but in actual circumstances I often forget and lose it.” This is precisely the difficulty we encounter in learning Buddhism. Through many lives and kalpas, the habits of attachment have grown deep and cannot be transformed at once. Therefore, one must become aware of them and diminish them again and again until one reaches complete maturity. This is not the work of a single day.

As for your statement, “I have a strong sense of enterprise and readily give rise to discriminating thoughts in my dealings with people,” this is ordinary people’s way of speaking. According to the Buddha’s teaching, “Give rise to this mind without abiding anywhere,” a strong sense of enterprise is precisely a necessary condition for benefiting and bringing joy to sentient beings. Without such a mind, one becomes passive and merely cultivates one’s own welfare. “Give rise to this mind” means giving rise to this very sense of enterprise. One need only give rise to the mind without abiding; one must not abide in affairs and give rise to discriminating thoughts. A difference of a hair’s breadth separates heaven from earth.

When habitual tendencies arise and you wish to turn them but cannot, you may use the power of mantra to turn them. Vigorously bring up the sacred mantra, and any stubborn deluded habit can dissolve into emptiness in an instant. Of course, the speed of transformation differs according to the depth of one’s meditative power. But there is no need to become dejected or remorseful. Simply struggle with it until you have passed through it, and the day will naturally come when conditions mature.

Through Chan practice, one can indeed recognize numinous knowing free of thoughts as one’s intrinsic nature. One then continues the work of safeguarding realization, diligently eliminates habitual tendencies, passes through the second and final barriers, and fully realizes bodhi. Few, however, do this. Most can only speak of it while their minds continue to follow circumstances: it is present in their words but absent when needed in practice. This is why Chan masters do not approve. How regrettable!

In fact, most Chan worthies of old first attained awakening at the level of principle and then continued safeguarding realization until it fully matured. Had the Sixth Patriarch previously undertaken Chan meditation? After receiving the Fifth Patriarch’s guidance and awakening, he concealed himself among hunters for fifteen years, until every last ‘layer of skin’ had fallen away. Is this not a clear example?

Please tell everyone to practice diligently. When seated, settle your mind completely and recite the mantra single-mindedly, reciting it in the mind and hearing it with the ears. Off the cushion, do not forget continuous contemplation. When, after a long time, the practice becomes mature, you will naturally directly realize the original nature and fully attain the noble fruition. Do not expect to rely on anyone else for help in attaining realization. In cultivating the Way, one can rely only on one's own diligent effort; others cannot do it for one.

Because someone wished to acquire spiritual powers, she changed to qigong practice. This was because she did not understand the origin of birth and death or the path of liberation, but was instead deluded by miraculous transformations. This, too, is the karmic result of an improper causal ground.

In practice, the most appropriate state is not to see any visions or appearances at all. For all appearances whatsoever are false and illusory; if one becomes attached to illusory appearances, there will never be a day of seeing one's true nature.

Cracking sounds throughout the joints are due to changes in the circulation of qi and blood. Because the mind affects the body, physical changes naturally occur in the course of practice.

Buddhist sūtras such as the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, and Avataṃsaka Sūtra should all be read and recited. The recorded sayings of the Chan patriarchs should likewise be studied and investigated.

During the plum-rain season, Shanghai is still fairly cool. After the rains end in a week, heat waves will arrive and temperatures will rise. Yet practitioners must train amid cold and heat, favorable and adverse circumstances, without being disturbed by them. Only then can they attain great freedom at the threshold of birth and death.

32. All sentient beings inherently possess the wisdom and virtuous characteristics of the Tathāgata. Yet because they are deludedly attached to sounds and forms, they have lost their original nature. If they now wish to return to the origin and recover it, they can only follow the Buddha's teaching: choose a method of practice suited to their own dispositions, enter deeply into one gate, and cultivate diligently and tirelessly with perseverance. Only then can they attain even a small measure of accord.

In this present Dharma-ending age, sentient beings have inferior capacities and heavy karmic obstacles. Relying on one's own efforts in cultivation, it is truly difficult to attain realization. (Of course, this does not apply to exceptional persons of great capacity or great bodhisattvas who have returned.) Therefore, the Chan school, which alone made Chinese Buddhism shine with singular brilliance, is now also

barely surviving; it has degenerated into transmitting the Dharma merely through written certificates, unable to free itself from this condition.

The compassionate Buddha foretold that, for sentient beings in the Dharma-ending age who seek to escape the bitter sea of birth and death, there are only the practices of Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhism. Therefore, for Buddhist disciples today, Pure Land practice is the most reliable. If you trust my words, then recite the Buddha's name devoutly morning and evening. Do not seek to enter samādhi, nor hope for awakening. Simply recite sincerely and steadfastly. When the person is empty and circumstances have vanished, the true eye will suddenly open, and you will directly behold Amitābha Buddha and your own Buddha-nature; then you will be in accord with Chan. This is what is meant by having both Chan and Pure Land; it does not mean that, apart from Buddha-recitation, you should also go and practice Chan inquiry.

The purpose of studying and practicing the Buddhadharma is originally to transcend birth and death. Awakening—seeing one's true nature—is only the forerunner of transcending birth and death. The ancients said, "true cultivation after awakening," for only after awakening can one distinguish the true from the false, thereby safeguarding one's intrinsic nature and not being deluded by false appearances. This is what the Chan school calls the practice of safeguarding realization, and what the doctrinal schools call "eliminating delusive thoughts." When delusive thoughts have been entirely eliminated and one is not deluded by circumstances, birth and death are transcended. This is according to the Chan school. Pure Land practice does not require this: if one's Buddha-recitation is solid, at the end of life a Buddha will guide one to rebirth in the Western Pure Land, and birth and death will thereby be transcended.

33. Because you have practiced without slackening, you have realized unobstructed ease amid favorable and adverse circumstances, freedom in all directions. This is truly cause for celebration! Practicing the Dharma and studying the Way are for transcending birth and death and going beyond saṃsāra. Birth and death arise from giving rise to attachment when encountering circumstances. If, upon encountering circumstances, one does not give rise to thoughts of love or aversion, grasping or rejection, then birth and death have nowhere to gain a foothold. What is called realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature is recognizing that mind is originally unborn and that one's nature is originally pure and genuine.

It is the fundamental great energy from which all things arise—the clear, numinous knowing that is distinctly present at the point where a thought ceases—and all things are but its shadows. So long as we recognize this principle, then, whenever we see an appearance, we do not cling to its false aspect but know it as a manifestation of our nature; thus we directly behold our intrinsic nature. Once one

has seen one's nature, one must be able to pass through affairs without obstruction, remaining wholly unmoved in feeling amid all circumstances. Only then is it genuine awakening. Now that you can remain unelated in favorable circumstances and untroubled in adverse ones, this is most gratifying and worthy of congratulations.

34. "Those far away are close; those nearby are distant." We need only apply ourselves at all times. Though separated by thousands of miles, we meet face-to-face every morning; conversely, though seeing one another every day, we may still be as distant as the ends of the earth.

When practice becomes effective, changes may occur in the body. Yet do not become attached to them; once attachment arises, your practice will stop there and will be difficult to advance. If you have had chronic ailments in the past and they now manifest, do not be afraid. After a period of cultivation, they will be uprooted and healed. Of course, if medical treatment is called for, you should still seek medical treatment.

To attain accomplishment, one must arouse a great resolve; only then can one endure hardship and labor and remain steadfast without retreating. Otherwise, at the slightest setback, one will lose heart. What practice most avoids is proceeding intermittently, for one must carry it through in a single unbroken line.

Sentient beings in the desire realm all have deeply rooted sexual desire. Therefore, one must meditate more, putting this deluded mind to death, before one can dwell in peace. As soon as this deluded thought first stirs, strongly raise right mindfulness and ask, "Where does this deluded thought come from?" This thought is inherently false and without real existence; once questioned in this way, it vanishes into nothing. To eradicate this delusion at its root, one must, after awakening, temper oneself through circumstances; only then can one fulfill this aim.

After leaving the meditation cushion, observe the mind: concentrate the power of the mind and look into the condition before a single thought arises. The moment a deluded thought is born, immediately recognize and dispel it. Simply watch it. In time, the right mindfulness that watches and the deluded thought that is watched will both dissolve together, and you will directly behold the original nature.

Because this Dharma is easy to attain accomplishment through, only those fully endowed with wholesome roots, merit, and virtue are capable of undertaking it.

35. In response to the questions in your letter, I reply point by point below:

(1) In practice, what is precious is carrying it through in one continuous effort; one must not practice for a while and then stop. If one practices intermittently,

meditative stability is not easily attained, the channels and vital energies are extremely difficult to clear, and the body is not easily restored to health.

(2) All karmic obstacles are created by the mind. When the mind is empty, obstacles disappear of themselves. The Song of Enlightenment says: “Once awakened, karmic obstacles are originally empty; without awakening, one must repay one’s past karmic debts.”

(3) Practicing intermittently is not in accordance with the Dharma, even if repeated many times. Concentrated practice of the second mudrā can cure illness, but it must be practiced continuously.

(4) Bodily movement during meditation belongs to past karmic obstacles. Nevertheless, press forward courageously and pay it no heed—neither suppressing it nor encouraging it. After some time, it will naturally subside.

(5) Observe the point at which a thought arises. The instant a thought arises, recognize it; do not follow it into proliferating attachments and wandering. This is the correct practice of the dharma gate of observing the mind. During practice, one should maintain contemplation at all times and not relax in the slightest. Still more, avoid having only arrogant and deluded aspirations while lacking firm resolve and being unable to put them into actual practice. The result will surely be that nothing is accomplished. Be careful! Be careful!!!

(6) In the past, you aroused your resolve vigorously, but recently you have been unable to arouse it. This is because your initial resolve was not genuine. Moreover, your girlfriend’s association with an unwholesome man has further caused you to lose your resolve for the Way. I hope you will repent and reform deeply.

36. Your interpretations of the koans are lively and flexible. But the work of practice lies in actual functioning, not in interpreting koans. If you remain attached amid circumstances, even a fine interpretation is of no use. People studying Buddhism today pursue empty talk instead of actual practice. Their habitual obstacles are deep, and their emotional attachments are strong; they are unwilling to let go wholeheartedly and practice sincerely. Therefore, I teach them to recite the Buddha’s name, seek rebirth in the Pure Land, and plant various wholesome roots. They are not able to receive the Mind-Ground Dharma Gate. Amitābha Buddha!

You have an affinity with the Buddha in Nantong. It is also an excellent thing that you can teach the Dharma as appropriate to visitors to the mountain and point out the path to those lost in delusion. Since ×× has taken you as teacher, you should instruct them according to their needs and help them leave the bitter sea. To undertake this without yielding to others is the mark of a true bodhisattva.

37. If the crown of your head swells and aches during meditation, this is because clear qi is rising. It is a very good natural phenomenon, so do not be alarmed. As meditation progresses, qi and blood circulate, turbid qi descends, and clear qi rises; only then can the blood vessels open. Otherwise, if there is no sensation at all, how could the channels be opened, the physical body dissolved, and the originally existent true nature directly realized?!

Your bodily discomfort arises because you do not understand its cause and thus become frightened and agitated. Simply settle your mind, sit in meditation with single-minded mantra recitation, and do not concern yourself with how qi and blood circulate. Let them move naturally. When your deluded mind becomes empty and quiescent, your breath and qi cease, the physical body dissolves into emptiness, and the world disappears, you will directly realize the original reality. But if you are frightened and restless, not only will you be unable to enter samādhi, but you will instead cause qi and blood to become blocked. Take heed! Take heed!

Strong sexual desire arises because the fire of prajñā inwardly permeates and stirs the seeds in ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna). You may recite mantras more often to dissolve it.

Pain in the hands when forming mudrās means that your past karmic obstacles are heavy; the pain is necessary for the obstacles to be eliminated. For every measure of pain you endure, a corresponding measure of obstacles is removed. I hope you will make a strenuous effort.

38. Recently, many people in Xi'an have been practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. But do they all cultivate in accordance with the Dharma and persevere diligently without slackening? In their spare time, can they still gather to study and discuss, helping and encouraging one another in their progress?

How has your practice progressed recently? Can body and mind dissolve into emptiness, with no abiding in anything? Practice presents three difficulties: recognizing the true mind and affirming it without doubt; safeguarding realization without forgetting it after recognition; and safeguarding realization without becoming inert. I hope you will persevere.

39. I respond point by point below to the questions in your letter:

(1) The final realization attained by the three traditions of Chan, Pure Land, and Esoteric Buddhism should not differ. The ancient worthies said, "There are many gates of skillful means, but no second road in returning to the source." This means that although their methods of practice differ, the Buddha-nature realized is indeed no different. The wondrous essence of suchness (tathatā) does not differ among any sentient beings, nor does it differ from that of all Buddhas: a thousand Buddhas and

ten thousand Buddhas share one essence. Yet before one has cultivated to the end, there are differences in the depth and shallowness of one's practice. Not only do the three traditions differ somewhat; differences also exist within a single school. This is not because the Dharma differs, but because practitioners differ in the sharpness or dullness of their faculties.

(2) Is Esoteric Buddhism a higher stage beyond the Chan school? This question arises from Esoteric practitioners boasting that their methods are profound and complete and claiming that Esoteric Buddhism is a higher stage beyond Chan. In fact, it is a mistaken assertion made by those who do not understand the ultimate meaning of the Chan school.

Consider Dzogchen (Great Perfection), the most profound and complete practice of Esoteric Buddhism: the final state it realizes is exactly the same as that of the Chan school, without the slightest difference. How, then, can it be called a higher stage beyond Chan? Esoteric practice merely has some additional skillful means, whereas Chan relies wholly on letting go of body and mind to realize for oneself. Although skillful means are beneficial, they also readily give rise to attachment; in this respect they are not as clean-cut and direct as Chan. Therefore, because practitioners differ in their dispositions, each should practice Esoteric Buddhism or Chan according to what is suitable; no general judgment can be made.

(3) After realizing the Original Face, must one still practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma? Having recognized one's own intrinsic nature, one need only safeguard it at all times: do not follow thoughts or be moved by circumstances. As the days pass and one's practice deepens, it will naturally become continuous and undivided. This is what is meant by practice after awakening in which there is no practice; it is true cultivation.

But if, when a thought arises, you do not recognize it, or recognize it only after it has persisted for a while; or if, when encountering circumstances and conditions, you cannot remain master of yourself but are carried along by circumstances, then your meditative stability is too weak. You cannot safeguard realization continuously and seamlessly, and what you have realized is only awakening at the level of principle, without genuine benefit. In that case, you must stand firmly on the ground and diligently practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma with all your strength, in order to increase your meditative stability and directly realize true reality. Only then may the work be brought to completion.

(4) Buddhism and Daoism differ at their highest attainment; they are not the same. Daoism has something to which it remains attached and cannot empty everything completely; Buddhism abides nowhere, and even emptiness itself disappears. Daoism can attain spiritual powers, so its functioning is not complete; Buddhism has

neither wisdom to be possessed nor anything to be attained, and therefore its wondrous functioning is boundless. This is why Patriarch Chunyang took refuge with Patriarch Huanglong Xuan.

40. Another year has passed easily away, and it too belongs to impermanence. Another layer has been added to the cap of age, and our illusory lives have been shortened by another span. To those who see only change, this leaves no room for joy; but for us practitioners, it brings no worry or anxiety. For fundamentally we have neither birth nor death. Appearing and disappearing in this world and other worlds is merely an illusory game.

41. What you say in your letter is quite correct: those who speak only of mind or only of matter have each grasped but half the truth. Mind is matter, and matter is mind. Yet mind and matter are neither one nor two. Because they are not two, one may say that mind is matter and matter is mind; because they are not one, one may say that matter is not mind and mind is not matter—for if there were two, they would thereby not be. Moreover, mind is the greatest energy: without this energy, none of the myriad things could arise, and all things return and transform into energy. Thus the sūtra says, “Nothing does not flow forth from this Dharma Realm; nothing does not return to this Dharma Realm.”

Once you understand this, constantly and closely safeguard this wondrous, luminous true mind. Do not let it be obscured by worldly toils or sullied by external objects and circumstances. This is precisely right practice. All Dharma gates, such as Buddha-recitation, mantra recitation, and Chan inquiry, are no more than means of attaining this “safeguarding of the true mind”—of preventing deluded thoughts from wandering.

Therefore, among the various Dharma gates, the Chan school is the swiftest and most direct, because it directly points to the mind, enabling one to see one’s nature and attain Buddhahood. Other Dharma gates require one to cross several more thresholds and are comparatively circuitous and slow.

If you can truly believe this, then the one who has come here to ask about the Dharma, who has made great vows, and who intends to attain Buddhahood and liberate sentient beings is your true mind. The one that shines from your face all day long and manifests in every gesture and movement is your Original Face.

Then there is no need to practice other Dharma gates. When, then, do you plan to come to Shanghai to study the Heart-of-Heart Dharma? If you cannot yet believe this, the weather is gradually becoming cooler. You may first practice the “Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra,” sitting for one hour each morning and evening; two hours would be still better if you can manage it. After practicing for a month and a

half, come to Shanghai to study the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. I shall say no more. May you attain accomplishment.

42. Since you are able to make vows, in accordance with the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, to attain Buddhahood and liberate sentient beings, this fully demonstrates the wholesome roots you planted in past lives and the depth of your vows. How greatly this delights me!

The Heart-of-Heart Dharma belongs to the unsurpassed heart esotericism. Although it is an esoteric practice, it is in fact a Chan practice, for it is formless and directly realizes the mind-ground; it is no different from Chan. Though its initial approach differs somewhat, through the Buddha's empowering blessing it is easier to enter into realization than through Chan inquiry. Nevertheless, it still requires diligent cultivation and cannot be attained easily.

If, after receiving the Dharma, you diligently nurture and cultivate it at all times and in all places, whether on or off the meditation cushion, you may be assured of entering realization and attaining siddhi. After realization, you may be reborn in any of the Pure Lands of the ten directions according to your vows; in this respect it also accords with the Pure Land school. When winter arrives, I shall write to invite you to Shanghai to receive the Dharma.

43. Some words arose in your stillness, but they seem plausible while actually being mistaken. Henceforth, do not indulge in speculative imaginings, and still less enter into any states or experiences. Only then can you accord with the wondrous essence and open undefiled wisdom.

The Pure Land method belongs to doctrinal teaching rather than direct realization of the essential principle. Esoteric practice may also lead to that realization, but this depends on the particular method. Because esoteric methods are extensive and diverse, they are collectively called esoteric teachings rather than the tradition of direct realization. Chan alone is called the tradition of the essential principle: here, "principle" means the center, the destination, and the true purport, which cannot be compared with expedient or gradual methods.

As for the four preliminary practices, they are the second of the five stages established by the Dharma Characteristics School. The first, the stage of provisions, is the stage of the three worthy ones; the second is this stage of preparation. What is called warmth is the initial stage after passing through the three worthy ones, when the "noble fire" has not yet arisen. At the summit stage, one may advance or retreat, just as one standing on a mountaintop may go either up or down. When practice reaches this point, advancing leads to the stage of forbearance; retreating may lead even to falling into hell.

At the stage of forbearance, practice is firm: one only advances and does not regress. It is foremost among worldly states, the highest and supreme teaching among conditioned worldly dharmas. This is a minor wholesome root that bridges the stage of the three worthy ones and the first bhūmi, and is therefore designated the stage of preparation. Although the dharma of forbearance also has superior, middling, and inferior grades, it is ultimately unlike the two stages of warmth and summit, from which one may fall into the three lower realms.

The following three stages are the stage of seeing the Way—realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature; the stage of cultivating the Way—true cultivation after awakening; and the ultimate stage—realizing the fruition of Buddhahood. Thus, seeing one's nature is only the beginning of the first bhūmi. One must still strive diligently in cultivation before one can fully realize the fruition of Buddhahood. I hope you will exert yourself!

When meditating, one must absolutely avoid deliberately waiting to enter samādhi or for sacred states to appear. Deliberate intention is itself a deluded thought; not only will it prevent awakening, it will also prevent entry into samādhi. While in samādhi, one cannot "notice" it, for as soon as one notices, one emerges from samādhi. Still less should one cling to sacred states; clinging to states becomes demonic. Be careful, be careful!

44. What you said in your letter is quite correct. Yet the pleasurable sensation of "the body becoming light and the mind melting away" is only a state of partial release. It is merely a passing guest, not yet the master of complete release, when the true mind fully reveals itself. Therefore it appears and disappears, and cannot become continuous and undivided.

Since you possess such wholesome roots, with further diligent nurturing and earnest cultivation, it will not be difficult for you to become continuous and undivided.

There is a great difference between "cultivating first and awakening later" and "awakening first and cultivating later." For those who cultivate first and awaken later, cultivation before awakening is blind cultivation; for those who awaken first and cultivate later, cultivation after awakening is true cultivation. Cultivating first and awakening later is like being in a dark room: one does not know where the dirt lies, does not see how disorderly the things in the room are, and has no way to begin cleaning and arranging them. This is why it is blind cultivation. Awakening first and cultivating later is like turning on an electric light in the room: one clearly sees where the disorder and dirt are and can easily put things in order and sweep them clean.

Moreover, although cultivating first and awakening later may appear to take more time, one who walks more develops stronger legs and is less likely to stumble. The

awakening of one who awakens first and cultivates later is often superficial; when circumstances arise, it lacks strength and one easily falls. Therefore, true cultivation after awakening is necessary. Only by diligently clearing away old habitual tendencies can one fully realize bodhi and proceed together with the Buddha of fruition.

45. Buddhist practice calls for single-mindedness, sincerity, perseverance, and steadiness. Do not be impatient, but do not be sluggish either. Your character is genuine and pure, and your wholesome roots were planted in past lives. Practice wholeheartedly, and accomplishment will come in time. The samaya precepts signify equality, vows, vigilance, non-transgression, and the removal of defilements and obscurations. You have already made great vows, and defilements and obscurations were removed on your behalf during empowerment. In daily life, therefore, maintain vigilant contemplation. Realize the true fruition, liberate sentient beings impartially, and remain faithful to these vows. In this way, you embody and genuinely uphold the samaya precepts. How could this compare with possessing the name alone?

When you begin the practice, do not be too hasty. Arrange your schedule according to the time available. If you have ample free time, you may practice two sessions; otherwise, one session daily is sufficient. If your legs become numb or painful during practice, you may adjust them slightly, but the mudrā must not be reversed or broken. As for mantra recitation, the principle is not to stop. But if you enter emptiness and continue until recitation can no longer continue, simply let it stop naturally.

At the beginning of meditation, the appearance of emptiness may be dim and hazy, as though one were falling asleep, yet there is awareness; it is unlike deep sleep, in which there is no awareness. At such a time, do not rouse your spirit. If a thought arises, resume reciting the mantra; simply let yourself follow the tendency to sink, and with one release you will peacefully enter samādhi, as body and mind dissolve into emptiness. If you suddenly become alert, give rise to thought, and resume recitation, you will again emerge from samādhi. But if you are asleep and unaware, you must rouse your spirit and recite the mantra aloud to dispel the demon of sleep. The distinction between these two states is subtle. I hope you will understand and apply this well.

As for the number of meditation sessions, it need not be fixed. Sometimes one session is suitable, and sometimes two. But you must ensure that you sit for one session every day; do not fail to sit one day and then sit twice the next. When sitting two sessions in one day—after completing the full six mudrās—the first session should use the fourth mudrā, and the second the second mudrā. If you add further sessions, add only the fourth mudrā, not the second.

46. That you are occasionally able to experience the wondrous nature of suchness (tathatā), suddenly feeling your body light and your mind melting away in incomparable ease, though the experience does not last long and gradually vanishes without your noticing it, is already no small matter. Without having deeply planted wholesome roots in past lives, how could one attain this?

The awakening of the ancients was likewise like a spark struck from stone or a flash of lightning. They could not maintain the condition of awakening for long, either; after awakening, they also had to safeguard realization continuously and closely over a long period before it could become continuous and undivided.

Master Zhaozhou said: “Apart from the two daily meals of gruel and rice, this old monk did not allow his mind to become mixed or distracted for forty years. Only then did it become continuous and undivided.” Chan Master Longya said: “To cultivate the Way, one must first have the basis of awakening; competing in crossing is like racing dragon boats. Although the old garden is idle land, one can rest only after winning it once.” This means that after awakening one must engage in true cultivation and continuously safeguard realization, eliminating attachments, emotional thoughts, and habitual tendencies. Although all sentient beings are originally Buddhas, one can cease only after habitual tendencies have been completely removed and the ultimate ground fully realized.

Further, if one truly experiences the wondrous nature of suchness (tathatā), then all deluded thoughts are the true mind, for without the true mind no deluded thought could arise. Waves are fundamentally water; without water, how could waves form? Those who understand this principle see water whenever they see waves and are not turned by the waves. Likewise, those who realize the Way see their true nature whenever they encounter any circumstance, appearance, or deluded thought, and are not carried away by circumstances, appearances, or deluded thoughts.

According to heart esotericism, the arising of deluded thoughts is like drawing on water: as soon as a stroke is made, not a trace remains. At the point where deluded thoughts arise, practitioners should become thoroughly familiar with what is original. The Fifth Patriarch said: “A person who truly sees their nature is still seeing their nature when wielding a sword in battle.” This is the meaning.

Finally, let me introduce another Chan koan to help you awaken and resolve your doubts.

Once, as Chan Master Zhenjing was reading the Śūraṅgama Sūtra with his disciples, they came to where Śākyamuni Buddha said, “If I press my finger, the ocean-seal emits light!” A disciple asked the master, “What was Śākyamuni Buddha’s meaning?” The master replied, “Śākyamuni Buddha deserves thirty blows!” The disciple said, “What fault has the Buddha committed?” The master replied, “Why press the finger?”

This means that the ocean-seal—the true suchness (tathatā) of Buddha-nature—shines at all times, whether or not one presses a finger.

The disciple said, “Although that is so, whenever I give rise to a thought, deluded thoughts fly about in profusion!” The master shouted sternly, “That too is the ocean-seal emitting light!” At the shout, the disciple experienced great awakening. He said, “Ah! For decades I have missed it right here!”

Look at how freely and swiftly the ancients realized the Way. Could they still be entangled by deluded thoughts or carried off by appearances? All circumstances, appearances, and deluded thoughts are the true mind. Amid all circumstances, appearances, and deluded thoughts, if one sees only the true mind, then one does not see circumstances, appearances, or deluded thoughts. Not seeing circumstances, appearances, or deluded thoughts does not mean that there are no circumstances, appearances, or deluded thoughts; rather, all of them are transformed into wondrous functioning. Can you awaken to this wonder?

47. That you have turned from practicing qigong toward the Buddha Dharma fully shows the depth of your wholesome roots. This is worthy of joy and praise. Your method of cultivation is entirely correct, so there is no need to be afraid. Simply continue sitting as you have been. As for the frightened feeling that arises when you recite the Buddha’s name, it is a creation of your own mind; it is not that Buddhas or bodhisattvas are punishing you.

Buddhas and bodhisattvas are supremely compassionate, devoted to liberating and benefiting all sentient beings. However much you distance yourself from them, scold them, or insult them, they continue to care for and protect you with the same kindness, never blaming you. Continue practicing with a settled mind. Do not let repeated doubts hinder your progress.

There is nothing wrong with the experiences that arise during your practice. Simply let them unfold naturally: do not rejoice when they are good, and do not worry when they are bad. In this way, you will not go astray. Moreover, you have a good husband who can offer guidance and correction at your side. You need be even less afraid; simply advance courageously.

Practicing the Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra is very good. You may also add recitation of Amitābha Buddha morning and evening; there is no conflict in this. For they are all Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the Western Pure Land. If you recite and make vows, you may be reborn in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Once you are able to sit for two hours, I will confer empowerment upon you to practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma.

48. It is truly admirable that, amid your many demands, you can set aside time to sit in meditation and practice the Dharma. You have already begun the second round of practice; drowsiness and restlessness have both diminished. You are about to set out upon the broad road, which is most encouraging and worthy of congratulations. I hope you will persevere to the end and never retreat out of fear of difficulty.

As for your strong attachment to your children, it is a habitual tendency accumulated over many lives. So long as you see through everything in this world and recognize that, whether husband and wife or mother and child, it is all but a spring dream, then, when the mind no longer clings to it, it vanishes into nothing.

49. Your letter has been received. What you say is quite right: awakening and seeing one's true nature is realized in the instant when the previous thought has ceased and the next thought has not yet arisen. But this is only recognition. You must still exert yourself in circumstances, polishing and refining yourself until the old habitual tendencies of grasping at appearances and pursuing objects have been swept away. Whether circumstances are favorable or adverse, remain unmoved; at all places and times, see only the nature and not appearances. Going further, even nature cannot be apprehended. Only when you are all day as though simple and unknowing can you reach the ultimate.

50. What you say in your letter accords very well with the subtle wonder of the Way, and I cannot help but rejoice on reading it. Yet be very careful not to misunderstand "ordinary mind is the Way." "Ordinary mind" does not mean the ordinary mind by which we cling to appearances. Ping ( ) means even and unwarped; chang ( ) means constant rather than temporary. When ordinary beings see forms and hear sounds, they are constantly turned by circumstances and their minds give rise to fluctuations; therefore, the mind is warped rather than even.

Those who have newly entered the Way have not yet brought their practice to fruition: at times their minds are empty and at times not, so their practice is intermittent rather than constant. Those who truly apply themselves contemplate at every moment and repeatedly examine themselves, until their practice is wholly mature and they merge with it, forgetting all distinctions. There is then neither one who contemplates nor anything contemplated; neither evenness nor distortion, neither temporary nor constant. This is the true ordinary mind. From this ordinary mind, one accords with conditions in daily life, with everything remaining as before. One displays no miraculous signs and does not cling to extraordinary or wondrous functioning. As it is said, "One remains the same person as before, yet one's conduct is no longer as before." Then one has truly arrived home.

All the actions and activities, every stirring of mind and movement of thought, of sentient beings in the six realms are nothing but the wondrous functioning of the

true mind. Yet, because of deluded thoughts and attachment to appearances, they are confused and fail to recognize it. They merely create karma and undergo its retribution, sinking in birth and death. Out of compassion for sentient beings, the Buddha manifests in the world and teaches the Dharma, instructing them to return home by the road itself and recognize that the very thing which gives rise to all ordinary functions is each person's own Buddha-nature. Thus it is said that ordinary mind is the Way. This does not mean that, because ordinary mind is the Way, one need not practice diligently and may be careless and dissipated.

Understanding the teaching in principle is only intellectual awakening. If it has no practical strength amid actual circumstances, birth and death remain unresolved. After such awakening, contemplate diligently. This is like the Chan practice of 'attending to the huatou (critical phrase)': train amid circumstances until deluded habitual tendencies have been swept away completely. Only then may you let go. My late teacher said, 'You must break through in samādhi; do not settle for intellectual understanding and consider the matter finished.'

Breaking through in samādhi does not mean doing so only through seated meditation. At all times, whether active or still, busy or surrounded by noise, remain collected in samādhi, unswayed by circumstances and unstirred by the winds. Only then can practice become continuous and undivided, and you can recognize this 'ordinary mind.'

51. 'Breaking through in samādhi' means attaining samādhi through practice and thereby opening wisdom. Once wisdom opens, one directly realizes that everything is illusory and nothing can be grasped. In daily life, one can therefore respond freely to conditions, moving naturally and living at ease.

The great worthies of old directly realized that this true mind is nowhere else but is present in everyday functioning. Thus they rose and rested with the assembly, blended their light with the common world without setting themselves apart, and neither sought abstruseness and marvels nor praised themselves. This is why there is the celebrated saying, "Ordinary mind is the Way."

"Do not seek samādhi while sitting in meditation"—this is quite correct. For once there is something one seeks, it obscures the luminosity of one's intrinsic nature; the more one desires samādhi, the more disorderly the mind becomes. Seeking signs, seeking some attainment, and the like are all deluded mind; the more one seeks, the farther away one gets. Not only will one fail to obtain true signs, but one will instead become confused and unsettled. Those who practice often seek visions of light, visions of Buddhas, explosions, spiritual powers, and so forth, not realizing that these are not true signs.

They are merely passing guests, not the host. In true signs there is neither anything seen nor anything attained. Since even "I" cannot be found, what could there be to see or attain? The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says: "When seeing sees seeing, that seeing is not what is seen." Thus true seeing has nothing to see, and true attainment has nothing to attain.

Then what, ultimately, are true signs? To remain unstained amid favorable and adverse circumstances; to use the mind while having no mind that can be used; to be neither defiled nor pure; to be able to enter among Buddhas and also enter among demons—to proceed against the current: these are the true signs of having arrived home. At all times, you must use this as a measuring stick for yourself. You must be able to accomplish each point genuinely; do not be careless or let yourself off easily. Hence the saying: "Whether one has the Way or not, one knows for oneself."

Never let your resolve be shaken by seeing others emit light, undergo explosions, or display some spiritual powers, and then seek the mysterious and extraordinary. To add filth to the luminous Buddha-nature within yourself that is pure and unstained—if you do so, not only will you ultimately fail to become a Buddha, but you will risk becoming a demon. Remember this! Remember this!

As attachment to self diminishes, it is entirely natural that your view of circumstances will change greatly. It is a major advance that you now have less clinging attachment even to those dearest to you. But less attachment does not mean that you do not care for them. Rather, you care without attachment. To care without attachment is right conduct. I hope you will strive to do so.

52. Having read your letter, I feel deeply gratified. In the short course of your study and practice, you have gradually dispersed, like dark clouds being blown away from dense to thin, the deepest and most harmful root of calamity in human life—attachment to one's children. Although it has not yet been completely eliminated, for one in the prime of youth to cut off so resolutely and decisively this root of birth and death for ordinary beings is truly not easy and exceedingly admirable.

Originally, all sentient beings are Buddhas. Yet because they have become lost, cling to appearances, and seek outwardly, they give rise to feelings upon encountering things. In matters of attachment between men and women, their delusion and attachment are especially deep, so that they create karma, undergo retribution, and sink in the six realms. Now that you have suddenly awakened, seen through false appearances, raised the sword of wisdom, cut the threads of attachment, and have nothing to which you cling, how could you have reached this point without wholesome roots deeply planted in former lives?

To attain accomplishment in cultivating the Way, we should train ourselves amid all kinds of complex circumstances, without being swayed by any state. Throughout the day and night, we should keep the mind empty and pure, as though freshly washed. The moment a thought arises, we should immediately become keenly aware of it. Still less should we be moved to sorrow and affliction by external scenes. If one practices in this way, although ordinary human feelings may temporarily linger, one day circumstances will become empty, attachment will perish, and the wondrous function of the subtle mystery will be fully revealed before one.

53. Your determination to seek the Way without fear of hardship is surely due to wholesome roots planted in former lives. I hope you will persevere, advance courageously and diligently, and take care never to abandon your efforts halfway and fail this life. When sitting in meditation, let go of everything. Do not indulge in random thoughts; do not seek to enter emptiness; and still less should you anxiously hope for awakening or seek spiritual powers.

Be like one who has died a great death: think of nothing and attend to nothing. Single-mindedly maintain the mantra, contemplate and listen to its sound, firmly gather in the mind faculty and eye faculty, and continue reciting directly. When your recitation reaches a state of seeming dimness and obscurity, as though asleep yet not asleep, while the mudrā neither collapses nor comes apart, the oral recitation continues without stopping, and the mind remains clearly aware, you have attained the initial stage of drowsy samādhi. Persist further. When you reach the point where recitation can no longer be sustained, let go naturally; body and mind will immediately dissolve into emptiness, and the Original Face will appear before you.

Conversely, if you can no longer recite the mantra but your mind is dim and unaware, your mudrā comes apart or droops, and your body bends forward or rocks backward, this is drowsy sleep, not samādhi. When you maintain the mantra silently, it is easy to deplete the blood and also easy to become drowsy. It is better to balance this by using vajra recitation. (That is, alternate between slightly moving the lips and not moving them; do not cling exclusively to either movement or stillness.)

Moreover, when practicing the Dharma and maintaining the mantra, you must continue until you can no longer maintain it—that is, until the deluded mind no longer functions, so that you cannot exert effort and cannot continue the recitation. Do not stop midway. If you stop it yourself, consciousness still remains, and body and mind cannot dissolve and be released.

Your letter says that you felt somewhat light and at ease, forgot to maintain the mantra, and then were no longer as calm and quiet as before. This is a matter of habit, because you previously practiced seated meditation and are not yet familiar

with the Dharma gate of mantra recitation. After a little more time, you will naturally be able to enter tranquility. I hope you will make every effort.

Wenzhou has always been a Buddhist land, and therefore many people there have faith in Buddhism. In this age of Dharma decline, the Pure Land Dharma gate is most suited to people's capacities. It is simple and easy to practice, reliable and convenient; moreover, one receives the Buddha's blessing and guidance to rebirth in the Western Pure Land. It is truly the most direct and expedient Dharma gate for attaining Buddhahood and transcending birth and death. I hope all fellow practitioners will go deeply into one Dharma gate, engage in one-pointed Buddha-recitation, and make vows for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Then you will achieve twice the result with half the effort.

54. Your letter says, "Your practice has now reached a crossroads, and you do not know which direction to go." I truly do not understand what this means. Those who have opened to their original nature must safeguard it and eliminate habitual tendencies, test and train themselves amid all circumstances, and completely remove the old habits of clinging to emptiness and clinging to existence. Then spiritual powers will naturally greatly develop, and they will directly realize the fruition of Buddhahood.

Those who have not opened to their original nature and realized the mind-ground must diligently sit in meditation, press forward with all their strength, and make great vows: "Until I awaken, I will never cease." If this cannot be accomplished in this life, return in the next life to practice again. Because of such great vows, one can retain the human body and continue one's cultivation. Those who are timid may vow to be reborn in the Western Pure Land or the Pure Land of Tuṣita, where they can continue practicing and will certainly attain accomplishment. I have said these things repeatedly. How can you still be at a crossroads, unclear about the direction in which to proceed?"

As for guiding others, this can only be done in accordance with conditions and cannot be forced. If they have the affinity, have faith and can practice, and practice and can realize, that is certainly best of all. If they have faith and practice but cannot realize, that is a matter of their capacities and there is nothing to blame. You must understand that, regardless of the Dharma gate practiced, not everyone succeeds as soon as they practice.

Speaking of the Chan school, "to net even one or half a person is supremely fortunate." How could it be that every hundred practitioners realize, or every thousand practitioners attain? Even in the most expedient Pure Land school, it is not the case that a hundred people practice and all one hundred attain rebirth. For each person's capacities differ, as do their efforts and application. One absolutely cannot

apply a single standard and obtain identical results. What, then, are you still afraid of?”

Whether the propagation of the Dharma can flourish is an even more peripheral matter. I do my utmost to spread the Dharma in order to save sentient beings and repay the Buddha’s grace, not for fame or material gain. If it flourishes, sentient beings have the affinity; my mind does not rejoice. If it does not flourish, sentient beings lack the affinity; my mind does not grieve. What, then, is there to worry about?

Whether I come or not is of no great importance. If you have found a suitable place and I am in good health, it would of course be very good for me to come and meet with everyone. If I cannot come, you are already grown children weaned from mother’s milk and no longer need adults to look after you. I hope you will apply yourselves diligently.

55. I have received your letter. Occasional setbacks in practice need not concern you. You need only press forward vigorously; if you do not retreat when encountering difficulties, you will surely succeed in the end. You are exceptionally intelligent and endowed with uncommon capacities. Yet intelligent people often become scattered and detached, unwilling to practice honestly. Thus they delight in literary embellishment and in discussing abstruse principles and subtle wonders, only to end up counting grains of sand by the sea—idly laboring to no purpose.

Although I have not read your Outline of the Chan School, the outline you have listed suggests that its contents must be rich and excellent. It should be of great help to modern scholars of the Chan school and to those intending to explore the profundities of Chan studies. Therefore, insofar as it does not interfere with your cultivation, you may well strive to compile it into a book for the benefit of later students.

Furthermore, there is nothing inherently wrong with writing works or lecturing on the sūtras, provided that, when lecturing, you do not give rise to the notion of conducting a lecture, and when writing, you do not give rise to the notion of writing a work. Whether lecturing on the sūtras or writing, remain wholly unmoved. If, on the contrary, you lecture for the sake of lecturing on the sūtras or write for the sake of producing a book, then you should not lecture on the sūtras or write.

The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is the proven prescription for our cultivation. Given your background, if you can indeed persist in practice without interruption, thorough awakening to your original nature is certainly within your grasp. But if you practice sporadically, or split your practice into two separate parts on and off the meditation cushion—that is, if you lose awareness and do not practice after leaving the cushion—you will disappoint your own intelligence and ability.

Your wife is excellent and has deep wholesome roots from past lives. Congratulations on having such a worthy helpmate within the household! May she persevere to the end and thereby urge you continually onward, so that together you may realize bodhi. Then the fine tale of an “immortal couple” will endure forever in the forest of awakening!

I appreciate your warm invitation for me to visit your city. It is quite possible that, on the way back to Shanghai, I may call at your residence to visit all my fellow practitioners and enjoy a full discussion of the unborn. I respectfully wish that the loving kindness between you and your esteemed wife may increase day by day.

56. The meaning of non-abiding in the two extremes, as stated in your letter, is very good. In the midst of changing circumstances, there is still some wavering; this is an unavoidable phenomenon for those who have only recently realized the mind-ground. So long as you maintain continuous and seamless awareness, constantly tempering yourself amid circumstances, you will be as the ancient worthies said: “The sound of the midnight bell follows each strike without clinging; the moon’s reflection in a cold pool meets the ripples without scattering.”

On encountering the words ‘understand and cherish it’ in Zhaozhou’s discourse, you suddenly awaken: mind and objects settle into empty quiescence, and understanding is clear and unobstructed. Does this still remain at the level of ‘understanding’? If there is still an ‘understanding’ to hold on to, that is not it.

After practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma for an hour, your mind is always uneasy because it has not yet settled. At the beginning, you may tighten up slightly; afterward, ease off naturally and allow the tension to dissolve. Then there will be no drawback of uneasiness.

Once the mind is at ease and circumstances are empty, there is no need to practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma continually. Instead, use the practice of safeguarding realization, and occasionally sit for one session of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma to see whether there is any difference in the state of mind. If practice and nonpractice are entirely the same, with no difference at all, this proves that your practice is free from the fault of being split in two. Otherwise, you must practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma more, so that the thieving mind may die out completely; only then can you realize the Way.

57. If you cannot stand firm on your own feet and are swayed by what others say, you have not truly awakened. If you had truly awakened, even a living Buddha standing before you could not shake you. I have read a little of Mr. So-and-so’s Essentials of the Laṅkāvatāra, and it is well explained; what he says is no different from what we teach. People differ in sharpness and dullness; dharmas have neither superiority nor inferiority.

Whether one is ultimate or not depends entirely on whether the practitioner can let go completely, without the slightest attachment. If you are constantly calculating gains and losses and never forget fame and profit, then even the most sublime Dharma of no dharma will not be ultimate. If you truly wish to be ultimate, there is no practice, no attainment, and no realization. If Mr. So-and-so still has a dharma, then it too is not ultimate.

We seek neither fame and gain nor the establishment of a separate school or sect. When there is affinity, we liberate others; when there is no affinity, we liberate ourselves. We do not contend or compete with others. I hope you will understand this deeply.

58. In studying Buddhism, what is valued is awakening of mind: thoroughly seeing one's own nature at all times and in all places, without being swept along by affairs, things, or circumstances. This is like the birth of a royal prince, who will surely become emperor and attain Buddhahood. Those who cultivate through provisional dharmas all fall into secondary and tertiary ranks; they belong to the outer ranks of meritorious service. No matter how great your spiritual powers may be, you can rise no higher than the rank of king or marquis. How could you ascend to become emperor?

Because all affairs, things, and circumstances are manifestations of the wondrous functioning of our spiritually marvelous true mind, when the eyes see all things, they see only intrinsic nature and are not disturbed by images. To contemplate in this way at all times is to practice truly. When the practice has become wholly mature, contemplation falls away, and one returns home to sit securely.

If you do not understand this principle and instead set your sights on the ranks of meritorious service, then whatever dharma you cultivate and however diligently and arduously you practice, because a dharma remains, you will eventually be compelled to bow your head and become a subject. How grievously unfair! How sad!

59. When practice reaches the point where you can advance no further and retreat no further, this is precisely the time when good news is about to arrive. Who is it that knows how to advance yet cannot retreat? Turn back and look directly at it, and its full beauty will reveal itself!

The ancient worthies compared this point to "a dog licking an oil cauldron": it wants to lick but cannot, and wants to leave it alone but cannot. This is the time when neither advance nor retreat is possible. At such a time, simply let this urgent, vexed mind that does not know what to do come to rest, and examine it. Then dog and cauldron are both empty, and neither advance nor retreat exists. At once, the banners are furled and the drums silenced; all is joy, ease, and peace.

I hope you will exert yourself well in practice. Safeguard the original nature at every moment, not allowing it to become stuck to things and circumstances; then practice can become continuous and undivided. If you do not do so, even a seven-day retreat will be futile.

60. Regarding "ordinary mind is the Way": this spiritually knowing mind that knows cold and warmth, hunger and thirst is precisely our Original Face. There is no need to seek it outside, and still less should one become attached to the slightest bit of the miraculous or extraordinary. In ordinary daily life, respond to circumstances as they arise, with neither grasping nor rejecting, neither anger nor attachment. This is why the ancients said, "Putting on clothes and eating food is it!" But as soon as you become attached to circumstances and allow anything to remain, it again becomes a case of "Raise the mind and stir a thought, and it is already wrong."

Your letter asks, "May I remain temporarily in this state until my strength is sufficient, and then leave it?" Does this not become "allowing something to remain"? When the mind abides in something, it becomes deluded thought. To nurture deluded thoughts while hoping to realize the Way is like cooking sand while expecting it to become rice. How could that be possible?

If your present strength is insufficient, diligently maintain contemplation and do not allow the mind to abide in anything. Throughout the day, be quietly alert and alertly quiet. You must never become lax, abide in a comfortable state, and sink into a hidden realm of delusion, until at last you fail completely.

Being able to awaken is the beginning of realizing the Way. If, following awakening at the level of principle, you make a determined effort to correct the deluded tendency to cling to things and circumstances, applying yourself to contemplation at all times and in all places, then the instant a thought arises, you immediately notice it. Do not merely work at words and verbal Chan. Over time, you will reach the state described in your letter: "When the discriminating mind ceases, the great Way appears before one."

The Buddha taught all dharmas in order to liberate all minds. Every dharma is illusory; thus it is said that the Dharma is fundamentally without dharma. It is also said that all dharmas are equal, without superiority or inferiority. Yet people today give rise to vain discrimination, saying that this is good and that is bad, liking this and rejecting that. This is because the mind lacks equanimity. Your place is naturally no exception. In propagating the Dharma, one must observe the time, circumstances, and conditions; one must not force matters.

61. Regarding ability, the most important things are correct view and practical understanding of the method of cultivation. Without direct realization of the original nature, one cannot open the vajra eye of the Way for others. One may even lead

people into a dead end or guide them onto deviant side paths, thereby delaying them. You are now able to guide others in practice and theory; that is enough. What else do you need? When first receiving and guiding people, some timidity and awkwardness are unavoidable. But with long experience, these conditions will disappear.

62. In fact, in the Dzogchen (Great Perfection) practice of the Red School, the first half, Trekchö (cutting through), is the seeing of one's true nature in the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. Because Trekchö (cutting through) has many methods of practice, those of inferior faculties need form-based practices as a transitional means. Conversely, if one directly accords with the three emptinesses, with no practice, no realization, and no distraction, and no dharma is established, that is Chan.

After practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma and seeing one's true nature, what need is there for any Trekchö (cutting through) practice? As for Tögal ("direct crossing" or "leap-over"), it is the upward-moving method of the Chan school. If one can safeguard realization continuously and seamlessly after seeing one's true nature, before long one will emit great light that brilliantly illuminates the ten directions. Tögal ("direct crossing" or "leap-over") merely provides an additional expedient for swift and complete attainment. To practice Tögal ("direct crossing" or "leap-over"), one must do so only after seeing one's true nature. Only when the mind does not move can one use light as a guide. Only after light has been brought forth can one avoid attachment to appearances. Otherwise, one will abide in the light and turn it into a deluded appearance of light.

You are still young, so there is no need to hurry into retreat. What is now needed is for you to teach beginning students. For the time being, continue practicing while teaching students. I now answer the questions in your letter as follows:

(1) The conditions for you to enter retreat are not yet mature.

(2) To enter retreat to practice Tögal ("direct crossing" or "leap-over"), you need to face south in order to view the sun and moon. There must also be a large body of water nearby, so that you may sit by the water and view its radiance. You also need electric lamps for viewing lamplight. More importantly, the environment must be quiet and free of noisy sounds.

(3) Prepare ample provisions for the Way. Still more important, your body and mind must be pure and free of all hindrance; otherwise, you may fall prey to demonic disturbance in retreat.

(4) Concerning lay practitioners guiding monastics, worldly people often hold prejudices. They believe that the status of a lay practitioner is less honorable than that of the saṅgha, that lay practitioners should rank below monastics and cannot

be spoken of on equal terms with bhikshus. How, then, could they teach monastics? They do not realize that a jewel of the saṅgha is one who has attained through cultivation in reliance on the Buddha-Dharma, observes the precepts strictly, and is worthy of being a teacher of others. It has nothing to do with whether one has left home or not.

Moreover, there are two kinds of saṅgha: first, those who leave home, shave their heads, and wear dyed robes—the śrāvaka-arhat saṅgha of the Lesser Vehicle; second, those who have attained through cultivating the Buddha's three trainings, yet do not shave their heads and wear the clothing of laypeople—the bodhisattva saṅgha of the Great Vehicle. (See the entry "Saṅgha—Two Kinds of Saṅgha" in the Great Buddhist Dictionary.) Therefore, you need not be timid; simply teach with confidence and conviction. If you wish to leave home, you must obtain your family's consent. Since you and your wife cultivate the Buddha-Dharma together and do not regard yourselves as an ordinary worldly couple, you are the highest kind of bodhi companions.

(5) It is best to cultivate the Heart-of-Heart Dharma for a longer time, so that your footing becomes firm and you are not turned by circumstances. Otherwise, your strength will be insufficient. Even if you have some awakening, you will not be at ease amid favorable and adverse circumstances, and will ultimately fall into delusion after awakening.

(6) The light appeared once but has not reappeared. It seems that your meditative practice is still inadequate. You should practice the Dharma more diligently, until you are within the light yet unaware of any light, wholly merged and forgetting all appearances.

(7) Where there is aversion, there is also delight; both are deluded appearances of opposition. We should have neither delight nor aversion. Zhaozhou said, "The very word 'Buddha' I do not like to hear." Yet even for this he would be reproved by the Chan adepts; how much more so for being weary of words?

(8) The relationship between so-and-so and their spouse has become strained; this cannot be remedied by practicing the dual-body method. The dual-body method is not sexual intercourse between husband and wife, but a test undertaken by those with attainment in order to transcend birth and death. Both parties must possess the skill of reining themselves in at the brink of a precipice, so that their seminal essence does not leak away. Otherwise, it is merely sexual misconduct leading to hell.

63. I have read your letter. I understand that you are somewhat unclear about the process of practicing the Dharma. I shall now answer your questions one by one as follows:

(1) You have not yet passed through the barrier of “tranquil idleness.” Concerning this, you need only know that attachment to tranquil idleness is also an illness, and refrain from clinging to it. Although you may not be able to eliminate it all at once, continue working diligently, and in time it will naturally disappear. There is no need to hurry. If you do not recognize it as an illness and instead regard it as pure and wondrous, you will inwardly guard secluded quietude and fall into delusion.

Once, while Yaoshan was sitting on a rock, his teacher Shitou asked, “What are you doing?” Yaoshan replied, “I am doing nothing at all.” Shitou said, “Then are you not merely sitting idly?” Yaoshan replied, “Sitting idly is itself doing.” Shitou said, “Just so, just so.” From this exchange between teacher and disciple, you can see that to fall into tranquil idleness is already wrong.

(2) Your memory is sometimes good and sometimes poor. This is a common affliction of those who exert themselves in practice but have not yet turned themselves around. Once you have died and revived, this affliction will be gone.

(3) Your heart races when you are nervous about giving lectures: first, because you are unaccustomed to it; second, because you care about saving face and fear that you will not speak well; and third, because you go into it carrying a burden. With these several factors, how could your heart not race? All of this is attachment to appearances, the illness of a mind not yet wholly emptied. Just let everything go. Enter it as though no one were there, with neither a lecturer nor listeners. Then your mind will be calm and your breath even, and subtle meanings will arise spontaneously.

(4) You become drowsy while sitting in meditation. If you fall asleep, it is of no use. But if you seem asleep yet not asleep, while inwardly remaining clear and distinctly aware, this is drowsy samādhi. At such a time, do not try to rouse yourself. Like a stone thrown into water, let it sink all the way to the bottom; then you will suddenly become clear and open. Trying to raise yourself up only spoils the matter. If daytime affairs are numerous and your sitting practice is ineffective, this means your meditative stability is insufficient. Therefore, while doing things, do not entertain the notion that you are doing things; only then can the mind be empty and non-abiding.

(5) “When external circumstances arise, my perceptions are keen, and I recognize a thought as soon as it arises; yet I find it difficult to get rid of it.” These words are contradictory. If you truly recognize a thought as soon as it arises, what is there to get rid of? The Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment says: “Knowing illusion is itself liberation; being free from illusion is itself awakening.”

Since you are already aware when a deluded thought arises, the thought dissolves without trace; fundamentally, there is nothing there. What, then, is there to remove? If you say that although you know when a deluded thought arises, it still circles

about in your mind and will not depart, then you have not truly recognized it at all; you are still attached to appearances. In that case, you must use the Chan hammer to strike dead this deluded mind that clings to circumstances. If you have found the method of using the word “forget,” you may certainly use it.

(6) You should prepare for your lectures, but do not become attached to preparation. In putting on clothes and eating meals, neither grasp nor reject; let your original intent be fulfilled naturally—this is the great Way. When something unusual occurs, awaken sharply to it and dissolve it. Such practice cannot be accomplished in a single step; it requires countless temperings and refinements. You are still young. As long as you strive diligently toward this goal, the day will naturally come when all is accomplished. I hope you will make a good effort.

64. Your practice has reached empty, sunken, dead stillness, and when lecturing or writing, your mind no longer functions well. These are signs that you are about to make a great leap forward. Do not be afraid. Do your utmost to work through them, and a new prospect will naturally open up, like another village appearing beyond dark willows and bright flowers.

65. Your letter says, “This experience has brought great progress. I have overcome many psychological obstacles and am much more at ease in all circumstances.” Originally, all obstacles arise from having a mind that clings; when the mind is empty and pure, there are no hindrances. To practice the Dharma and realize the Way is to empty out this mind, not to gain spiritual powers or mysterious marvels.

Those who study the Way nowadays all seek spiritual powers and mysterious marvels, yet do not know how to empty the mind. Consequently, they enter a wrong path; this is truly lamentable. If the mind is not empty and pure, then even if spiritual powers arise, one will not only fail to be at ease but will also acquire another layer of obstruction. This harms rather than benefits Buddhist practice, and it is essential to understand this.

On the first day of the month, when you go to Hebei, speak with the Chan practitioners as appropriate: speak of Chan to those who speak of Chan, and speak of Esoteric Buddhism to those who discuss Esoteric Buddhism. There is no need to be confined to a single pattern, for the Dharma has no fixed Dharma and differs according to the person. I am a Dharma king, at ease in the Dharma, and am not obstructed by circumstances or people.

The Mind-Ground Dharma Gate gives birth to princes. First recognize your own original mind and see your own intrinsic nature; then establish firm footing, diligently eliminate old habitual tendencies, and do not let any erroneous teaching shake you. In the future, you will certainly become a Buddha. If you use the Dharma to cultivate spiritual powers, that is merely an outer rank of meritorious

achievement. No matter how high your merit and achievement may be, you can only be made a king or marquis; you cannot become an emperor—that is, attain Buddhahood. If spiritual powers have not yet developed, do not abase yourself or think yourself inferior to others, becoming timid and shrinking back. Speak uprightly in accordance with your intrinsic nature, adapting to each person and teaching as appropriate.

66. It is truly not easy to serve as a model for others. One must not only willingly endure hardship without complaint, but also bear exclusion and jealousy from every side. Yet this is a good thing. Without it, how could one thoroughly temper away one's habitual tendencies? Thus, only in the process of liberating sentient beings can one eliminate dust-like delusions; this cannot be accomplished by sitting motionless in meditation. As the sūtra says, "Only by relying on sentient beings can one become a Buddha." There is indeed good reason for this.

Do not lose heart. The ancients rejoiced upon hearing their faults, for then they could improve. Carefully analyze what is said from every quarter: if there is a fault, correct it; if there is none, let it encourage you to improve. Then your virtue will advance day by day and the Way will increase day by day.

67. During the plum-rain season, Shanghai's temperature is still fairly cool. In a week, when the rains end, heat waves will strike and the temperature will rise sharply. Yet those who undertake practice must train amid cold and heat, favorable and adverse circumstances, without being disturbed by them. Only then can they attain great freedom at the shore of birth and death.

Selected Chan Verses



(I)

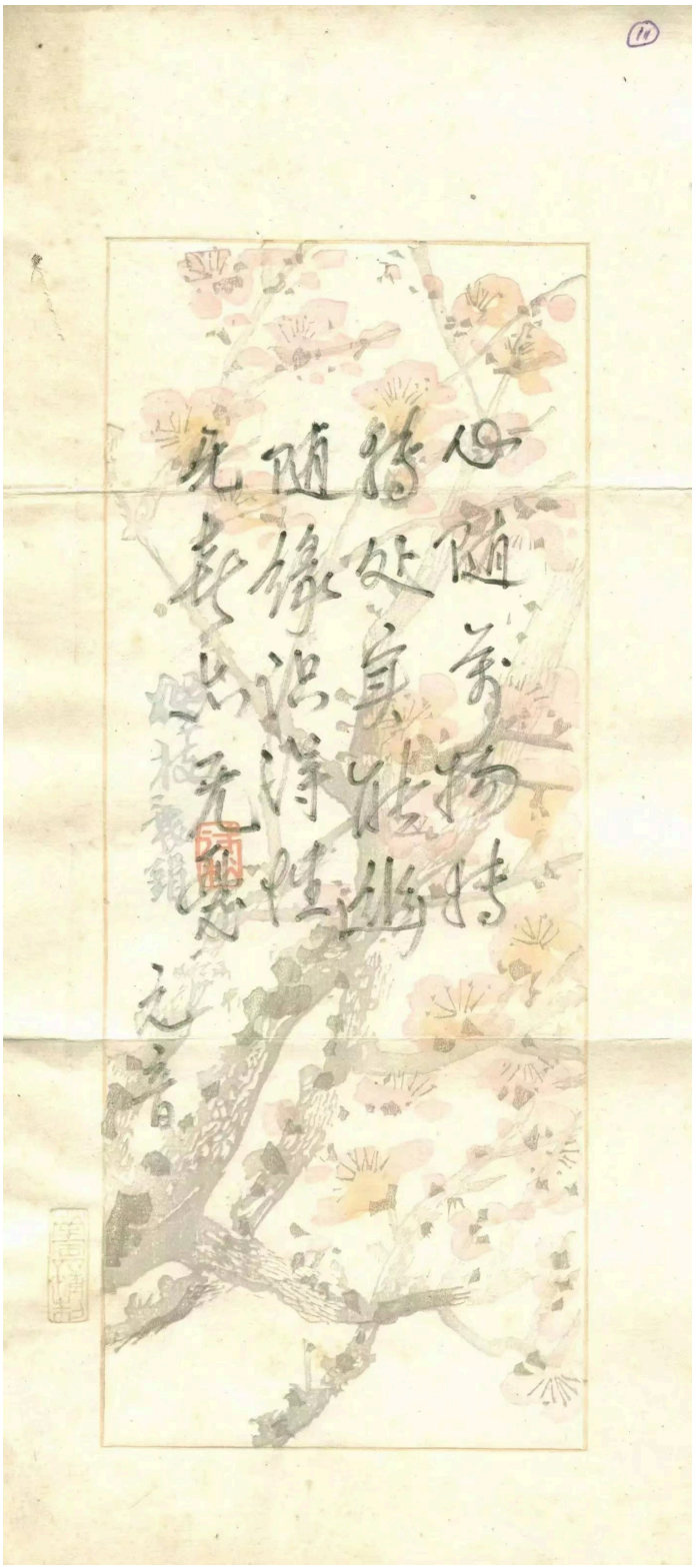
The innate essence is quiescent and still;
No one has ever possessed it as an attainment.

Rely on the principle of twofold emptiness;
Realize the body of the Dharma King.

Whatever is contrived by the mind is delusion;
Freedom from attachment is called true.

Awaken to the Dharma beyond dharma and non-dharma;
Roam freely beyond the six sense objects.

(Verse by Fu Dashi, calligraphed by Master Yuanyin)

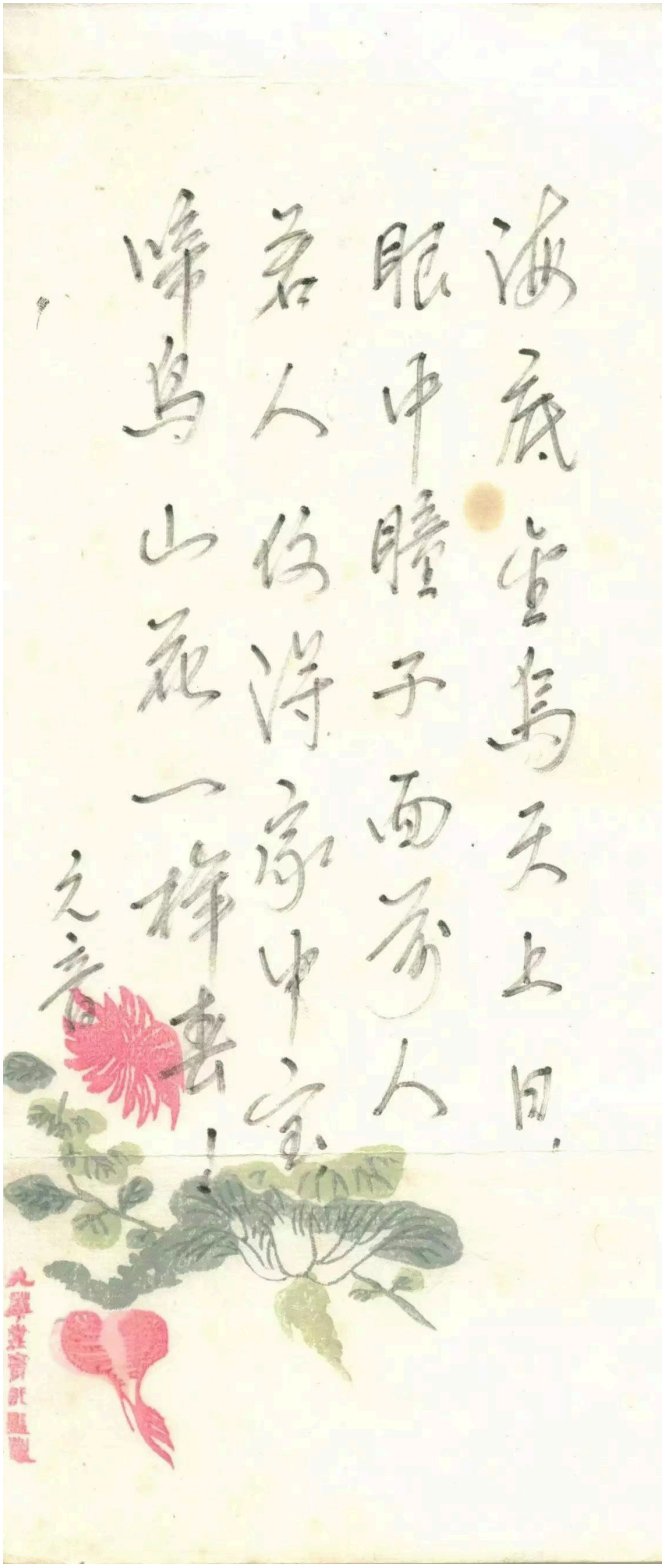


(II)

The mind turns with the myriad things;
In its turning, its subtle depth is revealed.

Recognize intrinsic nature amid conditions;
Neither joy nor sorrow remains.

(Verse by Chan Master Shishuang Chuyuan, calligraphed by Master Yuanyin)

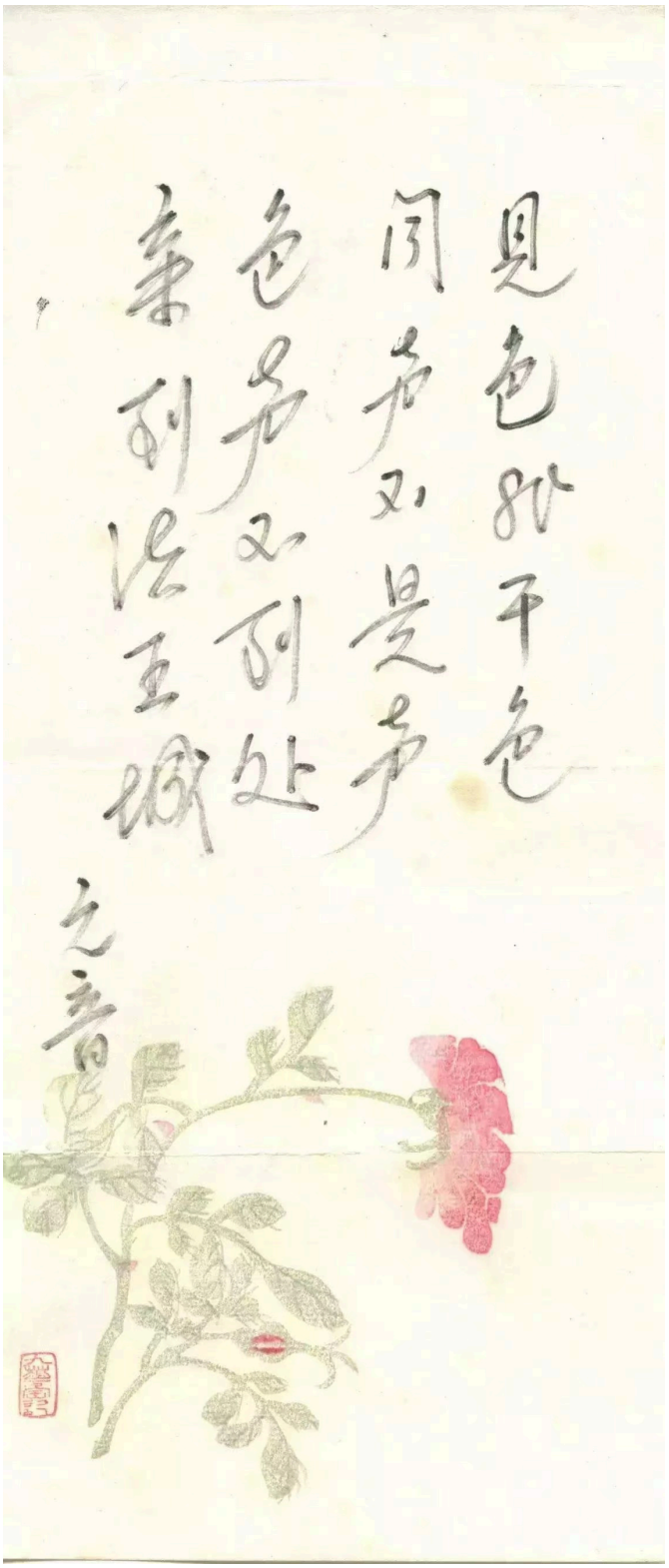


(III)

The golden crow beneath the sea, the sun in the sky;
The pupil within the eye, the person standing before you.

Trust the treasure within your own home;
Birdsong and mountain flowers share the same spring.

(Verse by Chan Master Daochuan)

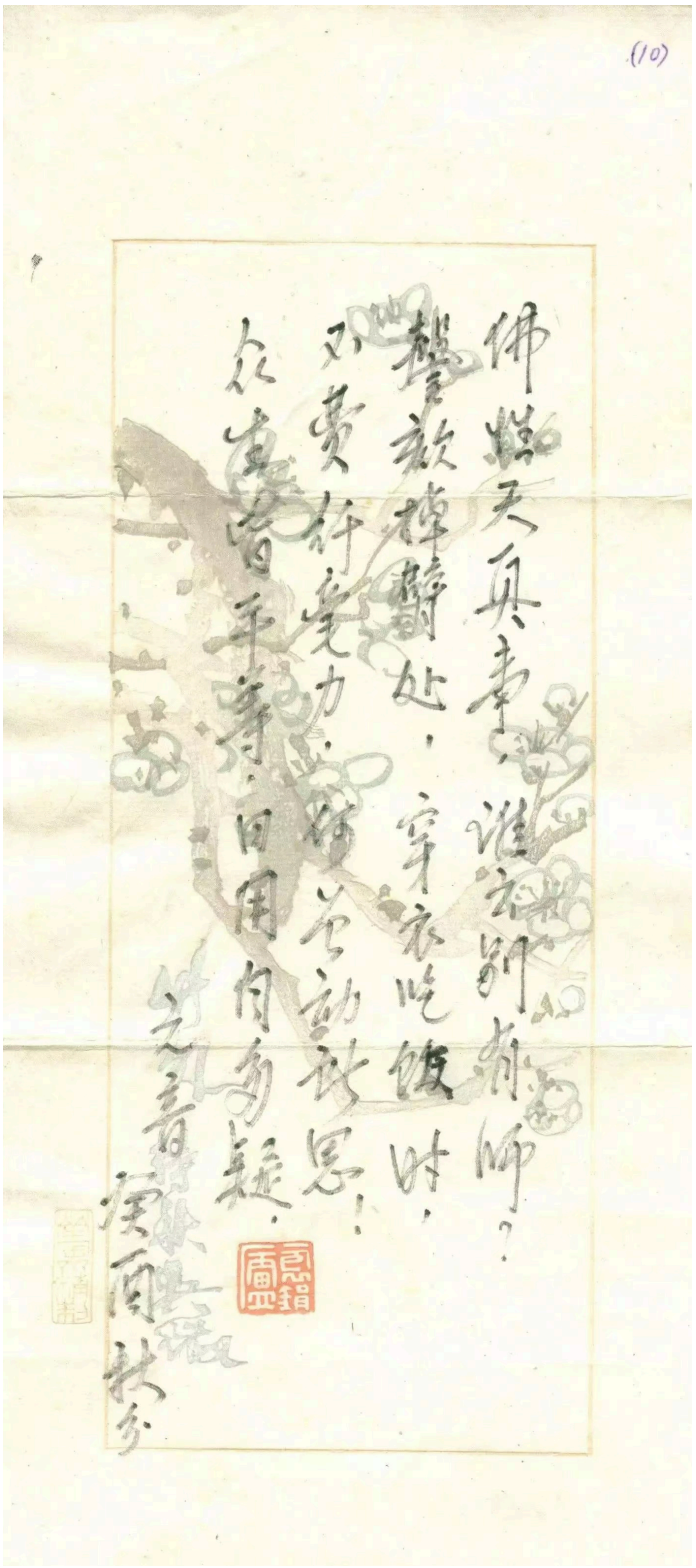


(IV)

Seeing forms is not bound to forms;
Hearing sounds is not bound to sounds.

Where forms and sounds cannot reach,
Enter the city of the Dharma King yourself.

(Verse by Fu Dashi, calligraphed by Master Yuanyin)



(V)

Buddha-nature is naturally so;
Who says another teacher is needed?

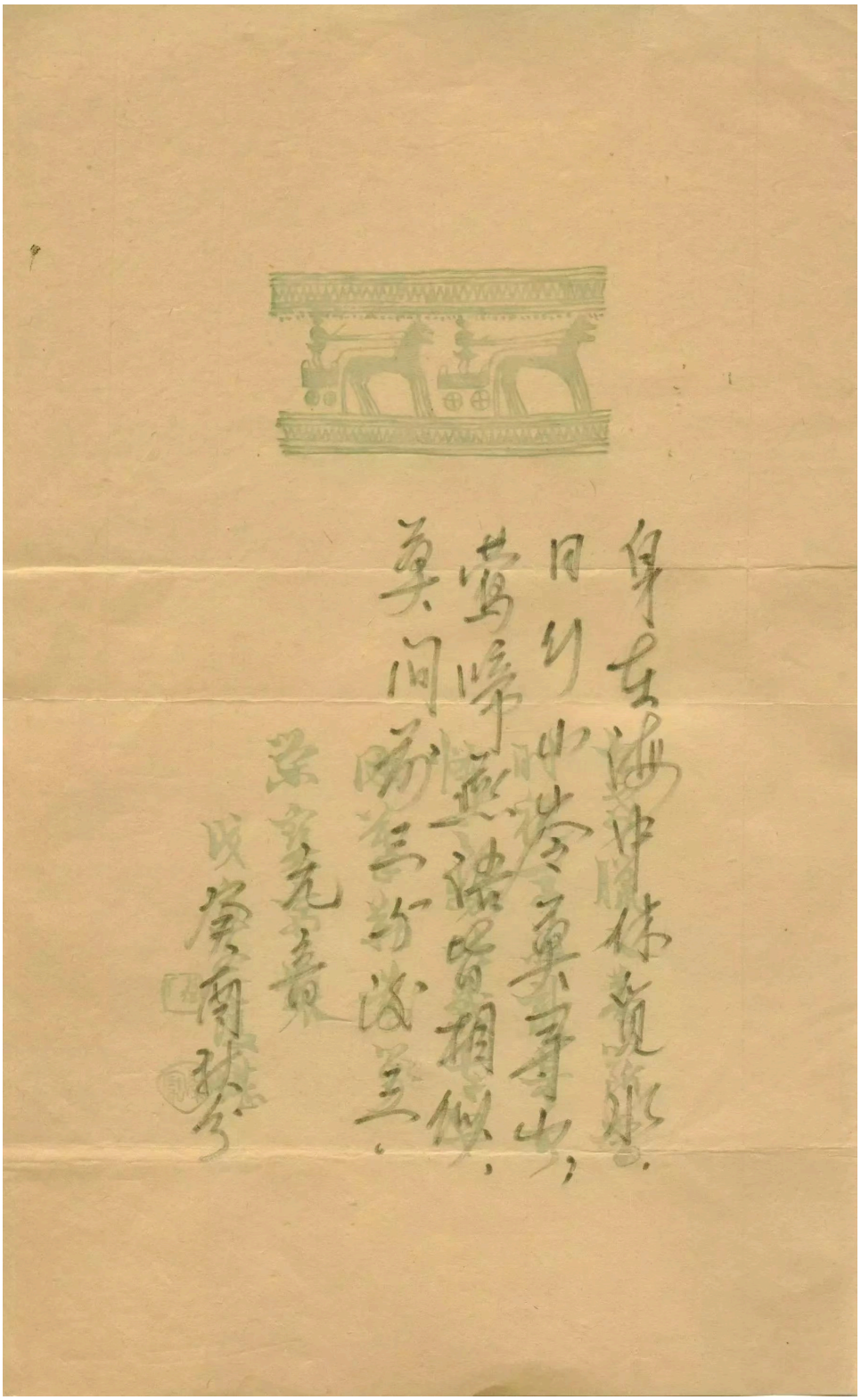
In coughing, speaking, and swinging one's arms;
In putting on clothes and eating meals.

Not the slightest effort is required;
When has deliberate thought ever been needed?

All sentient beings are equal;
Yet in daily life we multiply our doubts.

(Qinghe: coughing. He is a variant form of ke, "cough," and by extension refers to speaking and laughing; diaobi describes the manner of strolling.)

(Verse by Chan Master Yun'an, calligraphed by Master Yuanyin)

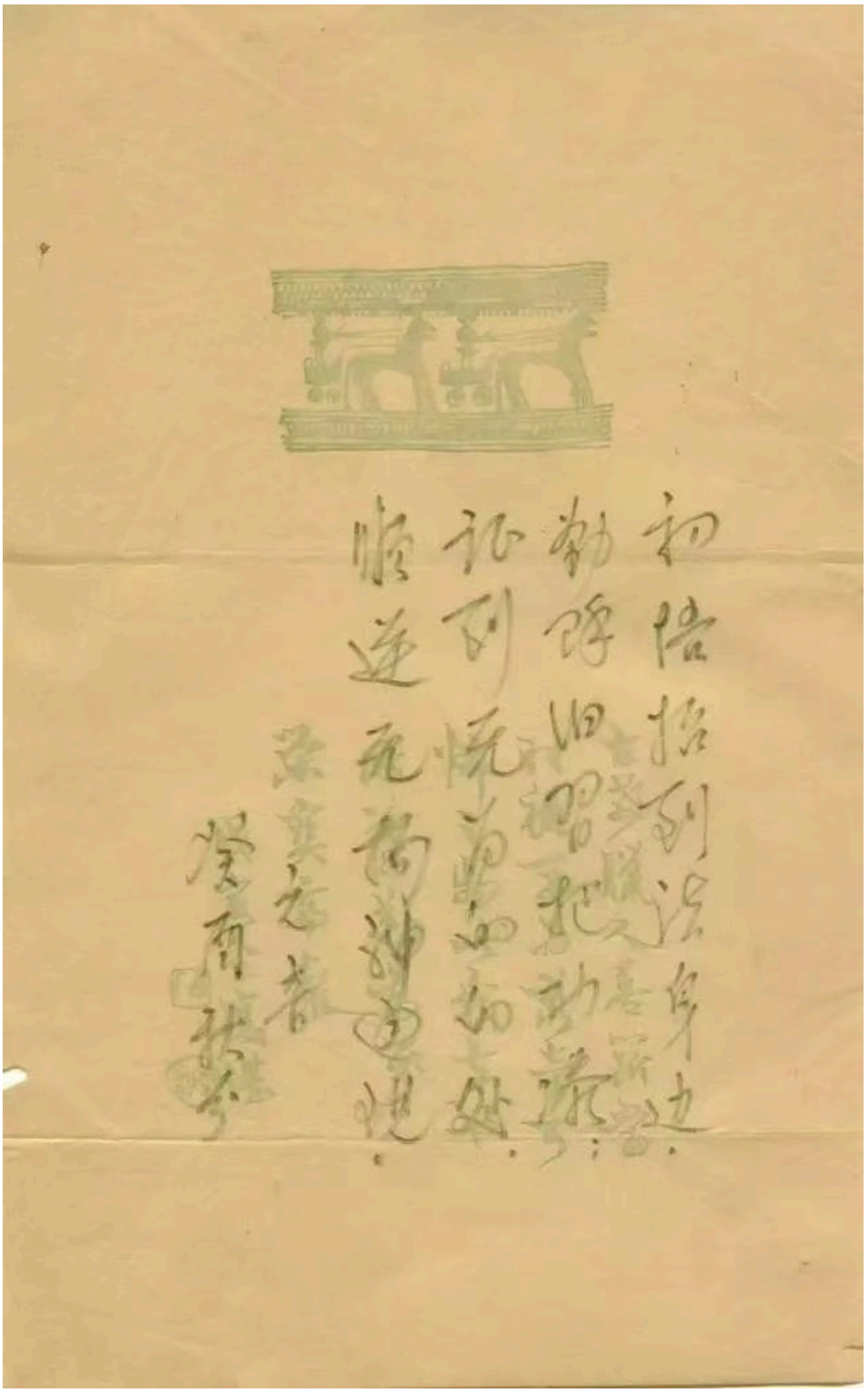


(VI)

Already in the sea, do not search for water;
Walking the mountain ridges each day, do not seek the mountain.

The oriole’s song and the swallow’s call are alike;
Do not ask about ‘three before and three after.’

(Verse by Chan Master Daochuan)

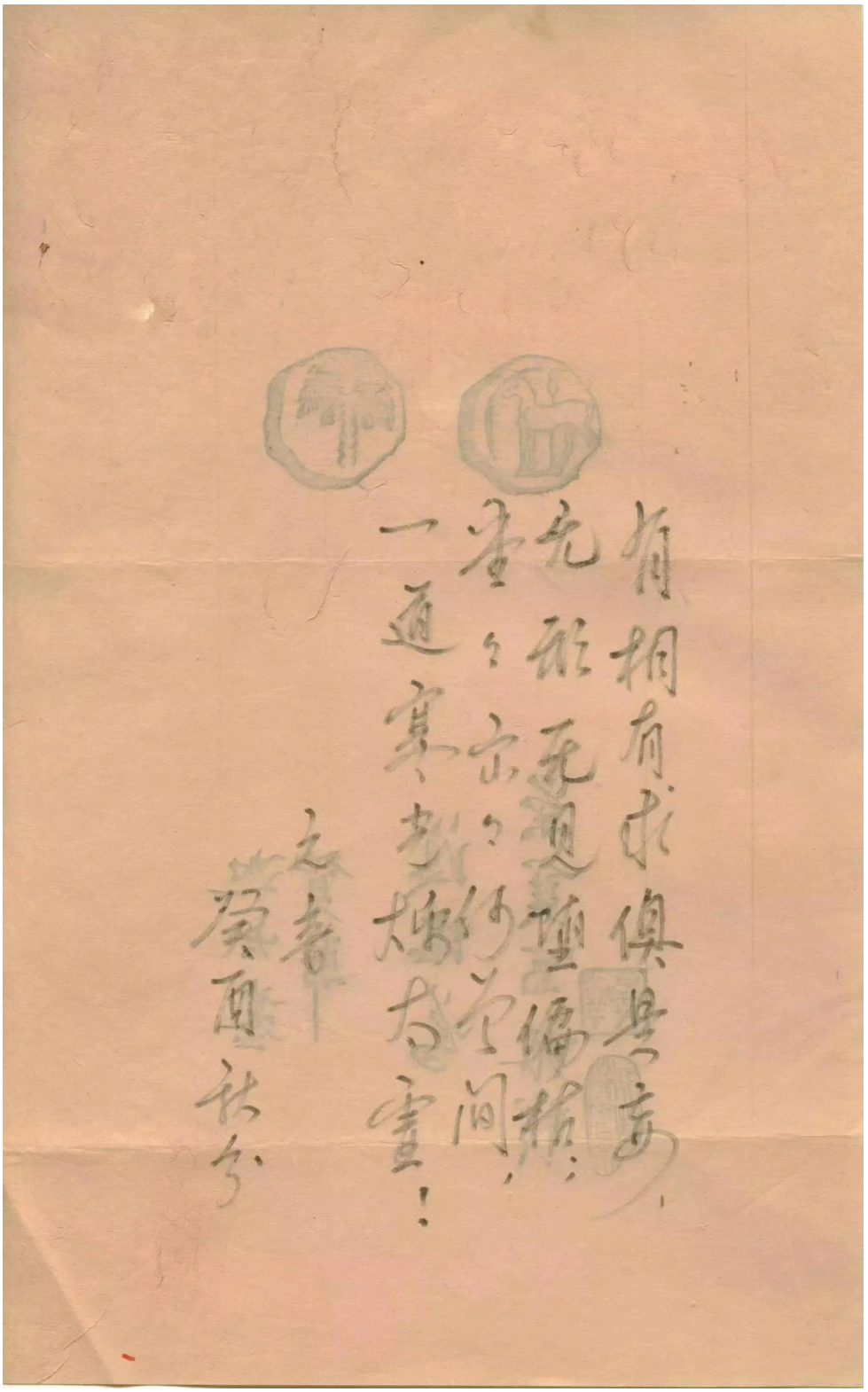


(VII)

Initial awakening brings you only to the edge of the dharmakāya (Dharma body);
Diligently remove habitual tendencies and deepen your practice.

Realize non-contrivance fully and precisely;
Unbound by favorable or adverse conditions, spiritual powers manifest.

(Verse by Master Yuanyin)

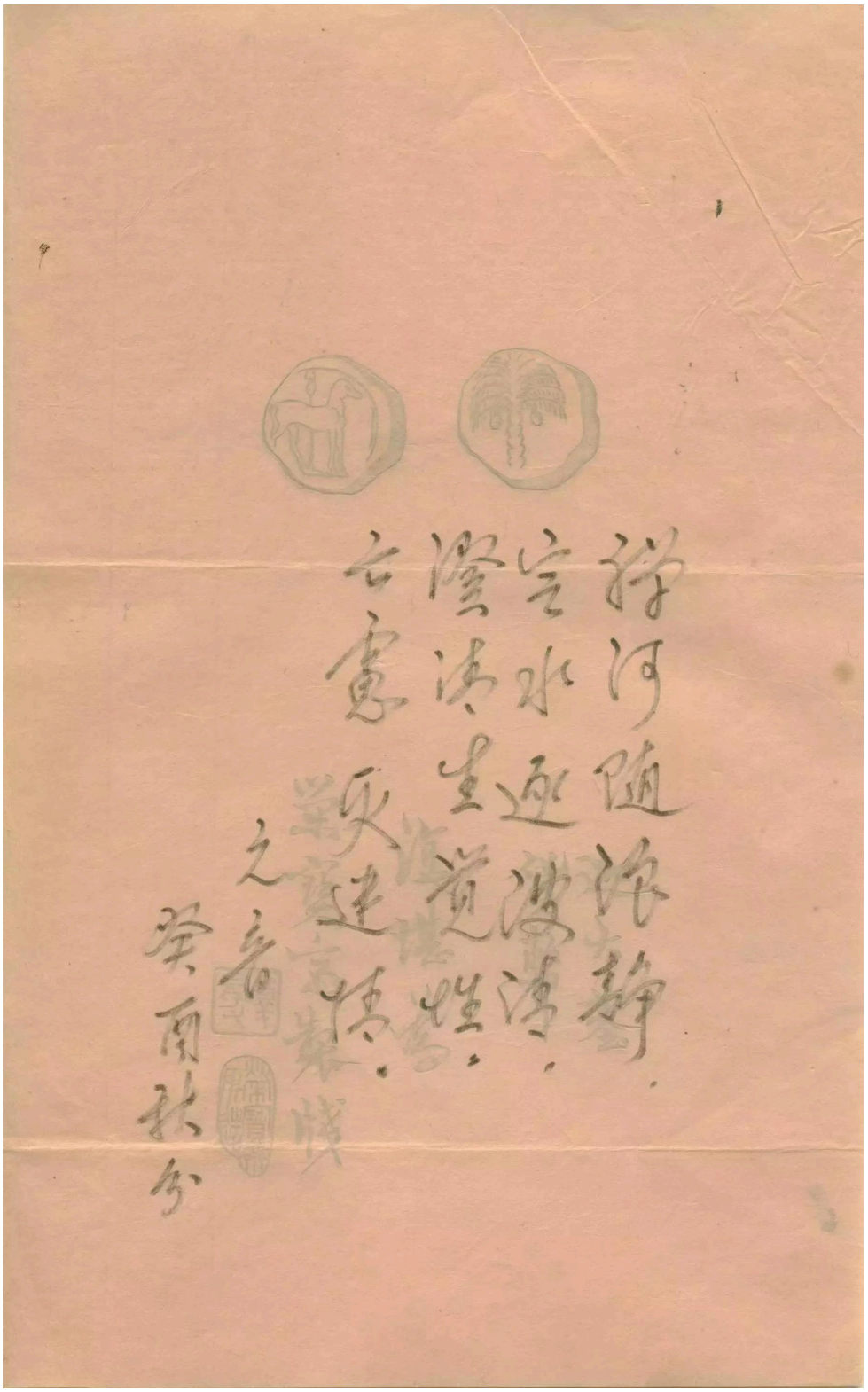


(VIII)

All forms and all seeking are delusion;
Having neither form nor seeing falls into one-sided barrenness.

Vast and intimately present, when has there been a gap?
A single cool radiance illumines the boundless void.

(Verse by Chan Master Daochuan)

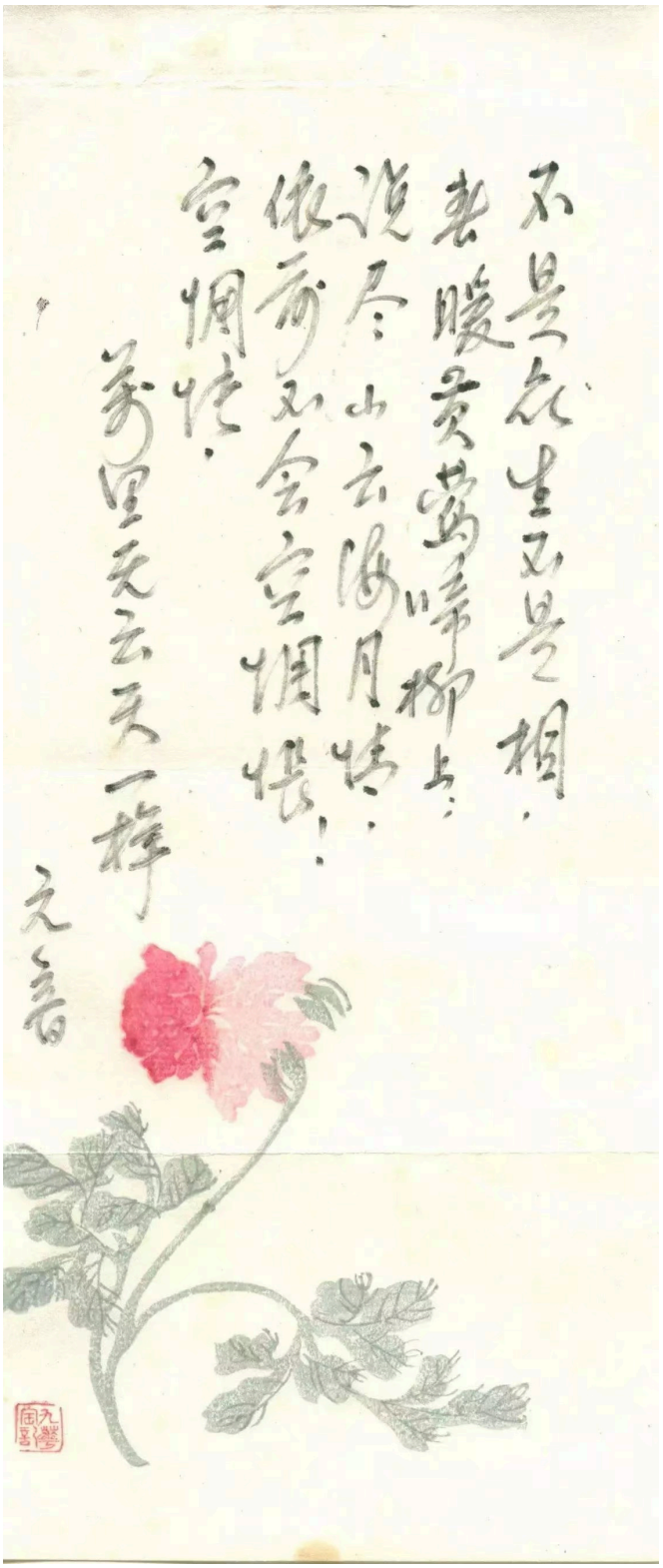


(IX)

The river of meditation grows still amid its waves;
The water of samādhi clears amid its ripples.

In clarity, awakened nature manifests;
As discursive thought falls away, deluded feelings cease.

(Verse by Fu Dashi, calligraphed by Master Yuanyin)



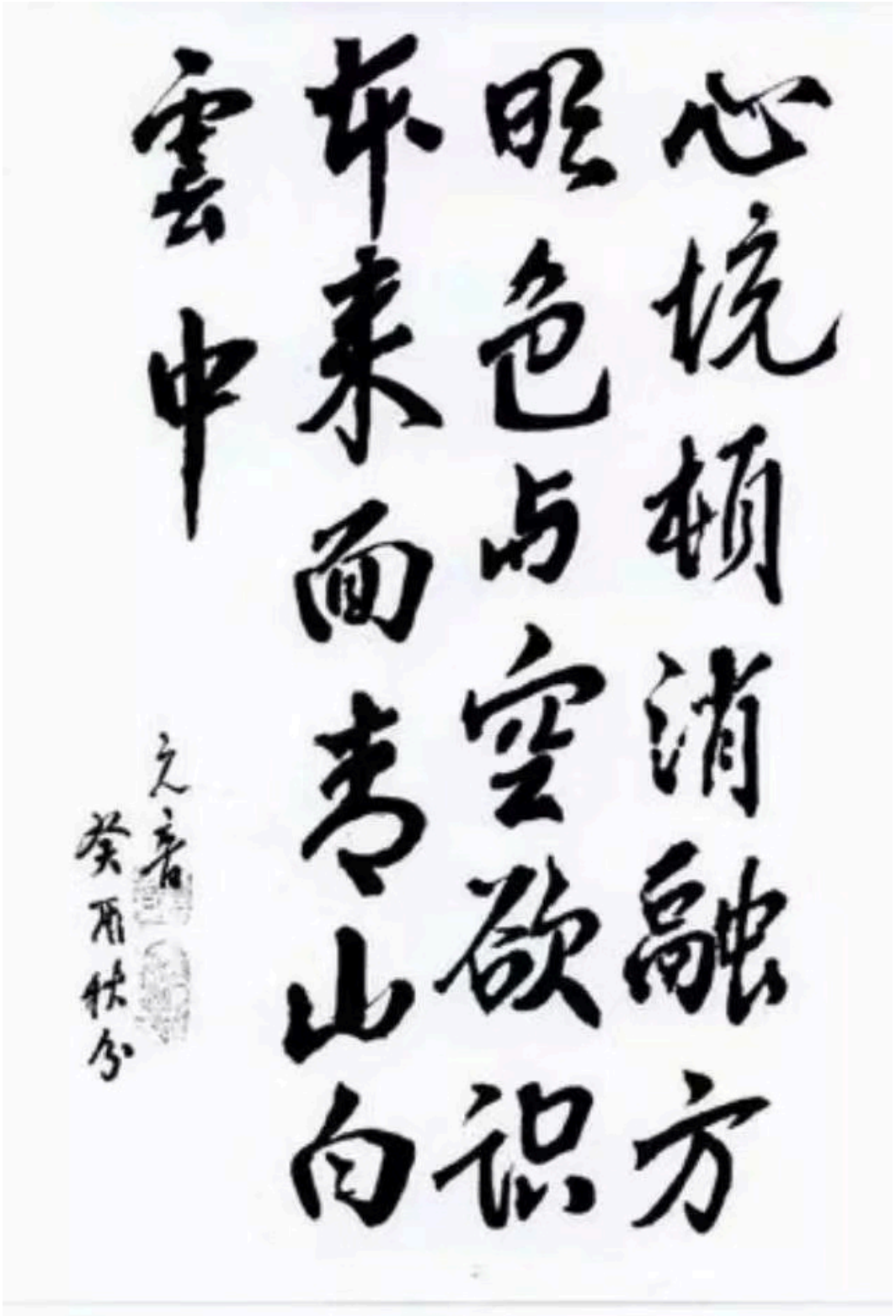
(X)

Neither sentient being nor appearance;
In spring’s warmth, yellow orioles sing among the willows.

Speak fully of mountain clouds and moonlight on the sea;
Still failing to understand, you grieve in vain.

Grieving in vain!
For ten thousand miles, the cloudless sky is one.

(Verse by Chan Master Dachuan)



(XI)

When mind and objects suddenly dissolve,
Form and emptiness become clear.

If you would know your Original Face,
Look amid green mountains and white clouds.

(Verse by Chan Master Cishou Huaishen)

Note: Calligraphy by the Elder; some verses are quotations from ancient verse.

Dharma Words for Master Yuanyin's Cremation Ceremony

Originally the lord of the Inner Court of Tuṣita, yet he walked with ease through the human world.

At parting, he clearly returned as the successor-to-be; beneath his feet, his descendants came in a mighty stream.

In Praise of Master Yuanyin, Third Patriarch of Heart Esotericism

Inwardly concealing the conduct of a bodhisattva, outwardly manifesting the form of a lay practitioner.

For more than forty years he propagated the Dharma; he lived to the age of ninety-six.

He upheld the true Dharma and transmitted the Buddha's Mind-Seal.

At his Dharma assemblies, pillars of the Dharma hastened to gather; in his writings, he spoke directly in accord with true nature.

His virtue spread throughout the world; humans and devas revered and looked up to him.

The final move—the true work.

Amid laughter and conversation, he passed away freely, seated or standing.

Radiant and forthright, like flowers in empty space, he suddenly vanished.

He passed away on Maitreya's holy birthday and was cremated at Avalokiteśvara's sacred site.

Now that the four elements have been cast off and he heads directly for nirvāṇa, what shall be said when the pyre is lit?

The fire of intrinsic nature, true emptiness, and wondrous merit burns away all appearances of right and wrong in the human world.

Burn!

Second day of the third lunar month, 2000 — Daosheng, Mount Putuo

The Great Master Yuanyin's Passing in Full Awareness

Great Acharya Yuanyin, Third Patriarch of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, a form of formless esoteric practice, passed away freely while seated at 8:15 p.m. on February 5, 2000, the first day of the first lunar month. He was ninety-six.

Until shortly before his passing, the Acharya had remained in excellent health, and his daily life proceeded entirely as usual. People came continuously each day to ask about the Buddhadharma; the Acharya always answered every question, discoursing freely on the Buddhadharma with abundant energy and a resonant voice. On the evening of the Little New Year, February 3, he took a shower as usual, with no sign whatever that he was about to depart this world.

On the morning of February 5, the Acharya said to those attending him, "I am going home." They replied, "Master, you cannot leave; we all need you." The Master said, "Everything is illusory. I have not left you. Remember: 'Coming, yet not coming; going, yet not gone. In this coming and going, there is likewise neither coming nor going.'"

That same day, he also conferred empowerment and blessings upon those who came to request the Dharma.

He ate dinner as usual, showing no sign that he was about to pass away. Afterward, he sat in his customary chair and discussed the Buddhadharma with those attending him, explaining how to embody it in daily life. After about forty-five minutes, he suddenly looked upward, as though seeing something, stood up, and then slowly sat down again. This true spiritual friend, revered by humans and devas alike, peacefully relinquished his body. Through his own passing, he demonstrated a practitioner's ease and freedom in relation to birth and death.

For several days after his passing, an unusual fragrance continued to fill the room. His remains were then taken to Mount Putuo, where they were kept for sixty days. Many disciples throughout China and overseas learned through various channels that the cremation would take place on April 6, although they had received no

notification. They wished to commemorate the Acharya's merit and virtue and his great accomplishments, and held him in profound reverence.

They gathered unbidden before the cremation kiln at Mount Putuo to bid a final farewell to the Acharya's remains. After the executor finished reading the will, an extraordinary sight appeared: a green lotus above the assembled crowd, and three shafts of golden light descending from the sky. One shone into the center of the crowd and the other two to either side, covering everyone present. Purple light also moved back and forth over the lotus. A video camera recorded the scene.

During the cremation, a lotus also appeared upon the Acharya's chest. Many of those present witnessed this extraordinary scene amid the fire.

After many days of continuous cloudy and rainy weather, the sky that day was exceptionally clear and cloudless. Following the cremation, auspicious clouds in the forms of dragons and phoenixes appeared in the sky. At times they lingered for a long while above the cremation kiln, and at other times moved back and forth. This remarkable sight appeared several times over the course of several hours, each appearance lasting a considerable time. Against the clear, cloudless sky, it was truly a beautiful spectacle.

The following day, when the relics were collected, a vast five-colored circular radiance again appeared in the cloudless sky. Four shafts of golden light shone out from its center, while purple, red, blue, purplish-red, and other lights continually filled the entire circular radiance. Within it, the Acharya appeared seated upright on a lotus. This auspicious sign lasted for more than forty minutes and was likewise recorded on video, leaving precious documentation capable of inspiring firm faith.

If the lotus that appeared above the heads of the assembled people on the day of cremation, together with the three shafts of golden light descending from the sky, constituted blessings for those present, then the vast circular radiance, the various colored lights filling it, and the majestic sacred image of the Acharya foretold that the Dharma gate of the Acharya's lineage would flourish still more brilliantly and illuminate the great thousandfold world.

All those present who collected the relics, upon seeing this auspicious sign, gave rise to boundless gratitude toward the Acharya and unanimously vowed to practice still more diligently in repayment of their teacher's kindness. Many onlookers who saw this spectacle marveled and praised it, vowing to cultivate the unsurpassed Buddha Way. Many relics and relic flowers were collected that day.

As early as 1989, the Acharya had wished to depart this world, but after the earnest entreaties of his disciples, he agreed to remain. Five years earlier, when a lay

practitioner happened to ask when the Acharya would relinquish his body, the Acharya replied, “In 2000.”

The previous year, the Acharya had already prepared his will. To avoid alarming his disciples or causing unnecessary complications, he informed only several close disciples so that they could discuss the arrangements afterward.

His close disciples earnestly urged the Acharya to remain in the world. The Acharya said, “Whatever is born must perish; even the Buddha was thus. My affinity for manifesting in this world is nearly complete, but I will not leave you all. My teacher and my teacher’s teacher are also constantly blessing disciples who practice this Dharma.”

The day before his passing, he told everyone, ‘I have always encouraged you to seek rebirth in the Western Pure Land, the Land of Ultimate Bliss. I shall set an example for you: I too shall be reborn there.’

He then immediately recited the Rebirth Mantra aloud. In the days before his passing, he had repeatedly hinted to disciples seeking instruction that he was about to leave this world. Because his health remained excellent, the disciples generally did not recognize what he meant until they reflected afterward. Some had understood, but did not dare ask.

A certain Dharma master from Mount Putuo came to ask the Acharya about the Dharma and had originally intended to return on the first day of the lunar month. As an exception, the Acharya asked him to remain one more day, saying, “When you return, take some things with you and convey my greetings to Venerable Abbot Miaoshan.”

The Acharya passed away that same day. With Venerable Abbot Miaoshan’s consent, this Dharma master arranged for his remains to stay at Mount Putuo for the period specified in his will. Otherwise, keeping the remains for a time without alerting disciples throughout China would have been difficult. This was the Acharya’s skillful arrangement. (He had taught sūtras to elder monks at Mount Putuo in the early 1980s and had thus come to know Venerable Abbot Miaoshan. Elder Miaoshan also passed away on the twenty-second day of that month.)

A lay practitioner living far away in Shandong telephoned the Acharya on the twenty-seventh day of the twelfth lunar month, asking to come to Shanghai to care for the elder. The Acharya replied, “Is that still necessary?” The lay practitioner thought that on several previous occasions he had also offered to care for the Acharya, but the Acharya had always said, “Your family needs you too. I am still all right.”

This time, however, both the reply and its tone were unusual. Two days later, the lay practitioner dreamed of a grave bearing the character yuan ( ). Reflecting on that dream and on the Acharya's reply two days earlier, he sensed something unusual and hurried to Shanghai. By then, the Acharya had passed away.

Before the Acharya's rebirth, many Dharma-receiving disciples throughout the country had dreams foretelling that he was about to depart this world. Thus people would often suddenly telephone to inquire after the Acharya's condition, though they could not speak openly about the dreams. When they spoke of these matters afterward, all felt them to be inconceivable. This was indeed the blessing of the Acharya's extraordinary power of merit and virtue.

In his youth, the Acharya studied Tiantai teachings under the eminent Tiantai master Venerable Xingci. He subsequently studied Consciousness-Only under the elder lay practitioner Fan Gunong, and later studied the Avataṃsaka teachings and practiced contemplation of the Dharma realm under Venerable Yingci, the leading lecturer on the Avataṃsaka. Finally, he relied upon Acharya Wang Xianglu, the second patriarch of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma of formless esoteric practice, to practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. Thoroughly awakening to the essential point of mind, he attained great accomplishment, and in 1958 succeeded to the position of third patriarch of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma.

He then lived quietly in Shanghai for several decades, renouncing fame and gain, integrating Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhism, and teaching according to people's capacities. He worked unobtrusively, unmoved by praise or blame. During the ten-year catastrophe, slander arising from his transmission of the Dharma and acceptance of disciples led to two and a half years of isolation and investigation.

After the catastrophe, freedom of religious belief was restored. The Acharya was already seventy-six, yet he was deeply moved by the suffering of sentient beings. They did not understand the true nature of the universe and human life, mistook illusory existence for real existence, and could not relinquish their attachments; thus they revolved endlessly in saṃsāra, with no prospect of release. Moreover, many Buddhist practitioners burrowed hopelessly into heaps of names and concepts, mistaking the finger for the moon, which did nothing to subdue their afflictions. Those aspiring to actual practice and liberation likewise engaged in blind cultivation because they did not understand the truth, wasting their time and even falling into deviation.

In view of this, the Acharya came forward and emphatically proclaimed the importance of realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature. This is truly the key to transcending birth and death. Only by recognizing their own original mind, seeing their own intrinsic nature, and returning to their original nature can sentient beings

leave the sea of suffering of birth and death. No school or tradition can bypass this. Even in the Pure Land school, which universally embraces practitioners of all three capacities, one must, after rebirth in the West, "see the Buddha when the lotus opens" in order to "awaken to the unborn." So-called "seeing the Buddha when the lotus opens" means that the flower of one's mind opens and one sees the Buddha of one's own intrinsic nature. Is this not another name for realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature?!

The Acharya was also concerned that sentient beings in the Dharma-ending age have scant blessings, heavy karma, deep obscurations, and shallow wisdom. Not to mention attaining accomplishment in this very life, even rebirth in the Western Pure Land is truly not easy. As ancient worthies often lamented: "Those who recite the Buddha's name are innumerable, but among those reborn there are scarcely one or two."

The reason, upon examination, is that sentient beings cannot let go. So long as there remains even one thing not relinquished in the Sahā world, rebirth in the Land of Ultimate Bliss is impossible. To speak of letting go is not truly to let go; only letting go in one's heart is genuine letting go. Yet how difficult it is to let go in one's heart. Look at your own attached and deluded thoughts: unless these deluded thoughts are subdued, they will inevitably lead toward the cycle of birth and death.

Unless one's practice becomes continuous and undivided, rebirth can scarcely be hoped for. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is truly the practice suited to the occasion, for it is exceptionally powerful and rapid in subduing afflictions. This great Dharma treasure is an exceedingly excellent Dharma gate for sentient beings in the Dharma-ending age to attain accomplishment in this very life or to be reborn in the Western Pure Land. The Acharya also pointed out that this Dharma is simple and easy to practice; relying on the Buddha's blessings, it rapidly and powerfully eliminates offenses, accumulates blessings, realizes the essence, and gives rise to its functioning, while also cutting off obstacles such as external demons.

The Buddha-Heart Sūtra, Also Corresponding to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī states: "At that time, the Tathāgata arose from samādhi and said: 'Good men, excellent, excellent. Sentient beings have all sunk away—do you fully understand this? Now sentient beings do not understand my Dharma, do not know my mind, and do not reach my realm. They are held by Māra—the māra of afflictions and the heavenly māra. How can they be saved? Who has a means to protect sentient beings? Who has a means…'"

to subdue this poison? . . . Among the assembly there was a bodhisattva named Shide, who addressed the Buddha: "World-Honored One, such Vajra bodhisattvas and celestial immortals are all unable to contain it. How, then, can the Buddha now

enable all sentient beings to escape this calamity?" At that time, the Tathāgata said to Bodhisattva Baode: "Only the Tathāgata's Heart-of-Heart can equal it. Why? Because it can cause all māras to give rise to great compassion . . . and can enable all . . ."

". . . Buddhas never to depart; it can enable all bodhisattvas to become one's retinue; it can enable all Vajras to display their power; it can enable all celestial beings constantly to offer protection . . . and can enable all to proceed directly to bodhi without regression . . ." It also says: ". . . Those who seek rebirth in the West, who seek freedom to be reborn below, who seek freedom to be reborn throughout the ten directions, or who seek flawless worldly eloquence should only contemplate and recite it with utmost sincerity."

"Recite it a thousand times daily, and within seven days one will be able to arrive there; once one has departed from this world, one will not return . . ." It also says: ". . . At the time of death, the Buddhas of the ten directions will appear above one's head and personally welcome one to their realms . . ." The power of this Dharma is inexhaustible and supremely extraordinary; its principle is profound and subtle, beyond measure.

The sūtra says: ". . . Among all bodies, none surpasses the Buddha's body. Among all essential and wondrous dharmas, none surpasses the minds of the Buddhas. When this mind is shown to sentient beings, sentient beings themselves are the Buddha's body. Such is this great sage's power, which bodhisattvas cannot comprehend. For as many kalpas as the sands of the Ganges, I have entrusted it only once. Whoever can practice accordingly will be the same as this body of mine . . ." Therefore, for sentient beings in the Dharma-ending age to have the affinity to practice this great Dharma is the response of wholesome roots cultivated over many kalpas, though they may not know it. If anyone slanders this Dharma or obstructs the propagation of the true Dharma, the terrible karmic retribution is likewise inconceivable; it will not be cited here.

In brief, this Dharma takes prajñā as its essence, esoteric practice as its function, and the Pure Land as its ultimate destination, integrating Chan, Pure Land, and Esoteric Buddhism. Having practiced it himself and attained great accomplishment, the Acharya worked tirelessly to propagate it and direct practitioners toward the Pure Land, repaying the kindness of the Buddha, his teachers, and sentient beings. He did so even though he was nearly eighty when he began teaching publicly after the great catastrophe.

People often came from great distances, thousands or even tens of thousands of li away to ask the Acharya to resolve one or two doubts. His residence was always crowded with those seeking and inquiring into the Dharma. His teachings all flowed

from the samādhi of intrinsic nature, never favoring any particular school or lineage; he taught according to each person's capacity and prescribed medicine according to the illness. While he taught, a strange fragrance often filled the room. The Acharya had many inconceivable meritorious deeds and occurrences, but because people today have inferior capacities and few wholesome roots, they do not believe in extraordinary things. Even those who do believe are often attached to them and easily fall into deviations. Thus, the Acharya never permitted those who knew of such matters to speak of them, and they cannot conveniently be made public.

Over the past ten years, tens of thousands of people have received the Dharma from the Acharya, throughout China and in such countries as the United States, Germany, France, Canada, and Japan. A number have attained accomplishment through practice, very many have realized the mind and seen their true nature, and those who have been reborn in the Pure Land or already possess the qualifications for rebirth are beyond counting. Thus, many Han Chinese went to great Tibetan living Buddhas to seek the Dharma, and these great living Buddhas all told them that Master Yuanyin of the Han regions was a truly accomplished great spiritual friend. Consequently, many students returning from Tibet to the Han regions drew close to the Acharya.

In this defiled Dharma-ending age, when people's capacities are exceedingly inferior, it is still possible to enable many sentient beings to receive the true benefit of the Buddhadharma—how difficult this is! The Acharya is like a glowing red coal upon an icy, snow-covered earth, melting sentient beings' attachments; he is also like a boat traveling over sand, arduously ferrying people toward the other shore. This is truly an inconceivable undertaking!

We trust that, in the years to come, outstanding disciples of the Acharya who are accomplished in study, practice, and realization will make Great Vows for awakening and come forward to propagate the true Dharma, rescuing sentient beings from suffering. This is the welcome prospect eagerly awaited by Buddhists committed equally to genuine study and practice.

In his leisure time, the Acharya wrote A Brief Discussion of Realizing the Mind and Seeing One's True Nature, A Simple Explanation of the Inscription on Awakening to the Mind, Lectures on the Blue Cliff Record, Slight Ripples on the Ocean of Chan, Uncovering the Hidden Meaning of the Heart Sūtra, and A Discussion of Key Issues in Rebirth in the Western Pure Land. These works are collected in Essentials of Buddhist Practice and Realization. An Explanation of Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State has also been published.

Regrettably, Direct Explanation of the Śūraṅgama Sūtra has been lost. A Brief Explanation of the Mahāmudrā of the Ganges and Questions and Answers on

Essentials of Buddhist Practice and Realization will soon appear. Questions and Answers will greatly benefit practitioners who have no opportunity to seek personal guidance.

Although the Master has relinquished his physical body, his dharmakāya (Dharma body) remains, and he continues to bless his disciples through various skillful means. This is what many disciples engaged in the practice silently pray for.

Wude

March 30, 2000

Afterword

Our revered teacher, Master Yuanyin, lived to the age of ninety-six. Throughout his life, he renounced fame and gain, studied the Buddhist canon in depth, integrated Chan, Pure Land, and Esoteric Buddhist teachings, thoroughly awakened to the essential meaning of the Buddhadharma, and attained great accomplishment.

Responding to the capacities of present-day sentient beings and the conditions of the time, the Master embraced the great Mahāyāna vow to benefit all through bodhisattva compassion. He vigorously taught the direct-pointing Dharma and widely transmitted the Heart-of-Heart Dharma as formless esoteric practice. Through the compassionate protection and blessings of the Buddhas' and bodhisattvas' mantras and mudrās, he skillfully guided students to see their true nature directly. He taught them to continue safeguarding realization, eliminate habitual tendencies, and train through lived experience, then realize the essence and bring its functioning into play, thereby perfecting the fruition of Buddhahood.

In the Master's formal teachings, annotations to letters, and informal talks given in response to circumstances, every answer flowed from the samādhi of intrinsic nature. All were medicine prescribed according to the illness, teachings suited to the recipient's capacity, inspiring practitioners to open the Buddha's knowledge and vision, penetrate the source completely, and see the truth in every word.

The Master once wrote, 'Collect and compile letters, informal talks, and other materials on Buddhist practice and realization into a book. This can help later students resolve doubts and strengthen their diligence.' He described it as an undertaking that would 'greatly benefit people and yield substantial results.' With his consent and support, we began collecting and organizing the materials in August 1998. Over more than a year, Dharma brothers and sisters from many places gave us generous assistance. We gathered, arranged, and compiled the materials into

Questions and Answers on Essentials of Buddhist Practice and Realization and published it for circulation.

During the final days of his life, the Master remained concerned with the compilation of this collection of questions and answers. Despite the strain of editorial work, he personally reviewed the page proofs that had been compiled and arranged, correcting and finalizing the first 106 entries. This portion, personally revised by the Master, ultimately became his final written legacy and is therefore especially precious. The final proofreading of the portion after entry 106 was completed through the continued work of Elder Xu Hengzhi, the Master's Dharma brother, who corrected and finalized it in full.

With the incense of heartfelt devotion, we bow to our beloved teacher. As this collection goes to press, let us receive the Dharma and awaken to the mind through the great wisdom, compassion, and luminosity that flowed naturally from him. Let us cut through delusion, realize principle, release attachments and bonds, and take the path home. May we remember his painstaking care and earnest instructions.

Everyone! Apply yourselves! Press forward with vigor! Apply yourselves with vigor! Press forward with vigor!

Compiled by: Dharma Master Wude and others