Essential Explanation of the Intermediate State

Compiled from Recordings of Master Yuanyin

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Introduction

Part One: Introduction

Today, through exceptionally favorable circumstances, we have the opportunity to study the Dharma together with many virtuous friends. Do not underestimate yourselves, for all sentient beings possess the Tathāgata's wisdom and virtues. If we arouse the aspiration to practice, recognize that all worldly appearances are illusory and unobtainable, cease chasing after them, turn our minds toward goodness, and liberate both ourselves and others, we are great bodhisattvas.

We often say, "A human birth is difficult to obtain, and the Dharma is difficult to hear."

Consider the countless beings throughout the universe: how many obtain a human birth? Beings born from wombs, eggs, moisture, or transformation are as numerous as the soil of the earth, while those who obtain a human body are like the speck of soil beneath a fingernail—pitifully few. Insects and ants, by contrast, are everywhere; even a single scoop of the tiny creatures used as fish food contains an incalculable number.

Thus, it is indeed true that a human birth is difficult to obtain. Of those who obtain one, how many hear the Dharma? Fewer still.

Among the world's vast population, few encounter the Dharma; fewer hear the definitive teachings of the Mahāyāna; and fewer still arouse the resolve to practice them and realize their true nature. Most Buddhists merely touch the fringe of the Dharma: they burn incense, bow to the Buddha, seek blessings, and plant roots of goodness. These activities can only serve as provisions for cultivating the path in the future.

Those who truly understand the Dharma's meaning and put it into practice are exceedingly rare. The work we are discussing today, The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State, is the secret within the secret of the esoteric tradition: a precious teaching not lightly transmitted, and a great Dharma through which attainment is possible without prior cultivation.

Ordinarily, practitioners of Pure Land, Chan, and the esoteric tradition must cultivate contemplation, sit in meditation, and enter samādhi in order to still deluded thought, reveal their original nature, and directly see Buddha-nature. This teaching does not require practice of that kind. Once you understand what Buddhahood and liberation from birth and death entail and receive this essential instruction, you can attain liberation at the time of death. It is therefore the supreme secret Dharma within the esoteric tradition.

Our good fortune in hearing this Dharma today is the karmic fruit of roots of goodness planted over innumerable lives and eons. Before discussing the teaching itself, let us examine the "Background to the Translation" and the "Preface." Once we understand how this Dharma was transmitted and the basic knowledge required to practice it, we will appreciate how precious it is.

I. Background to the Translation

(I) Freedom from Suffering and Attainment of Happiness; The Three Kāyas and Four Wisdoms

We live in a world where people are born and die every day. Some live for more than a hundred years, some for only a decade or so, and some die as soon as they are born. Although human lifespans differ, each passes in the blink of an eye.

Where, then, does life come from, and where do we go after death? No one knows. Birth and death are therefore the great matter. It was for this great cause that the Buddha appeared in the world: to guide us out of confusion, show us where birth comes from and where death leads, and resolve this baffling riddle.

A person without wisdom does not know where life comes from or where death leads. Such a person neither cares about nor investigates the question, believing that coming into this world is simply a matter of eating, dressing, marrying, and having children, and thus muddles through an entire life.

Liang Qichao once asked, "What, ultimately, is the purpose of human life in this world?" Are you here merely to eat and dress? Is there so much food and clothing in the world, with no one to consume or wear it, that you were summoned here for that purpose? Clearly not. Are you here to marry, have children, and perpetuate the family line? If that were all, human life would be no more meaningful than the life of maggots in a cesspit. Clearly that is not the answer either.

What, then, is the purpose? The foolish neither know nor investigate. They come from a dream and return to a dream; confused and unawakened, they muddle through decades—even a hundred years—and let an entire lifetime pass.

Among human beings, those who seek the truth of life and the universe and attempt to solve the mystery of birth and death are indeed few.

Most people care only about gaining rank, making money, marrying, living more comfortably, and enjoying themselves. Satisfied with that, they never investigate the truth of life and the universe or the value of human existence. A person of wisdom refuses to remain bewildered and asks: Where do human beings come from? Where do we go after death? How did the universe arise? The search for correct answers gave rise to philosophy.

Many outstanding thinkers, ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, have investigated the origins of the world and human life. Yet despite exhausting their ingenuity and intellect, they have not reached a true and definitive answer. Some advocate idealism and others materialism; some monism and others dualism. But what is actually the case? No conclusive answer is found.

Only the Buddha can guide us out of confusion, solve the riddle, and correctly explain the origins of human life and the universe. To hear today this esoteric scripture containing the definitive Mahāyāna teaching is an unsurpassed blessing.

It cannot be compared with worldly good fortune—higher status, greater income, or a more comfortable life. However well you live, you cannot escape birth, aging, illness, and death; when the time comes, you depart naked and cannot take even a penny with you. Only by studying the Dharma, understanding this truth and the real nature of human existence, and thereby escaping the snare of birth and death do we receive the great blessing of the definitive teaching.

Many intelligent people, unable to find answers through academic study, turn to religion to see whether it can provide a true answer. Religions give different accounts of where human beings come from. Christianity says, "God created us," and Islam says, "Allah created us."

But if we inquire more deeply—if God created us all, who created God?—no answer is available. The Dharma alone explains the matter thoroughly: it is not a question of one being creating another. Buddhism teaches that Buddha-nature has existed since beginningless time ("beginningless" means without a beginning).

What is Buddha-nature? It is our capacity to see, hear, feel, and know. Through the six faculties—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind—we encounter the six objects—form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental phenomena—and cognition arises when faculty and object meet.

Thus, the eye sees form, the ear hears sound, the nose smells fragrance and odour, the tongue tastes flavours, the body feels contact with the external environment, and the sixth consciousness, associated with the brain, cognizes and discriminates. Mind knows, body feels, eye sees, ear hears, nose smells, and tongue tastes: these capacities are our true nature.

Because people cannot see this nature, they assume it does not exist. Yet its functioning resembles electricity. When wires and a bulb are properly connected and the switch is turned on, the lamp lights, though the electricity itself remains unseen. The nerves of the brain are like the wires: they function by relying on this capacity.

If our breath stops—that is, if breathing ceases—the nerves of the brain are still there, but they can no longer function. So when Chan practitioners practice, they investigate: “Who is reciting the Buddha’s name?” Who, in the end, is doing the reciting? You are. But what do you call “you”? Do you call the body “you,” or do you call thought “you”?

The body is not you; it is only the house in which you live. Once Buddha-nature leaves the body, the body can no longer recite. Thought is not you either, for thought is the reflection of objective external conditions in the human brain; without those conditions, that thought would not arise.

If neither body nor thought is you, then who are you? Holding this critical phrase in the mind gives rise to a profound sense of questioning and cuts through deluded thought. When both perceiver and perceived fall away, awareness turns back upon itself and directly sees formless Buddha-nature. Although Buddha-nature has no form, it functions—it is present.

Thus, however thoroughly we investigate, the Dharma proves true, because its truth must be personally verified before it can bring genuine benefit.

When practice brings deluded thinking to an end—when the preceding thought has ceased and the next has not yet arisen—there is true emptiness: free of every attachment and unstained by a single speck of dust, yet clearly aware, not inert like wood or stone. What is this clear awareness? It is our capacity to know and perceive, our all-capable functioning; it is the Buddha-nature that everyone seeks to realize by seeing the true nature of mind.

This is the Buddha-nature that sees one's nature! If we focus on it, awaken to it, and experience it, and can then train ourselves amid circumstances—not elated in favorable conditions, not troubled in adverse ones, and without clinging, love, anger, grasping, or rejecting toward circumstances—this is called "awakening." The Buddha-dharma has a way to make us open this knot of confusion and see for ourselves the true nature of life and the universe, so the Buddha-dharma is the only correct guide to life.

Buddhism is nontheistic and differs from other religions. It does not teach that a God or deity created and governs us; rather, we govern and shape ourselves. Hence the saying, "Everything is created by mind." Other religions posit a supreme God or Lord who governs us.

Some who do not understand ask, "Does Buddhism not teach that after death the Ten Kings of Yama judge you? Does that not mean King Yama controls and sentences you?" No; that is a misunderstanding. In reality, we govern ourselves. Those who create wholesome karma receive wholesome results and go to favorable destinations;

Those who create evil karma must receive evil retribution and go to places of bitter suffering. It is not that King Yama assigns it to you. King Yama is equivalent to our public security bureau. If we have done nothing against the law, can the public security bureau interfere with us? If you commit a crime, the bureau will show you no mercy: it will arrest you and have you sentenced.

Everything is therefore governed by our own actions, not by someone else. Performing the ten wholesome actions leads to rebirth in the heavens, while evil committed through greed, anger, and ignorance leads to hell; both are one's own doing. The Ten Dharma Realms are a single mind.

They comprise the Four Noble Realms—Buddhas, bodhisattvas, pratyekabuddhas, and arhats—and the Six Ordinary Realms—devas, human beings, asuras, hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals. All ten are created by our one mind.

The Buddhist teaching of karma and rebirth tells us to understand the law of cause and effect: as one sows, so shall one reap. If we fear the result, we must first refrain from creating the karmic cause. Ordinary beings do not fear creating causes; they fear only the results. Bodhisattvas fear only the causes: if they do not create a cause, they will not undergo its result.

If we break the law, for example, we create an unwholesome cause and will inevitably face prosecution, trial, and imprisonment. If we do no wrong, we will not suffer that result.

Ordinary people are not like this: they fear only receiving the result, not creating the cause. To achieve their enjoyment, they create evil karma by any means, and so society has many crimes. Hence the criminal law, civil law, and other legal sanctions.

In fact, it is precisely because people cling to this physical body as themselves that they want to enjoy to the fullest. This is especially so in the world today, with its flourishing science and abundant material goods and many pleasures, while people's material desires run high and their craving is hard to fill: having this, they want that, all of it high-end consumption.

Without the income for it, they cannot help doing illegal things. So crimes in society keep multiplying, all because of this.

Because we mistakenly take this physical body to be ourselves, we create the cause for making karma and give rise to false feelings. Then, driven by these false feelings and views, we create karma as our feelings dictate, undergo retribution as our karma dictates, and revolve in birth and death with no end in sight. This shows that the Buddhist teaching of karmic cause and effect and rebirth is an irrefutable truth. Like the "law of causality" discovered by scientists, it is real, credible, and irrefutable.

The Buddhist teaching that "impermanence is swift" tells us that life is as brief as morning dew. A hundred years may appear to be a long life, yet it passes in the blink of an eye. We are now several decades old, but when we look back, the past seems to have happened only yesterday; decades have vanished in an instant. Time moves that quickly.

To the Buddha, our lives are like birth in the morning and death by evening. A hundred human years are only a moment to heavenly beings. In Tuṣita Heaven, one day is more than three hundred years in our world.

Can a person here live for four hundred years? Even if someone could, such a life would be extremely rare, yet to those beings it would amount to only a single day. Human life is short, and we will soon depart. What should we do? If we do not practice the Dharma diligently in order to free ourselves from birth and death, will we not have failed ourselves in making this journey through the world?

The Buddha's many admonitions sound an alarm, urging us to practice quickly and not waste this rare human life. We should therefore cease clinging to the physical body. It is not our true self but merely the house in which we live; the real person is Buddha-nature, the capacity to see, hear, feel, and know discussed above.

We must protect this capacity from being stained by adventitious defilements—the six objects of form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental phenomena. These defilements are called "guest dust": like dust, they are not the host and are therefore called guests. If we cling to them, seek enjoyment, and stop at nothing to satisfy our desires, we go astray.

Buddhism teaches us karma and rebirth and the swiftness of impermanence so that we may transform our lives, become genuine and morally sound human beings, and ultimately transcend the human state and attain Buddhahood.

Life does not last long. We must let go quickly, stop chasing external objects, and return to our original state—bare, unencumbered, clear, and pure—so that we do not suffer the cycle of birth and death in vain. At present, we are caught in inverted, deluded thinking without realizing it.

After attaining awakening upon seeing the morning star on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month, the Buddha said, "Wonderful! Wonderful! All sentient beings possess the Tathāgata's wisdom and virtues." Why do they not see this for themselves? Because delusion, inversion, and attachment obscure their original nature. We are now immersed in delusion, inversion, and attachment. The Buddha's warning to let go of everything is like a sudden blow to the head, urging us to wake from the dream.

The course of human life is an unbroken succession of suffering: birth, aging, illness, and death are all suffering. We may have forgotten the suffering of birth. Newborn babies cry "Wah!"; none emerge laughing.

Why? In the womb they are warm, their skin is tender, and they have no contact with the external environment. As soon as they leave the womb, cold air strikes them with pain like needles.

In the womb the baby's head is originally upward; for birth, the head must turn downward, and the baby is squeezed through the mother's pelvis as though through a narrow gap between two great mountains. The child suffers and therefore emerges crying.

The child suffers, and so does the adult: mothers in the delivery room also cry out in terrible pain. Aging is suffering too. Vision dims; hearing fails; teeth fall out and can no longer chew. As the body ages and energy declines, one must depend on others for care and loses freedom and ease. Illness brings still greater suffering.

Everyone knows how agonizing even a minor toothache can be. As the saying goes, "A toothache is not an illness, but when it strikes it can cost you your life!" How much worse, then, are serious diseases? Cancer and similar illnesses can cause unbearable pain. I once saw a person with cancer rolling across the bed in agony; illness is therefore among life's greatest sufferings.

Death is more painful still. At death the four elements disperse, an agony compared to stripping the shell from a living turtle. The human body is formed by the gathering of the four elements—earth, water, fire, and wind. At death, the earth element dissolves first.

Its dissolution feels as though Mount Tai were pressing down on the body, leaving one so heavy and suffocated that family members cannot move one. The dissolution of water feels like being immersed in water, oppressively wet and uncomfortable. As fire dissolves, the whole body burns with fever and the cheekbones of the dying person turn bright red; this is a sign of fire's dissolution.

The dissolution of wind is still more painful, like a gale stripping away the surface of the earth layer by layer; the patient feels as though a knife were slicing away skin and flesh one layer at a time. As breathing fails, there is only exhalation and no inhalation, while deep phlegm blocks the throat and makes breathing impossible. When the phlegm finally subsides, the breath stops. It is extremely painful.

Thus birth, aging, illness, and death make the whole course of human life one of suffering. There are other sufferings as well—not obtaining what one seeks, separation from those one loves, and meeting those one hates—but we will not discuss them here.

Layman Sun Jingfeng said: "Some people study Buddhism solely because they fear birth and death. Others arouse the great aspiration to study Buddhism because they realize that all beings in the six paths were their parents in past lives and now sink in the sea of suffering, rising and falling without any prospect of escape.

They therefore follow the Mahāyāna teaching and its spirit of selflessness: contemplating impermanence, ending birth and death, further developing the Four Immeasurable, practicing the Six Perfections and myriad practices, walking the bodhisattva path, and aspiring that all beings attain Buddhahood." This passage explains that people arouse the resolve to study Buddhism for different reasons.

Some do so out of fear of birth and death: they know that death will be painful, do not know where they will go afterward, and turn to Buddhism in search of a destination. By practicing Pure Land Buddhism now, for example, they may aspire to rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Others arouse the aspiration in order to liberate sentient beings.

Buddhism therefore distinguishes five vehicles. The first is the vehicle of ordinary beings. Its followers know only to do good and avoid evil; they neither seek liberation from birth and death nor know how to attain it.

Many people, for example, burn incense and bow to the Buddha in temples on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month, yet they do not truly understand the Dharma or know how to end birth and death. They have merely touched its fringe. This is called the vehicle of ordinary beings, or the human and deva vehicle.

The second is the arhat vehicle. Some practice solely to liberate themselves from birth and death. Knowing that birth and death are frightening and impermanence is swift, they resolve to practice in order to escape the six paths of rebirth as quickly as possible. This is the arhat vehicle.

The third is the pratyekabuddha, or solitary-realizer vehicle. Like arhats, its practitioners seek only their own liberation, but they are more perceptive: from subtle signs they discern larger truths, awakening to results through causes. They therefore cultivate the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, unlike arhats, who cultivate the Four Noble Truths and investigate causes from their results.

In times when no Buddha appears in the world, pratyekabuddhas observe flowers blooming and fading, realize emptiness, suffering, and impermanence, and attain the path; hence they are considered slightly superior to arhats.

The fourth is the bodhisattva vehicle, whose practitioners resolve to cultivate in order to liberate sentient beings. Seeing that people everywhere suffer birth, aging, illness, and death, they first practice and liberate themselves so that they can then liberate others.

If someone falls into the Huangpu River, for example, how can you save that person if you cannot swim? You must first learn to swim and then learn lifesaving techniques. Swimming alone is not enough: when you try to save a drowning person, that person may cling to you so desperately that you cannot move.

The Six Perfections and myriad practices therefore teach the methods of liberating beings. First liberate yourself and then others: this is the bodhisattva vehicle. The fifth is the Buddha vehicle. It recognizes that all sentient beings possess undefiled wisdom-nature, no different from that of the Buddha—without distinction from Śākyamuni Buddha, Medicine Buddha, Amitābha Buddha, or any other Buddha.

Because of delusion and attachment, we mistake the physical body for the self and fail to recognize that this capacity for awareness is our dharmakaya. We should turn back without delay, let go of everything, restore our inherent wisdom and virtues, and perfect the fruit of Buddhahood. This is the Buddha vehicle. Although Buddhism distinguishes five vehicles, all are created by the one mind; the distinctions arise only because practitioners differ in the scope of their aspirations.

Buddhism teaches us that only the One True Dharma Realm—Buddha-nature—is real, while everything else is illusory and impermanent. The earth on which we live is no exception; it passes through the four intermediate aeons of formation, abiding, destruction, and emptiness. Each intermediate aeon comprises twenty small aeons.

At the end of a great aeon, the earth will be destroyed. Scientists also say that the earth will one day collide with another planet and be consumed by a great fire, while Buddhist scriptures likewise speak of the earth being destroyed by fire. We shall not discuss that here. In short, everything is impermanent and nothing can be grasped.

To study Buddhism is therefore to contemplate impermanence: we are taught to let go of everything and not to cling, for fundamentally nothing is lasting or real.

Even those who live for more than a hundred years pass away in what seems an instant, and such longevity is rare. Why, then, should we be so petty about sensual pleasures, material possessions, and personal gain, or refuse to forgive others? If someone happens to bump into us on a bus, for example, we may immediately start an argument. They did not do it deliberately, so we should not be so petty.

I once read a thought-provoking account in a newspaper. A sports reporter traveling abroad was walking too quickly and accidentally stepped on an elderly foreign man's foot.

The elderly man apologized to him instead: “I'm sorry. I was walking too slowly and got in your way. If I had walked faster, you would not have stepped on my foot.” The reporter blushed with shame. He had stepped on someone else, yet the other person apologized to him. What remarkable courtesy!

If we all possessed this spirit, society would be peaceful and disputes would not arise. Buddhism teaches us first to become decent human beings and then to rise still higher, transcending the ordinary. If everyone possessed noble character and was always willing to put others before themselves, society would be peaceful, the nation prosperous and strong, and wars would not occur.

Buddhism therefore benefits the whole world. We should constantly contemplate our own impermanence, remembering that we are merely guests in this world. The poet Li Bai wrote, “Heaven and earth are the inn of the myriad things; time is the passing traveler of a hundred generations.”

Heaven and earth are a vast inn in which we stay only briefly before departing. Why, then, should we behave discourteously, cling so tightly, or fail to treat others generously? To study Buddhism is to put others before oneself and eliminate attachment, greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt; only then can we attain the Way.

Greed arises because we mistakenly take the physical body to be the self and consequently seek pleasure and long life.

After becoming emperor, Qin Shi Huang wished to live forever and enjoy imperial power without end, so he sent people in search of an elixir of immortality. This was a manifestation of greed. The unrest of present-day society and the prevalence of corruption and bribery are likewise driven by greed. If we awaken to the fact that everything is illusory and unobtainable, what remains to be greedy for? We should instead do all we can for the welfare of the public and accumulate virtue.

As the saying goes, “Better than leaving ten thousand pieces of gold to one's children is toaccumulate virtue and bequeath them a classic.” It warns us that leaving money to our descendants is less beneficial than teaching them to do good and accumulate virtue. Once we understand that everything is illusory and impermanent, we cease grasping and clinging. Without clinging, we let go; when we let go, the mind becomes empty; when the mind is empty, our true nature manifests and we transcend birth and death.

The principle is simple and easy to understand, but not so easy to put into practice, because the habit of attachment is deeply rooted. Even when told to let go, we cannot do so. We must therefore train at every moment and struggle with our own habits until this old tendency to cling is gradually exhausted.

The Four Great Vows of Mahāyāna Buddhism are: “However innumerable the Dharma gates, I vow to learn them all; however inexhaustible the afflictions, I vow to cut them all off; however boundless sentient beings are, I vow to liberate them all; however unsurpassed the Buddha Way, I vow to accomplish it.” We must arouse these Four Great Vows and constantly urge ourselves to practice with diligence and care, not merely for our own liberation. The Six Perfections and myriad practices are generosity, ethical discipline, patience, diligence, meditative concentration, and wisdom.

The first is generosity. Why should we practice generosity? In order to cut through miserliness and attachment. We are deeply attached and miserly, unwilling to give anything up. When we are willing to give, the capacity of the mind expands.

The second is ethical discipline. Here it means guarding the mind so that it does not stir. If the mind is constantly agitated and deluded thoughts arise in profusion, the practice cannot succeed.

The third is patience. It does not mean becoming angry and then forcibly suppressing the anger. No: doing so can cause illness through pent-up anger. What, then, should we do? We should contemplate emptiness. Nothing can be obtained, and even the “self” does not exist.

If there is no self, where can humiliation be found? If there is no self, who is there to be humiliated? Contemplate in this way, as the Diamond Sūtra teaches: “No mark of self, no mark of person, no mark of sentient being, and no mark of a life span.” If neither self nor person can be found, from where could humiliation arise? If there is no humiliation, what need is there to endure it? Patience that involves no enduring is great patience.

Nothing has independent existence; all forms are produced by causes and conditions. “Dharmas arising from causes and conditions, I declare, are emptiness.” Things do not exist in and of themselves but appear only when causes and conditions come together. We should therefore cease clinging to appearances. When we do not cling to appearances, the mind is empty; when the mind is empty, humiliation no longer exists.

The fourth is diligence. Practicing the Dharma and studying Buddhism both require diligence. How do we cultivate it? By tirelessly eliminating our deluded habits. This is why practitioners of the Pure Land school recite the Buddha's name tens of thousands of times a day: to sweep away deluded thinking and deluded thoughts. Our deluded thinking never stops, and our deluded thoughts take countless forms. They revolve in the mind all day without a moment's rest.

We notice them only when we sit down to recite the Buddha's name: one thought arises, then another. When we are busy, we do not see these thoughts and assume that they are absent. In fact, they never stop; we simply fail to notice them.

It is like a glass of muddy water. While the water is turbid, we cannot see the sediment. Only when the sediment settles and the water above becomes clear can we see it. Likewise, only as the deluded mind becomes quiet do we begin to see deluded

thoughts moving incessantly. Seeing deluded thoughts during seated meditation or Buddha-recitation is therefore a good sign, because the mind is gradually becoming clearer.

Some people say, “It is bad that I see so many deluded thoughts when I meditate; I would be better off not meditating.” When they do not meditate, they do not see the thoughts and imagine that none exist. That is mistaken: the thoughts have never ceased. We must therefore practice with unremitting diligence—morning and evening, in displacement and adversity alike.

At every moment, observe the mind: as soon as a thought arises, see it and do not follow it. If we genuinely practice in this way without interruption, within three to five years we can break through and see our true nature. Why do some people practice for many years without success? Because thoughts continue to move at every moment; they have not kept watch over them and have not been diligent.

If they watch continuously, within three to five years the thoughts will certainly come to rest and body, mind, and world will dissolve into emptiness. By continuing to train amid situations and diligently eliminating habitual tendencies, they will eventually become fully integrated. This is certain. Practitioners of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma are therefore told to meditate constantly.

This does not mean meditating for two hours and then, on rising from the seat, letting the wild horses loose and allowing deluded thoughts to run unchecked. We must maintain continuous and seamless contemplation, watching deluded thoughts without following them. What does “meditation” strike at? It strikes at deluded thoughts: we see the point at which a thought arises and do not follow it. To “sit” is to see one's true nature. We must see it at every moment. This capacity follows us like a shadow and can never be separated from us.

Layman Fu said, “Night after night I sleep embracing the Buddha; morning after morning I rise together with him.” We sleep embracing the Buddha and rise with the Buddha because our true nature never leaves us. If we are truly willing to practice with unremitting diligence, I assure you that within three to five years you will attain realization.

But if the practice is intermittent—meditating when pleased and abandoning it when not—or

if one recites the Buddha's name or a mantra while the mind continues to wander, what use is it? When meditating, we must resolutely let go of everything, like a person utterly dead to worldly concerns, and continuously “recite with the mind and hear with the ears”. Only then is there an entry into the practice. Reciting with the mind is not reciting with the mouth; it is the thinking mind that does the reciting.

The ears must hear the sound of the mantra or the Buddha's name clearly and remain fixed upon it. Master Hanshan said, “When reciting the Buddha's name or a mantra, be like someone pushing a heavy cart uphill, exerting every effort to keep it moving.” It is a heavy cart going uphill, not a light cart rolling downhill. A light cart needs no effort; with a whoosh, it rolls down by itself.

But can a heavily loaded cart be pushed uphill without exertion? It cannot. Recitation must therefore be sustained with the same determined effort. Two hours of seated meditation alone do not count for much. After leaving the seat, we must remain observant at every moment and not follow thoughts as they arise. Practice in this way and within three to five years I guarantee that you will see your true nature. If you practice like this and do not succeed, come and blame me. These are not merely my words; the great patriarchs taught the same thing, and it has been verified in practice.

The fifth is meditative concentration. It is attained through unremitting diligence. Meditative concentration means remaining unconfused by circumstances and unwavering in mind. On seeing something pleasing, we do not become enamoured of it or let the mind surge with desire to obtain and possess it. On encountering something unpleasant or contrary to our wishes, we do not become afflicted.

When the mind is truly empty, it is constantly gathered in concentration and is no longer confused by events. Concentration does not mean sitting there rigid and motionless, still less being incapable of undertaking important tasks. We speak, work, and walk as usual; although engaged in every activity, the mind remains unmoved. It is like a mirror reflecting things.

Many images appear within it, yet the mirror itself does not move. It does not say, “This is good, so I want it; that is bad, so I reject it.” It makes no distinctions but simply reflects whatever appears.

If an object is long, a long image appears; if short, a short image; if square, a square image; if red, red; if blue, blue. The mirror neither grasps nor rejects and makes no discrimination. This is called the “object of direct perception”. The object of direct perception is our Original Face. Everyone practices in order to see their true nature and their Original Face.

Where is this precious nature, this Original Face? It is nowhere else; it shines directly before us. If, in an instant, we let go of everything, not a single thought arises, yet we are not insentient like wood or stone. Instead, there is lucid, vivid knowing.

This lucid awareness is everyone's Original Face. Having clearly seen this nature, we must protect the Original Face at every moment. Whether praised or slandered, the mind remains unmoved and pays no heed; in this way we safeguard the mind of direct perception. When this safeguarding has become mature and complete, there is no longer any need to guard it. Letting it

respond freely to conditions, we accomplish the Great Way. The Buddhadharma is therefore not difficult to explain. If we are willing to practice, let go of everything, and continue tirelessly to work upon ourselves, we shall certainly attain realization.

The sixth is wisdom: the great wisdom that opens through meditative concentration. With it, we understand the causes and consequences of all things and the origin of the birth and death of sentient beings. Speaking of birth and death, we are originally unborn and undying; in truth, there is no birth or death. Why, then, do birth and death continually appear before us? Because the discriminating mind moves delusively.

If, when confronting circumstances, we neither give rise to thoughts nor pursue the objects before us, there is no birth and death. Birth and death are therefore illusory. Many people practicing Buddhism today cling to the idea that they must have somewhere to go at death and must know that destination in advance.

Yet if we have truly awakened to the Way, there is nowhere to go, because we have never died. We simply remain at ease in whatever circumstances arise, liberate beings in accordance with conditions, and roam freely in playful samādhi. What destination could be needed? Someone may say, "If you are awakened, you should know where you will go after death. That is called knowing your destination in advance. If you do not know it, you have not awakened."

The statement sounds correct, but it requires careful examination. When one has truly awakened to the Way, Buddha-nature pervades empty space and the entire Dharma Realm. It neither moves nor wavers and has neither coming nor going. Every event is its manifestation; every place is its magical display. Where could one go? There is nowhere to go. If there were somewhere to go, would that not show that one had yet to awaken?

Later in this book, two kinds of attainment are discussed. The first occurs when a great light shines forth in the intermediate state at the moment of death. If we recognize that this light and the light radiated by the Buddha are one and the same, non-dual and without difference, and that this is our true nature, we are liberated on the spot and need not go anywhere.

In the second case, our capacity is limited: we dare not accept the recognition and do not realize that this is Buddha-nature, the very nature we share with all Buddhas. We may then be reborn in an eastern or western pure land to continue our practice. Because we have not awakened to the Way, there is still somewhere to go. Once we have truly awakened and attained realization, there is no need to go anywhere.

Nirvāṇa is explained in four ways. The first is nirvāṇa of intrinsic nature. Our Buddha-nature is originally unborn and undying: it does not arise when the body is born or perish when the body dies. The true nature of every sentient being is naturally so, originally beyond birth and death and enduring from beginningless time. This is called nirvāṇa of intrinsic nature.

The second is nirvāṇa with remainder, attained by practitioners of the Lesser Vehicle. They have brought only segmented birth and death to an end. Segmented birth and death means birth and death in the six realms, whereas transformational birth and death is the arising and ceasing of thoughts. Their view of dharmas has not been eliminated; something remains unresolved.

They still identify the elemental natures of earth, water, fire, and wind with a self. Their thoughts are not yet purified and transformational birth and death remains; hence it is called nirvāṇa with remainder. The third is the noble fruition realized by a Buddha, called nirvāṇa without remainder. Both attachment to a personal self and the view of a self in dharmas have been eliminated. Person and dharmas are both empty, and not the slightest thing can be obtained.

When both have been fully resolved and the two kinds of birth and death—transformational and segmented—have been relinquished, this is nirvāṇa without remainder. The fourth is non-abiding nirvāṇa. Having no abiding place means there is no particular place in which to dwell: there is nowhere it is not; it is everywhere.

When Śākyamuni Buddha was departing, he said, "I have not left you. I am always before you. Those whose eyes are pure can see me; those whose eyes are clouded cannot." While afflictions and attachments remain, our vision is impure. If they are exhausted and deluded thoughts no longer arise, the pure Dharma-eye opens and we can see the Buddha everywhere. We should therefore not cling to a location or destination. Only then does great wisdom open. Great wisdom surging forth is expressed as the Six Perfections and myriad practices.

To attain Buddhahood, we must follow the Bodhisattva path, liberate sentient beings on a vast scale, and accumulate merit until the noble fruition is complete. Without complete merit and fully accomplished conduct, Buddhahood cannot be attained. To follow the Bodhisattva path is to liberate oneself and others and to awaken oneself and others. The Chinese term pusa ( ) abbreviates the transliteration of the Sanskrit bodhisattva and is explained in Chinese as "one who awakens sentient beings".

We must awaken from and break through our own emotional views while enabling all sentient beings to awaken. We all have our personal biases; we respect and cherish our own parents and children, while ignoring and neglecting those of others. This is all down to the mischief of personal affection. Romantic attachment between men and women, in particular, is a root of birth and death.

Why do we have this body? Because of craving and desire: intense sexual desire gives rise to this mortal flesh. As long as such craving continues, birth and death continue. To "awaken sentient beings" is to awaken and liberate both oneself and others; this is the Bodhisattva path.

Merely entering the Bodhisattva path is not enough. One must practice over many aeons, advance to ever higher levels, and vow that all sentient beings will attain Buddhahood; only then can the fruition of Buddhahood be perfectly realized. Bodhisattvas pass through many levels: the Ten Faiths, Ten Abodes, Ten Practices, Ten Dedications, Ten Grounds, and so forth. Even a great Bodhisattva of the Tenth Ground remains one level below a Buddha.

To use an analogy, when liberating sentient beings, a Bodhisattva still entertains the perception of appearing in and withdrawing from the six realms, of entering one realm and leaving another. A Buddha, however, enters and leaves while never entering or leaving, and liberates sentient beings while liberating no sentient being. This slight distinction separates a Buddha from a great Bodhisattva. A Buddha is one whose awakening and conduct are perfect—that is, whose merit and wisdom are both complete. The Buddha is therefore also called the "Honored One Complete in Both": the two completions are merit and wisdom. Awakening is great wisdom; conduct is the merit gained through liberating sentient beings. Only when awakening and conduct are both perfected can Buddhahood be attained.

A Buddha fully possesses the Three Bodies and Four Wisdoms. The Three Bodies are the Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya, and Nirmāṇakāya. Our present practice is directed toward realizing the Dharmakāya: revealing our Original Face and seeing the Dharmakāya. Whether we practice in the Pure Land, Chan, or esoteric school, the aim is to realize and see the Dharmakāya.

How is the Sambhogakāya realized? Its realization is associated with differentiated wisdom, which is cultivated by liberating sentient beings and accumulating merit. Revealing our Original Face and seeing the Dharmakāya is fundamental wisdom, which recognizes reality at its root. Differentiated wisdom is gained through liberating sentient beings.

Sentient beings have different habits, just as some people prefer spicy food, some sweet, and some sour. Their capacities and aspirations differ, and so do the teachings they study: there are forms of meditation suited to ordinary beings, to the Lesser Vehicle, to Bodhisattvas, and to the Mahāyāna.

When liberating sentient beings, if we have mastered all these Dharma gates, we can respond to each person's capacity and circumstances with ease rather than being at odds with them. By forming wholesome affinities widely and doing every kind of good, we perfect our merit and thereby obtain the Sambhogakāya.

If we do nothing for sentient beings, where could our merit come from? To not benefit humanity, but only oneself, makes one a self-centered person who lacks merit. As the saying goes, "Offerings to Arhats are meagre." One who seeks only personal liberation cannot attain Buddhahood. The Sambhogakāya is the fruition obtained after one has aroused the aspiration at the causal stage and perfected merit.

The Avataṃsaka Sūtra explains this clearly. When Sudhana saw the splendid and beautiful Sambhogakāya of Maitreya Bodhisattva—the Maitreya of Tuṣita Heaven—he marvelled at its majesty. Maitreya told him, "You have attained fundamental wisdom, but not differentiated wisdom; you do not yet possess the Sambhogakāya.

By liberating sentient beings, I perfected merit and thereby brought forth Maitreya's Tower and this luminous Sambhogakāya." There are two kinds of Sambhogakāya: the body of self-enjoyment and the body of enjoyment for others.

The former is the vast body brought forth by majestic merit and virtue. The latter appears in order to inspire Bodhisattvas to practice at higher levels, and its size varies: a smaller Sambhogakāya appears to junior Bodhisattvas and a greater one to advanced Bodhisattvas. Seeing this luminous and magnificent Sambhogakāya arouses courage and diligence in them, inspiring them to practice still harder so that they too may realize it soon.

In a former life, Śākyamuni Buddha saw another Buddha whose magnificent form appeared while abiding in the Samādhi of Light, also called the Samādhi of Fire-Light. He greatly admired that Buddha and thought, "I too wish to possess such a Sambhogakāya." Through vigorous, unremitting practice, he attained Buddhahood seven aeons earlier than he otherwise would have. The time required to attain Buddhahood is therefore not fixed.

We speak of attaining Buddhahood over three great incalculable aeons, but "incalculable" denotes a period whose measure cannot be known; its duration is not fixed and depends on how we practice. Vigorous diligence shortens the time, while indolence and procrastination lengthen it.

Venerable Ānanda is the clearest example. He and Śākyamuni Buddha first aroused the aspiration at the same time, yet by the time Śākyamuni had attained Buddhahood, Ānanda had still not awakened. The Śūraṅgama Sūtra was taught for Ānanda's sake.

Early or late attainment thus depends upon our diligence. Ānanda was foremost in learning. He delighted in hearing what one Buddha taught and what another taught; his knowledge was vast, but he did not apply himself to practice, and so it was insufficient. If we practice vigorously and diligently, the time becomes shorter.

To realize the Sambhogakāya and gain subsequently attained wisdom, we must liberate sentient beings. Otherwise, we attain only the fruition of Arhatship and not the Sambhogakāya.

The Nirmāṇakāya manifests freely and without obstruction in response to the capacities and conditions of sentient beings. As the Universal Gate Chapter of the Lotus Sūtra says: “For those who can be liberated by the body of a householder, such a body is manifested and the Dharma taught; for those who can be liberated by the body of an official, such a body is manifested and the Dharma taught.”

How is the Nirmāṇakāya realized? Practice must reach the point at which the subtle continuous stream is cut off. What is this subtle continuous stream? It is attention—manaskāra—one of the five universal mental factors taught by the Consciousness-Only school: attention, contact, feeling, perception, and volition.

This attention is the worst of all: it discriminates at every moment, discriminating about everything. And like a diver, it moves down in deep water, not on the surface, so it cannot be seen, and it moves extremely fast. Only when we finally reach Vajrasattva samādhi—the great samādhi—can this subtle continuous stream be severed.

We can then manifest hundreds of thousands of millions of transformation bodies to liberate hundreds of thousands of millions of sentient beings. Perfect Buddhahood requires the full realization of all Three Bodies. The Four Wisdoms arise through transforming the eight consciousnesses into wisdom. The ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) becomes the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom; the seventh, the Wisdom of Equality; the sixth, the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation; and the first five, the Wisdom of Accomplishing Activities.

This transformation proceeds in stages: “The sixth and seventh are transformed at the causal stage; the eighth and first five are perfected at fruition.” Our present work of eliminating habitual tendencies amid circumstances transforms the sixth and seventh consciousnesses. To transform the sixth is to change the discriminating mind into a mind that observes without discrimination.

From birth we habitually distinguish: this is good, that is bad; we want one and reject the other. Living all day amid judgements of self and other and right and wrong, deluded thoughts fly about and birth and death cannot end. The seventh is the transmitting consciousness. It resembles the porter at an institution, forwarding information from the first six consciousnesses to the eighth.

The eighth is the storehouse consciousness, like a warehouse that receives information from manas consciousness and stores it. It contains innumerable seeds accumulated over countless lives and aeons. Eliminating them all is extremely difficult; only a Bodhisattva of the Tenth Ground can exhaust them. We must therefore intensify our practice.

“Transforming the sixth and seventh at the causal stage” means that we must work upon them now, during practice, before the eighth and first five consciousnesses can be transformed and Buddhahood perfected. The eighth and the first five are transformed only later, at fruition, into the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom and the Wisdom of Accomplishing Activities.

The ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) of sentient beings is presently ignorant: it seizes and retains everything, good or bad. As the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom, it simply reflects without moving or grasping. The first five consciousnesses—eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body—face outwards.

We often say, “Of eight brothers, one is foolish.” The foolish one is ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna), which accepts both good and bad without discrimination. “Five conduct business at the gate”—eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body engage external objects: the eye craves forms, the ear hears sounds, the nose smells odours, the tongue tastes flavours, and the body contacts objects.

“One comes and goes conveying messages”—the seventh receives information from the first six and conveys it to the eighth for storage. “One among them is the most astute”—the sixth consciousness has the greatest power. To attain Buddhahood, we must perfect the Three Bodies and Four Wisdoms. A single awakening is still far from Buddhahood; sustained, earnest practice remains essential.

The foundation of Buddhism is the Mahāyāna teaching, not the Hīnayāna. The Hīnayāna is directed toward one's own liberation, whereas the Mahāyāna is for everyone. “May sentient beings attain Buddhahood before I do” is the aspiration of a great-hearted Bodhisattva: may all of you attain Buddhahood first, and may I be the last. This is how we should arouse the aspiration.

People today do not think this way. Quite apart from Buddhahood, even when a small benefit is at stake they rush forward, crying, “Me first! Me first! I must be at the front of the queue.” This is the mind of an ordinary being. Those who study Buddhism must possess a vast capacity of mind; the greater it is, the sooner Buddhahood is attained. Only by arousing the great aspiration do we accord with the Buddhist spirit of serving the Dharma and humanity.

The principles discussed above are readily understood by Buddhists, but how is the problem of birth and death to be resolved? Where should Buddhist practice begin? Many practitioners remain at a loss. Some elderly people know only to recite the Buddha's name and burn incense, without understanding this question.

Others obtain a few experiences or indications through seated meditation and consult certain teachers, only to be told, “I'm sorry; I do not know and dare not speak irresponsibly.” Such a teacher has not practiced or developed any real attainment, so how could he know how birth and death are resolved? Buddhism in fact explains the matter clearly.

One approach is to transcend the Three Realms vertically—the Desire, Form, and Formless Realms—by practicing Chan or the esoteric teachings until habits of attachment and greed, anger, and ignorance are eliminated. The other is to transcend the Three Realms horizontally through the Pure Land teaching: reciting the Buddha's name and praying for the Buddha's compassionate reception and rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Practitioners of Chan, Pure Land, and the esoteric teachings thus know where to begin. But what assurance do they have of attaining Buddhahood? Without deeply understanding the more profound Buddhist principles, they naturally do not know.

There is, however, a way to test one's assurance: verify the mind at two extremes. The first is the favorable extreme, when everything proceeds smoothly and accords with one's wishes. The second is the adverse extreme, when nothing goes as desired and one meets misfortune and failure everywhere.

In favorable circumstances, can the mind remain unmoved, neither becoming elated nor losing self-possession, with mindfulness of the Buddha still present? In adverse circumstances, can one remain free of unbearable grief and anger, with mindfulness of the Buddha still present? If both can be maintained, a practitioner of Buddha-recitation can be fully confident of rebirth in the Western Pure Land at death.

If favorable conditions make us so elated that we forget ourselves and cannot bring the Buddha's name to mind, or adverse conditions plunge us into such distress that we likewise cannot raise it, we have no assurance of rebirth there.

Someone may ask, “Surely that cannot be right. When the intermediate-state body emerges after death, will the Buddha not come to receive us? Does that not guarantee rebirth?” The Buddha does not lie or speak falsely and will certainly come to receive us.

But because we are confused by afflictions and attachments, like someone stupefied by strong wine, we may not see the Buddha when he comes. How, then, can we go with him? Master Lianchi therefore said, “Many recite the Buddha's name, but few are reborn in the West.” As an eminent Pure Land master, he would not lie to frighten people.

Why are many reciters but few who attain rebirth? Because their recitation lacks urgency and sincerity.

Their mouths recite the Buddha's name while their thoughts continue to race in every direction. We often see elderly people reciting while gossiping about one family and another. What effect can such recitation have? They are not single-mindedly mindful of the Buddha; their minds remain confused.

Śākyamuni Buddha therefore taught us to hold firmly to the Name for one day, two days, or as many as seven days, with one-pointed, undisturbed mind; then Amitābha Buddha appears before us.

If the mind is undisturbed, we see the Buddha before us. If it is in turmoil, we cannot see him even when he comes. Chan Master Yongming Yanshou explained: “The mind of one who recites the Buddha's name is like a basin of water, and the Buddha is like the moon in the sky.” When the water is clear, the moon appears within it.

When our mind is turbid like muddied water, the moon cannot appear and we cannot see the Buddha. The Buddha comes from nowhere and goes nowhere. The image that manifests in our mind is therefore called the Tathāgata, “Thus Come”.

When the pure karma of a Pure Land practitioner matures and rebirth approaches, an image of the Buddha manifests within the mind. We recite Amitābha Buddha, and the Buddha appears in the West in response; this is called the communion of stimulus and response. There are levels to the Buddha's manifestation in receiving sentient beings, because practitioners' attainment differs and so do the forms they see. Rebirth in the Western Pure Land is accordingly divided into nine grades. Those of the lower grades see only a Nirmāṇakāya Buddha; those of the middle grades see a Sambhogakāya Buddha; and only those of the highest grades see the Dharmakāya Buddha, the Buddha of the Land of Eternally Quiescent Light.

There are three kinds of actual realization in practicing the Dharma and transcending birth and death. The first is genuinely to refrain from following a thought when it arises. The thought dissolves immediately without the slightest delay, like drawing on water: as soon as a line is traced, the water closes and leaves neither shadow nor mark.

Like a bird crossing the open sky without leaving a track, we become free at the boundary of birth and death. We can go wherever we wish, no longer governed by karmic force; this is freedom in taking rebirth. The second is to remain entirely even-minded in the two kinds of circumstances described earlier, favorable and adverse, without the slightest movement of mind.

When the mind neither delights in what is pleasant nor becomes afflicted by what is unpleasant, segmented birth and death comes to an end. A Chan practitioner who has only just awakened has not yet ended segmented birth and death. Why not?

Because deeply rooted habits remain. The mind still follows circumstances and gives rise to emotion. In the doctrinal teachings, this is described as the persistence of the afflictions of thought; because they have not been eliminated, segmented birth and death has not ended. Pure Land practitioners therefore criticize Chan practitioners, saying that although they may have awakened, they have not ended segmented birth and death and are less secure than those following the Pure Land path. The reason is precisely that the afflictions of thought remain.

The doctrinal teachings divide coarse ignorance into afflictions of view and afflictions of thought. Afflictions of thought arise when the mind responds emotionally to objects. Afflictions of view concern understanding: once we recognize the right and wrong paths, truth and delusion, no longer go astray, and cease inverted attachment, the afflictions of view are cut off.

They are comparatively easy to eliminate; afflictions of thought are difficult. Habitually, people love what appears good and dislike or become afflicted by what appears bad. The mind remains unbalanced, moves delusively, and cannot relinquish its abiding attachments. Birth and death therefore cannot end, and one continues to cycle through the six realms. Accomplishing the first realization—not following thoughts as they arise—brings freedom in taking rebirth.

“Taking rebirth” means being master of one's own rebirth: one can go wherever one wishes, to the West or the East, without being entangled by karmic force. Accomplishing the second—not allowing the mind to be led by circumstances—brings freedom of transformation and liberation from birth and death.

The third realization is the cessation of the subtle continuous stream. Everything dissolves into emptiness and only the great wisdom of perfect enlightenment remains present. One can then manifest hundreds of thousands of millions of transformation bodies and liberate hundreds of thousands of millions of sentient beings. These are the genuine criteria by which practitioners verify realization of the Way. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma, like Chan, begins with the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) and applies practice directly to the mind-ground.

It differs in this respect from other esoteric teachings and is therefore called “Chan-Esoteric”: it breathes through the same nostril as Chan, although its initial method differs slightly. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma uses six mudrās and a mantra to reveal the original nature, after which the Chan method of sustaining the realization is used. Habitual tendencies are diligently eliminated; the mind is observed at every moment and awareness maintained everywhere, bringing the practice into accord with Chan.

Once observation has fully matured, one realizes stillness that is constantly aware and awareness that is constantly still. Having returned home and taken one's seat securely, there is no longer any need to maintain awareness or observation. This is the final assurance toward which all practice leads. Such practice is easy to describe, but actually accomplishing it still requires effort. Understanding the principle without realizing it in conduct is useless.

The path of practice therefore passes through four stages: the Dharma Realm of Phenomena, the Dharma Realm of Principle, the Dharma Realm of the Non-Obstruction of Principle and Phenomena, and the Dharma Realm of the Non-Obstruction of Phenomena and Phenomena. In the last of these, no phenomenon presents an obstruction and one can go anywhere without hindrance. One must then go a step further and not establish even the state of non-obstruction among phenomena. Only this is a true practitioner of Chan and one who has truly seen the mind and recognized one's true nature. This is the fundamental resolution of birth and death and the key to Buddhahood.

(II) The Three Realms Are Mind-Only; All Phenomena Are Consciousness-Only

As discussed earlier, there are two ways to attain Buddhahood and transcend birth and death: transcending the Three Realms vertically and transcending them horizontally. The Three Realms are the Desire Realm, the Form Realm, and the Formless Realm.

The Desire Realm refers to the world where lustful desires exist. It encompasses the six realms: gods, asuras, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings. Beings in the Desire Realm possess life and physical bodies driven by lustful desires.

The intermediate-state being—what we commonly call a “soul”—sees a man and woman having intercourse, becomes aroused by desire, and joins them as a third participant. There is also a “third party” in romantic relationships, but here the term refers to the intermediate-state being.

The wind element influences the intermediate state, making it invisible to both men and women during intercourse. When a man ejaculates, the intermediate state body is drawn into the woman's uterus, resulting in rebirth. To transcend the cycle of birth and death, it is essential to sever lustful desires. Currently, there is extensive discussion about openness and "sexual openness," which frequently leads to chaos.

I believe that lustful desires should not be openly expressed; we should not emulate Western countries known for their sexual openness, as such actions will only lead to disorder. China's sexual conservatism is preferable. The higher the realm of desire, the weaker lustful desires become. The Desire Realm alone comprises six heavens, commonly referred to as the Six Desire Heavens. The text outlines six kinds of lustful desire: receiving desire, intercourse, embracing, holding, laughing, and gazing.

The first heaven mentioned is the Heaven of the Four Heavenly Kings, which, according to Buddhist scriptures, is situated on the waist of Mount Sumeru. Mount Sumeru is a figurative term for a large mountain. The sun and moon revolve around this waist. The Heaven of the Four Heavenly Kings is divided among the four heavenly kings of the east, west, south, and north. Celestial beings in this heaven possess lustful desires, specifically "receiving desire," which refers to the acceptance of lustful feelings.

These desires are similar to those of humans but are less intense. The second heaven is the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven, the residence of the Jade Emperor. The term "Trāyastriṃśa" translates to "thirty-three" in Chinese, leading to its alternate name, the Thirty-Three Heavens.

This heaven does not consist of thirty-three layers; instead, it is divided into five directions: east, west, south, north, and center. Each of the four cardinal directions has eight heavens, totaling thirty-two, plus the central heaven, making thirty-three. The Jade Emperor resides in the central heaven, ruling over the four directions and governing the human realm.

Lust in this heaven is less than in the Heaven of the Four Heavenly Kings, but men and women still have intercourse—this is "intercourse" ( ). Below the Heaven of the Four Heavenly Kings (the mid-slope of Mount Sumeru) the sun shines on the human world, and above it on Trāyastriṃśa Heaven. In these places sunrise is day and sunset is night; one rising and setting is one day, which is a relatively short time.

The third heaven is Yama Heaven. In Yama Heaven it is bright day and night: the opening of the lotuses is day and their closing is night, so a day here is very long. Lust in Yama Heaven is less than in the first two heavens. To what degree? An embrace is enough—this is "embracing" ( ),

just as Westerners, when on good terms, embrace when they meet. The fourth heaven is Tuṣita Heaven, where lust is fainter still. A man and a woman need only hold hands—this is "holding" ( )—just as we shake hands when we meet; there is not even any need to embrace. The fifth heaven is the Heaven of Enjoying Emanations, where lust is fainter still; they need only smile at each other—this is "smiling" ( ).

The sixth is the Heaven of Mastery over Others' Emanations (Paranirmitavaśavartin), the highest heaven, where no smile is needed; a simple glance suffices. Thus, receiving desire, intercourse, embracing, holding, laughing, and gazing all represent various forms of lust. Once these desires are transcended, one is reborn in the Form Realm.

The Form Realm is more refined than the Desire Realm. It has wondrous forms, but they are so subtle that our physical eyes cannot see them. The Form Realm includes the heavens of the Four Dhyānas: the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Dhyānas. Before Bodhidharma came to China, Chinese Chan teachings spoke of the "Four Dhyānas and Eight Samādhis".

In the First Dhyāna heaven, one can rise into the air and radiate light. In the Second Dhyāna heaven, there is boundless joy—what people call being filled with Dharma joy. In the Third Dhyāna heaven, there is incomparable bliss, beyond anything in the world.

If your practice is good, you can taste this state; it is intensely blissful. The Fourth Dhyāna heaven is called the Ground of Purity through Equanimity and Mindfulness. When meditative concentration becomes profound, even bliss is no longer present. The "Ultimate Bliss" of the Western Pure Land means that everything has dissolved into emptiness and even bliss cannot be obtained. If bliss remains, the mind is still active, deluded thinking and deluded thoughts remain, and the Way has not yet been attained.

In the Fourth Dhyāna heaven, one no longer abides even in form. Some people say, "I no longer have sexual desire, but when I meet an attractive person I still want to look." This means that attachment to form remains. Sexual desire is a coarse delusion, whereas attachment to form is subtler. In eliminating habitual tendencies, we must first cut off sexual desire and then attachment to form. When beauty and ugliness are no longer distinguished and all are regarded equally, we leave the Form Realm and enter the Formless Realm.

The Formless Realm does not mean that there are no appearances at all; the higher one goes, the subtler and more attenuated they become. It comprises the Four Formless Heavens: Infinite Space, Infinite Consciousness, Nothingness, and Neither Perception nor Non-Perception. If we believe that emptiness can be attained and abide in emptiness, we still cannot leave the realm of emptiness. We must therefore abide nowhere and recognize that emptiness itself cannot be obtained. Only then do we leave the realm of emptiness and transcend the Formless Realm.

If desire has been cut off, form has been relinquished, and one no longer abides in emptiness, one has transcended the Three Realms vertically. Because vertical transcendence is difficult, the Pure Land school provides an expedient means of transcending the Three Realms horizontally, without passing through them one layer at a time. It is like splitting bamboo. Because bamboo has many joints, splitting it vertically, joint by joint, is difficult; crosswise, only one layer need be broken.

Pure Land practice breaks through this one layer and carries us horizontally to the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Whether we transcend the Three Realms vertically or horizontally, however, we must practice. Even this single layer must be broken; otherwise, we cannot escape the prison of the Three Realms. Many Pure Land practitioners today do not practice diligently, imagining that striking instruments and chanting will suffice.

If they cannot break through even this one layer, how can they be reborn in the West and leave the Three Realms? Pure Land practitioners must therefore attain "one-pointed, undisturbed mind" and the "Buddha-recitation samādhi".

The Buddha states clearly in the Amitābha Sūtra: "Holding fast to the Name for one day, two days, three days, four days, five days, six days, or seven days, with one-pointed, undisturbed mind, when that person approaches the end of life, Amitābha

Buddha and the assembly of noble beings will appear before them."

Only then can one attain rebirth. The Vajrayāna practice of phowa likewise teaches horizontal transcendence. It is a comparatively simple expedient method relying upon the Buddha's empowering support: one need only succeed in visualizing the channels and bindus (phowa is discussed in detail on page 322 of this book). Those who practice phowa with heartfelt urgency can accomplish it in seven days. Without diligent effort, even seventy days will not be enough. We must therefore practice earnestly.

When practice is good, the three wondrous and luminous experiences of emptiness, bliss, and clarity should arise. We must not, however, become attached to these appearances. Attachment to emptiness prevents us from leaving the Formless Realm; attachment to bliss prevents us from leaving the Desire Realm (here, bliss means the bliss of sexual desire); and attachment to luminosity prevents us from leaving the Form Realm.

A Chan kōan tells of a monk whose practice was very good. At every moment it was as though a bright moon shone directly above him, radiating brilliant light. He asked Patriarch Caoshan, a disciple of Dongshan and thus a master of the Caodong school, "What about the bright moon overhead?" Caoshan replied, "You are still a fellow below the steps."

In other words, he had not yet risen beyond the Form Realm. The monk pleaded, "Master, please compassionately guide me up the steps." Caoshan answered, "We shall meet when the moon sets." Does "when the moon sets" mean that the moon disappears and darkness remains? No. It means that, even amid light, we do not register light as something to grasp.

Just as fish in water do not notice the water, and human beings in the air do not notice the air, we should abide neither in the body's dissolution into emptiness, nor in incomparable bliss, nor in radiant luminosity. If we abide nowhere in anything, attainment follows. The moment we abide in something, we fall into a fixed pattern and cannot realize Buddhahood completely.

In the Diamond Sūtra, the Buddha says, "Whatever has marks is illusory." Some people understand this to mean that all marks are simply empty. In fact, emptiness does not mean the absence of marks; this point requires careful attention. Emptiness is understood in several ways: ordinary beings understand relative emptiness, also called inert emptiness; non-Buddhists understand annihilationist emptiness; practitioners of the Two Vehicles understand analytical true emptiness, also called partial emptiness; beginning Bodhisattvas understand the true emptiness of dharmas as they are; and a Buddha realizes the true emptiness of wondrous presence. These will now be explained in turn:

Ordinary people perceive emptiness in relation to existence. For instance, a cup here represents existence, but removing it renders it empty; a cup filled with water signifies existence, but pouring out the water leaves it empty; a living person embodies existence, while death signifies emptiness. This mechanical opposition of emptiness and existence reflects the ordinary person's understanding of emptiness—what can be termed relative emptiness.

Non-Buddhists often hold the belief that all phenomena are illusory and should be rejected, interpreting this emptiness as akin to a state of death. If it is like this again, then let's just burn down the house, take off our clothes, and forget about food. Let's just leave everything empty. Thus, this perspective is flawed; it represents annihilationist emptiness.

The emptiness recognized by the Two Vehicles (Sravaka and Pratyekabuddha) is known as analytical true emptiness. Through careful analysis, they conclude that all phenomena are illusory and only our Dharmakāya is real. They maintain that, apart from phenomena, a separate self exists, leading to a division between form and mind.

They assert that form is distinct from mind, and to realize the wondrous body, one must detach from form. This situation resembles a mirror and its reflection; they attempt to avoid the reflection while clinging to the mirror itself, which indicates a bias toward emptiness. It is understood that form possesses shape, color, and visibility, whereas mind lacks shape and is invisible (similar to our thoughts).

While the two can be distinguished, they cannot be separated. They fail to recognize that form is a manifestation of mind; instead, they cling to the mind and grasp at the self, resulting in a bias toward emptiness. Consequently, the two vehicles withdraw from worldly affairs and retreat to deep mountains to practice, ultimately failing to attain perfection. The Bodhisattva of the First Ground (also called the Bodhisattva of Initial Entry) is noted in both the Tiantai and Huayan schools, which categorize teachings into five groups.

The Tiantai school is divided into Tripitaka, Common, Separate, Perfect, and Lesser Vehicle teachings, while the Huayan school is divided into Beginning, End, Sudden, Perfect, and Lesser Vehicle teachings. The Common Teaching of the Tiantai school and the Beginning Teaching of the Huayan school both refer to the Bodhisattva of the First Ground, who realizes that all phenomena inherently lack self-nature and are empty in the present moment.

Emptiness does not require separation from phenomena. A cup placed here can be considered empty without needing to be removed. This is because the cup itself does not exist independently; it is formed by the combination of causes and conditions. For instance, this thermos consists of a plastic shell and a glass liner.

The cup does not exist independently, the house does not exist independently, and even our bodies do not exist independently; they are merely temporary combinations of the four elements: earth, water, fire, and wind. All phenomena arise from causes

and conditions. Therefore, one can cultivate without separating from phenomena, as phenomena themselves are empty.

While understanding these concepts enables one to achieve perfect cultivation without leaving the world, many still fail to recognize the boundless and wondrous function of form; this aspect is referred to as the emptiness of the Dharma body. What the Buddha realized was the extraordinary existence of emptiness. Although a beginner bodhisattva understands that form and mind are interconnected, they have not yet grasped its wondrous function.

If one could comprehend the boundless and wondrous function of form, then engaging with form would reveal the wondrous presence within emptiness. For example, the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—can obscure the light of our true nature, which is why one must "see that the five aggregates are all empty." Conversely, the five aggregates also possess remarkable functions. The Wisdom of Accomplishing Activities involves utilizing the five aggregates to achieve all undertakings.

For instance, when Śākyamuni Buddha was born, he took rebirth as a prince, manifesting a wondrous form—a body with thirty-two major marks and eighty minor marks (this is form). To save sentient beings, he would neither abandon them nor leave them behind, thus embracing a vast number of sentient beings (this is feeling).

Since sentient beings have varying capacities, different teachings must be offered; he must consider how to teach in a manner appropriate to their needs (this is perception). The question of when, where, and how to liberate sentient beings requires concrete action. Some sentient beings may have no affinity with the Buddha, so he allows others with affinity to teach them.

There was an old woman in the east of the city to whom the Buddha preached (his teachings were the best), but she did not listen. She covered her ears and said, "I won't listen." In response, the Buddha said, "Then I will show you my spiritual powers." She closed her eyes and declared, "I won't look."

Recognizing he had no affinity with her, the Buddha sent a boy with whom she had a karmic connection to preach the Dharma, which she ultimately accepted. The Buddha's methods for saving sentient beings are diverse (this pertains to practice).

Consciousness represents knowledge and accumulated experience. For us, this process involves the transformation of consciousness into wisdom. Consciousness and wisdom are essentially the same, akin to waves on water; water consists of waves, and waves are manifestations of water. Waves represent consciousness, while water symbolizes wisdom. The Buddha's wisdom is unparalleled, and his knowledge is profoundly deep. He recognizes the capacities of different sentient beings, which is consciousness.

To liberate sentient beings, the Buddha employs form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness; thus, when viewed in reverse, the five aggregates are utilized in a remarkable way. Beginner bodhisattvas do not yet possess this level of understanding regarding emptiness, so they have not reached the ultimate state. Only when one attains the wondrous presence and emptiness realized by the Buddha—where both emptiness and existence are recognized as true—is it considered truly ultimate.

The concept of "emptiness and wondrous presence" suggests that since Buddha-nature exists, it should manifest wondrous functions, which refer to various differentiated appearances. "Wondrous presence and emptiness" indicates that these appearances are all manifestations of the Dharmakāya and do not exist independently; they are inherently empty.

Therefore, essence (Buddha-nature), appearance (form), and function (wonderful function) are inseparable. Where there is essence, appearance will inevitably occur; where there is appearance, function will inevitably arise. For instance, without a house, how can we shelter from the wind and rain? Without appearance, where will Dharma-nature be manifested? Thus, the principle (Dharmakāya) serves as the root of all things and of Buddhahood.

This concept is often described as "things are accomplished through principle (the principle accomplishes its appearances), and principle is revealed through things (the principle is revealed through appearances). " Consequently, the Diamond Sūtra states, "All appearances are illusory," referring to emptiness, while the Amitābha Sūtra depicts the magnificent and wondrous appearance of the Western Pure Land, which symbolizes wondrous presence.

Some may misinterpret this verse as a contradiction. However, it is not contradictory; emptiness is wondrous presence, and wondrous presence is, in turn, emptiness. A mirror always has a reflection; without one, it ceases to be a mirror. If it cannot manifest and function, it lacks Buddha-nature. Therefore, Buddha-nature encompasses various wondrous functions.

Images such as union, blood-drinking, nakedness, and wrath are all manifestations of our own mind, not something that exists apart from the mind. Outside the mind there is no dharma, and outside dharma there is no mind. Our Buddha-nature is originally complete with every wondrous function; it was not produced from anywhere and will not perish anywhere. It is without beginning or end, and has always been so.

It is only because we do not know this that we are deluded by forms, seek outward, create karma, and receive retribution, vainly suffering the cycle of the six realms without end. We should awaken at once now and no longer be deluded.

Since our nature has such vast wondrous functioning, why do we pick up only a bit of false appearance from outside and forget our vast Buddha-nature? Having understood this principle, you should stop pursuing external realms and simply go along with conditions and let things take their course. Because the causes created in past lives differ, the results received in this life differ.

This aligns with the saying, "To know the causes of the past life, look at what one experiences in this life. To know the results of the next life, look at what one does in this life." Nothing escapes the law of cause and effect. Consequently, each of us has different karmic connections, karma, physical conditions, and so forth. We should simply live each day as it comes. If today's circumstances are as they are, then let today pass.

If tomorrow brings different circumstances, then let tomorrow unfold as it will. We should refrain from harboring resentment, pursuing desires, or becoming attached to material things; instead, we should embody the spirit of a "recluse of non-action," a person of profound learning.

By letting go of everything, we achieve unobstructed existence—that is Buddhahood! The Sixth Patriarch Huineng articulated these principles clearly: If we cling to the deluded thoughts, we are ordinary; if we let go, we are Buddhas. It's that simple. There is no need for extensive cultivation; just become enlightened, let go of everything, and avoid attachment to appearances.

The four-line verse by Master Shaoguo is particularly insightful. He stated, "At the summit of Tongxuan Peak, one does not know the human world; outside the mind, there is no Dharma, only green mountains." The summit of Tongxuan Peak symbolizes a wondrous and elevated state, representing our Buddha-nature. "One does not know the human world" implies that all things within it are illusions, unattainable; thus, we should avoid attachment to appearances.

Our fault lies in this attachment; our desires are lofty and never satisfied. There is no Dharma outside the mind (the term "Dharma" in Buddhism is used broadly, encompassing all things and even abstract thoughts). This conclusion indicates that the Dharma is the mind, and the mind is the Dharma. All things manifest from my mind; they are all aspects of myself.

Therefore, "He who understands everything is a manifestation of one's own nature, is he not a sage?" Everything is interconnected; everything is Buddha. The table is Buddha, the chair is Buddha, the house is Buddha... Everything is Buddha. This is because everything represents a manifestation of our inherent nature. Grasping this principle means we no longer chase after appearances.

Let go and live each day as it comes; the outcome is easy, joyful, and free. How wonderful! The passage states, "The superior man is magnanimous, while the inferior man is always anxious." The inferior man frequently worries about gain and loss, often thinking, "Oh dear, what if I fail?" This constant worry leads to a troubled state of mind. Studying Buddhism offers a remedy for this anxiety; it can bring us joy, peace, and immense freedom. It is evident that Buddhism holds immense value for humanity!

The Buddhist scriptures say: "The three realms are mind-only; all phenomena are consciousness-only." We explained the three realms earlier: the desire realm, the form realm, and the formless realm. Because we have sexual desire there is the desire realm; in it are the six heavens of desire, and sexual desire takes six forms: indulging desire ( ), intercourse ( ), embracing ( ), holding hands ( ), smiling ( ), and gazing ( ). The higher the heaven, the fainter the sexual desire.

When one reaches the point where there is no need even to smile or gaze, sexual desire is entirely gone. This takes one to the form realm, where form is subtler than desire. Although there is no sexual desire there, one still clings to forms: liking what is beautiful and disliking what is not. This means one has not yet left the form realm.

If there is no beauty and no ugliness, everything being equal, one leaves the form realm and reaches the realm of emptiness. If one dwells in the realm of emptiness and thinks there is emptiness to be attained, one cannot leave it. So "the three realms are mind-only" means that all three realms are created by our own mind.

"All phenomena are consciousness-only" means that all things and thoughts are manifestations transformed by our consciousness. All things and thoughts are dharmas, and our discriminating mind is consciousness. Long ago, Master Hanshan entered samādhi, went to the Inner Court of Tuṣita, and asked Maitreya Bodhisattva, "What is consciousness? What is wisdom?" (Wisdom means prajñā; consciousness means knowledge.

) Maitreya Bodhisattva said, "Discrimination is consciousness; non-discrimination is wisdom." This is both simple and clear. We humans are always discriminating—this is good, that is bad, this is big, that is small—and that is consciousness. So all things and thoughts are "manifested by mind alone, transformed by consciousness alone."

"If we can 'abandon defilement and return to purity, transforming consciousness into wisdom' (this phrase is found in the Yogācāra school's Treatise on Consciousness-Only), we can become Buddhas." "Abandoning defilement and returning to purity" means discarding and letting go of all defiled things, such as attachments, and achieving a state of non-attainment. Purity refers to non-attainment, not to an absolute state of purity. Attaining purity still involves some form of achievement.

Therefore, the "purity" referenced here aligns with what Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva taught: "Gather in all six sense faculties and maintain uninterrupted pure mindfulness" (this phrase will be explained in detail later).

Transforming consciousness into wisdom involves changing our eight consciousnesses into four forms of wisdom: the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) into the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom, the manas consciousness into the Wisdom of Equality, the sixth consciousness into the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation, and the first five consciousnesses into the Wisdom of Accomplishing Activities. As long as we can transform our consciousness into wisdom, we can restore our Original Face and reveal our bright and wondrous true mind.

This bright and wondrous true mind is not the physical heart in our chest; it is the capacity for perception and consciousness. This is Buddha! Thus, it is said, "The mind becomes Buddha; the mind is Buddha." As long as we cultivate our mind, remaining unattached at all times and in all places, we will achieve enlightenment. In the Pure Land tradition, Buddha-recitation also refers to mindfulness of mind.

Pure Land practitioners should understand that the land is the mind and vice versa; there is no land outside the mind, and no mind outside the land. We should recite "Amitābha Buddha, Amitābha Buddha..." from our hearts. As Master Lianchi said, "Each recitation awakens the master within." This practice uses the Buddha's name to awaken our minds.

In the past, a great patriarch of the Pure Land school would first strike a wooden fish and recite, "Amitābha Buddha, Amitābha Buddha..." Later, when his mind was clear and he understood, he chanted, "My Amitābha Buddha, my Amitābha Buddha..." This illustrates the meaning of "The mind creates the Buddha; the mind is the Buddha."

The Buddha is our mind, and our mind is the Buddha. Do not seek a Buddha outside your mind. By doing so, you will be reborn in the Pure Land of the highest grade. However, if you cling to appearances, seeking the Buddha and the Pure Land outside your mind, you will at most attain rebirth in the lowest grade. Therefore, we should strive to reach a state where mind, Buddha, and sentient beings are indistinguishable, and where mind, Buddha, and the Way are unified.

In other words, our mind, the Buddha we have realized, and all sentient beings are one, equal, and without distinction. Śākyamuni Buddha embodies Amitābha Buddha, and Amitābha Buddha embodies Maitreya Buddha, who is also a sentient being. All Buddhas and sentient beings share the same consciousness. However, many people remain unaware of this truth and are thus deluded; they are sentient beings.

Once awakened and free from attachment to appearances, one becomes a Buddha. Therefore, the path to becoming a Buddha is accessible, as we are inherently Buddhas—not something we acquire later. As long as we are willing to let go, we can return to our original nature and attain enlightenment. This leads to the proverb, "Lay down the butcher's knife and become a Buddha on the spot."

We are inherently Buddhas, yet we seek externally and refuse to let go; as a result, we cannot attain enlightenment. It's like cooking rice: using rice grains is adequate, but if you use sand, it will never work. Therefore, it is said, "Those who practice non-Buddhist paths to cultivate the body will ultimately perish." Because the body is not Buddha, it will eventually decay.

Qigong practitioners today cling to the body and so take a wrong turn; they can never achieve accomplishment. Some say, “Don’t Buddhism and Daoism also teach qigong?!” That is correct. But that is only the preliminary stage, mainly using the breath to gather in the mind (the Pure Land school also teaches the method of gathering in the breath while reciting the Buddha’s name).

But that's only the initial stage, primarily using qi to control the mind (Pure Land Buddhism also teaches qi-based recitation of Buddha's name). It's about using qi to grasp your mind, but not dwelling on the qi. qigong's practice of the Small and Large Heavenly Circuits involves dwelling on the qi and dwelling on the body, which is entirely wrong. They don't know that the mind is Buddha, that our numinous, responsive mind are Buddha. The body is like a house, and the wondrous true mind is the master within.

Those who practice non-Buddhist paths only cultivate the body, unaware of the importance of cultivating the mind, and thus make a grave mistake that prevents them from achieving enlightenment. For example, Taoist Lü Dongbin's cultivation was excellent; he achieved the Great Elixir. He carried a precious sword and wandered the world. When he arrived at Huanglong Mountain, he saw purple clouds covering the summit, knowing that an enlightened being resided there.

This person was none other than Chan Master Huanglong Xuanji, a renowned Chan master who had attained enlightenment. Lü Dongbin decided to go up the mountain to see for himself. Just then, Chan Master Huanglong's disciples invited him to deliver a sermon. Chan Master Huanglong sat down on his Dharma seat, slammed his hand on the table, and said, "I will not present a sermon today; someone is stealing the Dharma!" Lü Dongbin thought, "That must be referring to me."

Because you are all monks, and I am a Taoist. I have already attained enlightenment; why should I be afraid of you?! Being skilled and bold, he immediately stood up and said, "Monk, I have a question for you: 'How can one contain the world in a single grain of millet and cook mountains and rivers in half a sheng of grain?' " A single grain of millet is a grain of rice.

How can you possibly contain the entire world in such a small grain of rice?" "A half-sheng pot" refers to a tiny pot, only able to cook half a sheng of grain. How can you possibly cook mountains and rivers in it? He thought, "I have attained enlightenment and can manifest spiritual powers. Let's see if you, Chan Master Huanglong, can do the same!" Chan Master Huanglong pointed

at him and said, "You corpse-guarding ghost!" Because non-Buddhist practitioners cultivate the body for immortality, he was called a corpse-guarding ghost.

Lü Dongbin laughed and retorted, "However, I have the elixir of immortality in my bag." " In this context, "Bag" refers to the body, which is described as a stinking skin bag. He meant that he had refined the elixir within his body, achieving a Yang spirit, and thus possessed the elixir of immortality, making it unnecessary for him to have this body. Chan Master Huanglong replied, "Even after a million eons, it will all come to nothing."

This statement means he could only live a million more kalpas than others (a kalpa refers to time). A great kalpa consists of four medium kalpas, and a medium kalpa consists of twenty small kalpas.

During a decreasing kalpa, the human lifespan falls from 84,000 years to ten years, decreasing by one year every hundred years. The process then reverses: during an increasing kalpa, the human lifespan rises by one year every hundred years until it reaches 84,000 years again. One decreasing kalpa and one increasing kalpa together constitute a small kalpa.

Some have calculated that a small kalpa lasts 133,443,000 years, but eventually, the Yang spirit still dies. At this point, Lü Dongbin became impatient and frustrated and sent his flying sword against Huanglong.

Chan Master Huanglong flicked his whisk, knocking the sword to the ground. Why was this? It wasn't that Chan Master Huanglong used spiritual powers to fight him and knocked the sword away. It was still used as a symbolic gesture, meaning that Lü Dongbin's views and understanding were shattered. Therefore, Lü Dongbin bowed to Chan Master Huanglong and asked him to enlighten him.

Chan Master Huanglong told him, "The Yang spirit you cultivate is merely a body transformed from the manas consciousness. It is still false. All things with form will eventually decay. Only recognizing the Buddha-nature, which is both empty and wondrous, is real." Later, Lü Dongbin took refuge in Buddhism. Therefore, only Buddhism is the most thorough and ultimate.

We must understand the principles explained above and know that all appearances are transformations of our own nature. As the Heart Sūtra says, “Form is emptiness; emptiness is form.” Form means all appearances, while emptiness means our true nature.

In other words, every appearance is our true nature: “The verdant bamboo is none other than prajñā; the luxuriant yellow flowers are all Dharma-nature.” Once we penetrate emptiness, we know that every form-dharma arises from our empty nature. Without this empty nature, there would be no form-dharmas.

Men and women, old and young, mountains, rivers, and the great earth are all form-dharmas arising from our empty nature. Because no mark can be obtained, it is called emptiness; precisely because it is empty, it can give rise to the myriad dharmas. If there were a fixed substance, it could not give rise to anything else. Before this cup was made, for example, its materials could have been made into many different things. Once they have been made into this cup, they cannot simultaneously be made into something else. This is the principle that, because our true nature is empty, it can give rise to the myriad dharmas.

Only after penetrating emptiness and understanding that we ourselves are Buddhas can we comprehend the teaching of liberation in the intermediate state without doubt.

This teaching enables us to realize the Sambhogakāya at once. If we do not understand, when the Buddha's light appears we may doubt: “Am I a Buddha? I am an ordinary being—how could I become a Buddha?” To regard oneself as an ordinary being incapable of Buddhahood is to fall back into the external Three Vehicles. Worse still, some people fear the intensity of the Buddha's light and shrink from it.

Everyone must therefore understand and remember these principles. When the Buddha's light appears during the intermediate state, merge with it and you can realize the Sambhogakāya. This is not merely rebirth in the Western Pure Land; rebirth there is already a secondary outcome.

Once we understand these principles, we must also practice accordingly and realize the non-obstruction of principle and phenomena. Principle is the formless essence, invisible to the eye; phenomena are appearances and can be seen. Some people say, “Does not the Diamond Sūtra teach that ‘whatever has marks is illusory’? Therefore, I regard phenomena as false, not real.”

This view is mistaken; it makes principle and phenomena obstruct one another. All phenomena are wondrous functions manifested by our true nature. Phenomena are principle and principle is phenomena; the two are non-dual. How, then, can phenomena simply be false? On the other hand, clinging to phenomena and taking them as real is equally mistaken; this too makes principle and phenomena obstruct one another. Buddhism is therefore a non-dual Dharma gate.

In truth, there is neither real nor false. This is like the Tiantai teaching of emptiness, the provisional, and the middle. Emptiness means that no fixed form exists, yet provisional appearances remain, and these appearances are wondrous function. Not abiding in either emptiness or the provisional is the middle; not establishing even the middle is the meaning of the Middle Way. Thus, the provisional is the real and the real is the provisional—do not divide them. In any case, they cannot be divided.

Every appearance before us is manifested by our mind. When we see a teacup, the teacup is Buddha; when we see a table, the table is Buddha. Without the essence of principle, how could these phenomena appear? Once we understand this, phenomena no longer obstruct our activity.

Our failing is attachment to appearances: we chase material desires, crave enjoyment, compare ourselves with others, and insist upon possessing what they possess, using any means to obtain it. Do not cling to phenomena, pursue illusory external objects, and forget the essence of principle. Even becoming an emperor is only a fleeting, unobtainable appearance.

When the mind is truly empty and pure and does not cling to appearances, we see our true nature at every moment. Someone may claim, “I see my true nature constantly; whenever afflictions arise, I illuminate and break through them.” Is that really constant seeing of the true nature? If one truly saw it constantly, afflictions would not arise. When afflictions arise, one is not seeing the true nature. Such claims are therefore boastful and false.

We must temper ourselves continually amid actual circumstances. Correctly explaining the principles is useless if we fail as soon as events arise. Chan Master Dahui Zonggao rebuked such people as “medicinal mercury that flies off when it meets fire”. Those who can only talk about principles are like mercury: the moment they meet fire, they evaporate. That will not do. We must constantly spur and temper ourselves. The moment we begin to abide in appearances, we should let go at once, return to the original, and return to non-attainment.

(III) Practices of the Three Traditions: Chan, Pure Land, and Esoteric Buddhism

Śākyamuni Buddha and Confucius were born at approximately the same time, during the Zhou dynasty. Buddhism was transmitted to China during the Eastern Han dynasty. The sūtras, vinaya, and treatises are known collectively as the Buddhist Tripiṭaka. The sūtras record teachings spoken by the Buddha; the treatises were composed by Bodhisattvas on the basis of insights gained through their own practice, examples being the Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna and the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra; and the vinaya consists of codes of discipline, such as the precepts for bhikṣus, śrāmaṇeras, and bhikṣuṇīs. The Tripiṭaka is vast and profound, like an ocean whose depths are difficult to fathom.

The first school of Buddhism introduced to China was Chan Buddhism (the supreme and orthodox Dharma), while Pure Land Buddhism serves as a more accessible means to transcend the three realms. Chan can be categorized into non-Buddhist Chan, Lesser Vehicle Chan, worldly Chan, and Mahāyāna Chan. For instance, some individuals practice qigong to open their body's energy channels through meditation, concentrating on the qi itself. However, practicing with ulterior motives falls under the category of non-Buddhist Chan.

"Ulterior motives" refers to pursuing goals that do not align with the liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Some people, for example, cultivate to enhance their health and longevity, while others seek to acquire spiritual powers, gain recognition, and achieve fame and fortune. These pursuits represent non-Buddhist forms of Chan, driven by ulterior motives.

If one wishes to end birth and death but understands only that the body has no self, and practices according to the principle of biased emptiness, one practices Small Vehicle Chan. Because attachment to dharmas has not been removed, one clings to the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, among the seven great elements of Buddha-nature (earth, water, fire, wind, space, faculties, and consciousness), as the self. This is dharma-self, and it is called not having removed the view of dharmas.

Some dictionaries refer to the "biased truth of emptiness" as clinging to the notion of self-emptiness without recognizing that the Dharma is also empty. If one comprehends the emptiness of both self and Dharma, there is nothing to grasp; in this case, emptiness and existence become integrated, replacing the biased view of emptiness. This form of prejudice is referred to as the principle that "the emptiness of self is a biased truth."

Those who practice the four dhyānas and eight samādhis are engaging in worldly Chan. Mahāyāna Chan is practiced this way if one knows that both self and phenomena are empty. The absence of a self in phenomena implies the presence of the Dharmakāya, but one is not attached to the four elements of the Dharmakāya.

Just as we humans have eyes, ears, a nose, and a mouth, we are neither attached to the local senses nor to the entire body. Our Dharmakāya inherently possesses the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, but we must not cling to these four elements as self. The moment we cling to anything, it is as if phenomena have a self.

Those who practice Mahāyāna Chan realize the emptiness of both person and dharmas, without one-sided attachment. Realizing that the person is without self enables one to transcend segmented birth and death; realizing that dharmas are without self enables one to transcend transformational birth and death. Segmented birth and death is birth and death within the six realms. Each life has a bodily form that exists in the world for a certain period: human beings have human bodies, horses have horse bodies, and dogs have dog bodies.

This physical body's existence is birth, and its decay is death—this is called the segmented birth and death. The transformational birth and death is the arising and ceasing of our thoughts, infinitely changing. Understanding the segmented birth and death is called transcending the segmented birth and death. The understanding of the ever-changing nature of thought and the cycle of birth and death is called transcending the transformational birth and death.

All dharmas are fundamentally unattainable; to believe that dharmas are attainable or have real benefits is to have not eliminated the view of dharma. It means that dharma has a self, and thus one cannot transcend the transformational birth and death. Therefore, Arhats have realized the partial truth of emptiness. A Bodhisattva realizes the truth that both self and dharma are empty.

Going further, one recognizes that our Dharmakāya (the awareness that can see, hear, smell, touch, and know) is no different from that of all Buddhas. Cultivating this truth is the Supreme Vehicle Chan. Those who cultivate this meditation must constantly observe, without giving rise to even the slightest deluded thought.

As soon as a deluded thought arises, it dissolves into emptiness; one does not cling to it. One remains unmoved by any appearance of phenomena. Through prolonged practice in this manner, one can empty the body, mind, and the world, directly realizing one's original nature—Buddha-nature. Such realization cannot be achieved immediately; as soon as one thought subsides, another arises, necessitating a continuous struggle against it.

When a thought arises, we must acknowledge it without chasing after it, allowing it to pass. If a hundred thoughts arise, I will ignore them a hundred and one times. In this ongoing struggle of ignoring and letting go, thoughts will naturally dissipate. When not a single thought arises, suddenly, "whoosh..." the distinction between subject and object disappears, and the sense faculties and their objects fall away.

At that moment, the body and mind (that is, thought), the world, and emptiness vanish completely, and pristine Buddha-nature stands vividly revealed that enables us to personally realize our original essence. This kind of practice represents the supreme and highest form of "Mahāyāna Chan." This meditation is the Chan that Bodhidharma transmitted to us.

Despite their different methods and orders, all Chan types are effective if one engages with and practices them sincerely. Before Bodhidharma's arrival, practitioners primarily engaged in the "Four Dhyānas and Eight Samādhis," and many attained enlightenment.

Since the Tang and Song dynasties, most people have practiced the patriarchal Chan passed down by Bodhidharma. The profound influence of Confucianism and Taoism in my country, combined with the Chan methods imparted by Bodhidharma, has led to the development of a unique Chan style, resulting in more individuals attaining enlightenment. All of this is supported by authentic historical records from various dynasties, which can be traced and verified.

The Chan of the Patriarchs, transmitted by Bodhidharma, does not rely on written words but points directly to the mind, revealing one's true nature and attaining Buddhahood. It directly tells us what Buddhahood is. People at that time had excellent innate qualities; the only problem was that they didn't know. Once they knew what Buddhahood was, they would diligently protect themselves, preventing habitual tendencies from taking hold. Constantly contemplating emptiness and no longer clinging to appearances, they could achieve enlightenment in just a few years—very quickly.

Therefore, the sudden enlightenment Chan transmitted by Bodhidharma is excellent. It doesn't require much practice because we are inherently Buddhas; we just don't know it. For example, the Sixth Patriarch instructed Huiming, "Do not think of good, do not think of evil, letting go of everything, without any thought. "Huiming remained still for a long time," meaning he stopped there, without a single thought arising.

While he remained unmoving, not a single thought arose, and the Sixth Patriarch directly instructed him, "At that very moment, that is your Original Face, Venerable Huiming." That is, at this moment of no thought arising, you are not a piece of wood or stone (wood and stone have no consciousness) but are clearly aware; "that" is your Original Face.

This is direct instruction—how wonderful! Later people didn't understand this principle, and "that" became "which one." "Which one is your Original Face, Venerable Ming?" This becomes a question, inviting you to contemplate. It's like a riddle: Which one? Which one? Actually, the Sixth Patriarch didn't ask it this way; he gave direct guidance.

It's like when Official Yu Xiu asked Chan Master Ziyu, "What is Buddha?" The Chan Master called out, "Official Yu Xiu!" The doctor replied, "Yes." "This is it!" Chan Master Ziyu said: It is the one who answered. And so Official Yu Xiu attained enlightenment.

How simple and straightforward! But was Official Yu Xiu truly enlightened? Did he truly touch the ground? Later, Chan Master Yaoshan (a disciple of Shitou Xiqian) wanted to test Official Yu Xiu, so he said, "Oh dear, I'm afraid you've been buried in Ziyu Mountain."

Upon hearing this, Official Yu Xiu thought: “Did I get it wrong?” He hurriedly went to call on Yaoshan again and said, “Master, please instruct me: what is Buddha?” Yaoshan again called out to him, “Official!” Yu Xiu answered, “Yes!” This time Yaoshan changed his words and asked, “What is it?” Yu Xiu said, “Oh...” This time he truly awakened.

Chan Master Ziyu said, "This is it!" which meant telling Official Yu Xiu that this was Buddha. Yaoshan asked in return, "What is it?" which also meant telling Official Yu Xiu that this was Buddha. These were all direct instructions. Later, it didn't work anymore because people’s spiritual capacities had become shallow. If you told them directly, they wouldn't consider it amazing.

It is like property left by one’s ancestors: since it was not earned by one’s own sweat and blood, one does not take it seriously and squanders it. If you point it out directly, he says, “This is Buddha? Then why does it have no spiritual powers and no eloquence? I doubt that’s it.” He cannot take it on, much less safeguard it.

So Chan later became about arousing doubt and contemplating koans. Even now, people contemplate a dead koan: "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?" They contemplate it for decades without getting any results because they simply can't arouse doubt.

The key to koan practice is to cultivate doubt: Who is reciting the Buddha's name? It is I who am reciting it, but then what is "I"? Is the body "I"? The body is a temporary composite of the four elements: earth, water, fire, and wind. If we were to stop breathing, and our physical body hadn't decayed, why couldn't we recite the name? Therefore, the body is not "I."

Is thought "I"? Thought is a reflection of the external environment in the human brain. Without an external objective environment, there would be no thought; therefore thought is not the self either. Then, who is reciting the Buddha's name, "Amitābha"? To discover the answer to this question, one must cultivate doubt.

Because once doubt arises, one keeps pondering this question: Who is it? This process cuts off deluded thoughts. This doubt grasps the mind, preventing it from wandering aimlessly. Otherwise, our deluded thoughts are endless, never ceasing for even a second. Even when asleep, they don't stop; they are still full of deluded thoughts and chaotic dreams.

Therefore, the Chan masters say, "Great doubt, great enlightenment; small doubt, small enlightenment; no doubt, no enlightenment." This is the principle. Because doubt doesn't arise, thoughts are constantly in motion, making it impossible to grasp anything, deepen meditation, calm the deluded mind, and reveal one's true nature. Deluded thoughts obscure the true mind.

I've visited several temples and seen them chanting, "Who is reciting the Buddha's name? Who is reciting the Buddha's name..." Alas! It's terrible! They haven't developed doubt; chanting "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?" is far less effective than reciting Amitābha Buddha's name! Reciting Amitābha Buddha's name has the resonance of the Buddha's fruition embodied in the Name and the empowering merit of the Buddha's causal vows, making it far more powerful than chanting "Who is reciting the Buddha's name?"

We are now in the Dharma-ending Age. The Buddhadharma is in decline, and people are unwilling to apply themselves properly to practice. The present condition of Chan is truly lamentable. Those who transmit it have not personally realized their true nature before passing the Dharma to others; instead, transmission is represented by a lineage scroll.

Like a painted handscroll, it is a long sheet of paper bearing the four large characters “Treasury of the True Dharma Eye”.

It then names the first patriarch, the second, the third, the fourth, and so forth. If I am listed as the thirty-fourth generation and transmit it to you, I write in the thirty-fifth generation and hand you the scroll; this is then regarded as transmitting the Dharma. Neither the transmitter nor the recipient has awakened to the Way, yet in their confusion they continue passing down the scroll and call this awakening and an authentic lineage. With transmission conducted in this way, how could Chan not be brought into disrepute?

The Pure Land school arose long after Chan. It was established during the Eastern Jin dynasty by Dharma Master Huiyuan of Donglin Temple on Mount Lu.

Seeing that Chan practice did not accord with the capacities of many people, Huiyuan established two halls: a Chan hall and a Buddha-recitation hall based on the three sūtras—the Amitābha Sūtra, the Sūtra of Infinite Life, and the Sūtra of Contemplation of the Buddha of Infinite Life. Those whose capacities were unsuited to Chan entered the Buddha-recitation hall, and in this way the Pure Land school arose.

Pure Land is a comparatively accessible method: relying upon the Buddha's compassionate power of reception, practitioners transcend the Three Realms horizontally and attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Yet they must genuinely attain one-pointed, undisturbed mind. This requirement has caused much controversy within the Pure Land school.

Some say, “We rely entirely upon the Buddha's power. We do not need one-pointed, undisturbed mind; reciting with a scattered mind is enough.” Reciting with a scattered mind means that the mouth recites while thoughts continue to wander. Others reply, “Surely that cannot be right. The Buddha taught that we must hold fast to the Name with one-pointed, undisturbed mind; only then will that Buddha appear, receive us, and enable our rebirth.”

Pure Land practitioners are therefore divided over whether one-pointed, undisturbed mind is necessary. If casual Buddha-recitation were sufficient for rebirth, why did Master Hanshan say, “Reciting Amitābha with the mouth while the mind is scattered is futile, even if one shouts until one's throat is hoarse”? One-pointed, undisturbed mind is still required.

It has several levels: one-pointedness in phenomena, in principle, in principle and phenomena, and in phenomena and phenomena. We shall not discuss the profound levels, but only the simplest. The Buddha's name must remain in the mind at every moment: “Amitābha Buddha, Amitābha Buddha...”

Whatever good state one meets, one does not become overjoyed and forget oneself, but goes on with Amitābha Buddha, Amitābha Buddha...; whatever bad or troublesome state one meets, one is not troubled, but goes on with Amitābha Buddha, Amitābha Buddha..., the mind unshaken. This is one-pointedness at the level of phenomena. One must be able to do at least this. If one cannot even do this, I think rebirth in the West will be very difficult.

The Buddha does not run up before us to receive us. In the Zongjing lu, Chan Master Yongming Yanshou says that the Buddha is like the moon in the sky, reflected in a thousand rivers and ten thousand streams, while our minds are like those waters. One-pointed, undisturbed mind is like clear water, in which alone Amitābha Buddha can appear.

If the mind is filthy and confused, like a pool of muddy water, we will not see the Buddha even when he comes. Because people are unwilling to practice diligently, this book says that in the present Dharma-ending Age, even the widely practiced Pure Land method of Buddha-recitation has become difficult to carry out as an accessible practice.

The Pure Land school is in fact easy and accessible to practice: one simply recites the Buddha's name, “Amitābha Buddha”. Why, then, is it said to be “difficult to practice”? Because practitioners today are unwilling to apply themselves to Buddha-recitation. They merely put on appearances: attending morning and evening services, striking instruments and chanting, and then considering their daily practice complete.

These are the better ones. Those who are worse do not even attend services; they think only of earning money by performing sūtra recitations and repentance rites. Is such practice of any use? None at all. To seek rebirth in the West through Buddha-recitation, one must recite until the mind is one-pointed and undisturbed. The Buddha said, “If you wish to purify your land, first purify your mind; as your mind becomes pure, so does the Buddha-land.”

An impure mind does not correspond to the Pure Land and cannot be reborn there. In the Contemplation Sūtra, the Buddha teaches sixteen contemplations; the last is the contemplation of Buddha-recitation. How is it practiced? While reciting, one must “recite with the mind and hear with the ears”: the ears listen clearly to the sound of one's own recitation.

This contemplation does not use the eyes to look; it uses the faculty of hearing to illuminate the sound of Buddha-recitation. The ear faculty gathers in the mental faculty so that deluded thoughts do not arise, leading to the Buddha-recitation samādhi. If we genuinely enter this samādhi, when the final day comes we shall certainly attain rebirth in the West; otherwise, the outcome is difficult to predict.

We must therefore let go of everything and quietly recite, “Amitābha Buddha, Amitābha Buddha...”, while listening calmly to the sound of our own recitation. Only then can we gather the mind and enter contemplation. People today recite without entering contemplation and are unwilling to put the Buddha's instructions earnestly into practice; consequently, they achieve very little.

The Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta teaches us, "Gather in all six sense faculties and maintain uninterrupted pure mindfulness." This instruction signifies that, while reciting the Buddha's name, we must focus all six sense faculties—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—on this single name.

The eyes do not look at other things; the ears hear no other sounds, but listen only to one's own recitation; the nose does not follow pleasant or unpleasant smells; the tongue neither tastes flavours nor speaks. Exert all your strength, quietly and continuously reciting, "Amitābha, Amitābha..." Gradually, deluded thoughts will subside, allowing one to enter a state of Samādhi.

Unfortunately, many Pure Land practitioners today seem reluctant to do this. The phrase "uninterrupted pure mindfulness" carries profound meaning and is quite challenging to attain. It is not as straightforward as it may appear; it involves more than simply reciting the Buddha's name quietly. This practice is deeply profound, akin to the maturation of post-awakening preservation in Chan Buddhism.

True purity necessitates the dissolution of both subject and object, liberating the senses and their corresponding objects. This means that, while reciting the Buddha's name, both the mind engaged in recitation and the name itself must simultaneously fade away, leading to a state of serene purity—this represents a singular moment of pure mindfulness. The intention to recite the Buddha's name and the name being recited are both relative concepts. Relative phenomena are illusory and unreal. Only the absolute is true;

Only our Buddha-nature is absolute. When you recite the Buddha’s name now, the mind, the dharma, and the Buddha’s name are all relative, so this is not pure mindfulness.

You must wait until you attain a state of deep concentration in your recitation, transcending the duality of subject and object, akin to the practice of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. One continues reciting the mantra until, suddenly—“pa!”—everything falls away—the Dharma is gone, the person is gone, the mind is gone, the world is gone—everything becomes empty and pure, yet your lucid knowing remains vividly clear. Only this is the purity of a single thought.

The purity of a single thought is one thought in harmony; this single thought embodies Buddha. One thought in harmony equates to one thought of Buddha; every thought in harmony reflects every thought of Buddha. Each thought remains unmoved like this; every thought is Buddha—this single thought is what is meant by “maintaining pure mindfulness

continuously". Reflect on the level of skill demonstrated here! When discussing " maintaining pure mindfulness," it is crucial to differentiate between maintaining pure mindfulness within stillness and maintaining pure mindfulness within movement.

Maintaining pure mindfulness within stillness indicates that during meditation, both subject and object are extinguished, revealing our original nature and allowing us to align with Buddha. However, when we rise and move, we frequently forget our true selves, yielding to external influences and thereby losing that mindfulness, which can lead to a disconnection from our original nature and the insights gained during stillness. Consequently, while maintaining pure mindfulness within stillness is the primary objective, maintaining pure mindfulness within movement is also vital.

The skill must develop to a point where stillness and movement merge, maintaining mindfulness in movement just as in stillness. This process is even more demanding. "Maintaining" refers to uninterrupted awareness, regardless of whether one is in movement or stillness, consistently remaining in the same state—not just for a moment but at all times.

Our deeply rooted habits mean that we may break through in meditation today but be unable to do so tomorrow. We may have to wait many days for another breakthrough, and it may never happen again. That is like a blind cat stumbling upon a dead mouse: it is neither continuous practice nor awakening.

Even when practice improves and continuity is possible in stillness, it is not yet continuous and undivided practice if one goes astray in activity. True continuity must be maintained in activity just as in stillness. While fully engaged in a task, one acts as though nothing had been done, without the slightest abiding attachment. Afterward, not even a trace of having acted remains. Only such continuity, equally at ease in stillness and activity, is called uninterrupted pure mindfulness.

Chan practice requires reaching a certain level to achieve true unity. After realizing one’s original nature through Chan meditation, it is essential to further cultivate and nurture this realization, akin to nurturing the sacred embryo so that it develops and matures. This cultivation consists of two stages: protecting it and letting go.

Once we have opened our original nature and recognized the Dharmakāya, we must carefully protect it to prevent stagnation due to external influences. We must remain constantly aware of it without forgetting. Once this protection is perfected, it is no longer needed. We should allow it to function independently and autonomously, free from interference, because Dharma-nature is naturally self-sustaining and requires no deliberate manipulation.

When practice reaches this depth—where pure mindfulness remains unbroken in both stillness and movement—Chan and Pure Land become truly inseparable. Even Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, stated, "At seventy, I could follow my heart's desires without transgressing the rules." This conclusion indicates that when one’s practice reaches its peak, it transcends sectarian boundaries.

Some individuals who do not understand Buddhist truth often distinguish between Chan and Pure Land, asserting, "You are Chan, I am Pure Land." In reality, these practices are connected. Others claim, "Pure Land is beneficial and safe; Chan is not good and is dangerous!" They fail to recognize that they are essentially the same. You may perceive Chan as dangerous because you do not fully engage in your practice.

If you do not concentrate on reciting the Buddha's name, Pure Land practice can be just as perilous. Did not Master Lianchi say, "Many recite the Buddha's name, but few are reborn in the Western Pure Land"? You may regard Pure Land as outstanding, yet Chan is equally excellent. Since the Sixth Patriarch, many have seen their true nature and attained enlightenment. Therefore, let us refrain from slandering one another; all Dharma teachings are beneficial.

It ultimately depends on whether a particular Dharma aligns with your capacity. If a particular Dharma suits your capacity, then it is considered a good Dharma. Furthermore, people often make distinctions because they have not fully practiced the Dharma and tend to cling to one particular method or viewpoint, which leads to differing opinions. When one realizes and sees their true nature, they will understand that all schools are fundamentally the same.

Therefore, our Heart-of-Heart Dharma encompasses both Chan and Pure Land and is essentially aligned with the ten major schools of Chinese Buddhism; the only difference lies in the initial approach to practice.

The principles taught in our Heart-of-Heart Dharma are entirely consistent with those of Chan Buddhism. This teaching also emphasizes the importance of opening one’s mind to recognize one’s true nature, eliminating the two kinds of affliction associated with views and thought, and perfecting the Three Bodies and Four Wisdoms. Moreover, it stresses that a pure mind results in a pure Buddha-land, and one should aspire to be reborn in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. It also offers the possibility of rebirth in other Pure Lands, not just this one. Therefore, the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is both Chan and Pure Land. However, true practice requires focused and dedicated effort; it cannot be accomplished merely by talking about it.

The same is true of the Pure Land school: practitioners must recite the Buddha's name single-mindedly and diligently, without laxity. What people teach as Pure Land today, however, differs radically from its original meaning. Not only do they fail to enter concentration through Buddha-recitation; they reject even the Buddha-recitation samādhi. Some go so far as to say that recitation itself is unnecessary and that merely hearing the Buddha's name once ensures rebirth in the West. This has devastated and disfigured the Pure Land teaching.

They have utterly ruined and undermined the Pure Land school. Truly, they are perverters of the teaching and demonic offspring cloaked in Buddhist robes. It would be strange if such people did not fall into hell to suffer mountains of blades and cauldrons of boiling oil! Pure Land has practices such as the Sixteen Contemplations, the samādhi of Buddha-recitation, and Pratyutpanna samādhi, showing that practitioners must cultivate earnestly.

To practice the Pratyutpanna Samādhi, one recites the Buddha's name while walking or standing throughout the day; sitting and sleeping are not permitted. It is extremely arduous and difficult. Thus this book says, “Even the widely practiced Pure Land method of Buddha-recitation is difficult to carry out as an accessible practice.” This is entirely reasonable: it is indeed difficult. At the end of life, people are therefore confused and disordered.

They cannot pass away peacefully, free of attachment and with one-pointed, undisturbed mind, because they have not practiced properly. There are, of course, people who depart calmly and securely, without the slightest obstruction, but they are exceedingly rare. I once met an elderly woman who lived in great poverty on public assistance.

At that time, the government gave her only eight yuan a month. She survived by gathering discarded vegetable leaves from the market. She would place a little leftover rice in a thermos, obtain boiling water from the boiler room, and let the rice swell into thin porridge.

All day long she recited, “Amitābha Buddha, Amitābha Buddha...” A week in advance, she knew when she would depart; this is knowing the time of death beforehand. She told the person in the boiler room, “I have soaked my rice today; I shall not be coming tomorrow.”

The person asked, “Where are you going?” She replied, “Ah, I am going on a long journey.” No one saw her during the following week. Someone said that she had entered her room one evening and had not come out. They broke open the door and found that she had passed away seated upright on her bed. That was excellent.

This shows that Pure Land practitioners still need one-pointed, undisturbed mind in order to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, whereas Chan practitioners must cut off delusion and realize truth in order to attain Buddhahood and transcend birth and death. To cut off delusion and realize truth is to eliminate the afflictions of view, the afflictions of thought, and the affliction of ignorance, thereby realizing one's true nature.

Awakening means that one has seen the true nature, but has only just reached the edge of the Dharmakāya. The afflictions of view—one's views and understanding—have been resolved. Once one's understanding is correct, the mind no longer wavers; yet the afflictions of thought have not been resolved, and the mind still moves when it meets circumstances. Segmented birth and death therefore cannot end.

Pure Land practitioners consequently criticize Chan on this point: “Although Chan practitioners awaken through meditation, they still cannot end birth and death. Pure Land is more secure: ‘Once you behold Amitābha, why worry that you will not awaken?’ Upon rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, one attains non-retrogression and becomes a Bodhisattva one lifetime away from Buddhahood, never again revolving through the six realms.”

Many Chan practitioners gain a little intellectual understanding and take it for awakening, although their actual practice has not kept pace. Even those who apply themselves and break through to see their true nature have only just reached the edge of the Dharmakāya.

It is like stepping onto the edge of a stage without yet reaching its center. They must continue practicing until the mind is completely empty and pure; only then is realization genuine. Body and mind must therefore be tempered amid circumstances. Master Shenguang, the Second Patriarch in Bodhidharma's lineage, tempered body and mind in brothels and wine shops.

Others asked him, “You are a monk; why do you frequent brothels and wine shops?” He replied, “I come here to train the mind and see whether it still moves.” This is genuine practice. It is nevertheless wrong for Pure Land practitioners to disparage Chan in this way, because doing so discourages others from studying it.

Chan and Pure Land in fact proceed from different standpoints. If a Chan practitioner genuinely sees the true nature, even though habitual tendencies have not yet been eliminated, they need only ascend to the heavens seven times and return to the human realm seven times before those tendencies are exhausted. They will continue to advance and will not fall again into the three lower realms; this is already excellent. People today quote the phrase, “Master Jie reincarnated as Su Dongpo, while Master Qinghuo was reborn as the Grand Chancellor Zheng Gongliang.”

They say that although Chan Master Jie of Mount Wuzu had awakened, he had not ended birth and death and was subsequently reborn as Su Dongpo. They add that Su Dongpo married several wives and was unable to become a monk. In fact, Su Dongpo was still admirable: he never forgot spiritual practice and diligently cultivated both the Dao and Buddhism.

Many of his poems and literary works concern the Buddhadharma. It is said that in his next life he became Master Hanshan. Is that not excellent? Chan therefore has its own distinctive standpoint. The schools should not slander one another but should offer mutual praise, because everyone has different karmic affinities and capacities. It is like food: you may prefer sweetness, while another person prefers something spicy. Each has their own taste. Thus all dharmas are equal, with none higher or lower.

The Buddha foretold that in the Dharma-ending Age, Pure Land and the esoteric tradition would be the teachings best suited to people's capacities. The standards of Chan are lofty and exacting and require a high level of spiritual capacity for connection; individuals with average or lower capacity cannot connect with it. Currently, Chan Buddhism primarily transmits teachings through lineage documents, not through enlightenment; it exists in name only.

This situation is truly regrettable and a great pity! In fact, Chan Buddhism is the true Dharma gate of Buddhism; all others are expedient methods. Pure Land Buddhism is simple and convenient, enabling horizontal transcendence of the Three Realms. the esoteric tradition has many methods, but very few truly practice the profound Dharma; most cultivate spiritual powers to show off.

For example, before studying Buddhism, Master Haiteng practiced martial arts with his uncle, a swordsman from Qingcheng Mountain in Sichuan.

One day, Master Haiteng saw two young lamas smoking opium on the Sichuan border. He said to them, "Hey! You're still monks; why are you smoking opium? You're not learning good things!" One of the lamas said, “Don't look down on us. Although you possess knives and swords, we will recite a spell, rendering your blades incapable of cutting our arms.”

Master Haiteng shook his head, indicating disbelief. The young lama said, "You don't believe me? Wait until I finish smoking, then I'll let you try." After the young lama finished smoking the opium, drawing on the pipe with repeated puffs, feeling refreshed, he mumbled a spell. Then he rolled up his sleeves and let Master Haiteng chop at them.

Master Haiteng was hesitant at first, only lightly touching the blade with the back of his knife. "Snap!" The knife bounced back. He used some more force, and the knife bounced back again. Master Haiteng thought, “Hmm? It works somewhat!” The young lama stated, "Strike vigorously with the blade; my spell is highly potent." This time, Master Haiteng gently touched the lama's arm with the cutting edge, and with a crisp "Snap!", the knife recoiled once more. The young lama said, "Chop rigorously; it's alright."

This time Master Haiteng touched the knife edge lightly, and with a “snap” the knife bounced up again. The young lama said, “Chop hard; it doesn’t matter.” This time Master Haiteng chopped with force, and with a “snap” the knife bounced up again. Now Master Haiteng was convinced and resolved to study the Buddha-dharma. Master Haiteng said that this is how his affinity with the Buddha-dharma came about.

Therefore, Master Tsongkhapa saw that the esoteric tradition had become corrupt over time, with Nyingma disciples focusing on minor spiritual powers instead of practicing the true Dharma, creating chaos within the Nyingma school. So he discarded the dross, kept the essence, reorganized the rules, donned yellow robes, and established the Gelug school. Now there are many schools of the esoteric tradition, including the Nyingma, Gelug, Kagyu, and Sakya schools.

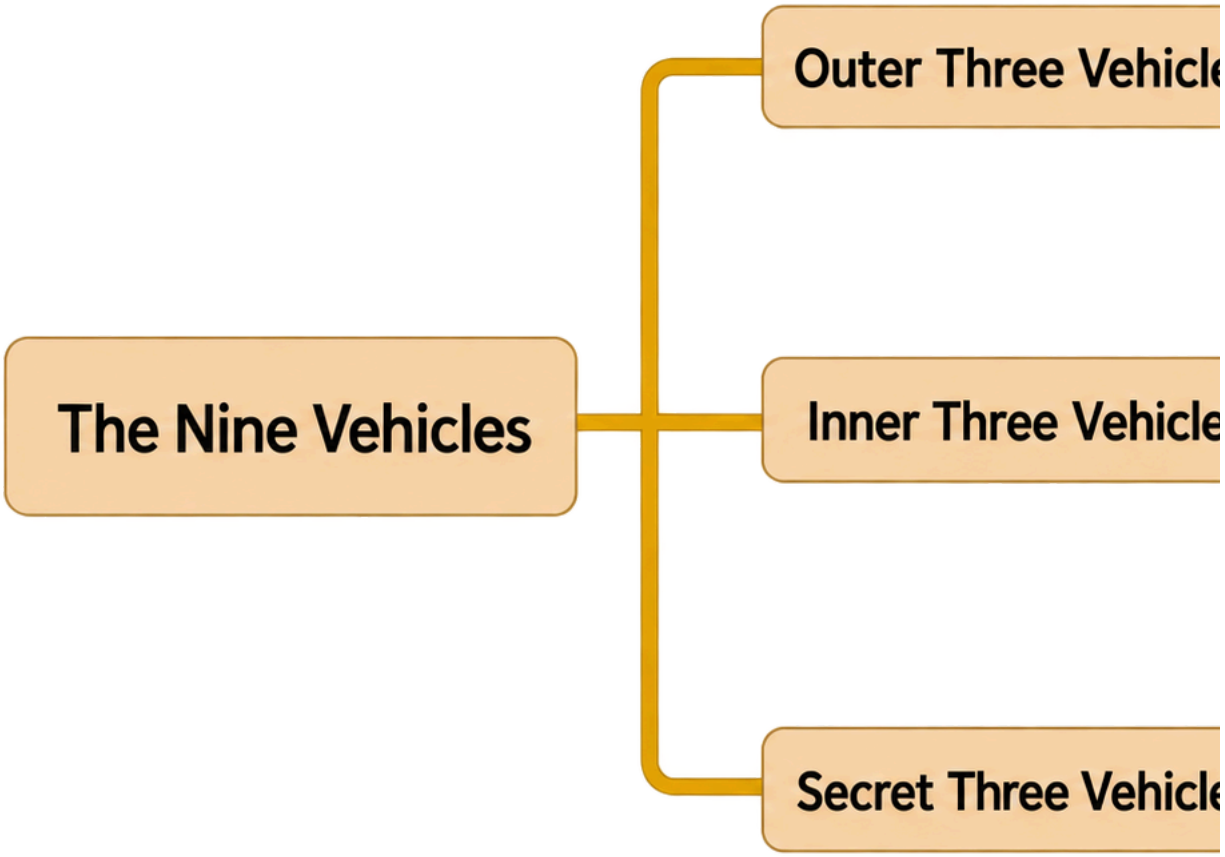
However, most people studying the esoteric tradition today are seeking spiritual powers, not seeking liberation from the cycle of birth and death; they have gone astray, which is truly a pity! In fact, when we cultivate to a certain level, spiritual powers will naturally manifest, and we will naturally possess the six supernatural abilities. Non-Buddhist practitioners also have supernatural abilities, but only the five: divine ear, divine eye, supernormal locomotion, knowledge of others' minds, and knowledge of past lives.

They do not possess the knowledge of the exhaustion of the outflows. Knowledge of the exhaustion of the outflows is called a “power of the Way”; it means meaning complete detachment from all appearances and the purification of all afflictions. Only Buddhas possess all six spiritual powers; for example, Padmasambhava attained Buddhahood through physical ascension, possessing inconceivable power and supernatural abilities. Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva also possesses great power and supernatural abilities.

We still do not fully understand the origins of spiritual powers, even though we can develop them to a certain extent through the practice of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. These powers are inherent within us rather than coming from an external source. If we remain unattached to appearances and relinquish our hold on everything, spiritual powers will naturally emerge; however, seeking them directly will only result in failure.

Regarding this esoteric teaching, Layman Sun Jingfeng said, “Those who hear it must at least understand the teachings of the Nine Vehicles and possess a preliminary intellectual understanding of yoga. Only then can their mind accord with the mind-seal, fully comprehend and integrate the teaching, and attain the non-obstruction of principle and phenomena.” Those who hear this Dharma must therefore possess considerable wisdom; it is not something that just anyone can understand. We shall consequently begin with a brief explanation of the esoteric tradition's “teachings of the Nine Vehicles”. The Nine Vehicles comprise the Three Outer Vehicles, the Three Inner Vehicles, and the Three Secret Vehicles

(see the diagram below):



The Three Outer Vehicles are the exoteric vehicles of the Śrāvaka, Pratyekabuddha, and Bodhisattva. They primarily teach doctrine, enabling us to understand how to attain Arhatship, Pratyekabuddhahood, Bodhisattvahood, and Buddhahood. We must first understand these principles before we can cultivate the esoteric teachings deeply.

If we know nothing of Buddhist doctrine before practicing the esoteric teachings, practice will be very difficult. It is like traveling somewhere: first we must ask which road to take and which vehicle to use; only then do we set out. In this way, we avoid going in circles and taking unnecessary detours.

The Three Inner Vehicles are Kriyā, Caryā, and Yoga, which teach specific methods of practice. Kriyā, also known as Kriyā tantra, includes methods of pacification and enrichment. In light of the numerous disasters occurring in the world today—such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, and droughts—pacifying methods can help avert these calamities.

Meanwhile, enrichment methods can yield benefits like improved health and longevity, reduced illness, wealth, and plentiful harvests. Caryā the esoteric tradition pertains to the initial stages of visualization practice, which is fundamental in esoteric practices.

For example, in practicing “Om Ah Hum,” one visualizes white light, red light, and blue light at the crown, throat, and heart respectively. In the phowa method, one first visualizes in the lower dantian a crescent-moon maṇḍala (like a crescent moon, curving upward, not downward, and very bright).

From this base a channel rises, narrow below and wide above like a trumpet mouth, running straight up to the Brahma aperture at the crown. One must make this channel bright, as bright as a fluorescent tube, from the perineum straight to the

Brahma aperture. At the bottom of this channel is a bindu the size of a mung bean, slightly smaller than a soybean.

After visualizing the crescent moon, channel, and bindu, practitioners use a three-syllable mantra. The first syllable is "Hē," which is uttered in the lower dantian. As "Hē—" is spoken, the qi in the lower dantian rises, naturally lifting the anus.

The mantra facilitates this; the sound invigorates the qi, causing the bindu to ascend from below to the top. However, it must not escape, as doing so could be fatal. This bindu represents the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna).

At this stage, one should visualize one foot of Amitābha Buddha (known as the Amitābha Buddha phowa method) or one foot of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva (referred to as the Avalokiteśvara phowa method) resting on the Brahmā aperture to ensure the bindu remains contained. As you chant "Hē—," allow the breath to reach the top of your head, then transition to the syllable "Ga." When you say "Ga—," the breath descends.

You can practice this: "Hē—" as the breath rises, followed by "Ga—" as the breath falls. When nearing death, the third syllable, "Phaṭ—," is employed to facilitate the release.

For instance, as you approach death, first use the syllable "Hē—" to elevate the bindu to the top of your head, then remove the foot of Amitābha Buddha (or Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva) from your head. Finally, chant "Phaṭ—" to open the Brahmā aperture, allowing the bindu to exit into the heart of Amitābha Buddha or Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, leading to rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

This practice is known as the "phowa" method. The Pure Land school offers various visualization methods, as outlined in the Sixteen Contemplations Sūtra, which describes sixteen types of visualization. In the context of Yoga the esoteric tradition, the term "correspondence" signifies that our mind should align with the Buddha's mind; ideally, our mind, the Buddha, and the Way should become one. In practice, it is essential that our words and actions remain consistent—that is, correspondence. Merely talking without taking action, while allowing greed, anger, and ignorance to persist, will not yield results. Therefore, we must maintain correspondence with the Buddha above and all sentient beings below, embodying loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity at all times.

The Three Secret Vehicles are Mahāyoga, Anuyoga, and Atiyoga. Mahāyoga—mahā means “great”, while yoga means “union”—entails entering samādhi through mantra recitation and realizing a wondrous, luminous state. This state is emptiness, bliss, and clarity. Emptiness means that the body dissolves into emptiness; bliss is incomparable joy; and clarity is the radiance of great light.

In the practice of the Four Dhyānas and Eight Samādhis, the Second Dhyāna is characterized by joy and the Third Dhyāna by bliss. This bliss is a light, peaceful, and joyful ease beyond comparison with any worldly pleasure. Even after realizing the wondrous, luminous state and experiencing emptiness, bliss, and clarity, we must not abide in them.

If we abide in emptiness, we cannot leave the Formless Realm; if we abide in bliss, we cannot leave the Desire Realm; and if we abide in clarity, we cannot leave the Form Realm. Thus, even after realizing this state, we must not cling to its appearances but return to non-attainment.

Anuyoga means perfect union: Buddha-nature is originally and naturally this wondrous, luminous state. Every sentient being inherently possesses emptiness, bliss, and clarity; they are not produced by practice. Awakening occurs when we realize, “Ah! A Buddha is not manufactured through our practice; Buddhahood has always been so.”

Thus, the Way is not fabricated through cultivation; it is awakened to. Atiyoga is a level higher than Anuyoga. Atiyoga means union with Dzogchen (Great Perfection), with ati understood here as “great perfection.” In other words, we ourselves are originally Buddhas and already possess every wondrous function. This is the heart essence of Dzogchen. The Rainbow Light practice, Mahāmudrā, and our Heart-of-Heart Dharma are all Dzogchen teachings.

The Dzogchen (Great Perfection) is the highest teaching of the Nyingma school of the esoteric tradition and is presented here as the same Dharma as Mahāmudrā. Mahāmudrā is described as a preliminary to the Dzogchen (Great Perfection) and identified with the Tibetan term Trekchö, meaning “cutting through”. Mahāmudrā likens our true nature to a vast hand pervading empty space and the entire Dharma Realm.

Sun Wukong, for example, can somersault 108,000 li, yet however far he travels, he cannot leap beyond the palm of the Tathāgata. The capacity of our mind is just as vast; this is our Buddha-nature. To practice Mahāmudrā is to realize the union of the three emptinesses—that is, to illuminate the mind and see the true nature. The three are inner emptiness, outer emptiness, and secret emptiness.

Inner emptiness means that the body dissolves into emptiness. This is why we often say that in practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, it will not do if the body remains and has not dissolved into emptiness. Outer emptiness is the space outside the body. Secret emptiness is our true nature, Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is originally empty and contains no thing.

It has no male or female, old or young, blue, yellow, red, or white. Yet it is not annihilationist emptiness or sheer nothingness. It is the numinous, wondrous true mind: wondrous presence. Wondrous presence exists without fixed existence and, while not

existing as a thing, nevertheless manifests; no form can be seen. It therefore possesses immense function and energy. When inner, outer, and secret emptiness merge into one, there is one great emptiness. This great emptiness is not devoid of awareness; it is lucidly and vividly knowing. This is the realm of Trekchö, namely Mahāmudrā.

The three essentials of Mahāmudrā are view, meditative concentration, and conduct; the three must become one. First, our view must be correct and we must understand our true nature. This nature is possessed by every sentient being. It is unborn and undying, neither increasing nor decreasing, neither defiled nor pure, unmoving and unwavering.

We then know that everything in the world is illusory and unreal: “Dharmas arising through causes and conditions, I declare, are emptiness.” We need only let go of everything to which we cling and restore our vivid, dynamic true nature; then attainment follows. Correct view gives rise to the power of concentration.

Knowing that external forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles, and mental objects are false—nothing more than worthless straw—we cease clinging to appearances. Once we possess the great treasure of Buddha-nature, we no longer want the straw outside. The Buddhist scriptures praise our most precious Buddha-nature as a wish-fulfilling jewel capable of bestowing every treasure and giving rise to all things.

When the mind is settled, conduct accords with it. This is yoga: union or correspondence. If we say one thing and do another, it will not do, because our conduct has not caught up with our understanding. “Conduct” therefore means genuinely realizing the teaching in practice.

After practicing Mahāmudrā to realize one's true nature, one further engages in the Dzogchen practice of Tögal, which means sudden transcendence and is also referred to as the Rainbow Light Method. In Chan Buddhism, the process begins with achieving enlightenment, followed by refining one's habitual tendencies related to spiritual states. The procedure involves purifying so-called afflictions of view, thought, innumerable phenomena, and ignorance, ultimately leading to a state of no attachment; this is the method through which enlightenment is attained.

In contrast, the esoteric tradition provides a more structured form of guidance, specifically through Tögal. Tögal entails the integration of the five lights within our body with the five lights of the external world, facilitating a process where each light reflects and merges into a unified whole. The five lights within our body are as follows: 1.The light emanating from our eyes.

Aren't our eyes watery? This light is due to channels that lead directly to the eyes. 2. Light emanates from various channels. Practitioners of qigong discuss the Ren, Du, and Central channels, among others. These channels all emit light, referred to as the light emanating from the white, soft channels.

3. The light of the physical heart radiates from the heart. 4. The light of the Dharma Realm represents our true nature. 5. The pure light of the realm indicates that our entire body is a Dharma Realm and that the whole body is light. The five external lights include sunlight, moonlight, lamplight, water light, and black light.

Darkness is also considered a form of light. Practicing the Rainbow Light method utilizes these five external lights to stimulate the five internal lights within our body. Don't we have lasers now? This practice involves placing a luminous ruby in a laser disc and shining a strong electric light on it to stimulate the ruby's own light.

This device is known as a laser, which is powerful enough to penetrate steel plates. By using external light to stimulate our inherent light, the Rainbow Light method facilitates the merging of the five external lights and the five internal lights into one, resulting in a qualitative change in the entire body that transforms it into a body of light.

At the time of death, the individual transforms into a beam of light and departs with a "boom." This is called attaining Buddhahood in this very body, which differs from attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime (body vs. life).

"Attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime" means achieving Buddhahood in this life without transforming into light at death, thereby leaving behind a physical body. If the body transforms into light and one also attains Buddhahood, it is referred to as "attaining Buddhahood in this very body."

The most successful cultivation of the Rainbow Light method results in the complete complete transformation, leaving behind neither nails nor hair, merging the body and mind into the Dharma Realm, and transforming into a body of light. Less successful cultivation may leave behind nails and hair while the rest transforms into light. The least successful outcome is that the body fails to transform into rainbow light and instead shrinks, becoming smaller. For example, the preserved body of Chan Master Wuxia, enshrined at the Centenarian Palace on Mount Jiuhua, is tiny, measuring less than two feet tall. After being gilded, it is placed in a shrine for people to admire; this process exemplifies the shrinking of the body.

To practice the Rainbow Light method one cannot go to work; one must go into retreat and practice without stopping from morning to night. It will not do to practice a while and then go off to work, because in this method one is always looking at either sunlight or water light; if not water light, then moonlight; if not moonlight, then lamplight; if not lamplight, then dark light.

In short, one must meditate and practice throughout the day in order to attain accomplishment; otherwise, the body cannot transform into light. Those who lack either time or suitable external conditions cannot undertake the practice. If one is to

contemplate water light, for example, water must be available. The Rainbow Light method is therefore very difficult to practice.

Even after accomplishing it, one must not abide in the rainbow light. If one clings to it, one remains merely a wandering spirit roaming the Dharma Realm and cannot realize Buddhahood completely. Buddha-nature is originally empty; our mind is like the whole of vast space, utterly unencumbered and unstained by a speck of dust. Every appearance is manifested by the Buddha-nature we inherently possess.

Buddha-nature contains all appearances and all capacities. Because there is nothing, everything can appear. Buddhist doctrine is the most complete and thorough. Other religions always retain something to cling to; if one abides in any single thing, the whole cannot be perfectly complete.

At its highest level, the esoteric tradition is therefore exactly the same as Chan: it too is formless. Methods employing forms are means of guidance, preliminary methods adapted to practitioners' capacities; only the formless teaching is supreme. Chan itself is actually an esoteric teaching, not an exoteric one. “Esoteric” refers to the Tathāgata's secret cause, which has no visible form.

Does not the Śūraṅgama Sūtra speak of “the Great Buddha-Crown, the Tathāgata's secret cause, and the complete meaning of cultivation and realization”? Our Buddha-nature has no form to be seen and no sound to be heard. Since it is soundless and formless, how can it be seen? The Great Buddha-Crown cannot be seen; what matters is that mind accords with mind. This is the Tathāgata's secret cause—this is the secret.

When Huiming asked the Sixth Patriarch, “Is there anything still more secret?”, the Sixth Patriarch replied, “The secret lies with you. Whatever I tell you is no longer secret.” The secret is within oneself; once it is spoken to you, it is no longer secret. Earlier we discussed non-Buddhist Chan, ordinary-beings' Chan, Lesser Vehicle Chan, Superior Vehicle Chan, and Supreme Vehicle Chan.

Non-Buddhist Chan is cultivated with ulterior aims: it posits a dharma outside the mind, delights in what is above, and rejects what is below. Its practitioners do not know that above and below are equal, that sentient beings are Buddhas and Buddhas are sentient beings. Ordinary-beings' Chan is not cultivated with ulterior aims; it is based on right faith in cause and effect, while still delighting in what is above and rejecting what is below. Lesser Vehicle Chan is cultivated after awakening to partial emptiness and recognizing that the body is not the self, but it remains biased toward emptiness. Superior Vehicle Chan, also called Bodhisattva Chan, is cultivated after realizing the emptiness of both person and dharmas. Supreme Vehicle Chan is the realization that we ourselves are Buddhas and Buddhas are none other than us.

We lack nothing of the Tathāgata-nature and are identical with the Buddha in this respect. Cultivation based on this understanding is Supreme Vehicle Chan. Is this not the same as the Dzogchen (Great Perfection) of the esoteric tradition? At the highest point, the esoteric tradition and Chan are exactly alike.

(IV) If One Hears the Way in the Morning, One May Die Content in the Evening

It is said that in the Tibetan esoteric tradition there are two methods by which one may attain Buddhahood without practice: one is the practice of “phowa”, the transference of consciousness for rebirth; the other is the method taught in this book. How wonderful it would be to attain Buddhahood without practice! Everyone would like such a method.

But can one truly attain Buddhahood without practicing? In fact, one cannot. We discussed phowa earlier. “Without practice” means that one need not practice meditative contemplation, although visualization is still required. Likewise, although The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State states, “This is a profound teaching through which liberation may be attained without practicing meditative contemplation,” becoming thoroughly familiar with its contents and keeping them constantly in mind is itself a form of practice. Therefore, we should not look for an easy shortcut.

Our present methods of practice are inseparable from meditative contemplation. Contemplation means maintaining awareness: watching thoughts as they arise without following them. The Pure Land practices of Pratyutpanna Samādhi and Buddha-recitation Samādhi are forms of meditative contemplation.

The Sūtra on the Contemplation of Amitāyus teaches sixteen contemplations, including contemplation of the sun, the sacred realm of the Pure Land and Amitābha Buddha. The easiest, the sixteenth contemplation, is the contemplation of Buddha-recitation: one listens to the sound of one’s own recitation, hearing every syllable distinctly.

Pure Land practitioners today cannot enter contemplation if they recite with a distracted mind. They recite while entertaining wandering thoughts and engaging in idle talk, so their practice has little effect. They suppose that, since Amitābha Buddha made a great vow to receive and guide us, it is enough to believe in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss and recite the Buddha’s name. After all, they say, we may be reborn carrying karma: the karma we have created can simply be taken with us to the Western Pure Land.

Can it really be so easy? This is a misunderstanding. Rebirth carrying karma is indeed possible, but we must understand that karma is the movement of thought. As soon as thought moves, ignorance arises. Thus the Awakening of Faith says, “With

ignorance as the cause, the three subtle aspects arise." These are the karmic aspect, the perceiving aspect and the objective aspect. When thought moves and ignorance arises, this is the karmic aspect—the appearance of karma being created.

Originally there was no appearance, for the Dharmakāya is formless and contains not a single thing. The Four Books likewise speak of "the first opening of primordial chaos". In that primordial state there was originally no appearance; yet, being restless, we allowed wandering thoughts to stir. This is called true suchness failing to abide, the mind itself moving chaotically.

We thought that if awareness existed, something ought to be seen: why was nothing seen, and why was there emptiness? The more we pursued appearances, the more violently the mind moved—movement added to movement. Thus the karmic aspect is produced by movement. The transition from non-existence to existence is the perceiving aspect, and the appearance that finally emerges within primordial chaos is the objective aspect.

The three subtle aspects are therefore karmic obscurations. They cannot be exhausted through practice in a single lifetime. Even at the stage of Equal Enlightenment—after the ten bodhisattva grounds and before Wondrous Enlightenment—the final fraction of ignorance remains unbroken. This too is karma and must still be carried when one is reborn in the Western Pure Land; hence the expression "rebirth carrying karma".

It does not mean that, while meditating, reciting the Buddha's name and practicing the Dharma, we may also do wrong and create karma without consequence. Once we have taken refuge in Buddhism and begun practicing the Dharma, we must not create further evil karma. To do wrong then is knowingly to violate the Dharma and makes the offense still more serious. Wrongdoing leads to the hells; it is not karma that may simply be carried to the Pure Land.

We must therefore take great care not to misunderstand "rebirth carrying karma". We should practice every good and refrain from every evil, however slight. Some Pure Land practitioners think, "Since we may be reborn carrying karma and ten recitations at death are enough for rebirth in the West, it does not matter if we do not practice now."

But if you do not practice now, will you be able to recite at death? That ability depends upon the effort you make now. I have seen many people at death suffer terribly as the four elements dispersed. They could not recite at all and did not even wish to hear recitation: "Oh, how irritating! My mind is in utter confusion."

Why? Their minds were impure and they could not bear to leave this world, where they had been born and where their relatives, wealth, reputation and status remained. Added to the unbearable pain of the four elements dispersing, these attachments left them unable to recite the Buddha's name. The ability to recite at death depends upon present practice.

One must possess strong samādhi so that, even when illness and pain come, one can still recite and arouse right mindfulness. How can one neglect practice now and rely upon the final moments? A fellow practitioner once said, "It does not matter if I do not practice now. When I am about to die, one week of practice will be enough.

Does not the Amitābha Sūtra say that if one practices for one day, two days … up to seven days, with one-pointed concentration, that Buddha will appear before one?" Later, I saw that he could not make use of even that week; he was in such pain and confusion that he no longer knew how to practice. Grand talk is not enough. Rebirth carrying karma through ten recitations at death is far from simple. To be secure, we must practice diligently now and attain one-pointed concentration.

Chan is the same; it never departs from Chan contemplation. For example, the Faxiang school requires the practice of Vijnaptimatrata (consciousness-only) contemplation, the Tiantai school requires the practice of the Great Cessation and Contemplation, and there is also the investigation of Huatou—all of these are forms of Chan contemplation. In investigating a critical phrase, one must arouse a sensation of doubt and gather one's entire body and mind into that single mass of doubt. If one can truly do this, good news will come.

The danger is that a scattered mind cannot arouse the sensation of doubt; one must therefore enter deeply into meditative contemplation. Esoteric Buddhism places even greater emphasis upon contemplation through the empowerment of the three mysteries: body (mudrā), speech (mantra) and mind (contemplation). Forming a mudrā with the hands and sitting cross-legged without moving the hands or feet is the mystery of body; continuously reciting a mantra is the mystery of speech; and maintaining contemplative awareness is the mystery of mind.

Esoteric Buddhism is therefore also inseparable from contemplation. Its practices involving appearances depend still more upon meditative contemplation: contemplating seed syllables, light, Buddhas, the moon disc, the sun disc, winds, channels and bindus. Not one of these methods dispenses with meditative contemplation.

The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State differs from other methods. It directly points out that, at death, everyone experiences the dawning of the death-light and radiates luminosity. This luminosity is not produced by practice; even those who have not practiced radiate it after death. Our intrinsic nature is endowed with luminosity, but, deluded by appearances, we do not recognize it.

If we remember clearly the process described in the text, then, when consciousness leaves the body at death and a Dharma companion reminds us, we may awaken, merge with the luminosity of our intrinsic nature and attain accomplishment.

It is like an actor who forgets a line on stage: when the prompter supplies it, the actor remembers what to do. In this sense, the teaching does indeed offer liberation without meditative contemplation. Yet we must not seize upon this as an excuse to stop practicing and let the mind run wild.

As soon as you hear that no practice is needed, you stop practicing and let your wild horse run free! That ruins everything. If you do not practice diligently now, you have no power at all; when you die you will be like someone drunk on old wine, dazed and muddled, and even if someone beside you reminds you, you will not wake up.

The luminosity appears only briefly—for the time it takes to eat a meal, at most half an hour. Thereafter, the karma created during life unfolds scene by scene like a film. We then follow these karmic appearances and miss the opportunity for liberation. Moreover, favorable conditions at death are indispensable.

The Buddha repeatedly cautions in the Amitābha Sūtra that one cannot be born in that land with only scant roots of goodness, merit and favorable conditions. Timing and circumstances are therefore crucial. A dying person may, for example, be rushed to hospital, injected with stimulants and subjected to forceful resuscitation.

A dying person is already in great distress; could he stay at ease if this were done? Could this method still be performed for him? It could not. So it is best to be careful and cautious, and we must all practice diligently.

People's capacities also differ. Some encounter Pure Land practice early but practice poorly, merely going through their morning and evening services. Others know nothing of it until a virtuous teacher tells them at death that reciting the Buddha's name can bring rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

A person of great roots of goodness may then let go of everything and immediately arouse right mindfulness: "Amitābha Buddha, Amitābha Buddha ..." That single thought may bring rebirth in the West and liberation. We cannot generalize. Liberation without meditative contemplation is indeed possible, but while we can practice, it is better to practice diligently, lest unfavourable conditions at death cause us to miss liberation in this life.

If our practice is ineffective during life and we do not attain Buddhahood, we must rely upon this teaching for liberation in the intermediate state. Even Master Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, attained accomplishment through liberation in the intermediate state. During his life he had to reform the discipline of the Nyingma school, discarding its dross, retaining its essence and strictly upholding the precepts.

As a great teacher, he led the community and laboured for others, leaving little time for his own practice. We must therefore practice diligently and never be careless. Why do we fail to attain Buddhahood while alive? To speak frankly, it is because we are unwilling to exert ourselves or let go of everything; greed, anger and ignorance remain powerful.

If we were truly willing to let go, everyone could succeed. "Lay down the butcher's knife and become a Buddha on the spot." If we are willing to let go, the very present is it, for we are Buddhas originally. Upon awakening, we understand that reality is formless: it is the vividly aware spiritual knowing that contains all things as great energy.

All appearances are false and cannot be grasped. We must wear away our habitual tendencies amid circumstances. The instant attachment is about to arise, we must awaken sharply. Chan calls this "herding the ox": grasp the ox's reins firmly, raise the whip high and strike as soon as attachment begins. Practiced in this way, accomplishment is certain.

Those who fail to attain accomplishment during life do so because they are unwilling to work hard. They seek comfort now—eating rich food, dancing and playing mahjong—and cling fiercely to appearances, unwilling to relinquish anything.

How could they succeed without diligent practice? We are Buddhas originally. If we eliminate habitual tendencies, break through ignorance and cease clinging, how could we fail to attain accomplishment? Do not discriminate between one Dharma method as high and another as low. Upon attaining Buddhahood, one knows that "all dharmas are equal, without high or low".

Śākyamuni Buddha long foresaw that beings in the Dharma-ending Age would be unwilling to practice diligently, and therefore established the Pure Land method so that we might rely upon the Buddha's compassionate power to receive and guide us to rebirth. Otherwise, there would have been no need for the Pure Land method. Later, Guru Padmasambhava taught The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State as the final means of liberation in human life. The various Dharma methods were established through the urgent compassion of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, according to the differing capacities of beings; the methods themselves are neither high nor low.

It is an immense blessing that everyone now has the opportunity to read this book. After undergoing birth and death throughout countless lives and kalpas in the six realms, we at last have assurance of liberation. Such great merit could not arise from roots of goodness planted before merely one, two or three Buddhas. Do not regard this lightly. We must recollect the text constantly and become thoroughly familiar with its contents, so that a single reminder at death may bring liberation.

No matter who you are, whether intelligent or foolish, everyone is afraid of death and wants to live a few more years. As the saying goes, "Better a wretched life than a good death." This means that even the best death is not as beneficial as living and suffering. When we say we are afraid, we are actually afraid of death.

If you are not afraid of death, what else is there to fear? Some say, "I'm afraid of ghosts and monsters." Being captured by ghosts and monsters—that's still being afraid of death. In fact, "death" is merely the decay of the body; the essence remains intact. Therefore, Confucius said, “If in the morning I hear the Way, I may die content in the evening.”

This saying perfectly describes Dharma. Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism share many commonalities. We should especially study Confucius's Analects, as it deals with worldly matters. "The Buddha's teachings are in the world; enlightenment is not separate from the world. We must understand the principles, norms, ethics, and reasoning within worldly matters.

If we don't understand worldly matters, our character is inadequate; how can we become Buddhas? Therefore, ethics and morality are even more important for Buddhists. "If I hear the Way in the morning, I can die content by evening." If one hears the Great Way in the morning and understands these principles, one has no regrets even if one dies in the evening.

Because we haven't wasted this life, our Dharmakāya has been liberated, our wisdom life has been saved, and we can escape the cycle of rebirth and not die. In fact, we are originally beyond birth and death, because Buddha-nature is unborn and undying, neither going nor coming, neither moving nor stirring, neither increasing nor decreasing, neither defiled nor pure.

Some people say, "Buddhism only cultivates innate nature but not life, and this method is unhelpful; Taoism's dual cultivation of innate nature and life is better." Alas, these people are truly confused! Our Buddha-nature encompasses both nature and life;

Because Buddha-nature is all-capable, everlasting, neither arising nor ceasing—is that not long life? What life could be longer than this? Whereas the yang-spirit refined by Daoists is described as “even after a million kalpas, it still falls into emptiness and extinction.” How can it be compared with our Buddha-nature? The yang-spirit is only a mind-born body produced by the manas consciousness; it is still false.

Buddha-nature is immeasurable life. The three characters of Amitābha mean "immeasurable life" and "immeasurable light." Doesn't immeasurable life include lifespan? What need is there for cultivating both nature and body? The physical body will ultimately decay, because where there is creation, there is decay; where there is birth, there is death. This is dialectics.

The Diamond Sūtra says, "What is called Buddhism is not Buddhism," which is also dialectics. Therefore, Engels said, "Dialectics originated from Buddhism." Some people remain unsatisfied, wanting to cultivate both nature and body, which is a mistake. This procedure is called the ascetic practice of heretics, where the body will inevitably decay.

The body is a house; what's the use of cultivating the house? We should cultivate the person inside the house—that is, Buddha-nature. Therefore, when we truly hear the Great Way and grasp its essence, we are no longer afraid of death. Especially after reading this book, when our consciousness emerges at the moment of death and sees the intermediate state, we can naturally realize the true nature of reality. This is because Buddha-nature is fundamentally a powerful light.

We cannot emit light because of delusion and inverted thoughts. At the moment of death, the four elements disperse, causing pain and confusion. Delusional thoughts cannot arise, and at that time, light is emitted. This phenomenon is referred to as the discovery of the death light. Although we emit light at this time, it is like being drunk, unaware of anything.

This light lasts for a while, and karmic obstacles appear like scenes from a movie. Our consciousness follows these scenes and is thus pulled away by karmic obstacles. The light during this brief moment of confusion is exactly the same as the light released when we break through during meditation. We must recognize it; this is our Original Face.

At that time, once reminded, we unite with the light and can attain the Sambhogakāya Buddha and achieve liberation. Therefore, strong light is good, dim light is bad, and those who prefer dim light will fall into the three evil realms. Understanding these things will prevent you from going astray or taking the wrong path, and you won't be afraid of any spiritual experiences. Fear is always about fear of death.

I often tell those who practice Dharma, "Don't be afraid of any spiritual experiences you encounter. What's there to fear if you're not going to die?" One of our fellow practitioners experienced a sudden activation of his energy channels during practice, and it felt like they exploded with a "pop!" "Oh no! I'm doomed! My head is going to explode!" He was terrified. Actually, there's no need to be afraid; your head won't explode.

It's just that the energy channels are being activated to help open up our meridians, what practitioners of Qigong call opening the Ren, Du, and other extraordinary meridians. When these meridians are opened, vibrations occur; the result is a change in the body. What are you afraid of? If your body doesn't change, it means you haven't practiced well enough. When your practice is effective, your body will change.

If you see a state of meditative absorption, don't be afraid either; it's all illusory. Some individuals encounter pythons, tigers, or lions and exclaim, "Oh no! I'm terrified!" What exactly are you afraid of? It's all because our minds are not empty and pure; the sixth consciousness manifests these states. As long as we ignore them, they will immediately disappear.

Once, a fellow disciple of mine was meditating when a large, hairy hand, as big as a fan, suddenly slammed onto his face. "Ouch, that hairy hand is suffocating me!" he cried. He quickly chanted this mantra and that mantra, but nothing worked. In desperation, he finally thought, "It's fine."

I've heard Master say the physical body is illusory anyway. "I'd rather be suffocated by this hand. "The moment this thought arose, the hairy hand vanished. This shows that all these are illusory and unreal. All Dharma methods and mantras are not as valuable as a pure and empty mind.

When the mind is truly pure and empty, all phenomena disappear. Therefore, when meditating, don't be afraid of any phenomena you see; they are all illusory. Remember, "Whatever bears characteristics is illusory. "Even if you see a Buddha, don't be pleased. If 'an image of' Buddha comes, slay the Buddha; if 'an image of' demon comes, slay the demon—it is all unattainable.

The Buddha's teachings are perfectly integrated, and the more knowledgeable people are, the more they appreciate them. Many Europeans and Americans today have left Catholicism or Christianity for Buddhism because the Buddhadharma is scientific and can be verified. The doctrine most difficult to accept is rebirth within the six realms.

Some ask, "How can there still be rebirth in the six realms after death? We cannot see or touch them; perhaps they do not exist." Yet they most certainly do. If we practice according to the appropriate methods and reach a certain level, we can see that the six realms truly exist. Their forms are simply too subtle for ordinary eyes.

We cannot, for example, see the forms of the Form Realm or the Formless Realm. The Form Realm has wondrous forms finer than those of the Desire Realm. Nor is the Formless Realm utterly without appearance; at progressively higher levels, appearances become ever subtler and fainter. When science becomes still more advanced, it will be able to photograph the intermediate-state body, and people will then believe without doubt.

The intermediate-state being is what is commonly called the soul or consciousness; it truly exists. It continues to transmigrate: those who do good and benefit humanity ascend to the heavens, while those who do evil descend into the hells.

Some ask, "Why, then, do people not remember their former lives? Have they drunk a potion of forgetfulness?" No. They become confused through entering the womb, dwelling in the womb and leaving the womb. At conception, the intermediate-state being is driven into the mother's womb when the man emits semen.

The being remains for nine and a half months in the turbid environment of semen, blood and flesh and becomes dazed. This is called the intermediate state of gestation, which will be discussed later. At birth, with head down and feet above, it is forcibly squeezed through the pelvis as though between two great mountains.

Through the three processes of entering, dwelling in and leaving the womb, it becomes confused and forgets the former life. Only a Buddha can pass through these processes without confusion.

Then someone may ask, "How is it that some people know about their previous lives?" There certainly are such cases. Newspapers and magazines have reported that a Hollywood star was reborn in Bulgaria and knew about his previous life. When he told the things of his previous life, people checked them, and they were not wrong in the slightest.

Several children in Yunnan, Guizhou and elsewhere in China have likewise remembered former lives. Why? The explanation given here is that, through favorable conditions, just as another intermediate-state being was about to be born, they drove it out and took its place. This is called "seizing a womb".

Like seizing a house during the Cultural Revolution, one expels the occupant and moves in. Having avoided the three stages of entering, dwelling in and leaving the womb, they retain memories of the former life. Thus, the teaching maintains that rebirth in the six realms is real and that death is not the end.

The Buddha's words are not groundless assertions; he personally verified what he taught, and we should not doubt it.

There were no microscopes in the Buddha's time, so how could he have said, "An ordinary person sees a cup of water; a Buddha sees myriad living organisms"? There were no telescopes either, yet he spoke of innumerable suns and innumerable worlds in the sky.

Today, bacteria in water, innumerable suns and innumerable worlds can all be verified. We can now travel to the moon in spacecraft. Scientists say there are no people or living beings there, but the teaching presented here maintains that beings inhabit both the moon and the sun.

You will say, "Oh, that can't be right—wouldn't people on the sun be burned to death?" In fact, the people on the sun and moon do not have bodies like ours. Our bodies need oxygen and cannot survive without it. Their bodies cannot be burned to death, and we cannot see them.

Human eyes cannot even see ghosts in our own world; how could they see beings on the sun or moon? If you wish to see them, you must practice the Dharma diligently, but never cling to appearances, for such clinging leads one into demonic states. Thus, what the Buddha says is entirely correct: he speaks what is true, what is real and what is not deceptive.

The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State should likewise not be doubted merely because some passages are difficult to understand. Master Taixu said, "Set aside for the time being what you do not understand; do not

doubt or disparage it." As practice gradually deepens, understanding will come. The words spoken by the Buddha contain no errors and are not false. Unlike people nowadays, many of whom enjoy deceiving others. For example: Medicine is meant to cure people, and human life is of paramount importance, yet there are still people who make fake medicine to harm others—it is truly appalling.

(V) An Explanation of Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State

The title The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State is rather cumbersome in translation. Put simply, it means "the method of liberation through hearing the teaching in the intermediate state". The term "intermediate state" refers to the intermediate-state being: after the previous body has perished and before the next body has formed, there is an intermediate subtle body governed chiefly by the wind element.

Our present body is governed chiefly by the earth element and encumbered by its physical shell. Free of this great burden, the intermediate-state being possesses minor supernormal abilities, though not the complete powers of a Buddha. It undergoes death and rebirth every seven days.

During the first seven days after death it remains relatively tall. At the second seven-day period, the former intermediate-state being dies and another is born, shorter than the previous one. It becomes progressively shorter, and the conditions of rebirth progressively worse. Liberation should therefore be effected as early as possible.

This teaching enables the intermediate-state being to attain liberation upon hearing the instructions. It is consequently one of the treasured scriptures of the Tibetan esoteric tradition, a supreme teaching established by Guru Padmasambhava.

Guru Padmasambhava came from India to Tibet and established the Nyingma, or "Red", school. He was therefore the first patriarch of the Tibetan Nyingma school, though not the first patriarch of Tibetan Buddhism. His lineage was transmitted by mind-seal from mind to mind, as is the lineage of all Buddhas and patriarchs: what I understand and through which I attain the Way, another understands in the same manner and thereby also attains it.

Everyone attains the Way in the same way, like characters printed from the same seal, with no difference. This is called sealing mind with mind. Because Guru Padmasambhava rose bodily into the sky and attained the Way, he saw clearly what states a person goes through at the time of death.

Out of compassion, and because human birth is difficult to obtain, he recorded what he had seen in the intermediate state and the means of liberation, so that those whose practice had not been perfected during life would not miss this final opportunity.

Having written it down, he concealed it in a cave without transmitting it, and no one knew of it. Why? The transmission of every teaching requires the proper time and conditions. Likewise, in our practice, the time and conditions must ripen before our original nature opens and we personally realize Buddha-nature.

Later, Guru Padmasambhava manifested as Master Karma Lingpa and brought forth the hidden teaching for dissemination. The account given here says that Chinese Esoteric Buddhism arose similarly: the Buddha wrote the esoteric texts and concealed them in an iron stūpa; when the proper time and conditions had ripened, Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna retrieved them and propagated them.

As everyone knows, the Buddhas of the three times did not explain the forty-nine-day process following death, still less how liberation might be attained after death. Many teachings in the Buddhist scriptures require practice before one can attain Buddhahood. The sole teaching by which Buddhahood may be attained without prior practice is Guru Padmasambhava's "The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State".

Seeing that sentient beings—especially those of the Dharma-ending Age—were unwilling to practice wholeheartedly, Guru Padmasambhava, moved by profound compassion, left us this supreme esoteric teaching. Indeed, how many people today are willing to practice with complete dedication? Most merely go through the motions.

Because they do not apply themselves sincerely, even excellent methods fail to bring a response, and the physical body does not dissolve into emptiness. Some who recite the Buddha's name, for example, do not unite mind and speech: the mouth recites while the mind does not. Even while reciting, they calculate this and that, their thoughts in utter disorder.

I have seen many elderly people reciting the Buddha's name while gossiping about other families. They are not reciting properly at all. Master Hanshan said, "One who recites the Buddha's name should be like someone pushing a heavily laden cart uphill, pressing forward with all his strength." The Buddha's name must be present in the mind, each syllable passing distinctly through it.

The same applies to mantra recitation: each syllable of the mantra must pass through the mind, while the ears hear the recited sound clearly. This is called "reciting with the mind and hearing with the ears". Practiced in this way, one will certainly enter samādhi and the body will dissolve into emptiness.

How could it do so otherwise? Some people remain aware of the body yet think they have entered emptiness. Asked whether they can still hear external sounds, they answer that they can.

Then they have not entered emptiness. In genuine emptiness, sound has vanished and the entire world has vanished; there remains only solitary, vivid awareness—vivid means perfectly clear, while solitary awareness means the absolute true mind without a second. Someone may say, "I can hear sounds, but I do not distinguish what is being said."

This still does not count as entering samādhi; it falls far short. The body has not dissolved, the mind has not become empty and pure, and one has not broken free. Out of compassion, therefore, Guru Padmasambhava wrote this method of liberation in the intermediate state so that people might be awakened at death.

Of course, if we can truly sever delusion and realize the truth, we shall have no need of this teaching. If our minds remain unmoved amid circumstances and do not cling to appearances, we attain accomplishment while alive. An ancient master said, "For one truly awakened, life becomes the source of merit and, at death, one is a Sambhogakāya Buddha."

In other words, one who is truly awakened benefits the community while alive and, at death, becomes a Sambhogakāya Buddha, without passing through the intermediate state. Thus, those of superior capacity do not fall into the intermediate state. Nor do those genuinely reborn in the Western Pure Land: as soon as they die, they see Amitābha Buddha coming to receive and guide them and are reborn in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Those of genuinely superior capacity therefore have no need of liberation in the intermediate state.

We should understand, however, that transcending the Three Realms horizontally through rebirth in the Western Pure Land is difficult, while severing delusion, realizing the truth and leaving the Three Realms vertically is still more difficult. Accomplishment of the Dharmakāya is beyond those of middling or lower capacity. Our habitual tendencies from countless lives and kalpas are extremely strong, like a foul latrine in which filth has accumulated for years: the stench cannot be removed at once.

Hence the saying, "Although the truth may be realized suddenly, deluded emotions are difficult to end." It is therefore mistaken for practitioners of Pure Land, Chan or Esoteric Buddhism to think that they need not become familiar with The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State. In Chan, for example, those of middling or lower capacity do not awaken easily.

Practitioners must arouse a sensation of doubt, but many cannot do so and merely repeat the critical phrase. For them, the Pure Land method of Buddha-recitation may be more accessible: the Buddha receives and guides them at death to rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Yet recitation is insufficient unless one attains one-pointed concentration.

The Buddha's compassionate guidance is unconditional; even if you neither believe in the Buddha nor recite his name, Buddhas and bodhisattvas still come compassionately to guide you. But if your mind is as turbid as muddy water, you cannot see them and may even flee in terror from the intense Buddha-light.

The capacities of beings in the Dharma-ending Age are poor; not everyone can achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. Even Tiantai's founding patriarch, Master Zhiyi, delayed his own practice while establishing teachings and contemplations to guide beings. At death, as he was about to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, he said, "I have attained only the middle grade."

We therefore still need this teaching. Familiarity with it enables us to recognize what occurs in the intermediate state after death. When that state appears and someone nearby reminds us, we may attain liberation; even those of lesser capacity may be reborn in a Buddha's Pure Land and receive genuine benefit.

The book contains an account of Guru Padmasambhava's manifestations; I will say only a little here. Eight years after Śākyamuni Buddha passed away, Guru Padmasambhava was born on a lotus in the Dhanakośa Sea in western India. He was manifested through the combination of Amitābha Buddha's great vow, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva's great compassion, and Śākyamuni Buddha's great wisdom.

We often say, "The lotus emerges from the mud unstained." So the lotus here is symbolic: it represents purity without stain, cause and effect occurring together, perfect and unobstructed. Guru Padmasambhava was complete with the wisdom of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas. He came from western India to Tibet and laid the foundation of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism.

So he is the great patriarch of the Nyingma school, the Red Sect of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism (the esoteric Buddhism of Tibet at that time was the irregular Black Sect). Later the Yellow, White, and Flower Sects were divided from Esoteric Buddhism. Guru Padmasambhava rose bodily and became a Buddha, unlike the patriarchs of the Chan school, who all left physical bodies behind after passing away.

Some left incorrupt bodies, such as the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, whose body remains at Nanhua Monastery. Another was Master Shitou Xiqian, a grand-disciple of the Sixth Patriarch. He had originally sought to become the Sixth Patriarch's disciple, but when he arrived the patriarch was approaching death and directed him to study with his senior Dharma-brother Qingyuan Xingsi. Shitou Xiqian's body also remained incorrupt. During the Japanese invasion of China, it was stolen by a Japanese dentist and is now preserved in a Japanese museum, where it is displayed once a year.

The scriptures circulating in China were translated from Indian languages. Before the Śūraṅgama Sūtra reached China, Master Zhiyi, founding patriarch of Tiantai, heard its title and daily bowed toward the west, hoping it would arrive soon.

Yet none of the Buddhist canons then circulating in monasteries—including the Qisha, Dragon and Taishō canons—contained this teaching of liberation in the intermediate state; Layman Sun Jingfeng had not even heard its title. Thirty years before translating it, he took refuge under Vajra Master Norla.

“Vajra” means that which destroys everything yet cannot itself be destroyed; here it symbolizes indestructibility. A master should be able to destroy all demonic obstructions for us and enable us to perfect the fruit of Buddhahood. A true Vajra Master must possess such qualities. Master Norla visited Shanghai when he traveled from Tibet to teach in inland China.

Among the great masters teaching in Tibet, he was regarded here as the wisest and as thoroughly versed in prajñā, whereas other masters understood Tibetan esoteric ritual but were less versed in prajñā. Buddhism flourished in Kham and Tibet, with Esoteric Buddhism especially prominent.

Phowa was widely transmitted, and many people in Shanghai practiced it. It is a relatively simple practice and, in Tibetan Vajrayāna, is often undertaken before other methods. If the other methods do not succeed, phowa is treated as a safeguard through which one may be reborn in the Western Pure Land and continue practicing there.

Later, Layman Sun Jingfeng studied under a Mongolian teacher called Master Bao Khenpo. Bao Khenpo told him of an exceedingly secret and precious scripture—the very text now under discussion, The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State.

At the time, he kept it so secret that he would not reveal even its title. He said that anyone who heard it seven times could attain Buddhahood without practice. Sun Jingfeng was perplexed: how could anything be so easy? Could success really come without practice? He suspected that Bao Khenpo was deceiving him, but this was not so.

Why hear it seven times? After hearing something once or twice, people often pay little attention; after seven hearings, they become familiar with it and remember it. Christianity too speaks of accomplishment in seven days: a week forms one complete cycle.

Yet the number must not be taken rigidly. Must it be precisely seven—would eight or ten not do? The point is completeness and thorough familiarity with the text. If we are still not familiar with it after listening seven times, then we must listen to it a few more times. This is just like how Chan (Zen) practitioners do their cultivation by "holding a seven-day retreat" (Da Qi)—it carries the exact same meaning.

"Holding a seven-day retreat" means that from start to finish, from beginning to end, one must see immediate results, succeed in meditation, and attain enlightenment within a strict, set timeframe. If accomplishment does not come in seven days, one undertakes another seven, then another, continuing until completion. Even after becoming familiar with the text, we must not forget it but constantly recollect its instructions: when luminosity begins to shine at death, that luminosity is our own nature; if we recognize and merge with it in the intermediate state, we shall attain Buddhahood.

Remember these teachings: at what point we begin to emit light, and that the luminosity is ourselves; if in the intermediate state we see the luminosity and merge with it, we will certainly become Buddhas. This scripture is truly of immeasurable merit! Those without blessings cannot hear it. That we can hear it today is a supreme blessing, an endless blessing! We should think of it as something extremely hard to encounter.

Guru Khenpo Bao kept the scripture’s name secret and would not tell it—not out of stinginess but out of respect—for fear that if it were told casually, people would not value it and would take it lightly. For example, when we speak of realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature, we say, “Seeing one’s nature is not hard; realizing the mind is also easy.”

Some people, hearing this, think it so simple that they pay no attention, show no respect, and let it slip by. But in fact seeing one’s nature is not hard. As explained before, “nature” is our energy or capacity for seeing, hearing, perceiving, and knowing.

The capacity by which the eyes see and the ears hear is our Buddha-nature. There is nothing extraordinary about it; it is readily accessible. Yet some let this teaching enter one ear and leave the other. The ancients were different.

Once they heard, “This is it!” they immediately treasured it, guarded it continuously and never relaxed their vigilance.

People today think it unremarkable; some lack even the merit to consider or accept it and ask, “Is this Buddha-nature? If so, why do I have no supernormal powers?” They do not realize that they have merely received a hint. They have not dissolved the body and world into emptiness or personally realized the truth.

Body, thought, world and empty space must all be shattered without remainder. Nor is a single dissolution into emptiness enough, for habitual tendencies accumulated throughout countless lives and kalpas cannot ordinarily be eliminated in one stroke. This should not be stated absolutely: rare beings of exceptionally great capacity may reach the end and succeed at once, but they are exceedingly few.

With regard to practice, the Buddha speaks in the Śūraṅgama Sūtra of two approaches. In one, “the principle is realized suddenly and, through that realization, everything is simultaneously dissolved.”

One instantly understands that the nature of seeing, hearing, perceiving and knowing is one’s Original Face; at awakening, everything dissolves completely and supernormal powers arise. Such people exist, but they are exceedingly rare. Most experience sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation, corresponding to the other approach: “Phenomenal matters are not removed suddenly; they are exhausted in due sequence.”

One must practice gradually amid phenomena, eliminating little by little the habitual tendencies of countless lives and kalpas: “As ignorance is broken fraction by fraction, the Dharmakāya is realized fraction by fraction.” When realization is complete, supernormal powers arise naturally. Thus causes must be exhausted slowly, through practice and realization step by step.

Chan practitioners say, “Although the principle may be suddenly awakened to, deluded emotions are difficult to eliminate at once.” These are our attachments to deluded feelings, knowledge and views—our notions of self and personal opinions. They must be eliminated gradually by tempering the mind amid circumstances. Merely understanding a little principle cannot immediately produce supernormal powers.

After understanding, the essential task is to practice and personally verify the principle. We must refine ourselves amid circumstances, remaining constantly aware and reducing attachment again and again until habitual tendencies and the three poisons of greed, anger and ignorance are exhausted. When not the slightest tendency remains, the Way is attained. There are methods of sudden awakening and gradual cultivation; everything depends upon how we take responsibility for practice. If habitual tendencies remain unchanged and we cannot bear the responsibility, what shall we do at the critical moment of birth and death? We must then rely upon liberation in the intermediate state.

More than twenty years before translating this scripture, Layman Sun Jingfeng saw The Tibetan Book of the Dead, translated from Tibetan into English by Dr W. Y. Evans-Wentz and Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup. It was later translated from English into Chinese by the lay Buddhist Zhang Miaolian (Bodhi Miaoding). Layman Zhao Hongzhu subsequently produced another Chinese version from the English, written in four-character verse.

Later I saw another edition, translated into Chinese by Layman Zhao Hongzhu from the English version, with the Chinese in verses of four characters per line. Verses are like poems and hymns, and this one is a notch above Zhang Miaoding’s translation, but because of the need to rhyme, the meaning departs a little.

The Tibetan title is Bardo Thödol, also known as The Tibetan Book of the Dead. “Bardo” means the intermediate state: the subtle being between the dissolution of the former body and formation of the next. “Thödol” means liberation of the intermediate-state being through hearing the teaching—liberation through hearing.

You may wonder: can the dead still hear? They can! Because our seeing, hearing, perceiving, and knowing are not the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, or body, but our Buddha-nature. Scientists today also say that it is not the eyes that see things but the brain. If the brain does not function, the eyes cannot see.

Likewise, what hears sounds is not the ears but the brain. If the brain does not function, the ears cannot hear. Moreover, the sound the ears hear is coarse and is called “listening” ( ); the sound the brain hears is fine and is called “hearing” ( ). That is why the title of this scripture contains both the character and the character .

Someone once did an experiment: during surgery, a very weak electric current was passed to the brain, and the brain could hear music in the air that the human ear cannot hear, while the person beside him could not hear it, because that person was hearing with the ears and not with the nerves of the brain.

This shows that we do not see with the eyes either. The eyes are like eyeglasses: they work only through the brain, and only then can we see. As the saying goes, “When the mind is elsewhere, one looks but does not see and listens but does not hear.” That is to say, when we are not attentive, we neither see what is in front of us nor hear the sounds beside our ears.

The brain and the intermediate-state body spoken of here are both manifestations of the manas consciousness, because the notion of self and attachment to self are formed in the manas consciousness. If one’s practice is good, the manas consciousness can leave the physical body; this is the mind-born body, which is what Daoists call the yang-spirit.

He has spiritual powers: without a body, and without eyes, ears, nose, or tongue, he can see, hear, and smell. So when we speak to the intermediate-state being, he hears us perfectly clearly. In fact, he is also speaking to us. After death, the spirit-consciousness (the intermediate-state body) comes out.

He may not even know that he has died. Only when he hears his family weeping bitterly and sees his corpse lying on the bed does he realize: I am dead! He too calls out to his family and is very sad, unable to bear leaving them. He tries to burrow back into the body but cannot get in, because the physical body is already ruined.

It is like an electric lamp: once the bulb is broken, it will not light again even when current comes. So at this time he grieves and weeps and wanders about in all directions. The intermediate-state body is just such a stage. So you must speak to him well, and

you must not cry. If you cry, he cries beside you, and with his mind in such turmoil he cannot be liberated. The Pure Land school says the same: when a person dies, nobody should cry; instead help him with Buddha-recitation and help him be reborn in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss. This is the reason.

When Layman Sun Jingfeng saw these two translations, he knew that the book truly existed, although he had not seen the Tibetan original.

He exclaimed, “Before reaching China, long renowned for Mahāyāna Buddhism, this book had actually reached Western Europe!” Many European and American countries were then studying Buddhism, and, according to the passage, many highly educated readers considered the Buddhist scriptures more integrated and compelling than the Christian Old and New Testaments and consequently converted to Buddhism.

The propagation of every teaching requires the proper time and conditions. Since the book had already reached Europe and America, there was no longer any need for secrecy, and our present access to it is a blessing. The contribution of Laymen Zhang and Zhao deserves praise.

But because Eastern and Western cultures differ, the ways of expressing things differ somewhat. Take names: Chinese put the family name first and the given name after, whereas in the West the given name comes first. Moreover, one sentence often carries many implied meanings, not just one. This is especially true of Chinese characters, where one character often has many meanings.

So when Western scholars translate profound Eastern Buddhist teachings, misunderstandings easily arise. In addition, in the esoteric division of Buddhism the Buddhas are countless and their names are many—just as the Buddhas of the six directions in the Amitābha Sūtra have many names. The technical terms and nouns in the scriptures are more numerous still.

It is very difficult to explain the meanings of words clearly without becoming attached to the literal sense. We often say: “To explain meaning according to the words wrongs the Buddhas of the three times; to depart from the sūtra by a single word is to speak the words of Māra.” That is, one cannot simply interpret according to the words; it is not good if the meaning contained in the sūtra is not brought out. So the hardest thing in explaining a sūtra is called “hitting the mark of the words.”

That is, one must bring out the central meaning: which is the most important central idea, and how it can enable us to awaken and see our nature. Terms can be set aside; one must put forward the central idea. This is called choosing words and fixing terms.

How could one write it without understanding it oneself? The versions by Zhang and Zhao passed first from Tibetan into English and then from English into Chinese.

Sun Jingfeng reasoned that even one translator working from a single original would scarcely produce identical results on separate occasions, whether translating literally, freely or by combining the two. After two stages of translation, errors and omissions were unavoidable.

It would be best to see the Tibetan original and translate from it into Chinese, which would make the content fuller. Because Layman Sun was proficient in Tibetan (in this book he says he knows a little Tibetan, out of modesty), he wanted to obtain the Tibetan original to check against. He had this aspiration, but could not obtain the original text of this scripture, and it weighed on his heart like something buried there.

“Where there is a will, there is a way!” After Guru Khenpo Bao passed away, when his scripture chest was being sorted, the original text of this precious scripture was actually found.

Layman Sun was as delighted as if he had found a treasure; his long-held wish was at last fulfilled! The whole scripture is a handwritten copy, not printed, because this scripture was written by Guru Padmasambhava on leaves (the scriptures of Tibet and India were written on the leaves of the bodhi tree, called Sanskrit leaves).

The Tibetan original contained more material than the English version and comprised fourteen sections, to be discussed later. The section titled the Dazhuo Mantra Text, for example, contained many mantras—reproduced at the end of the book—through which an intermediate-state being might be freed from the suffering caused by unwholesome karma. Zhang’s and Zhao’s translations gave only the section title.

The original also contained a Collection of Verses for Releasing Karma, verses for removing karmic obscurations in lines of four, five or seven characters; this too was absent from their translations.

Comparison showed that the two versions were incomplete, and Sun Jingfeng resolved to devote the rest of his life to retranslation. He first produced a draft, then repeatedly revised and reorganized it for fear that the wording might be inappropriate or imperfect, before storing it in a chest. When he reached the age of seventy—he had been younger when translating—he feared the manuscript might be dispersed or lost, so he reorganized and reordered it and completed the translation.

To help readers understand and remember the scripture, Layman Sun annotated its terminology and added two maṇḍala charts, thereby making the whole text coherent. Just as an essay or book requires a continuous structure, the blood vessels and channels of the body must also remain unobstructed.

Within our bodies are a negative pole and a positive pole. When our thinking is disordered and deluded thoughts abound, the two poles do not unite. So we must practice until the mind is truly pure; then the poles will naturally fuse and the eight extraordinary meridians will naturally open. But one must not seek this deliberately. Deliberate seeking is delusive thought and only blocks the channels and winds. Just let everything go, and the channels and winds will open naturally.

“Maṇḍala” means the practice place or altar where Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and their retinues gather in full. Practitioners of esoteric Dharma all have a maṇḍala.

The maṇḍala of our Heart-of-Heart Dharma has Śākyamuni Buddha at its head; below him is Maitreya Bodhisattva, below Maitreya is Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, and below Avalokiteśvara is the Child of Luminosity; on both sides are Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, the Four Great Vajra Guardians, and others.

Because the establishment of the altar belongs to the Child of Luminosity, who secretly learned the esoteric mantra of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma from the Buddha and can thereby perform great functions, the Child of Luminosity is in the Heart-of-Heart maṇḍala. There are many kinds of maṇḍala: the samaya maṇḍala, the great maṇḍala, and the activity maṇḍala (that is, the karma maṇḍala).

The great maṇḍala is the place, mentioned above, where the full retinue gathers; the samaya maṇḍala is the place where Buddhas and bodhisattvas gather holding different implements and forming different mudrās, to show that each Buddha and bodhisattva has made a different vow; the activity maṇḍala is the place showing how Buddhas and bodhisattvas accomplish their various works.

A maṇḍala commonly sets out the Five Buddhas in the five directions—east, south, west, north and center—representing the Five Wisdoms. At the center is the most important, the Wisdom of the Essential Nature of the Dharma Realm, which is the luminosity of intrinsic nature.

The other four are the Great Mirror Wisdom, into which the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) is transformed; the Wisdom of Equality, from the seventh; the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation, from the sixth; and the Wisdom of Accomplishing Activities, from the first five consciousnesses. Buddha-nature itself has no fixed direction; it is a great circle. Directions are symbolic. The Western Pure Land lies west of our world, but farther west again there is another west; from that relative standpoint, would not the Western Pure Land lie to the east? Direction therefore cannot be fixed absolutely.

This scripture contains images of naked Buddhas in union and wrathful deities drinking blood, which many people find difficult to accept. They ask, “How can such images appear in a Buddhist scripture?” We shall now discuss them in detail.

Why do the Buddhas appear naked in union form? On one hand, it's to meet the needs of sentient beings. Tibetan Buddhism is specifically for Tibetans (though it's also for the general public). Tibetans are very attached to appearances; they can't accept the idea that we are all Buddhas.

They think, "If we were Buddhas, why can't we display spiritual powers? We're not omnipotent! Therefore, we are not Buddhas, but ordinary beings." They need to be dressed up in fur hats and Buddhist robes to believe they are Buddhas. So they need a certain image.

They also say, "To transcend birth and death, to attain Buddhahood, how can there be birth without yin and yang?" Therefore, the Buddha appears in union form to meet their needs. In fact, our bodies inherently possess yin and yang. Our bodies are a temporary combination of the four elements: earth, water, fire, and wind. Fire belongs to yang, and water to yin.

Yin and yang are usually out of sync due to delusions, inversions, attachments, and the pursuit of external objects. If one practices diligently and the mind is pure and empty, one can clearly feel two currents within the body merging together. The result is the Daoist concept of the infant goddess Zha Nu, with Huang Po as the matchmaker.

It involves visualizing an "infant"—the so-called Yang spirit—in the central Huangting (lower abdomen) of the heart. This practice is entirely a matter of visualization; as long as you visualize with your mind, you can succeed, because everything is created by the mind! Therefore, everyone has Yin and Yang; it's not necessary to have a Buddha father and mother for Yin and Yang to interact.

On the other hand, the union imagery, which represents the two aspects of existence, is used to symbolize the Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha said in the Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment, "All sentient beings attain their life through lust. " We humans have physical bodies because of lustful desires. Even in the intermediate state, lustful desires remain, without diminishing in the slightest. When it sees its destined parents in intercourse, lustful desires stir, and it drifts toward the womb.

Therefore, birth comes from lust. To become Buddhas and escape the cycle of birth and death, we must also emerge from this point. The union imagery represents that birth comes from this point, and liberation comes from this point; therefore, it is symbolic. If you still have lustful desires, and your mind is still agitated when you encounter this state, you cannot escape the cycle of birth and death.

It's just empty talk. To truly transcend birth and death, we must be able to detach ourselves from lustful pleasures and remain completely unmoved when we see images of union. Otherwise, it's impossible. This is why Tantric Buddhism includes the practice of union. Guru Padmasambhava said, "The practice of union should not be attempted lightly."

This practice is like a two-headed snake: one end leads directly to ascension, the other to hell (because the slightest stirring of the mind will lead to hell). To satisfy their lust, many people deceive others by saying, "We can practice union to transcend birth and death. " They don't know that this union doesn't free them but leads to hell.

Therefore, understanding this principle, we should not attempt it lightly. We should constantly observe and remain unmoved when we see images of union. The Buddha clearly stated in the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, "A naked image presented is like chewing wax." That is to say, a naked image presented to you is like chewing candle wax—it has no taste whatsoever.

Therefore, the most profound and important test is reality, not child's play. The Buddha has no fixed form; he manifests according to the minds of sentient beings—this is called an emanation form. The Buddha manifests the union form to guide us, to see if we truly possess meditative power and whether we can enter into samādhi amidst sensual pleasures. This type of manifestation is called samādhi within desire. Therefore, it's important to understand that the union form manifests according to the needs of sentient beings and is also symbolic. Please do not doubt it.

Why do Buddhas manifest in wrathful, blood-drinking forms? A Buddha has two kinds of wheel-body: the Body of the Wheel of the True Dharma and the Body of the Wheel of Command. The former displays the thirty-two major marks and eighty minor characteristics, the appearance of wisdom and merit, at which beings rejoice. The latter, also called the body of a Wisdom King, displays wrathful, terrifying and blood-drinking forms to frighten māras, warn them and prevent interference. Wrathful forms are thus also symbolic, and we should not fear them.

We explain these things to prevent people from doubting the union form, wrathful appearance, and other such phenomena, thus avoiding falling into lower realms. We prevent future encounters from giving rise to evil thoughts, leading to doubt and slander of the Dharma: “Why does it still appear as a union form? That's not right!” The Buddha manifests according to sentient beings' abilities; we come from and leave this world after death.

Everything is unattainable; all are illusory appearances manifested by our minds. If our minds are truly pure, then no forms exist; this state is known as the supreme great luminosity, which represents the Sambhogakāya. If our minds are not pure, then various forms will appear. Therefore, whether these forms appear or not depends on the purity of our minds.

For example, the Western Pure Land is divided into four Pure Lands: the lowest is the Land of Coexistence of Saints and Ordinary Beings, above that is the Land of Expedient Means, above that is the Land of Real Reward and Adornment, and at the very top is the Pure Land of Eternal Tranquillity and Light. Which Pure Land one is reborn in depends on the quality of one's practice. The Pure Land of Eternal Tranquillity and Light has no form because Buddha-nature is inherently like this.

Forms appear only because we are attached to them. Take dreaming as an example. If our practice is beneficial and our minds are clear and free from attachment in daily life, we won't have dreams when we sleep. However, if we allow our minds to wander due to external circumstances and contemplate various things, we will experience dreams when we fall asleep, and a variety of different states of mind will manifest before us.

In the past, Patriarch Gaofeng’s teacher asked him, “Can you be your own master in ordinary times?” He answered, “I can.” That is very good; it is not easy to be master in ordinary times.

For instance, when we see a gold ingot, our hearts flutter with excitement. "Oh! I wish this gold could be mine!" A lustful person sees a beautiful woman, feels a stir in their heart, and runs after her. This is exactly what is meant by “it is not lust that misleads people, but people who mislead themselves”. A person who loves to drink will drool at the smell of wine. These are examples of losing control of one's mind.

If one can remain unmoved by these states, it's only the beginning. Therefore, Gaofeng Patriarch's master then asked him, "Can you control your mind when you dream?" He replied, "I can control my mind even in my dreams." Dreaming is a state of semi-consciousness; death is a state of deep unconsciousness (because the four elements disperse, causing immense suffering).

Being able to control one's mind in dreams signifies progress in one's practice. Some people are usually in control but become confused in their dreams. Therefore, it was quite remarkable that Master Gaofeng could be in control in his dreams.

His master further asked him, "Can you be in control when there are no dreams or thoughts? Where is the protagonist when there are no dreams or thoughts?" That is, when there are neither dreams nor thoughts, where is the protagonist? He couldn't answer. "Alas! "No, no, you must quickly contemplate!" his master said. Therefore, one must progress in practice.

Once we understand the meaning of the union and wrathful images, then when we see these forms in the intermediate state we should no longer give rise to inverted, deluded views. We should know that all these forms are manifestations of our own mind.

Our mind is like a mirror, and every form is a shadow appearing in the mirror. If we can remain unmoved by any realm and merge with the luminosity in the intermediate state, we accomplish the sambhogakāya Buddha.

While alive, it is not easy to become a sambhogakāya Buddha. Still, as long as we practice honestly, we can accomplish the three bodies—dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya—in this life: when our practice opens up and we see our original nature, that is the dharmakāya Buddha; when we go further, diligently remove habitual tendencies, and the mind is truly empty and pure, we can transform realms, transform the physical body, and develop spiritual powers, and so accomplish the sambhogakāya Buddha; going a step further, we can emit a mind-born body, which is the accomplishment of the nirmāṇakāya.

A bodhisattva on the Third Ground can manifest a mind-born body, a body produced by the mental faculty of the manas consciousness. On the Fifth Ground, a bodhisattva can manifest three mind-born bodies, as in the Daoist expression “one breath transforms into the Three Pure Ones”. Daoism and Buddhism thus share certain features, but the Daoist account remains incomplete and not definitive, always retaining some attachment to appearances.

A mind-born body produced by the manas consciousness is still provisional—a wondrous function arising from Buddha-nature—and must not be grasped. Bodhisattvas above the Eighth Ground can manifest mind-born bodies of every kind: not only human bodies, but mountains, rivers, trees, houses and all forms.

This is freedom of transformation. Everything depends upon our practice. First, we must not follow thoughts as they arise: see each thought without pursuing it, remaining perfectly clear and leaving no trace.

This brings freedom of rebirth—the ability to take birth wherever one intends. Second, we must remain equal toward good and bad, neither delighting in the good nor becoming troubled by the bad. This brings freedom of transformation. Third, the subtle stream must cease and everything dissolve into emptiness, whereupon the great wisdom of Perfect Enlightenment shines forth. One can then manifest hundreds of thousands of millions of emanations to liberate innumerable beings.

By practicing progressively profound methods such as Dzogchen and the Heart-of-Heart Dharma during life, we may attain these accomplishments. If practice remains incomplete, liberation in the intermediate state offers a final means of attaining the Sambhogakāya. To hear this supreme teaching today is truly a boundless blessing.

People say that after death one sees many different states. Some see terrifying figures such as Yama, the infernal warders, the Black and White Messengers of Impermanence, or Ox-Head and Horse-Face. Others who have committed much wrongdoing see such terrors even before death. I have met several such people, including Buddhists.

They had, of course, violated the precepts and failed to practice properly. As hellish states appeared at death, they became terrified and muttered, “Oh! So-and-so has come to collect a debt; so-and-so has come to claim my life.”

Why does this happen? Because of karma created during life: at death, one’s own consciousness produces these states. Entangled in them, people cannot attain liberation. In truth, their own consciousness is causing the disturbance, for every appearance is manifested by intrinsic nature; there is no separate Yama or infernal warder outside oneself.

Thus, there is no Dharma outside the mind and no mind outside the Dharma. In such a situation, one should comfort the dying person and remind them to recite the Kṣitigarbha Sūtra and seek Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva’s protection. This may help remove karmic obscurations and bring liberation. Once the mind is at peace, the terrifying appearances dissolve; if it remains disturbed, the person may indeed fall into a hell realm.

Does hell truly exist? No—it too is an illusory appearance. Yet for someone undergoing the experience, it is not non-existent. When dreaming of pleasant circumstances, we are happy; when dreaming of frightening ones, we are afraid. Only after awakening do we think, “Oh, that was merely a dream; nothing was really there.” Before we awaken, however, the experience remains present.

Illusory appearances are not sheer non-existence: they are produced by karma and transformed by consciousness, manifestations of karmic consciousness. Once the mind becomes genuinely empty and pure, they vanish. Someone may say, “Then I might as well do wrong, since everything is empty.”

But a person whose mind is genuinely empty and pure does not do wrong. Wrongdoing is committed by those whose minds remain impure and filled with greed, anger and ignorance. When the resulting states appear, their conscience condemns them, and they cannot make the experience empty merely by wishing it so.

In the intermediate state, people burdened by grave karma may see seven vicious dogs pursuing and biting them—“the pursuit of the seven barking hounds”—or yakṣas thrusting spears at them and tigers and wolves driving them toward evil destinies. Panicking, they may be chased into a hell or animal realm. Those who have killed chickens, ducks or pigs may, because of the weight of their killing karma, see red and green caps pursuing them at death and hide in terror.

This is why we encourage people to eat vegetarian food and refrain from killing. Those who can should be vegetarian as far as possible; those who cannot may temporarily eat threefold pure meat—meat from an animal not seen being killed, not heard being killed and not killed specifically for oneself—but should cease killing and creating such karma, lest they undergo its result.

These terrifying appearances arise because our minds are neither empty nor pure: by clinging to appearances, we create karma. When the mind is peaceful, sacred or Buddha images may appear. When it is completely empty and pure, even Buddha images cannot be grasped, for the Dharmakāya is formless.

As the Diamond Sūtra says, "Whatever bears characteristics is illusory." Being unawakened, we mistake appearances for reality. We should not assume that what can presently be grasped, touched or seen is real, or that spouses, children and wealth are truly possessed.

I have seen men and women embracing like one bucket of foul manure embracing another, taking the nauseating for something pleasurable; these too are illusory appearances, no different from the scenes of a dream. Understanding this, we must temper ourselves amid circumstances and remain unmoved and unattached in every situation.

Only diligent practice brings awakening. If, for example, we practice Buddha-recitation and enter deeply into Buddha-recitation Samādhi, body, mind and world dissolve into emptiness and only the vividly clear reality appears. It is like being awakened from a dream: no circumstance remains. Where then are mountains and rivers, men and women, young and old, gold and silver? Our practice must reach this point. Meditation is not a quest to see pleasant states; such states are illusory, not real. Reality is formless, and we must not be deceived.

This scripture says, "In the intermediate-state body, wandering without refuge, one eventually sees three great precipices—one white, one black and one red—whose depths cannot be fathomed. They are produced by the three poisons of greed, anger and ignorance accumulated during life."

After death, the intermediate-state being manifested by the manas consciousness sees its corpse upon the bed and hears the family crying out its name; only then does it know that it has died. Still wanting a body, it tries to enter the corpse but cannot, for the body has failed. It becomes frightened, without support, drifting here and there.

We therefore urge everyone not to cling to appearances; in truth, we can relinquish the body. In rites for the deceased, we advise the consciousness: "The physical body is the root of suffering. Quickly abandon it and cease clinging. We shall recite the Rebirth Mantra and send you onward so that you need suffer no longer."

Yet attachment makes the intermediate-state being continue to crave a body and wander. It then sees three bottomless cliffs—red, white and black—blocking the way. These are produced by the three poisons accumulated during life. Insatiable greed belongs to fire and is red;

Anger is the mind of hatred and is white. Ignorance is stupidity, lacking wisdom, and is black. Having all three of greed, anger, and ignorance in full is the seed of hell; heavy greed with lighter anger and ignorance is the hungry-ghost realm—which is why hungry ghosts all breathe fire from their mouths; heavy anger with lighter greed and ignorance is the asura realm; heavy ignorance with lighter greed and anger is the animal realm. So when you see these three cliffs, do not be afraid: once you put an end to the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance, the three great cliffs will vanish.

If greed, anger and ignorance remain powerful, they will later manifest evil states that entangle us. Having read this scripture, we should awaken and press ourselves to practice quickly. Greed, anger and ignorance are all ungraspable—what is there to covet?

However vast our wealth, not a penny can be taken at death, and leaving it to descendants may actually harm them. "Accumulating virtue is better than accumulating gold."

Passing virtue to one's descendants benefits their future development; leaving them great wealth may be harmful, for, not knowing how hard it was to earn, they may squander it, create much karma and rapidly exhaust their merit. Yang Jingwu, the proprietor of a small Shanghai jewellery shop, squandered the entire business inherited from his father, became destitute and eventually froze to death by the roadside.

We should therefore understand that worldly things are illusory and unreal, cease clinging to and becoming infatuated with appearances, and let go quickly. To be deluded by appearances is superstition. Those who do not understand Buddhism call us superstitious, but the lecturer argues that they themselves are superstitious: they are deluded by appearances, selfishly pursue them as real, create karma, undergo its results and wander endlessly through the six realms.

In this way they create karma and undergo retribution, revolving through the six realms with no end. That is why they are the superstitious ones. We understand that all this is false appearance and ungraspable, so we should no longer compare ourselves with others.

Each person has particular causes and conditions. Someone enjoying prosperity now did good in a former life; our present difficulties result from what we did poorly before. We need only begin doing good now. Those who cannot let go compare

themselves with others and, failing to obtain what they desire, may turn to corruption or theft and ultimately face the law. It is better to live in accordance with conditions.

We rise and sink without end in the six realms, confusedly immersed in the bitter sea of birth and death. Like maggots writhing in a cesspit, we imagine ourselves happy. Seeing such maggots, people think, “How filthy!”

Buddhas and bodhisattvas likewise look upon us with compassion: “How pitiable these beings are—like maggots in a cesspit, yet imagining themselves happy. How greatly they suffer.”

We are truly in suffering! For example, to stay alive in this world we must eat; to eat we must buy food; after buying we must wash it; after washing we must cook and boil it before we can eat. And before buying, washing, and cooking we must work to earn money, for how can we buy things without money? So we are busy all day long.

In the heavens, according to the passage, favorable karmic results make desired food appear at a thought, without buying, washing or cooking. Good deeds may therefore bring heavenly rebirth and enjoyment, but when that merit is exhausted, one descends and suffers again; if one creates evil karma, one may fall into hell and suffer still more. Heavenly merit is therefore not ultimate.

Only liberation from the six realms is ultimate. Practicing the Buddhadharma is like encountering a rescue ship upon the bitter sea of cyclic existence, which carries us to the other shore—“the compassionate vessel that ferries all beings across”. If storms threaten to overturn it, the ship also has lifebuoys and rafts.

Buddhism likewise offers many skilful means, including Chan, Esoteric Buddhism and Pure Land. Esoteric Buddhism offers especially numerous means, encompassed by the nine successive vehicles discussed earlier. They prevent us from sinking and help us escape the bitter sea of birth and death.

This scripture is presented as the most direct and secure means: it has not only a lifebuoy but a motor that propels us automatically to the other shore without effort. It is therefore called a safeguarded method for directly reaching the other shore.

Great Vajradhara Buddha said, “Though one daily kills Brahmins and accumulates the five heinous acts, upon encountering this instruction one will undoubtedly be liberated.” “Daily-killing Brahmins” is a school within Indian Brahmanism. Like Catholic and Protestant Christianity, Brahmanism has many schools.

Our Buddhist schools are also many: the Pure Land school, the Chan school, the Esoteric school, the Dharma Characteristics school, the Caodong school, and so on. The Brahmins who kill every day ( ) are the lowest kind of sect; what they do are the sins that send one to the lowest of the five uninterrupted hells.

Uninterrupted hell has two meanings: first, the suffering has no interval at all, not even a fraction; second, there is no unoccupied space in the room—a hundred people are crammed unbearably into the room, and a single person in it is just as cramped.

Great Vajradhara tells us that even one who has created karma grave enough for Avīci Hell may be liberated upon encountering The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State. How? When a nightmare terrifies us, it disappears as soon as someone awakens us.

This scripture awakens us from evil states; as soon as we awaken, we are liberated—so quickly!. All appearances are illusory and ungraspable. We should not suppose that the present is real; it too is an illusory appearance. A skilled practitioner knows that when the mind becomes empty and pure, the great earth subsides and empty space shatters—where then is the world? Nothing remains. So I say that, fundamentally, there is no hell. It all depends on whether you can awaken.

We are extraordinarily fortunate to hear this teaching. Even if our practice does not bring accomplishment during life, at death we still possess this safeguarded method. We should understand it clearly and learn it by heart, maturing its seeds within ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna), so that at the final moment a reminder from someone nearby may awaken and liberate us.

Because this scripture is so exceptional, those who encounter it must not cling to personal views and consequently doubt or disparage it. Such views arise especially in response to its union imagery. Some say, “Everything else in this scripture is good, but the union images are not.” Others object to images of Buddha-father and Buddha-mother in union.

If we are to transcend birth and death, however, we must relinquish distinctions between male and female; how can birth and death end while such distinctions remain? The union imagery has already been explained in four ways. First, it is symbolic. The human body contains yin and yang;

Birth and death come from the union of parents, so to be free of birth and death we too must go out by this very route! Second, Buddhas appear in response to the capacities of sentient beings.

If at death the mind of a sentient being is empty and pure, truly without a thread hanging on, no appearances at all would be manifested. It is only because our minds are not pure that we see terrifying scenes: seven dogs barking and chasing, yakṣas

pursuing, jackals, wolves, tigers, and leopards, the Ten Kings of Hell.

Rather than that, it would be better for such Buddhas to manifest good scenes (such as Buddha-father and Buddha-mother in union) to liberate us. How good that would be! Third, this scripture was written by Guru Padmasambhava in accordance with the customs and habitual attachments of the Tibetan people.

Because the Tibetans' cultural level was relatively low and they were very attached to forms, they would not believe there are no forms; they would think, "Without form, how could I have been born? There must be parents for birth." So the Buddhas transformed into Buddha-father and Buddha-mother for them.

As the "Universal Gate" chapter on Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva says: for those who can be liberated by a government official's form, he manifests as an official and teaches the Dharma; for those who can be liberated by a woman's form, he manifests as a woman and teaches the Dharma. The union figures are manifested in response to the opportunities of sentient beings. Fourth, if we truly want to be free of birth and death, we must withstand the test of actual events.

It does not count if we merely say it with our mouths or understand it in principle. When the union figures appear before you, we shall see whether you can remain unmoved. Only if one is liberated in actual events can one become a sambhogakāya Buddha. If not liberated in events, one can attain only the dharmakāya! And this Dharma enables us to go beyond the dharmakāya and realize the sambhogakāya Buddha.

The dharmakāya is only the first step; one must realize the sambhogakāya and then the nirmāṇakāya to be complete. To realize the sambhogakāya Buddha one must withstand the test of actual events: seeing the union form as if one saw nothing, with the mind not moved in the slightest. This is the final test.

Moreover, when our mind is truly pure, what "single-body form" or "union form" could there be? There are no forms at all; there is only one great luminosity. So the Esoteric teaching is very profound; never doubt, or even slander, this teaching on the strength of your own opinion, for doing so brings bad karmic retribution.

In the past, when Master Hongyi had just become a monk, he saw the union practice of Esotericism and said, "What kind of demons and monsters is Esotericism? How could there be such things?" Later, after studying it deeply, he understood, and wrote a "Text of Repentance." In it he said, "In the past I did not understand and spoke recklessly, slandering Esotericism.

Now I will repent deeply." He also warned later people not to speak recklessly about what they do not understand. If you are interested, you can look up Master Hongyi's "Text of Repentance." There is much that we do not understand; you must never slander this teaching on the strength of your own opinion.

This great teaching is the supreme treasure of the esoteric tradition and is therefore exceedingly precious. It enables us immediately to realize the perfect wisdom of intrinsic awakening belonging to the intrinsic nature of the One Great Dharma Realm. This is the One True Dharma Realm encompassing the Ten Dharma Realms—our intrinsic nature, the Dharmakāya.

The Dharmakāya is originally great awakening, the sole Perfect Enlightenment; awakening is not newly acquired, and it is therefore called the perfect wisdom of intrinsic awakening. The Sixth Patriarch said, "Who would have thought that intrinsic nature is originally perfect? Who would have thought that intrinsic nature is originally complete?" It is complete in every respect and lacks no capacity or knowledge.

Why, then, do beings not know it? Deluded by appearances, they forget original Buddha-nature. Amid constant noise and confusion, they mistake the false for the true and the true for the false; afflictions obscure wisdom and prevent luminosity from appearing. Practice restores our Original Face.

This teaching opens our original nature, bringing accomplishment of the Dharmakāya, then the Sambhogakāya—the body of luminosity—and finally the Nirmāṇakāya. It teaches that when great luminosity appears in the intermediate state, we merge with the luminosity of the Buddhas, attain the Sambhogakāya, and perfect the wisdom of intrinsic awakening within the One True Dharma Realm. It is therefore an exceedingly secret and profound teaching.

This great teaching is also described as the heart-essence of Ādibuddha Samantabhadra, known in Chinese as the Tathāgata Samantabhadra King. Because Esoteric Buddhism emphasizes practice and imagery, its practitioners regard Ādibuddha as the first Buddha to attain accomplishment.

In Exoteric Buddhism there is no first Buddha to attain and no last Buddha to attain; it is a great circle without beginning or end. Put this way, it is more complete.

If there were a first Buddha, people would ask who had taught him. It is like asking a Catholic, "If God created human beings, who created God?" Such an account would not be fully satisfactory.

In truth, all beings are Buddhas; there is no ultimately first Buddha. The Buddha who first establishes teachings to guide beings is conventionally called the first, and in this esoteric context that Buddha is the Tathāgata Samantabhadra King. Because this teaching is his heart-essence, it is exceptionally precious. Bodhidharma likewise had many disciples.

Before his death he tested their understanding and said that one had obtained his skin, another his flesh and another his bones, but only Master Shenguang had obtained his marrow—the heart-essence of the Buddhadharma. Master Shenguang therefore became the Second Patriarch of Chinese Chan.

This is also the supreme, most secret teaching of the Tibetan Nyingma school established by Guru Padmasambhava. Nyingma has many methods, some for realizing the essence and others for activating its functions. This teaching, however, is neither roundabout nor indirect, but a supreme method of attaining the Way directly.

Ordinarily, before practicing esoteric methods, one might first complete 108,000 full prostrations, 108,000 recitations of the Four Refuges, 108,000 recitations of the Hundred-Syllable Mantra and 108,000 maṇḍala offerings. These preliminaries may take more than ten years, after which one practices initial visualisations and then numerous practices of corresponding union, all relatively indirect. This teaching, by contrast, enables immediate accomplishment. We are therefore extremely fortunate to hear it.

Layman Sun Jingfeng completed the translation of this scripture, fulfilling his own aspiration and the long-held wishes of Zhang Miaoding, Zhao Hongzhu and the elder layman Qu Wenliu—Dharma name Faxian, known as Master Faxian, Sun Jingfeng's senior Dharma-brother—and thereby benefiting beings widely.

Sun modestly said that his learning was shallow, his practice insufficient, his age advanced and his energy declining, so omissions were inevitable.

He hoped, first, that worthy and learned experts would carefully examine the scripture and correct errors. "Three Worthies" here refers to the stages before the First Ground: the Ten Abodes, Ten Practices and Ten Dedications.

Second, he hoped readers would not skim the text carelessly but settle their minds and study it attentively. Having understood it, they should tell and help others. This is the excellence of Mahāyāna Buddhism: one should not stop at self-liberation, but liberate and awaken both oneself and others.

The teaching must not be hoarded as private treasure. When time and conditions ripen, it should be circulated, publicized and explained widely. The lecturer criticizes the insularity of many Buddhist institutions: temples charge admission yet may not teach the Dharma, and may demand further payment before chanting scriptures or conducting rites of repentance.

After paying for admission and going in, there is still no propagation of the Buddha-dharma; further money is demanded before they will chant for you and perform sūtra and repentance rites. So the Buddha-dharma has been swept into the dust—what a pity! It is not even as good as Christianity, which requires neither an admission ticket nor payment for prayers. They throw their doors open and draw people in to hear their teaching.

Compared with Christians, we Buddhists fall far short! We do even worse in social welfare. Christians help one another, whereas we Buddhists say of one another, "You're no good," "No, you're no good," and slander each other.

Buddhism's doors should be open, without sectarian division; its true meaning should be explained fully to everyone. Buddhism's original purpose is to liberate beings from the bitter sea of suffering. If Buddhist services are performed merely for money, what benefit do they bring to society or human relations? Such religion degenerates into superstition.

Those who are ill and approaching death are the most pitiable; all the more reason to explain the teaching to them carefully so that they understand. One should speak beside the deceased person's ear and tell them not to be afraid. The voice should be clear and somewhat raised, though not excessively loud, because the deceased person's hearing is more than nine times as acute as ours.

We now all have a physical body; the deceased has none, so he has the five spiritual powers: the divine eye, divine ear, miraculous travel, knowing others' minds, and recollection of past lives. He can drift a thousand or ten thousand miles in an instant. He can hear us when we speak to him, and he is also speaking to us, but we cannot hear him.

Seeing the corpse upon the bed, it realizes it has died, becomes anxious, longs for a body and runs about in confusion. For one who created evil karma, karmic obscurations manifest as threatening appearances that drive it toward evil destinies.

We should therefore explain beside the deceased person's ear: "Whatever you see, do not be afraid. These appearances are illusory. Only luminosity is true. Merge with it, and you will leave the six realms and attain the Way." The teaching is presented as both joyful and convenient.

We then dedicate (that is, give) the merit of this liberating of beings to all sentient beings, hoping that they will cut off their emotional views. All beings are sentient. So the term pusa ( ), short for bodhisattva ( ), means "one who awakens sentient beings"—that is, awakens them to see through emotional views and cuts off the root of love. Love is a bad thing.

Love produces water (for example, when close friends part, they weep and cannot bear to leave; at the sight of a favorite food, saliva flows), and water flows downward, never upward—unless a pump draws it up, only then can it flow from below to above. So anyone who wishes to be born in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss must cut off emotional views.

If emotional views are not cut off and one still clings to family and children, one cannot be born in the West, because the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss is a pure land, in the heavens, and what flows downward cannot fly up to the West. Hence the Śūraṅgama Sūtra says, “Pure thought brings flight.” That is, if emotional views are all cut off and one thinks only of the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss, one can fly up.

In flight, the sacred realm of the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss will appear before you. Chan Master Zibo and Master Hanshan also said: “Buddha-recitation must reach the point of cutting off the root of love; if the root of love is not cut off, Buddha-recitation is useless.”

The foregoing is the “Account of the Translation”. Through it, present and future readers may understand the origin and general contents of the scripture, recognize its preciousness and never regard it lightly.

II. Preface

(I) Types of Intermediate States

In the esoteric tradition, the intermediate state is divided into six kinds, grouped as the “first three” and the “last three”. The first three are the intermediate state of birth, intermediate state of dreams and intermediate state of meditative concentration. The last three are the intermediate state at death, intermediate state of dharmatā and intermediate state of becoming.

We shall introduce them in turn.

1. Intermediate State of Birth (also called the Intermediate State of Gestation)

This occurs when, during sexual intercourse, the intermediate-state being is moved by desire and becomes a third participant. At ejaculation it is driven into the womb, where the embryo forms. This is the intermediate state of gestation, which lasts nine and a half months. The mother has a body of flesh and blood, and the environment of the womb is turbid. After dwelling there for nine and a half months, the intermediate-state being becomes dazed; the painful process of birth adds further confusion. This is why people do not remember former lives after birth—not because they have drunk some potion of forgetfulness.

2. Intermediate State of Dreams

This refers to the various states that appear while we sleep and dream. In dreams the six sense faculties seem fully present: we see, hear, touch and grasp things; pleasant circumstances delight us and frightening ones alarm us. The experience is vivid, just like waking life. Picture books and comics portray a dreamer with several circles and a drawn-out “Eh—”, as consciousness leaves the body.

Look at picture books or comic strips; they illustrate it vividly: someone dreams, a few circles are drawn, “Pop!”—and the spirit-consciousness comes out. Dreaming is just like this: the spirit-consciousness goes out and sees all kinds of realms. This is the intermediate state of dreams.

3. Intermediate State of Meditative Concentration (also called the Intermediate State of Samādhi)

This refers to the states seen when consciousness emerges as we enter samādhi in seated practice. As explained earlier, the manas consciousness is naturally capable of emerging, but is ordinarily bound by the impurity of the six sense faculties.

When the six faculties—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind—meet the six objects—form, sound, smell, taste, touch and mental objects—thoughts arise and various appearances are produced; this is consciousness.

During meditation the mind is relatively quiet, the six faculties do not receive external objects, and nothing obscures consciousness, so it can emerge. What emerges at this stage, however, is described as the yin-spirit, not the yang-spirit. Others cannot see this subtle shadow, just as they cannot see the intermediate-state body, which is governed chiefly by the wind element. This is the intermediate state of meditative concentration.

4. Intermediate State at Death

Immediately after death, a person is dazed and confused, like someone intoxicated. This stage lasts about three and a half to four days and is called the intermediate state at death. Ordinarily, the seven-day observances for the deceased are counted from the day of death.

In this teaching, however, the first seven-day period begins on the fifth day. During the initial state of unconscious confusion, the intermediate-state being knows little of what is happening and scarcely understands rites performed on its behalf. These three and a half or four days should therefore not be included when counting the seven-day periods.

5. Intermediate State of Dharmatā

After approximately four days, the deceased person's consciousness gradually awakens from confusion. Its abilities are then said to exceed ours: seeing, hearing and perception are nine times more acute, and it can travel instantly wherever it thinks of going. These are called karmically produced supernormal abilities, manifestations of karmic and retributive obscurations. Beginning on the fifth day, this phase lasts fourteen days and is called the intermediate state of dharmatā. Together with the preceding four-day intermediate state at death, it makes eighteen days.

6. Intermediate State of Becoming

This is the period from the eighteenth day after death—following the intermediate state of dharmatā—until conception. During the intermediate state of becoming, the intermediate-state being takes rebirth and the cycle of birth and death begins anew.

(II) Types of Attainment in Esoteric Practice

In esoteric practice, attainment is divided into three kinds: (1) attainment in this very life, (2) attainment in the intermediate state, and (3) attainment after taking another body. We shall introduce them in turn.

1. Attainment in This Very Life

Every Dharma method—Chan, Pure Land or Esoteric Buddhism—can bring accomplishment of the Three Bodies, the Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya and Nirmāṇakāya, in this very life. That is, we can cultivate and accomplish all Three Bodies while alive.

Chan points directly to intrinsic nature: awakening in the present moment reveals the Dharmakāya and is therefore the most direct method. Esoteric methods are numerous but may broadly be divided into the Generation Stage and Completion Stage. In the Generation Stage, one begins from apparent non-existence, visualizing winds, channels and bindus, practicing nine-cycle Buddha-breathing and deep respiration; through successful visualization, appearances are generated.

In the Completion Stage, what has arisen is dissolved into emptiness, and finally one does not abide even in emptiness, thereby realizing the Dharmakāya. Ordinarily, Generation Stage precedes Completion Stage: form-based practice comes before formless practice, making the route less direct than Chan. Our Heart-of-Heart Dharma, however, proceeds directly to Completion Stage.

But our Heart-of-Heart Dharma is direct: it goes straight to the completion stage in a single step, without any detour. Because everything is ungraspable, the body is false, and the world is false—all unreal. Practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma can make our body, mind, and world all vanish; then the great earth sinks level and empty space shatters, and one can realize and see the dharmakāya.

Though called esoteric, the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is actually Chan in method and is therefore called Chan-Esoteric practice. Pure Land too can reveal the Dharmakāya in this life, though it uses such expressions as "Buddha-recitation Samādhi" and "when the lotus opens, see the Buddha and awaken to non-arising". The lotus is the lotus of the mind.

Our physical heart is shaped like a lotus bud; an unopened lotus bud looks like the pig hearts and cow hearts sold at the market.

There are two ways the heart-flower opens. One is at the moment of death: when the last breath stops, it strikes a vital point beside the heart, and the heart-bud suddenly opens with a "whoosh," ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) can depart, and once it departs the person is dead. The other is in meditation practice: when the winds and channels open, the heart-flower opens.

So "the flower opens" refers to the heart-flower opening, and "seeing the Buddha" refers to seeing the Buddha of one's own nature, that is, seeing the form of the formless; at that point one realizes and sees the dharmakāya. From this we can see that Chan, Pure Land, and Esoteric teachings are all connected. Chan is Pure Land, Pure Land is Esoteric, and Esoteric is Chan. But Pure Land practitioners today do not speak of this, and they are unwilling to practice diligently.

Yet some Pure Land practitioners reject one-pointed concentration and rely upon ten recitations at death and rebirth carrying karma. This weakens their willingness to practice. Master Lianchi said, "Many recite the Buddha's name, but few are born in the West. Why?

Because their recitation is not earnest." They do not apply the mind or relinquish attachment to body, family and worldly pleasure.

The Buddha compared life to fish in dwindling water: as the water diminishes day by day, what happiness remains? Whether practicing Chan, Pure Land or Esoteric Buddhism, we must let go of everything, practice diligently and realize the Dharmakāya in order to be free in birth and death.

Is it enough to just realize and witness the Dharmakāya, and then everything will be perfectly fine? No! As we mentioned earlier, just reaching the threshold of the Dharmakāya is not enough. You must advance beyond the Dharmakāya, until you truly and securely abide in the Dharmakāya.

If one only grasps a fragment of the principle but fails to penetrate its application in practice—remaining attached to appearances, becoming flustered and troubled by negative circumstances, and overly joyful and forgetful of worldly gains from positive ones—how can one expect to attain enlightenment in such a state? Therefore, one must transcend all realms of existence in order to transform this physical body into the luminous Sambhogakāya and achieve Sambhogakāya Buddhahood.

It is not impossible to attain Sambhogakāya Buddhahood while alive; it hinges on how diligently we cultivate. The Buddha stated in the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, "All phenomena, mountains, rivers, and the earth are all manifestations of the wondrously luminous mind." This means that everything, including mountains, rivers, and the earth, reflects our true nature; they are all aspects of ourselves.

Our bodies are also manifestations of the wondrously luminous mind. If we can transform mountains and rivers, we can likewise transform our physical body! Thus, if one can penetrate the physical body in practice, it can be transformed, radiating great light and attaining Sambhogakāya. Naturally, this light manifests gradually, not all at once in a grand and perfect form.

It's akin to the light seen in the intermediate state described in this sutra: first, a light resembling mist appears; then gradually, a light akin to the white belly of a fish at sunrise appears; then slowly, the light brightens; then over time, the moon appears; then progressively, the sun appears; and finally, light as bright as millions of suns emerges. In this manner, one gradually attains Sambhogakāya Buddhahood.

What about the Nirmāṇakāya? It can also be attained in this very life. The Buddha didn't discuss this state in the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, but he did in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra. Therefore, one should study many sutras. The Buddha explains in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra that a bodhisattva who has attained the third stage can manifest a mind-born body—this is the Nirmāṇakāya.

To attain the Nirmāṇakāya, one must cultivate oneself in the face of adversity, constantly observing and diligently eliminating habitual tendencies. By understanding that all things are illusory, merely objects of our wonderfully clear mind, and ultimately unattainable, a person will no longer become angry or quarrelsome with others. If someone wants something, let them have it.

Why fight and struggle? The answer is because we each hold our opinions and refuse to let go, believing that our views are correct while others are not, which leads to arguments. Actually, there's no right or wrong; it all depends on our perspective. Different perspectives lead to different understandings, which in turn cause conflict.

If everyone just puts things aside and discusses calmly, sharing their perspectives, then there's no need for further arguments. One person may believe that this cup belongs here, while another may believe that it belongs there. If they disagree, then it's fine to follow their opinion. We should be selfless and compliant.

Doesn't the Samantabhadra bodhisattva's Vows say, "We should always be in harmony with sentient beings"? We Buddhists should always be in harmony with sentient beings, cultivating ourselves in this aspect, and through continuous progress, we can attain the Nirmāṇakāya Buddha.

If you consistently believe you are right and others are mistaken, how will you address your habitual tendencies? When will you attain the Nirmāṇakāya Buddha? Even if you catch a glimpse of the Dharmakāya, you will still be ensnared in the cycle of birth and death, unable to achieve the Sambhogakāya, let alone the Nirmāṇakāya.

Therefore, true achievement requires constant self-cultivation in all matters, without selfishness. Wang Yangming once said, "To thoroughly investigate the principles and laws governing things and summarize them into rational knowledge" means eliminating material desires and the attachment to self. The attachment to self is the worst; it stems from always feeling that one is wrong about others and prioritizing oneself. This mindset is also the reason for disharmony in families. If the attachment to self is eliminated, families will be harmonious, and the Dharma will flow freely.

Thus, while living in this world, we are capable of accomplishing the Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya and Nirmāṇakāya; everything depends upon how we practice. This book says, “Attaining Buddhahood in this very body is attaining the Dharmakāya Buddha.” That is one manner of speaking. We may develop the point further: not only the Dharmakāya, but all Three Bodies can be accomplished in this very life.

2. Attainment in the Intermediate State

If our practice remains incomplete during life and we do not accomplish the Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya and Nirmāṇakāya, we still have an opportunity after death.

The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State enables the deceased to hear its instructions during the fifty-three-day intermediate-state period, transcend cyclic existence and attain liberation. This is attainment in the intermediate state. Having failed to attain accomplishment while alive, it would be a great pity to miss these fifty-three days as well:

Birth and death would begin again, and one would take rebirth and suffer retribution, sinking in the cycle of the six realms, with no telling when one could be liberated. Because a human body is hard to obtain and the Buddha-dharma is hard to hear, among the multitude of sentient beings fewer than one in a hundred obtain a human body.

There are only a few billion people on our earth, yet no one knows how many bacteria there are! How many of those who obtain a human body can hear the Buddha-dharma? Shanghai has more than thirteen million people; how many of them can hear the Buddha-dharma! Those who can hear it and truly believe in the right Dharma are fewer still.

Most people just go to temples to burn incense, bow to the Buddha, and ask for protection. So while we are alive we should practice diligently. If practice does not bring accomplishment, in the intermediate state we can still use this Dharma to attain it. We can see how precious this scripture is.

The words “intermediate state” in this Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State refer to the last three of the types of intermediate state described above. It is the intermediate-state body, dominated by the wind element, between the destruction of the former body and the formation of the next. Each seven days is one birth and death; over seven times seven, forty-nine days, there are seven births and deaths.

In the first seven days the intermediate-state body is relatively tall; with each seven days it becomes shorter, and afterward smaller and smaller. It is best to liberate it in the first seven days; the longer it drags on, the worse. But there is no intermediate-state body in the following cases: those who do good and ascend directly to heaven and those who do evil and fall directly into hell have no intermediate-state body, and those who practice the Way and are reborn directly in the Land of Ultimate Bliss have none either. Everyone else has one.

The post-mortem intermediate state may be divided by duration into three stages: the intermediate state at death, the intermediate state of dharmatā and the intermediate state of becoming. We shall explain in turn how liberation may be attained in each.

(1) Attaining the Dharmakāya Buddha in the Intermediate State at Death

The intermediate state at death occupies the first three and a half or four days and is also called the stage in which consciousness is overwhelmed and ceases. Immediately after death, a person is like someone in shock or under general anaesthesia, unconscious of everything.

Remember that this period is within three and a half or four days after a person dies, and two great luminosities appear (how the light appears we will explain later). These two appearances of light are very brief, no more than the time it takes to eat a meal, and then the light is gone. Before long our karmic obstacles appear and cover the light.

During this time, if through teaching, instruction, and guidance we can awaken, we can realize the dharmakāya Buddha, so accomplishment is very quick. But few can attain accomplishment during the intermediate state at the time of death, because the great majority are in a swoon at this time. So to attain accomplishment in the state of fainting one must have a certain degree of concentration and practice.

This depends on our practicing diligently now. If one has truly realized the dharmakāya while alive, one can attain accomplishment in the state of fainting. If one’s practice is deep, then even if no one recites or prompts you at that time, you can attain accomplishment. So it is most important to practice well now.

(2) Attaining the Sambhogakāya Buddha in the Intermediate State of Dharmatā

Three and a half to four days after death, one enters the intermediate state of dharmatā. The individual is now conscious and not sleepy or disoriented. The light of Dharmatā will appear many times. This period lasts for fourteen days, plus the four days of The Intermediate State of the Moment before Death, making a total of eighteen days.

In the intermediate state of dharmatā there are as many as twenty-one instructions, because the realms differ every day, so each instruction differs. See how compassionate the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are! After so many instructions, even someone with extremely heavy karmic obstacles should be liberated.

Therefore, you no longer need to go to the temple to ask monks to perform the Flaming Mouth Ritual. The Flaming Mouth Ritual is performed for the hungry ghosts in the hungry ghost realm, who breathe fire but are unable to eat. The Flaming Mouth Ritual is an offering to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the hungry ghost realm, asking for their compassion so the ghosts can eat and be freed.

When a person has just died, they have not yet entered the hungry ghost realm, so there is no need to perform the Flaming Mouth Ritual. Are all deceased individuals so sinful that they are destined to enter the realm of hungry ghosts? Therefore, performing the Hungry Ghost Ritual for the recently deceased is inappropriate. It is better to instruct them according to this sutra: “What is your current state? How do you emit light? How do you unite with the light?

Which Buddha has come to guide you?”This kind of guidance is better. In the Intermediate State of Dharmatā, there is no burden on the physical body; nothing obscures it, and a luminous nature manifests. The light manifests gradually.

As described in this sutra: first, one sees light like mist; slowly, one sees light like the white belly of the rising sun; then slowly, the light shines forth; then slowly, the moon appears; then slowly, the sun appears; then slowly, light as bright as millions of suns appears.

If you can recognize this light and unite with it, you will attain a luminous reward body and become a reward Buddha. The Dharmakāya Buddha is also included, because the Dharmakāya is fundamental. Like a large tree, the Dharmakāya is the root, the reward body is the trunk, and the transformation body is the branches and leaves.

The attainment of the Sambhogakāya Buddha within the intermediate state refers to the realization of Buddhahood within these fourteen days. How extraordinary it is to directly attain the Sambhogakāya Buddhahood during the Intermediate State of Dharmatā! This lesson is a profound teaching given to us by Guru Padmasambhava out of compassion (not even mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures). We should all be extremely fortunate!

(3) The Intermediate State of Becoming: Closing the Womb and Selecting a Womb

After fourteen days of the Intermediate State of Dharmatā, the deceased descends into The Intermediate State of Becoming, which is a transitional phase in the cycle of life and death in Buddhist belief. The situation in The Intermediate State of Becoming is relatively dire. For the first seven days of the Intermediate State of Dharmatā, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas guide the deceased through the Dharma Wheel Body; for the last seven days, they guide the deceased through the Command Wheel Body, i.e., the Vidyaraja. The Vidyaraja is the wrathful form of the demon, and his appearance is terrifying and frightening.

If we fail to liberate ourselves from our heavy karmic obscurations within the first two Intermediate States, we will enter The Intermediate State of Becoming, which is the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in Buddhist belief. In The Intermediate State of Becoming, all kinds of karmic illusions manifest, so as we mentioned earlier, the later the liberation, the worse it becomes.

"Closing the womb" and "selecting a womb" are the main methods of liberation in The Intermediate State of Becoming. "There are as many as twenty-four methods of guidance in The Intermediate State of Becoming, three more than in the intermediate state of dharmatā. Selecting a womb means choosing a favorable place to be reborn. Closing the womb means preventing the deceased from going to a bad place.

Once upon a time, the Buddhist monk Xuanzang was traveling to India to obtain Buddhist scriptures. While crossing the Himalayas, he saw a hillside and remarked, "There lives a great ascetic in there." They searched and searched, eventually finding traces of a cave. Over time, rocks, soil, trees, and grass had sealed the entrance.

They dug it open, and sure enough, there sat an ascetic inside. This ascetic had entered a state of cessation of perception and feeling, waiting for the Buddha to appear and preach to him. This state of cessation could last for thousands, even tens of thousands of years. Xuanzang woke him. Upon seeing Xuanzang, the ascetic exclaimed, "Ah! The Buddha has appeared to guide me!

" Xuanzang replied, "I am not the Buddha; the Buddha passed away many years ago. Why are you hiding here?" The ascetic said, "Oh dear, I was waiting for the Buddha to appear and guide me!" Unexpectedly, he entered the meditative state of cessation for too long and missed the opportunity. He was deeply saddened and wept.

Master Xuanzang said, “Don’t cry; your body has been useless for so many years. Go to Zhen Dan (China) and see tall buildings with glazed tiles and yellow walls, then go there to be reborn.” This instruction was to help him choose a suitable place to be reborn. So he was reborn into the family of Yuchi Gong(a general).

Later, he became Master Kuiji (also known as Master Sanche), the renowned disciple of Xuanzang. The purpose of this Dharma in the intermediate state of reincarnation is to ensure that the intermediate being is reborn in a favorable place with ideal conditions to hear the Dharma, rather than in a poor location, such as a remote area where one cannot access the Dharma. This process is what this book refers to as "rebirth into a Nirmāṇakāya Buddha.”

In fact, simply taking rebirth does not mean that one will realize the nirmāṇakāya Buddha. Even if one returns to continue practicing, such realization is not guaranteed. None of us began studying the Buddhadharma only in this lifetime. If our study were confined to this one lifetime, we would not have been able to practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma or hear this extraordinary teaching of liberation in the intermediate state.

Therefore, in this book, the phrase "rebirth into a Nirmāṇakāya Buddha" means being reborn in a favorable place, having the opportunity to learn Buddhism, diligently cultivating oneself, progressing upwards, attaining the three kayas of Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya, and Nirmāṇakāya, and perfecting the four wisdoms.

From this we see that with this Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State, even if one has not realized the three bodies (dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya) while alive, one still has a chance of attaining accomplishment after death. But this requires that we understand the teaching of this Dharma and memorize its contents, and that at the time of death we also have good conditions, which is very important.

Some people die suddenly, for example in an unexpected road accident, and may then forget the instructions. Without favorable conditions, where could they hear the Dharma? We must therefore be careful while alive and practice diligently. When the intermediate state appears, prior practice may enable us to awaken without prompting and recognize and merge with luminosity, thereby attaining the Sambhogakāya Buddha.

3. Attainment after Taking Another Body

This means that, if we do not attain Buddhahood in the present life, we may be reborn at death in a Buddha's Pure Land and continue practicing until Buddhahood. Pure Land practice and the Vajrayāna practice of phowa are examples of attainment after taking another body. Those reborn in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss are not yet necessarily Buddhas; ordinary beings must continue practicing and progress from the Land Where Sages and Ordinary Beings Dwell Together to the Land of Expedient Liberation, then to the Land of True Reward and Adornment, and finally to the Pure Land of Eternal Quiescence and Light, where Buddhahood is attained. This is attainment after taking another body.

(III) This is the most expedient path to liberation for practitioners of middling or lesser faculties, ordinary beings, and even those who have committed grave offenses.

Those of superior capacity who have practiced great methods such as Dzogchen, Mahāmudrā, and our Heart-of-Heart Dharma, and have already realized the dharmakāya, do not need this esoteric method. Within the esoteric vehicles, the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is the highest vehicle, the heart essence of Dzogchen. At death, as soon as the dharmakāya manifests, we can recognize it.

In effective meditation, when the sense faculties separate from their objects, everything ceases and even the breath may stop, producing an experience like death. People then become afraid: "Oh! Why has my breathing stopped? Am I going to die?" There is no need to fear.

Some call this embryonic breathing: there is no breath at the nose, but movement remains in the lower dantian. I have told such people, "You have entered concentration but not emptiness. Embryonic breathing still remains; that will not do. You have not yet realized the true mind and seen intrinsic nature; you have not awakened."

At awakening, nothing remains except lucid, clear awareness. What question could there be of embryonic breathing? If we truly reach this point, we will not fear death: having already experienced the cessation of breath, we know what dying is like. When the time comes, we will not panic, but will pass away peacefully. This is called "liberation while seated or death while standing." Those who reach this level do not need this esoteric method; they can realize the Way through their own mastery.

The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State was specifically established for those of middling or lower capacity, ordinary beings and people burdened by grave karma. Why can even someone with grave karma attain accomplishment upon encountering it? Because everything is originally empty. Karmic offences and obscurations have no inherent existence;

The so-called hell is also empty and not truly existent, just like killing someone in a dream, where we cling and are deluded and think it is real. After waking we know it was a dream and never existed. So all karmic obstacles are originally created by our own deluded emotions, deluded thoughts, and deluded thinking.

If we had no inverted deluded thinking, how would we commit murder and arson? How would we rob others? We too are all dreaming now! All day long we quarrel and stubbornly hold to our opinions: you say I am bad, I say you are bad, and we insist on quarreling it out. In fact all of it is bad; all of it is dreaming.

If we stopped dreaming and understood that everything is false appearance, we would not quarrel. When our practice is good and we truly enter samādhi, body, mind, and world dissolve entirely into emptiness, leaving only radiant spiritual awareness—that is the time of waking from the dream! So I urge you all to let go quickly; nothing can be grasped.

The purpose of this Dharma is to wake us up quickly when, after our life ends, we see bad scenes. It is like falling asleep and having a nightmare: someone calls, "Wake up! Wake up!" and as soon as we wake, the nightmare vanishes. But awakening only at the time of death is not as good as awakening now.

We should practice and establish a foundation now, relinquishing attachment, so that when someone recites the scripture beside us, consciousness hears, awakens and attains liberation during the intermediate state of dharmatā, accomplishing the Sambhogakāya Buddha. If attachment is too strong, we remain dazed and cannot be awakened.

This sutra is extremely precious. Even if we are illiterate or haven't seen it, it doesn't matter. We can be free if we hear the oral instructions (seeing them is even better). Even hearing it just once can liberate us, even if we have committed the five heinous acts.

The five heinous acts are patricide, matricide, killing an arhat, causing the Buddha to bleed, and disrupting the Saṅgha.

In society, we often hear of people killing their parents; this is patricide and matricide. Killing an arhat means killing someone who has attained arhatship. Causing the Buddha to bleed means injuring the Buddha's body and causing him to bleed. Disrupting the Saṅgha means destroying the Saṅgha community.

A group of four or five monks gathered together is called a Saṅgha, also known as a harmonious Saṅgha. A single monk cannot be called a Saṅgha but rather a monk (an individual monastic, or bhikṣu). How wonderful it would be if everyone lived together, focused on their spiritual practice, encouraged and motivated each other, and attained enlightenment together! But now, temples are not like that;

But in temples today it is not like this: there are factions, you say I am bad, I say you are bad, sowing discord and destroying unity; this is called destroying the Sangha. These five offenses are the gravest and are called the five uninterrupted offenses. Those who commit the five uninterrupted offenses must fall into the uninterrupted hell. There are eighteen levels of hell, and the greatest hell is Avīci Hell.

Uninterrupted hell is one kind within Avīci Hell. “Uninterrupted” has two meanings: one is that the time of suffering has no gaps, with no stopping for a minute or a second; the other is that your body is as large as the room, so you are crammed and wedged in.

Everyone is crammed in, whether there are thousands or just a few. It's like being squeezed onto a bus in China, unable to breathe. Individuals who reside in Avīci Hell go directly there upon death. There is no intermediate state.

Even if one has committed such grave sins, liberation can be achieved simply by hearing the teachings of this Dharma. You might say, "Is it really that easy? Can someone who has committed such grave sins be liberated?" Indeed, it is! As we mentioned before, all karmic offences and obscurations are inherently empty, like flowers in empty space, the moon reflected in water, dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows.

It is just that we are not awakened; as soon as we awaken, karmic obstacles are gone. So it is said: “If one understands, karmic obstacles are originally empty; if one does not, one must repay past debts.” To understand is to be clear, to awaken.

Understanding empties your mind and karmic obscurations, making hell disappear; lack of understanding leaves your mind full and keeps you attached to appearances. Then your sins remain, you still need to repay past debts, and you will have to suffer in Avīci Hell.

Therefore, this sutra awakens us at the most crucial moment: "Hey, [someone’s name], wake up quickly! These are all illusions, manifestations of karma, and they are all unattainable.

Now, the Buddha and the bodhisattvas are shining an enormous light to welcome you. Unite with the light, and you will become a Buddha!" Isn't that liberation?! Therefore, even the greatest sins can be liberated.

However, people's attachments are profound. Once, there was a practitioner who cultivated it to the level of a fourth-stage arhat and gained the power of knowing past lives. He knew that in a past life he had killed his father, one of the five heinous acts. He was very distressed, feeling the weight of his sins, and could no longer sit still.

When the Buddha learned of this, he said to Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, "This arhat has gained the power of remembering past lives and has discovered that he killed his father in a past life. He is very uneasy. Let's play a game together to save this arhat." So Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva drew his sword as though to kill the Buddha. Oh dear! Drawing blood from the Buddha's body is even more terrible! It's worse than killing one's father.

Those watching said, "Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva is going to fall outside the Iron Enclosure Mountain and go to hell!" The Buddha said, "Don't be alarmed. Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva had no intention to kill the Buddha; everything is unattainable."

This insight teaches us that as long as we are not attached to appearances, everything is empty and unattainable. If we are still attached, all kinds of sins will arise from our hearts. That is, "When the mind arises, all kinds of sins arise; when the mind ceases, all kinds of sins cease." When the mind is empty and pure, there is no sin; it is similar to killing someone in a dream and then waking up to find that nothing has happened.

Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva possessed no murderous intention and therefore incurred no offense. Without sin, how could he possibly fall outside the Iron Enclosure Mountain? At this, the arhat awakened, and his heart was at peace. Therefore, to save a person, one must save their heart. As you hear my words, please refrain from thinking, "I can simply take a life; it holds no significance. Just call out to me when I'm dying, and I'll be saved.

" That won't do! The purpose of Buddhism is to empty and purify our minds, to awaken us. If you're awakened, if your mind is truly empty, why would you still kill someone? If you kill someone, it proves your mind isn't empty! Therefore, I urge everyone to be careful and not to be attached to appearances!

Even if you've committed such a grave sin, you can be liberated, and in an instant, you can attain the stage of bodhisattva of Equal Enlightenment (above the Tenth Ground bodhisattva).

This principle is profound, and most people don't understand it: how can such a grave sin suddenly lead to becoming an bodhisattva of Equal Enlightenment? Actually, this concept is what the Buddha meant when he said, "All things are created by the mind!" When we truly awaken and understand, we become bodhisattva of Equal Enlightenments.

The Sixth Patriarch stated in the Platform Sūtra: “A deluded preceding thought makes one an ordinary being; an awakened succeeding thought makes one a Buddha.” In other words, if your previous thought is still deluded but your next thought is enlightened, you become a Buddha in an instant! This transformation occurs instantaneously. Therefore, the Pure Land school's recitation of Buddha's name follows this principle.

"Amitābha, Amitābha..." This word is transformation! Originally, we contemplated greed, anger, and ignorance; now, by reciting the Buddha's name, aren't we transformed into Buddhas?! Everyone knows Zhao Mengfu was a great writer, calligrapher, and painter. His calligraphy was excellent, and his paintings were superb.

One day, he was painting "Eight Horses," depicting eight horses in different poses. He pondered what these horses should look like.

Just then, his wife brought him lotus seed soup. She opened the door and was startled: "Bang!" The bowl fell to the ground, startling Zhao Mengfu. "Oh dear! What happened?" His wife said, "I just saw you turn into a horse!" Zhao Mengfu had been thinking too deeply about horses; his body had even taken on a horse's shape.

He reasoned, "If contemplating horses transforms me into a horse, then meditating on Buddhas will surely transform me into a Buddha! Yes!" I won't paint horses anymore; I'll paint Buddhas. Zhao Mengfu was very clever; from then on, he painted Buddhas. Therefore, everything is created by the mind. This is why we constantly contemplate. Everything is created by our nature.

The worst of the Ten Dharma Realms is the Hell Realm (you will go to hell if you keep doing evil things), and that too is created by ourselves. As long as we constantly think of becoming a Buddha, we can become a Buddha; the principle is that simple. It's not about relying on others to help us but on transforming our own minds. Others' help is merely to awaken us.

As long as we can immediately awaken and transform ourselves, even the greatest sins can be eliminated. Therefore, those who have done bad things in the past should no longer have any attachments in their hearts: just let go of everything. But from now on, never do bad things again!

“Mantra yogins of the Vajrayāna of middling or higher capacity, who have practiced the Generation and Completion Stages and undertaken such practices as reciting heart-mantras, need not wait for the intermediate state of dharmatā; they are received and guided to a Pure Land by vidyādhara heroes, ḍākinīs and other beings.” The Generation Stage brings appearances forth from non-existence.

Although we presently see nothing within the body, for example, through successful visualization we may perceive channels, bindus, Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The completion stage dissolves what has arisen back into emptiness. Whatever possesses form is illusory: even the bindu is nothing other than ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna), still deluded consciousness.

It too must dissolve before the Dharmakāya Buddha is realized. Thereafter, supernormal functions arise freely from emptiness. When practicing a formless method, we begin directly with Completion Stage: after dissolving appearances and realizing the Dharmakāya, we diligently eliminate habitual tendencies;

This process of removing habitual tendencies is a return from nothing to something; once habitual tendencies are exhausted, one can give rise to wondrous functioning and display spiritual powers. So the generation stage is the form-based method for initial entry, while the completion stage is the formless method.

“Esoteric-vehicle mantra yogis of middling capacity or higher who have practiced the generation and completion stages” refers to those in Esoteric Buddhism who are in accord with mantra recitation; they have practiced and recited the heart mantras of various Buddhas and bodhisattvas (such as the most common Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra, the heart mantra of Four-Armed Avalokiteśvara: Om Ma Ni Bei Mei Hong; the heart mantra of Amitābha Buddha: Om, A Mi Die Wa Sha; the heart mantra of Guru Padmasambhava: Om Bei Ma Bie Zha Hong). They need not wait for the intermediate state of dharmatā: already in the intermediate state at the time of death they are welcomed to the Pure Land by vidyādhara heroes, ḍākinīs, and others.

A vidyādhara ( ) is a wrathful Wisdom King who terrifies demons; he is very fierce, and demon kings are so afraid on seeing him that they dare not come and make trouble. Ḍākinīs ( ) are all the spirits who protect the Dharma. Pure Land does not mean only the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss; all the worlds of the ten directions are pure lands, and one can go to any of them. So it is better for us to practice diligently while alive.

Even those of the lowest capacity may attain liberation upon hearing this teaching if they possess unwavering faith in Esoteric Buddhism, give rise to no wrong views and practice it morning and evening. Many people today disparage Esoteric Buddhism, particularly some Pure Land practitioners who say, “Esoteric Buddhism is bad and leads to demonic influence; Pure Land is good.”

Such speech damages the esoteric tradition and disparages the Buddhadharma. Pure Land is indeed good, but the lecturer points out that its liturgy also includes mantras such as the Ten Short Mantras, Rebirth Mantra, Great Compassion Mantra and Śūraṅgama Mantra.

Since the Pure Land school cannot do without Esoteric Buddhism, isn't it nonsense to say that Esoteric Buddhism is bad?! So do not harbor doubts about Esoteric Buddhism, and do not hold wrong knowledge and wrong views that damage it; that is very bad! In fact these people are pitiable: they talk wildly without even knowing what Esoteric Buddhism is.

Like the Master Hongyi we mentioned earlier, who also said Esoteric Buddhism was bad when he did not know. Later, when he saw the esoteric scriptures, he said, "Ah! How perfect, with everything complete; I have truly committed a grave wrong!" For this he wrote a special "Text of Repentance."

Some people just repeat what others say and slander Esoteric Buddhism without knowing what it is; this is wrong view. If one can truly believe in Esoteric Buddhism and not give rise to wrong views, such a person is liberated as soon as he hears this Dharma. So what matters most in realizing the Way is faith and confidence.

Faith and confidence are essential to attainment. Exoteric Buddhism likewise teaches the Ten Faiths, followed by the Ten Abodes, Ten Practices, Ten Dedications and Ten Grounds. Without faith, how could the Way be attained? Thus, even a person of the lowest capacity who hears this teaching with unwavering faith may attain liberation.

This method of liberation in the intermediate state is also important for Dharma teachers trained in exoteric Buddhism, including Pure Land, Chan and Faxiang.

Although these teachers of exoteric Buddhism observe the precepts very strictly—unlike the many monks nowadays who break them—and teach with great eloquence, they have not earnestly practiced the heart-mantras of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. They do not understand the true meaning of esoteric mantras, also called "true speech," and have not formed connections with particular Buddhas or bodhisattvas.

For example, we who practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma recite the Maitreya Mantra forty-nine times each day to form an auspicious connection with Maitreya Bodhisattva. Thus, when consciousness emerges into the intermediate state, those teachers remain bewildered and understand nothing.

Sometimes they see very fierce, terrifying wrathful forms, and union forms of Buddha-father and Buddha-mother embracing, and they think wildly: "How could Buddhas and bodhisattvas have such forms? No, no—probably they are demon kings." They take all these wrathful forms of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas to be demon kings.

They do not know that the Buddhas manifest wrathful forms to terrify demons. Take Mahākāla, the Dharma protector of Esoteric Buddhism (called Great Black Heaven in Han Chinese areas): he devours fresh blood, tramples a woman, holds a stūpa in his left hand and a skull in his right—very frightening.

He is not like the Dharma protector Skanda Bodhisattva, who has a kindly, dignified appearance, because Skanda is a body of the Wheel of the True Dharma, while Mahākāla is a body of the Wheel of Command. We must not treat every wrathful form or union form like an enemy and give rise to anger.

Some people even slander it, saying, "Esoteric Buddhism is not good," "Esoteric mantras are not good," "Only our Dharma is best," with arrogance and pride. Now there is a so-called "Qinghai Supreme Teacher" who says, "You don't need to recite Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva's mantra, and you don't need to recite Amitābha Buddha's mantra; just recite me, the Qinghai Supreme Teacher."

This is arrogant speech; this is a great demon king! Because of slandering the Esoteric Dharma, one will fall into the "ravine of evil destinies" and drop into the deepest level of the evil realms, Avīci Hell ("ravine" means a bottomless pit; "destiny" means realm; evil destinies are evil realms). So we must study this Dharma well while alive and make it clear; and for the Dharma masters of Exoteric Buddhism, to tell the truth, this too is an indispensable and important link.

(IV) The Extraordinary Merits of This Esoteric Practice

After death we enter the dark netherworld, where there is no light and no sense of east or west. This scripture is like a lighthouse in that realm: it points out the direction for us in the realm of the dead, so that we do not stray onto the wrong path or fall into an abyss.

Going further, it can even carry us beyond the cycle of birth and death, which is why this scripture is also called an everlasting life-insurance policy. Many Pure Land practitioners today are unsure whether they will be reborn in the West, and they worry about it, because to be reborn in the West through Buddha-recitation one must reach one-pointedness of mind without distraction—at the very least, one-pointedness at the level of phenomena.

Now that we have this precious scripture, there is nothing to fear even if our Buddha-recitation has not been done well. At the moment of death, as long as someone teaches us the Dharma and guides us, we can be liberated.

To be able to hear this teaching is like grasping a life-saving straw in the middle of the ocean; it is as good as holding the insurance policy in our hands. How fortunate we are! We should therefore read this supremely excellent, unsurpassed esoteric teaching often, sincerely, and devoutly.

We should immerse ourselves in the words and meaning of this book and savor them. (“Immersing” means that the meaning lies hidden deep; “chanting” means reflecting deeply, as when we chant a poem; “savoring” means bringing out the true meaning and wondrous flavor of the scripture and understanding it deeply.) Do not skim through it carelessly. Work through the meaning of every word and truly grasp the ultimate purport of this teaching.

We should memorize and carefully observe the two maṇḍalas of this scripture, the “peaceful” and the “wrathful,” and the ocean-like assembly of the Hundred Deities. Ji ( ), “peaceful,” means quiescent; nu ( ), “wrathful,” means wrathful or fierce.

As explained earlier, a Buddha displays two wheel-bodies: the solemn, dignified and compassionate Body of the Wheel of the True Dharma, belonging to the peaceful assembly; and the frightening Body of the Wheel of Command, also called the body of a Wisdom King, belonging to the wrathful assembly and commanding beings and māras to submit to the Buddhadharma.

A maṇḍala is an altar or sacred assembly-ground where Buddhas, bodhisattvas and their retinues gather completely; a place where the Dharma is taught is likewise an assembly-ground. The “ocean-like assembly of the Hundred Deities” denotes an immense gathering rather than exactly one hundred individuals. The lotus-pool assembly of the Western Pure Land in the Amitābha Sūtra may similarly be called an ocean-like assembly. We should observe these images carefully and retain them in memory.

We must never give rise to inverted or deluded views regarding images of Buddha-father and Buddha-mother in union in this scripture, thinking, “Were there still such sexual images at that time?” A single movement of lust spoils the practice. Nor should we say, “Perhaps this book is unreliable,” thereby disparaging the Dharma.

It could have brought us great benefit, but if we give rise to inverted, deluded views, we gain no benefit and cannot be liberated. Worse, we incur the offense of slandering the Dharma—this is what “further incurring the fault of slandering the Dharma” means. The original meaning of (lí) is calamity; here it means to have, to acquire, or to suffer. To slander this teaching is a grave sin, and that would be terrible indeed.

We have explained this point many times; let me say a little more now. The union image is symbolic. It shows that we ourselves originally possess a body in which yin and yang are united, and that our Buddha-nature and Dharma-nature (the root of all dharmas is called Dharma-nature; the root of becoming a Buddha is called Buddha-nature) are originally complete with this capacity of yin and yang in union.

Did not the Sixth Patriarch Huineng say, “Who would have thought that our own nature could give rise to the myriad dharmas!”? This means that our nature in its essence originally has the capacity to give rise to the myriad dharmas, and the myriad dharmas arise from the union of yin and yang. So the image of Buddhas in union holds a supreme secret meaning. We must never entertain evil thoughts about this supreme secret meaning, nor think of it as sexual pleasure.

For example, our present body is a temporary combination of earth, water, fire, and wind; the fire element is yang and the water element is yin. Daoism also speaks of “the Infant and the Maiden, with the Yellow Matron as matchmaker.” So our body itself has a negative pole and a positive pole.

Ordinarily the negative and positive poles in our bodies do not meet. But when our practice reaches samādhi, we can clearly sense two electric currents in the body joining together with a “whoosh.” This is the union of yin and yang.

So our physical body itself is already a union of yin and yang. Why, then, would anyone still slander or doubt this? Therefore we must not entertain evil thoughts about the union image, and we must not think of it as sexual intercourse between a man and a woman.

If we truly understand this secret meaning and do not let our thoughts run wild, then, because we have been habituated to it during life (“habituation” means that I teach and you listen; “familiarity” means becoming well acquainted), we will not forget it at death. Once I asked everyone, “We have discussed the union image many times. Can any of you say what it is?” Not one person could answer. How dreadful! You have not become familiar with it. So we must become familiar with, understand, and grasp the contents of this scripture.

If we truly understand these principles and add our own wisdom (that is, our Buddha-nature, which inherently has boundless wisdom; this wisdom arises from the intrinsic nature of our own mind and is called prajñā, also called wisdom realized within oneself,

not some experience or knowledge absorbed from outside—that is worldly intelligence and petty cleverness, which has nothing to do with true great wisdom),

then when the realm of the intermediate state appears we will suddenly see clearly: “Naturally, we will recite the verses and text of the scripture as if flowing; we will not be startled or afraid before the peaceful and wrathful forms; we will give rise to Right Faith toward the Buddha-father and Buddha-mother in union; and by non-dual fusion we will attain the Buddha stage.” This scripture contains many verses.

The verses are like poems or hymns of four or five characters per line, and they can be recited like songs. At that time the intermediate-state being's memory is especially strong, nine times stronger than it is now.

As soon as you speak, it understands. It can recite these verses and text as swiftly as flowing water; it is not at all frightened by the Buddha's Wheel-of-Command body; and when it sees the union image of Buddha-father and Buddha-mother in embrace, it can give rise to Right Faith and exclaim, "How wonderful! This is symbolic. That is simply how things are: we are originally complete with yin and yang.

" In this way, the Buddha is us and we are the Buddha; we blend like water and milk and become one. It is not that there is a Buddha apart from me, or a me apart from the Buddha. The Pure Land school says the same: "Mind and Buddha commune on the Way and are fused into one." When your Buddha-recitation reaches this point, you are Amitābha Buddha and Amitābha Buddha is you. It is not that there is an Amitābha Buddha apart from you, or a you apart from Amitābha Buddha. This is what it means to fuse non-dually and become one, and thereby to attain the Buddha stage.

"The intermediate-state body has all six sense faculties and possesses karmic spiritual power (spiritual power induced by karmic force). Its intelligence and agility are nine times what they were in life. Its ear faculty is especially sharp: even a person who was hard of hearing in life, though far away at this time, can come at once in response to a call, with nothing to obstruct it."

As we said earlier, the intermediate-state body has all six faculties—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. It is not that once the corpse is left behind the six faculties are gone, because its ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) still exists. This consciousness is the root, from which the seventh, sixth, and first five consciousnesses arise.

Because it has spiritual powers induced by karma, the intermediate-state body at that time sees farther and hears more finely, but it has only the five spiritual powers and not the power of the exhaustion of outflows. These five powers are not as profound or as vast as a Buddha's, but it is nine times as sharp as a living person, and the ear faculty is especially keen.

In the Śūraṅgama Sūtra the Buddha asked Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva which of the six faculties of beings in this Sahā world brings the quickest and most rapid benefit in practice. Mañjuśrī chose the ear faculty: "The true essence of teaching in this world lies in pure hearing." For example, if someone is asleep and you softly call, "So-and-so," he wakes up the moment he hears it.

If you try to make him see something, he cannot see it, much less wake up. If you give him food, he does not know it, much less eat it. Even a mountain between us does not stop us hearing a call when we are awake, whereas the eyes cannot see through a single sheet of paper. So the ear faculty is clearly the sharpest.

It is the same with the intermediate-state body: the ear faculty is the sharpest, and it can hear you when you call its name and speak to it. Even a deaf person (one hard of hearing), after death, though very far away, can come in response to a call. For example, if someone dies far from home and the bad news arrives, you call his name: "So-and-so, please come here to receive offerings.

" Though he died far away, because of the power of miraculous travel he arrives in a single drift, and no mountain or river can obstruct him. This is what the scripture means by: "All six faculties are endowed with awareness; moving without hindrance, it roams at will."

Our physical body is dominated by the earth element, so it meets obstacles: it cannot rise to a great height, and if it wants to cross a river it cannot do so without a boat or a bridge. The intermediate-state body, by contrast, is dominated by the wind element. It has left the obstructive body of flesh and blood; it has put down a burden and has no material form, so it can move without hindrance.

The intermediate-state body is the "spirit of consciousness" transformed by the manas consciousness. Such a spirit is either a yang spirit or a yin spirit. A yang spirit is one produced by good practice, able to manifest form; a yin spirit is one produced by poor practice, unable to manifest form. If we could truly send our spirit out, nothing could obstruct it. When someone tells a lie, we know it as soon as we hear it.

Someone says, "My spirit went out, and I came to a big river with no bridge. I couldn't cross, so I begged Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, and later Avalokiteśvara helped me across." I say this is utter nonsense. That is not your spirit going out; that is going out as a ghost! If the spirit really went out, it could float—how could it fail to cross even a river? Clearly this is deception. There are many heterodox sects outside now, and no one knows how many wrong teachings and wrong views there are. None of them is spiritual power; all are false, meant only to deceive people.

During the intermediate state at death, when consciousness is overwhelmed, the being remains dazed as though asleep. In the intermediate state of dharmatā it awakens, but wanders alone without companions.

Why does it wander? Because the terrifying scenes brought by its karmic obstacles appear before it one after another, like a film; and because it has no body, it does not know where to go. Where can it find a body? So it becomes terrified and bewildered, not knowing where to turn, and drifts about east and west.

Once it hears someone speaking the Dharma to it, pointing things out and teaching it—"This is what you should do..."—it gladly complies. For example, if following this scripture we tell it, "Do not be afraid. These appearances are all manifestations of your own nature; none of them is real," then, hearing that they are not real, it will no longer be afraid.

Or we say to it, "Luminosity is appearing now. This is your own light. The Buddha is also radiating light to receive you. Merge with this light and you will be liberated." Hearing this and merging with the light, it can attain accomplishment.

This scripture contains many verses based on the Buddha's light, all for instructing the deceased. As long as the words and phrases are not recited wrongly, the deceased, on hearing them, can suddenly awaken, understand that all these phenomena are false, and cease to be afraid. So there is no need to invite anyone to perform the Flaming-Mouth ritual, because a person who has just died does not go straight to the hungry-ghost realm.

It is better to follow the scripture's teaching to save the deceased. In the intermediate state of Dharmatā the scripture gives the deceased twenty-one instructions, and in the intermediate state of becoming twenty-four, forty-five in all. After so many instructions, "even a being as stupid as an animal can be led to take refuge in the Three Jewels" (p. 50 of the original).

We know that animals are the most ignorant. A person who is too ignorant will be reborn as an animal. Earlier we explained that people have the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. One who has all three in full is a seed of hell; one with heavy greed is a seed of the hungry ghosts; one with heavy ignorance is a seed of animals.

After so many instructions in this scripture, even the most ignorant person can be led to take refuge in the Three Jewels ("taking refuge" means returning home, coming back; "relying" means depending on.

The Three Jewels are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.) At the very least, this keeps one from losing the human body! Do not underestimate the human body—it is hard to obtain! Those who fail to obtain one number in the tens of thousands, the hundreds of millions; only a very few obtain one. The whole world has only a few billion people, and no one knows how many fail to obtain a human body.

Even fewer are those who not only keep a human body but are also born into a good destiny. In this world there are good people and bad people; some families are well-off and some are very poor and wretched—those are people of evil destinies.

For example, the ghost of someone just out of hell cannot be reborn as a human at once; it is first born in the animal realm, as a mosquito or a fly, and is soon swatted dead, and only then slowly reborn as a human. When first reborn as a human, one is very stupid and one's life is very hard.

This teaching can enable even people of the very lowest capacity to avoid losing the human body, to be born in a good place with good conditions and the Buddha's teaching, and to practice the Dharma until they become Buddhas. But those worthy people who lived good lives in the world yet never heard the instructions of this scripture while alive still cannot get out of the cycle of the six realms.

In our practice of the Buddha's teaching there are the stages of sages and worthies: the Ten Abodes, Ten Practices, and Ten Dedications are called the three stages of worthies, and the Ten Grounds are called the stage of sages. In the human world, too, there are worthies and sages. It is hard to become a sage but relatively easy to become a worthy. For example, Confucius had seventy-two worthies—seventy-two good students, all of whom treated others well and were willing to help and relieve people.

Though they were good people of great virtue, because they had not heard this scripture, or had not understood its teaching, still less knew the various states of the intermediate state after death, they could only go on drifting in the great sea of birth and death.

Even if one is reborn in a heaven through the Ten Wholesome Actions (the Ten Wholesome Actions are not ten good deeds but concern our body, speech, and mind: the body has three bad ways—killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct; the mind also has three—greed, anger, and ignorance; and speech has four—divisive speech, harsh speech, frivolous speech, and false speech.

Three of body, four of speech, three of mind: when all ten are good, that is the Ten Wholesome Actions), one still cannot end birth and death. At most one rises to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven, the thirty-three heavens where the Jade Emperor lives. When the blessings are used up, one falls again and still cannot escape the cycle of the six realms.

This teaching is the best secret dharma gate by which one can become a Buddha without entering contemplation or cultivating the path. If we simply read this scripture through seven times and recall it often without forgetting, we will be liberated at the moment of death. That is why it is also praised as the only dharma gate by which one becomes a Buddha without practice.

Yet constantly recollecting its words is itself a form of practice. If we read and then forget them, liberation at death will not follow. We must frequently recall and become familiar with the contents—"practicing without practice". The teaching is also described as "the heart-essence of the tantra section among all dharmas".

"Tantra section" refers to the last step among all dharmas, and "heart essence" refers to the Mind-Ground Dharma Gate. The Mind-Ground Dharma Gate trains the mind and is the most important (it is not a method of form; practicing qigong, for example, to exercise the body, is a method of form).

Because we all originally have Buddha-nature, at that time it will naturally radiate light, and the luminosity is ourselves—this is the heart essence, the last step among all dharma gates. These principles are very important; they are not only for saving the spirits of the dead, but also serve as a guide to the common knowledge of life and death in the human world.

Our Buddha-dharma (commonly called Buddhism) is really meant to educate people who are alive, not only to liberate the dead. Today's Buddhists have gotten this wrong: temples do nothing but perform Buddhist ritual services and make money liberating spirits. They cannot expound the sutras and cannot educate people.

In fact, true Buddhism should teach everyone how to conduct themselves in society, how to serve the public actively, and how to attain liberation at death; it is good for everyone to know and understand this common knowledge. We can see that Buddhism is both a religion and a philosophy, both a science and a sociology.

(V) Fourteen Important Points to Observe When Assisting the Deceased

These fourteen points must be learned thoroughly, one by one; it would be serious to get them wrong. We shall now explain them in turn:

Point One: The "Method for Liberation in the Intermediate State" is the method generally used in Tibet to guide the deceased to liberation. In Han Chinese regions, however, the usual practice is to invite monks to recite sutras and perform the Flaming Mouth ritual, for many people there do not know of this method.

This scripture describes the different states we encounter on each day after death, what we should do at each stage, how we should instruct the deceased, and what happens after they attain liberation. According to accounts handed down by Tibetan practitioners, a great lama who had cultivated extremely well had already realized the highest state in which "life and death are one".

Birth is death and death is birth: there is neither birth nor death. "One" here means unmoving.

Having reached this level, the lama experienced the entire process of death for himself: what happens when the breath ceases, when the light appears, and which Buddha is seen at each point. He experienced, one by one, every state described for each day in the scripture, and found that all of them corresponded exactly to its account.

This fully demonstrated that the scripture is correct and beyond doubt. Similarly, after Patriarch Lü Chunyang attained the Way, he wished to experience what it was like to be beheaded and just how painful it was. Afterwards he said, "It was like walking forty miles with a cauldron of scalding oil balanced on my head, until I was scalded to death."

This is called "playful samādhi"; the Tibetan lama did the same. Thus, whether one reads the scripture or performs this practice for the deceased, one should act with the utmost sincerity and have complete faith in it. One must concentrate single-mindedly and devoutly recite the text, or explain it to the deceased in accordance with the text, without the least carelessness.

In this way, "both the living and the deceased obtain great benefit". The person explaining the Dharma is among the living, and the person who has died is the deceased; both receive great benefit. The deceased naturally benefits greatly by attaining liberation and Buddhahood, while the practitioner gains great merit by guiding sentient beings to liberation.

Moreover, by repeatedly reciting the text to the deceased, the practitioner becomes thoroughly familiar with it. Each recitation deepens its impression until it is firmly imprinted in the eighth consciousness, laying a stable foundation. Then, even if no one performs the practice for that practitioner at the time of death, as soon as the states of the intermediate state arise, the practitioner will understand them and be able to liberate himself or herself.

Point Two: The Buddhist canon, comprising the Three Baskets and twelve divisions, is vast as an ocean and profound in meaning. Those who have not studied it may well feel overwhelmed and not know where to begin. In fact, the countless scriptures and treatises do nothing other than point directly to the intrinsic nature of sentient beings. To understand one's own mind and see one's own nature is therefore the essence of the Buddhadharma and the key to attaining the Way.

This scripture presents the supreme Dharma of the esoteric tradition. It contains many principles and technical terms not found in exoteric scriptures.

Layman Sun Jingfeng was perhaps concerned that, when the practice was performed for the deceased, the practitioner might doubt whether the deceased could understand the meaning of the text. He therefore again drew the reader's attention to this point: if you study the method for yourself, it is best to comprehend its principles and become thoroughly familiar with the text.

If you perform it for someone else, you need only read the scripture aloud, but your mind must be single-pointed, your articulation clear, and every word distinct; the deceased can then certainly attain liberation. Why is this? First, this method possesses great power of blessing: reciting this scripture has the same efficacy as reciting an esoteric mantra, also called "true speech". Second, during the intermediate state, the deceased's six sense faculties are nine times more acute than they were in life. Even someone who was ignorant, slow-witted, and illiterate while alive can be liberated immediately upon hearing the instructions in this scripture.

Point Three: In Han Chinese regions, it is customary after a death to invite monks to perform the Flaming Mouth ritual for the deceased. The Flaming Mouth ritual is a major esoteric practice, also known as the Yogic Flaming Mouth Food Offering. “Flaming Mouth” has two meanings. First, it describes the hungry ghosts of the hungry-ghost realm.

Flames issue from their mouths, preventing them from eating; hence they are called “flaming mouths”. In the Ullambana Sūtra, the Buddha relates that Maudgalyāyana’s mother fell into the hungry-ghost realm because of her heavy karmic obstructions and could not eat.

When Maudgalyāyana brought her food, it turned to charcoal as soon as she took it in her hand. Hungry ghosts therefore suffer terribly. The second meaning of “Flaming Mouth” refers specifically to the Buddha presiding over the hungry-ghost realm. A Buddha presides over each of the six realms. In his great loving-kindness and compassion, the Buddha seeks to benefit all sentient beings.

Wishing to liberate the suffering hungry ghosts, he manifested as one of them, with flames issuing from his mouth. He accords with sentient beings and takes a form close to theirs so that he can teach them the Dharma. It is like Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva manifesting as a pig and living among pigs in order to liberate them: by assuming the same kind of body, he can more readily guide them.

The Buddha who dwells in and presides over the hungry-ghost realm is therefore called “Flaming Mouth”. In the Yogic Flaming Mouth Food Offering, one invokes the Buddha’s Dharma power to extinguish the flames in hungry ghosts’ mouths so that they can receive Dharma food and attain liberation.

Is this a good custom? Certainly, if the deceased has actually become a hungry ghost and is starving, performing the ritual to help that being is a good deed and brings great benefit. The Buddhadharma should benefit sentient beings in both the visible and invisible realms.

Enabling hungry ghosts to eat and escape their realm is indeed excellent. One must remember, however, that the Yogic Flaming Mouth Food Offering is intended for hungry ghosts; it is not a universal method for guiding the deceased.

During the intermediate state, not everyone who dies has karma so heavy that he or she must fall into the hungry-ghost realm —especially not during the forty-nine days of the intermediate state. Beings revolve through the six realms according to their karma: those who do good and cultivate virtue ascend to the heavenly realms; those whose deeds are mixed are reborn as human beings; and the hell, hungry-ghost, and animal realms are the three lower realms.

If the Flaming Mouth ritual is performed after every death, does that not imply that everyone is so wicked that all must fall into the hungry-ghost realm? That is mistaken. When we practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, the blessings of the Dharma and the Buddha after completion of the six mudrās prevent us from falling into the three lower realms.

What use, then, would the Flaming Mouth ritual be? During the intermediate state it is unnecessary. It is better to use *The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State* to guide the deceased: explain the process of death and instruct them to recognize the light. They may then attain liberation and realize the Sambhogakāya. This is the method of liberation most beneficial to the deceased, and it is therefore better to use it in place of the Flaming Mouth ritual.

Inviting monks to perform the Flaming Mouth ritual and other services may appear to be a good deed, but in fact it is not. When one layperson after another invites monks to conduct services, the monks have no time to practice.

A patriarch of the Nanshan school once commented on this social custom: “Laypeople today all invite monks to conduct services, but in fact they are harming these masters. Not only do the laypeople gain no merit; they also incur wrongdoing.” Monks do not leave home to earn money by conducting services.

They do so to cultivate the Way, attain liberation from birth and death, and leave the cycle of the six realms. If you leave them no time to practice because they must rush from one repentance service to another all day, you gain no merit and instead incur wrongdoing. I therefore urge everyone not to do this.

Moreover, when monks accept such requests but lack the time to fulfill them, a measure of pretence inevitably enters the proceedings. I have personally seen temples that lacked enough participants for a service simply bring in two villagers to make up the numbers. The villagers knew neither how to recite the scriptures nor how to play the ritual instruments.

They were dressed in monastic robes and struck the instruments when told, making a great din until someone told them to stop. This was sheer pretence. Did the sutras and repentance texts they recited count? No. A yellow proclamation is issued for a Water and Land Dharma Assembly, listing how many times each scripture is to be recited.

The yellow paper states which scriptures are to be recited and how many copies of each. But because water-and-land ceremonies follow one after another, they have no time to recite them all, so they recite fewer.

Two Dharma masters told me personally, “Alas! We do not know how we can repay our debt of scriptures. The proclamation states how many times the Lotus Sūtra must be recited, but we had no time to do so and substituted the ‘Universal Gate’ chapter instead.”

These masters naturally also incur wrongdoing, for they fail to fulfill the scriptural commitment and thereby incur a debt of scriptures. Such debts are hard to repay. Yet it is the laypeople who have brought this about. It is therefore better to use this method in place of the Flaming Mouth ritual. Everyone should become familiar and proficient in it, so that whenever someone dies, you can go and help guide the deceased to liberation. This truly benefits the deceased and enables them to attain liberation; the merit is therefore greater.

The Flaming Mouth ritual was not taught directly by the Buddha. Great patriarchs compiled it from principles taught in the Buddhist scriptures and from relevant mantras. For example, its liturgical texts contain many lines written by Su Dongpo, a distinguished writer and poet.

Different versions of the Flaming Mouth liturgy exist, but the mantras in them are the same. They include many excellent mantras, such as the Food Transformation Mantra, which are also found in our daily liturgy books. No Dharma approach—whether Pure Land, Chan, or any other school—can dispense with esoteric Dharma and esoteric mantras.

The method for liberation in the intermediate state is “best taught and recited professionally by an eminent monk who has studied esoteric Buddhism or possesses pure discipline, or by a lay practitioner thoroughly familiar with phowa and this method”.

There are many lamas in Tibet, but in the Chinese interior it is difficult to encounter either a lama or an ācārya, a Vajra Master able to instruct sentient beings and transmit the Dharma. It is also difficult to meet someone with genuine attainment. There are many monastics in China today, but most do not understand the Buddhadharma very well.

A person of genuine cultivation is one who observes the precepts completely and does not violate them. Unfortunately, many monastics today break the precepts, while very few uphold them fully. I have seen some change out of their robes at the end of the working day on Saturday, put on ordinary clothes and caps, and leave. I do not know where they went;

Some go home by car to see their wives and children. When I was teaching the Dharma on Mount Putuo, I once saw a master performing a Buddhist ritual for someone while his wife and a whole crowd of children came to call him: “We are about to harvest the rice, come home quickly.” Can such a man still be called a monk?! He has broken the precepts; he doesn’t even look like a monk.

He has broken the precepts and no longer resembles a monastic. Thus people with genuine attainment are extremely hard to find today. One may also invite a lay practitioner familiar with phowa or this method to recite for the deceased. Yet lay practitioners generally have jobs and cannot devote themselves to recitation.

I therefore encourage everyone to learn esoteric Buddhism. This method contains many mantras, and reciting them is itself a way of studying esoteric Buddhism. Ideally, some ācāryas, lamas, eminent monks, or lay practitioners familiar with this method would make it their occupation—this was Layman Sun Jingfeng’s suggestion. Among the many occupations in the world, one may choose this as one’s work.

Yet if one treats it as a means of earning money, that is wrong: it amounts to selling the Tathāgata, using the Dharma of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas as a business. When the Buddha was alive, he did not recite scriptures or mantras for the deceased;

There is no such statement in the Buddhist scriptures, so where did performing Buddhist rituals come from? In the past monks all practiced in the mountains and forests; some built thatched huts on the mountains, and some lived in hermitages or temples. Because these masters did not work and had no way to make a living, lay practitioners from below the mountain often sent them offerings.

Feeling obliged to repay such kindness, the monastics would recite scriptures or mantras and dedicate the merit when a lay family encountered difficulties. This was the origin of Buddhist services. Gradually, however, fees came to be charged and fixed prices were established: so much for a Water and Land Dharma Assembly, so much for a Universal Prayer Service, and so forth.

Nothing of this kind appears in the Buddhist scriptures. If you make this work your occupation, guide the deceased to liberation, and take no money, it greatly benefits the deceased. By benefiting others, you naturally accumulate great merit. If you do it for money, however, it is wrong and brings no merit. Thus we say, “To give freely as circumstances arise is the greatest merit.”

If you encounter such a situation, recite a mantra to help without seeking any reward. That is best. By reciting for others, you also become increasingly familiar with the teaching. At the end of your own life you will then need no external assistance: when the light appears, you will recognize it and merge with it, attaining liberation. In this way both the living and the deceased benefit. How excellent this is!

Point Four: The entire practice may be divided into four stages:

The first stage begins when signs of impending death appear in a dying person. These signs fall into two principal categories. The first is the failure of the five sense faculties: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body begin to fail. When the eye faculty fails, vision becomes blurred.

Originally our eyes are bright; when the eye faculty fails, they lose their luster like pearls that have lost their sheen, and the eyeballs become dull and fixed. The eyeballs of people with mental illness are also dull and fixed. When the eye faculty fails as a person is about to die, it is like this, and you can see it. When the ear faculty fails, one can no longer hear sounds.

When the ear faculty fails, hearing ceases: one may call to the person, but he or she cannot hear. When the nose faculty fails, the bridge of the nose becomes crooked. When the tongue faculty fails, speech becomes slurred and indistinct, as when someone is drunk.

When the body faculty fails, the body becomes extremely heavy and cannot be moved. This is the first sign of death: the failure of the five sense faculties. Everyone must remember it clearly. As soon as these signs appear, the practice should begin, for the person is about to die. Do not miss the proper time. The second sign is the dissolution of the four elements. While we are alive, the four elements are integrated;

Now, as death is near, the four elements are about to dissolve ("dissolve" meaning melt) and fail. Our skin, flesh, and bones belong to the earth element. When the earth element fails, the body stiffens, becomes extremely heavy, and cannot move. Blood, saliva, and other flowing fluids belong to the water element. At that time the blood congeals and the heart stops beating.

Bodily warmth belongs to the fire element. When the fire element fails, the body grows cold. A living body normally has a temperature of thirty-six or thirty-seven degrees Celsius. If the person is still warm to the touch, life remains; as the body gradually cools, the fire element is dissolving. Breathing belongs to the wind element.

When it fails, there is exhalation but no inhalation. As death approaches, phlegm known as "sea phlegm" gathers in the throat and produces a gurgling sound; it is difficult to expel. With the final discharge of phlegm, the last breath leaves the body. These are the two signs of death to which the family and the practitioner must pay particular attention.

When these signs appear, phowa should be performed for the person. How is phowa practiced? As explained earlier, one visualizes the central channel as luminous, like a fluorescent tube, with a point of light at its center. With "Hēi—" the point is raised; with "Gā—" it is lowered.

At the moment of death, "Pā—" propels the point of light out, thereby attaining liberation.

If the dying person practiced phowa while alive and the opening of the channel was verified, one need only remind that person when the signs of death appear: "The time has come. Concentrate on raising the point with 'Hēi—', then use 'Pā—' to send it out." This enables rebirth in the Pure Land.

Such a reminder is enough, but it is sufficient only for someone whose phowa practice has already been verified. In Tibet today, auspicious grass is often inserted at the crown aperture. The body has nine apertures, of which the crown aperture is one. After the aperture has been opened, a blade of auspicious grass can readily be inserted.

Yet this does not by itself prove that the channel is truly open; it may merely provide psychological reassurance. How could the channel be open if the practitioner has not even visualized it? The channel must be visualized as open and luminous. Inserting auspicious grass is only a symbolic indication that the crown aperture has opened, not the genuine opening itself.

For a true opening of the crown, yellow fluid must flow out of the crown. When a person dies it is also like this: there is always one opening from which yellow fluid flows. A true opening of the crown must have verification. A person who truly has verification from practice does not need others to help him; he can liberate himself. We only need to remind him. In addition, we can help him by reciting many mantras for liberating the dead, namely the many mantras we will mention later, such as the "Six Realms Vajra Mantra," the "Liberation Through Hearing Mantra," and the "Great Secret Mantra of Original Awareness."

What should be done for someone who has not practiced phowa? There is a way to help. Those of us who have practiced esoteric Buddhism know how to direct and project qi. Visualize the person's consciousness rising from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head and then breaking out with a "pop".

In this way you can help that person. This can be done only by someone with considerable attainment in esoteric practice; otherwise the projected force will lack power. What if the helper is new to esoteric Buddhism and knows none of this? Layman Sun devised a method for such cases: recite the following texts for the dying person. First, the text on pursuing the noble path of clear light;

Second, the Instructions on the Dissolution of the Four Elements. Third, the Verses for Arousing the Resolve to Recognize the Clear Light at the Time of Death. Fourth, the Direct Instructions on the Clear Light. For now we only need to know the names of these texts; the contents will be explained later. For those who have practiced phowa in life, these passages need not be recited.

For someone unfamiliar with esoteric practice, however, they should be recited repeatedly without counting the repetitions. The practices for guiding the deceased are divided into several stages, and this is the first. It must be carried out before the person dies; after death it is too late. Everyone should therefore understand and memorize these passages so as to be able to help others.

The second stage begins after the signs of death—the failure of the five sense faculties and the dissolution of the four elements—have fully appeared and breathing has ceased. The preceding discussion concerned the period before the breath stops; this stage concerns the period after it has stopped. After a further twenty or thirty minutes, three more sections should be recited: fifth, the contemplation of the assembly of the yidam;

That is: fifth, the Visualization of the Yidam and Maṇḍala; sixth, the Instructions on the Intermediate State of Dharmatā and the Six Essential Verses; seventh, the instruction for letting the deceased recognize the Original Face. These three texts together with the four texts mentioned earlier make seven texts. These seven texts are recited in rotation until the intermediate state at the time of death has ended.

If you wish to help others, do not be afraid of the trouble involved; reciting them only once or twice is not enough. Continue without counting the repetitions. The deceased may not hear an earlier recitation but may hear a later one and thereby attain liberation. For three and a half to four days after death, therefore, recite these texts every day without counting the repetitions. During this period, do not invite monks to perform the Flaming Mouth ritual.

These four days constitute the intermediate state at death, during which the deceased remains dazed and confused and the consciousness is still obscured. We should therefore recite repeatedly in the hope that the deceased will hear and attain liberation. This is the second stage of the practice.

The seven verses above teach the deceased how to recognize their Original Face, a concept that is also essential for us to understand. The Original Face does not have a physical appearance; it is a reality that everyone should acknowledge. It is not defined by male or female characteristics, age, or the shape of one’s face.

In fact, it is entirely formless! True reality exists beyond form and is characterized by immense light. Our practice of Dharma aims to help us understand our minds and see our true nature, which involves recognizing our Original Face. Historically, Chan practitioners have contemplated the question, "What was it like before my parents gave birth to me?" After birth, we adopt identities such as male or female, fat or thin, among others.

So, what was it like before our birth? One master pondered this question for several years without attaining enlightenment. One day, while taking a stroll, he witnessed two neighbours fighting and cursing at each other, creating a truly vile scene. Someone intervened to mediate the altercation, saying, "Greetings, we are all neighbours; we see each other daily.

How can you be so ‘faceless’”? (In Chinese, this verb refers to a lack of shame.) Upon hearing this, he exclaimed, "Oh!" In that moment, he realized that the true nature of the spirit is its facelessness. If the spirit had a face, it would not represent its true nature.

Someone once asked me, "I meditated very well today, and I saw an image of a spirit." "Am I a spirit?" I told him he was merely seeing a ghost! Anything with form is not the true face. Therefore, it is crucial for us to recognize our true nature now so we may attain liberation more easily at the moment of death.

The third stage begins on the fifth day after the breath has ceased, when the intermediate state at death has ended. The intermediate-state being is no longer dazed and confused, but gradually awakens and gains some understanding. This is the intermediate state of dharmatā, the period when the luminosity of intrinsic nature manifests fully.

If the being awakens at this point and immediately merges with the light, liberation is attained as the Sambhogakāya. During this period, one particular scriptural passage or verse should be recited each day in accordance with the method. The passages and verses to be recited, and the manner of recitation, are explained clearly later. They must be recited in sequence and not out of order.

This continues for fourteen days. Together with the preceding three and a half to four days, the total is eighteen days. This is the practice of the third stage. In other words, there is one practice before death, another during the intermediate state at death, and a third during the intermediate state of dharmatā. Everyone must learn these three practices thoroughly.

The fourth stage begins after the intermediate state of dharmatā has ended—that is, after eighteen days following death. This is the intermediate state of becoming, when rebirth is imminent. The fourteen days during which the luminosity of intrinsic nature manifests have passed, and the karmic obstructions created in life now appear scene by scene, like a film.

Those who created virtuous karma follow that karma; those who created unwholesome karma follow theirs, entering the cycle of the six realms. The earlier liberation occurs, the better; the later it occurs, the worse. Ideally, liberation in the first four days brings realization of the Dharmakāya. If liberation is not attained then, it may still be attained between the fifth and eighteenth days, bringing realization of the Sambhogakāya.

But if liberation has still not occurred after the eighteenth day, the being enters the intermediate state of becoming, which is far less favorable. The scripture also provides methods of liberation for this period: helping the deceased to choose a womb and close the entrance to an undesirable womb. This enables a favorable rebirth and another opportunity to cultivate, which is better than falling into the three lower realms.

The scripture is divided into two volumes. The first gives the methods of liberation for the intermediate state at death and the intermediate state of dharmatā; the second gives the methods for the intermediate state of becoming. During the intermediate state of becoming, the entire second volume should be recited for thirty-five consecutive days. Together with the preceding period, this makes fifty-three days.

The current custom of observing seven-day memorial rites comprises seven periods of seven days, or forty-nine days, without counting the first four days. Including the four days of the intermediate state at death gives a total of fifty-three days. Recitation should continue throughout all fifty-three days. Nowadays, people often recite only during the first seven-day period.

From the second seven-day period onward, people wait until each successive seventh day rather than reciting daily. This is not good. Throughout the fifty-three days, recitations and offerings should be made every day, not merely once every seventh day. The practice of The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State may thus be divided into four stages, of which the intermediate state of becoming is the fourth.

Layman Sun Jingfeng feared that people would find daily recitation troublesome and the text too long, so he proposed dividing one complete recitation over three days. On the first day, recite from the beginning through Instruction Twelve; on the second, from Instruction Twelve through Instruction Nineteen; and on the third, from Instruction Nineteen to the end of the volume. Repeat this three-day cycle until the seven periods of seven days are complete.

This reduces the daily amount. In my view, however, it is still better to recite the whole text every day. Before we obtained *The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State*, we recited the Kṣitigarbha Sūtra and the Diamond Sūtra. Reciting both in full takes much longer than reciting the second volume of this scripture, yet we still did so daily.

When a deceased person is present in the home, one should recite every day and not complain of the trouble. It is best to complete the entire text. Layman Sun's three-day arrangement was a concession to those who might find it burdensome.

The deceased enters the intermediate state of becoming on the nineteenth day after the breath ceases. At that point, besides reciting the entire second volume, it is more complete and secure to add the methods of liberation for the preceding three stages. Do you again find this too long and troublesome? For the sake of liberating sentient beings, we should not fear the effort. To benefit others is to benefit ourselves, for it becomes provision for our own future passing. We gain merit and also become familiar with the text. How excellent this is! Do not be afraid of the trouble.

Point Five: during the fifty-three days of our practice, on which day will the deceased be liberated? When will he attain liberation? None of us can know. Unless we have gained some spiritual power through practice, we are all in the dark. So we can only recite from beginning to end in order.

We can therefore only recite in sequence from beginning to end: from the intermediate state at death to the intermediate state of dharmatā, and then to the intermediate state of becoming. Daily recitation over so long a period may feel burdensome. Concerned that people would find it troublesome, Layman Sun Jingfeng devised a way to shorten the recitations according to the deceased person's conduct in life. This reflects his painstaking concern.

If the deceased did many good deeds, he or she will not fall into the three lower realms and the recitations may be shortened. If the person did many bad deeds, the situation is dangerous and more must be recited. One must exercise judgment.

If the deceased cultivated very well in life, it is enough to recite through the intermediate state at death; the texts for the intermediate state of dharmatā and the intermediate state of becoming need not be recited. If the person did not practice diligently, the entire text must be completed. Thus the recitations may be shortened according to the deceased person's conduct and spiritual practice in life.

The scripture itself does not prescribe how they may be shortened. This was Layman Sun Jingfeng's own proposal, derived by bringing out implications not stated explicitly in the text. We shall now explain his three methods—A, B, and C—in turn.

Method A: This method is much as described above. For a person who practiced esoteric Buddhism during life—or who did not practice it but was thoroughly familiar with *The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State*—and who possessed pure discipline, it is sufficient to recite through the end of the intermediate state at death, the second stage.

Pure discipline is extremely important: it means practicing every virtue and committing no evil. If one practices esoteric Buddhism yet still does bad deeds, that will not do. To do bad deeds is equivalent to not practicing at all. We should only benefit sentient beings and must not commit even the slightest wrong. Do not commit an evil because it seems small, and do not neglect a good deed because it seems small.

We should perform a good deed even if it is no larger than a sesame seed, and refrain from an evil deed even if it is that small. Many practitioners today, it seems to me, lack pure discipline. Otherwise, the saying "If you seek the black-hearted, look among the vegetarians" would not be current.

"The vegetarians" means those of us who believe in Buddhism. The saying points to Buddhists who profess faith while continuing to do bad deeds. Such people lack pure discipline. Bad deeds create karma, and karmic obstructions cover the

luminosity of intrinsic nature like dark clouds. At death, that luminosity cannot manifest, and liberation is therefore difficult.

If one does no evil and is truly complete in precepts and conduct, one is broad-minded, generous, and openhearted, and the light of intrinsic nature is easily aroused. Because one has done no evil, no karmic obstacles cover the light of intrinsic nature. For such a person it is enough to help him by reciting during the intermediate state at the time of death, for three and a half to four days.

Remind the person: “At this point the light will appear, passing through the four transformations of appearance, increase, attainment, and near-attainment. Finally, it will shine forth like a vast, cloudless sky. Simply merge with the light and you will be liberated.” The texts for the intermediate state of dharmatā and the intermediate state of becoming then need not be recited.

Method B: This method applies to someone who did not practice esoteric Buddhism in life but did practice an exoteric tradition, such as Pure Land or Chan, and possessed pure discipline. Pure discipline is essential: the person must have observed the precepts rigorously. For such a person, the texts may be recited through the end of the third stage, the intermediate state of dharmatā.

The person can then be reborn in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. This method therefore lasts only eighteen days. The texts for the intermediate state of becoming need not be recited thereafter, for one who has reached the Western Pure Land no longer revolves in saṃsāra.

Method C: This method addresses the worst case: a person who practiced no Dharma in life, neither invoked the Buddha nor recited mantras, and lacked virtuous conduct. To lack virtuous conduct is to think only of taking advantage of others. Alas, everyone wants to gain an advantage, and that is the worst attitude.

Hence we often say, “To suffer a loss is a blessing.” In truth, what have we lost? Yielding to others is good and shows virtue. A virtuous person possesses roots of goodness. If one thinks only of gaining an advantage, harms others for personal benefit, and causes everyone else to suffer, one lacks virtue and roots of goodness.

Without roots of goodness, one will not receive a favorable karmic result in the future. For someone who did not believe in Buddhism, did not invoke the Buddha, and committed harmful deeds in life, the entire scripture must therefore be recited from beginning to end for fifty-three days after death. There must be neither slackening nor reduction.

Moreover, for such a person, the whole second volume must be included immediately after death; do not wait until the nineteenth day to begin it. Because the person committed harmful deeds, lacked virtuous conduct, and carries heavy karmic obstructions, the adverse states of the intermediate state of becoming may appear before eighteen days have passed and drag the person toward hell.

In the three situations described above, the deceased person’s family and the practitioner must assess the circumstances and decide which scriptural passages to add or omit. The circumstances must be considered carefully so that no mistake is made. This shows how important it is to do more good deeds, practice esoteric Buddhism diligently, apply oneself earnestly, and realize one’s intrinsic nature while still alive. Then there will be no need to continue to the third stage; the first or second stage will suffice. How excellent that would be!

As mentioned earlier, we have no way of knowing when the deceased attains liberation. Layman Sun Jingfeng devised a method: at the end of each intermediate state, draw lots to request guidance from the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Prepare several lots marked either “liberated” or “not liberated”. Before the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, collect the mind and pray sincerely: “Has so-and-so attained liberation?” Then draw one lot.

If it reads “liberated”, the person has attained liberation and no further practice is needed. If it reads “not liberated”, the practice for the next stage must still be performed. For example, when the four days of the intermediate state at death have ended, request guidance by drawing a lot.

If the deceased has attained liberation, the practice may stop. If not, perform the practice for the intermediate state of dharmatā. When the eighteen-day period has ended, draw lots again. If the deceased has attained liberation, there is no need to perform the practice for the intermediate state of becoming.

If not, that practice must still be carried out. It is best to draw lots only on rare occasions. Do not ask today, again tomorrow, and yet again the following day. That will not do; it turns the matter into child’s play.

Pray with complete sincerity and devotion, asking whether the subsequent practice is still required. Used in this way, the method is quite practical. In the past, Master Yanshou—Master Yongming Yanshou—was an eminent master of both Chan and Pure Land.

The Chan tradition included the Linji, Guiyang, Caodong, Yunmen, and Fayan schools, and Master Yongming Yanshou was a disciple of the Fayan school. Later he devoted himself to Pure Land practice, and the Fayan lineage came to an end with him. When he could not decide whether to practice Chan or Pure Land, he sought guidance before the Buddha by drawing lots.

He prepared lots marked “Chan” and “Pure Land” and prayed sincerely. The first and second drawings both indicated Pure Land, but he was still not fully reassured. He drew seven times in all, and every lot indicated Pure Land. He therefore decided to practice Pure Land. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas are greatly compassionate. If we request their guidance with complete sincerity, the response will be as immediate as an echo:

It is like a bell: strike it once and it sounds once; this is response like an echo, the meeting of response and Way. So as long as we are sincere, we can evoke a response. This is a method Layman Sun Jingfeng devised; it is not in the scripture. This method may also be used.

Point Six: if someone dies away from home, in a foreign place, and a telegram or letter reports: “So-and-so died on such-and-such a date,”

the family, on learning of it afterward, should count from the date of death according to the scripture’s rules, see which intermediate state the deceased is in at that time, and use the scripture text for that intermediate state to instruct the deceased so that he can be liberated.

The first three and a half to four days constitute the intermediate state at death. The fifth through the eighteenth day constitute the intermediate state of dharmatā. From the nineteenth day onwards, including the nineteenth day itself, the deceased is in the intermediate state of becoming.

Because news sent by telegram or letter may arrive late, the family does not learn of the death immediately. Passages for stages that have already elapsed need not be recited retrospectively. For example, if the telegram arrives on the nineteenth day, the deceased is already in the intermediate state of becoming. There is no need to make up the passages for the intermediate state at death or the intermediate state of dharmatā, for reciting them then would serve no purpose.

Point Seven: When performing the practice, keep all arrangements simple. According to the scripture, it is enough to place a small offering of fruit and food before the deceased; offerings should also be made before the Buddha. As we recite scriptural passages and verses and request the Buddha’s blessing, offerings are appropriate. Whether beside the sick person or at the place where the body rests, avoid crowds and confused conversation; the surroundings should remain quiet.

Only the practitioner needs to recite the scriptures and mantras for the sick or deceased person. If many people are talking and everything is disorderly, the person will not be able to hear the text clearly.

I have seen many Pure Land practitioners form assisted-recitation groups to invoke the Buddha’s name for the sick or deceased. They recite extremely loudly and even strike a wooden fish: “Dong, dong … Amitābha Buddha, Amitābha Buddha …” It is too noisy. This agitates the person’s consciousness and prevents it from becoming calm.

It is better to recite quietly, neither raising the voice so loudly nor striking the wooden fish. The wailing of family members is particularly harmful. Loud sobbing makes the deceased person’s consciousness even more alarmed and confused. Do not cry in this way, for it stirs the person’s emotional attachment.

I remember clearly that there used to be a vegetarian restaurant in Suzhou called Gongdelin. Its owner was devoted wholeheartedly to Pure Land practice. He ran a vegetarian restaurant, refrained from killing, and did good deeds. As he approached death, auspicious signs appeared and he saw Amitābha Buddha coming to receive him.

Just then, however, his concubine came in crying, “My dear, what shall I do after you die?” Her weeping disturbed his mind. Once his mind was disturbed, inverted and deluded thoughts arose and karmic appearances manifested. The auspicious Pure Land vision disappeared, as did the image of the Buddha, all because of the disruption caused by his concubine.

This is why family members should not wail. One must also refrain from killing living beings. Do not think that, because someone is close to death, two soft-shelled turtles should be killed to strengthen the person’s body. That would be terrible—it would hasten the person’s death. Nor should animals be slaughtered to prepare a lavish funeral meal, the so-called “tofu feast”.

I have seen many such feasts at which people eat meat, drink alcohol, and play drinking games as though attending a celebration, without the least grief. This has nothing to do with mourning and brings no benefit whatever to the deceased. We should not do such things.

Point Eight: Everyone should note that, before the dying person’s breathing has ceased, the family may help place the body in the lion posture, also called the auspicious reclining posture: lying on the right side. Because the heart is on the left, this avoids pressing upon it.

As a person dies, the pericardium—called “duti” in this scripture—opens and the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) departs. Therefore, lie on the right side so that the heart is not pressed upon. The left hand rests on the left knee and the right hand supports the head. The scripture also instructs one to plug the right nostril so that the breath passes through the left, but in my view this is unnecessary.

the auspicious reclining posture is enough. This is how lions sleep, so it is also called the lion posture. In Exoteric Buddhism there is a book called Scenes at the Time of Dying. It describes the ten scenes at the time of death and what we should do then.

One point is that, as the four elements dissolve, the dying person's body should not be touched, lest the additional pain arouse anger. Moving someone who is just about to die causes great suffering.

It is like disturbing a person who is just falling asleep: "Oh, how irritating! I was just drifting off, and you woke me." There was once a king who was dying in summer. Someone was fanning away the flies and accidentally touched the king's nose with the fan.

The king had been calm and was about to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land, but the touch made him angry. With the arising of anger, he was reborn as a venomous snake. Thus the disturbance harmed him. The surroundings must therefore remain quiet when a person is dying, and the body must not be touched or prodded. Whether to move someone into the lion posture depends on the circumstances.

If the person can still move and has not yet reached the final cessation of breath, it is acceptable to help him or her assume that posture. If the person is just about to stop breathing, do not move the body. Leave it as it is, whether facing left or right. Everyone must pay close attention to this. Taking a dying person to hospital is, in my view, most unhelpful.

When someone is close to the final breath, hospitals may administer cardiac stimulants or artificial respiration, and the movement causes extreme pain. Even someone about to attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land may be pulled back. The body should not be dressed until at least eight hours after breathing has ceased. Even eight hours is rather short; it is preferable to wait twenty-four hours.

During this period the person remains in a dazed state: the outer breath has ceased, but the inner breath has not yet ended. Those of us who meditate know that, in genuine absorption, the outer breath may cease while the inner breath remains. Moving the person at this time may still arouse anger and resentment.

One must therefore assess the circumstances carefully before moving the body. Experience and care are essential. I have seen people who, near death, lose control of the bowels and bladder, whereupon the family exclaims, "Quickly, clean everything up!" Yet the person may be on the verge of departing. Do not move the body merely to clean it. If anger arises because the person is moved, rebirth in the Western Pure Land may be lost. At this time, the body must not be disturbed.

Point Nine: Whichever Dharma method one ordinarily practices, and whichever Buddha or bodhisattva is central to that practice, one takes that figure as the deity of reliance—the yidam. "Reliance" means that one depends upon the deity and, having done so, rests unmoving in meditative absorption. A yidam is thus a particular Buddha or bodhisattva in whom one places faith and upon whom one bases one's regular practice.

For example, when we practice the Six-Syllable Great Mantra, our yidam is Avalokiteśvara, specifically Four-Armed Avalokiteśvara. In Pure Land practice, Amitābha Buddha is our yidam. In the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, our yidam is Mahāpratisarā Bodhisattva, a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara.

In Tibet, followers of the Nyingma, Gelug, Kagyu, and Sakya traditions all recite the Six-Syllable Great Mantra, just as people in Han Chinese regions recite "Namo Amitābha Buddha". Everyone knows it; nowadays even children can recite it. A song in the television series *The Legend of Jigong*, for example, repeats "Namo Amitābha Buddha, Namo Amitābha Buddha …", and even children can sing it. This plants roots of goodness in them, which is excellent.

If the deceased practiced no Dharma in life and had no yidam, what should be done? Take the Lord of Great Compassion and Amitābha Buddha as the yidams. The Lord of Great Compassion is Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, who arouses great compassion and vows to liberate all sentient beings.

A "lord-protector" is one who supports, cherishes, and protects us. Why take Avalokiteśvara as the yidam? Because everyone here knows Avalokiteśvara and almost every household enshrines an image of the bodhisattva. The image is therefore readily impressed upon the deceased person's mind. Even people who do not believe in Buddhism sometimes display an image of Avalokiteśvara as decoration.

I have seen many families put a statue of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva on the piano as an art object.

That is also good: at least they admire Avalokiteśvara's dignified form. In Han Chinese regions, even children generally know Amitābha Buddha. Thus, when performing the practice, it is also good to add Amitābha Buddha of the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss after the Lord of Great Compassion as a yidam and protector. The deceased can then readily understand: "Ah, I am going to Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva and Amitābha Buddha." We may therefore apply the method flexibly, provided that we do not depart from the scripture's essential intent.

Point Ten: Suppose that, after the seven periods of seven days—that is, after fifty-three days have elapsed—we draw lots to determine whether the deceased has attained liberation, only to discover: "Oh dear! The person has not attained liberation, yet has not revolved into another realm either." The being has entered none of the six realms and is still wandering without a home. At this time, the changing thoughts of the deceased person's mind-born intermediate-state body may cause it to manifest as a hungry ghost or as a ghostly being wandering through space—the "lonely ghost or wandering spirit" of ordinary

speech, which is not necessarily a being reborn in the hungry-ghost realm. With no one to guide it to liberation, such a being suffers greatly.

Around us, in the space above and below, dwell rākṣasas, malevolent ghosts, followers of heterodox paths, and other spirits. Chī, mèi, wǎng, and liǎng ( ) are the four great evil ghosts. Where could there be no ghosts? Ghosts are everywhere; do not be afraid. As long as our hearts are upright and bright and we pay them no heed, ghosts see us from afar and avoid us.

If someone's mind is dark and that person continually commits wrongdoing, ghosts have an opportunity to exploit. It is therefore best to live uprightly. Rākṣasas and malevolent spirits dwelling throughout the ten directions possess supernormal powers and can display many transformations.

Many people who practice qigong today say, "I have developed extraordinary abilities." In fact, they have not! These are all rākṣasas and evil spirits attached to their bodies, which is how they can display all kinds of supernatural transformations. Ghosts who have just come out of hell wanted all kinds of spiritual powers during their lives (before falling into hell).

After completing their suffering there, they emerge and attach themselves to human beings in order to display such powers. Many people are attached to appearances and crave extraordinary abilities, precisely corresponding to these ghosts. As soon as the thought arises, a ghost attaches itself to the person, who then appears to possess powers and can show them off before others. In fact, these displays are the work of spirits.

For example, "viewing the deceased" is, according to this teaching, a form of spirit possession. The deceased relatives have not truly been summoned by the medium; wandering spirits are making mischief. Such mediums have troubled, improper minds and a strong yin quality, which enables spirits to possess them.

The two exploit one another to deceive people: "I shall display a little power so that you can earn money, and you will make offerings to me." Because wandering spirits have no one to guide them to liberation, they seek offerings and hope to be liberated.

How can a medium know another family's affairs? The possessing spirit has some minor powers and can question the local earth deity. Suppose Zhang San is coming to see the medium tomorrow. The spirit asks the earth deity how many people are in Zhang San's family, who will arrive the next morning, and what the circumstances are.

When Zhang San arrives the next day and the spirit possesses the medium, she accurately describes his household. People exclaim, "This medium is truly effective!" and believe her. In fact, spirits are at work. I once knew such a medium.

The possessing spirit said directly, "I am a homeless wandering ghost. I help her and she helps me; we make use of one another." Thus, do not place your faith in such mediums; their claims are false. Those of us who cultivate should first of all refrain from pursuing supernormal powers. The mind should be entirely empty and abide nowhere.

Intrinsic nature is formless, like a vast cloudless sky containing nothing at all. We must continually empty and purify the mind in order to attain the Way. The moment we become attached to appearances or seek something, chī, mèi, wǎng, liǎng, and other spirits arrive. Everyone should take note of this.

In the second volume of this scripture, which treats the intermediate state of becoming, there is a "method of protection from the pursuing emissaries of death". These emissaries are adverse appearances experienced after death because a person committed too many harmful deeds in life. They drive the being toward the worst destinations, toward hell; hence they are called pursuing emissaries of death.

At that time, hailstorms, fierce winds, tigers, venomous snakes, pursuing emissaries, and many other frightening appearances arise everywhere. They are evoked by the harmful deeds committed in life and are represented by the "mirror of karma". The chapter on the Ten Kings of Hell describes this mirror, in which all our harmful deeds appear before us.

At this point there is a mind-born body produced by the manas consciousness. The manas consciousness is the mental faculty that clings to a self. If there were no such clinging, there would be no intermediate-state body: there would be only the body of great luminosity, the Dharmakāya, and Buddhahood would be attained.

It is because the manas consciousness continues to function that the mind-born intermediate-state body appears. This body has not yet been reborn in any realm and still wanders without support. Confronted by frightening appearances, it is anxious and afraid and cannot decide what to do.

One moment it thinks, "Shall I go here?" and the next, "Shall I go there?" These anxious, unsettled movements are called changing thoughts. Such changing thoughts may cause the being to appear as a hungry ghost with flames issuing from its mouth, or as a rākṣasa, malevolent spirit, or other wandering ghost.

These forms are created by the mind's changes under pursuit by adverse appearances, for everything is made by mind. Do these frightening appearances truly exist? They possess no intrinsic reality. They are evoked by our harmful actions and karmic obstructions and manifested by our own deluded mind. If we understand that nothing whatever can be grasped, we awaken immediately.

The practitioner should therefore follow the scripture, call the deceased by name, and instruct the being not to be afraid: “All these appearances are manifestations of your own intrinsic nature; they are illusory.” The deceased should awaken quickly and escape from the adverse state. This is the “method of protection from the pursuing emissaries of death”: it prevents them from driving us onwards, enables us to escape adverse appearances, and keeps us from falling into a lower realm.

The deceased may fail to attain liberation within fifty-three days and become a wandering spirit, suffering greatly.

For this reason, there is a custom in Tibet of continuing to make offerings for the deceased during the first hundred days. Offerings and scriptural recitations are also made for the deceased on anniversaries of birth and death and on annual festivals —corresponding, in Han Chinese regions, to Qingming, the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, the first day of the tenth lunar month, New Year’s Eve, and similar occasions.

These commemorations are observed out of concern that the deceased may not have attained liberation and may have become a wandering spirit. The same custom exists in Han Chinese regions.

How should we guide deceased parents and relatives, other unsupported wandering spirits, or the consciousnesses of chickens, ducks, and pigs when we see them being killed? The appendix to this scripture provides methods that may be used as appropriate. One may judge which scripture or mantra suits each circumstance.

For example, when commemorating parents or relatives, it is excellent to recite the Great Luminosity Mantra, the Mantra of Liberation through Hearing, the Great Secret Mantra of Primordial Awareness, the Six-Realm Vajra Mantra, the Kṣitigarbha Mantra, the Hundred-Syllable Mantra, and so forth. This shows how comprehensive the scripture is.

Point Eleven: Here Layman Sun Jingfeng explains the various dhāraṇīs and esoteric mantras in the appendix. An esoteric mantra is a symbolic expression manifested from the meditative mind of a Buddha or bodhisattva; in Chinese it is called a “true word”. It gathers all teachings and concentrates all their power. Reciting a mantra is like sending a coded telegram that establishes communication with the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Its power is great, yet the method of recitation is simple. He gives several examples. The Mantra of Liberation through Hearing has only five syllables: “A-bi-jia-dang-ga”. It should be recited aloud; upon hearing it, the deceased attains liberation.

Reciting these five syllables carries the same merit and power as reciting the entire scripture. This is the blessing power of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Another is the Great Secret Mantra of Primordial Awareness, the heart mantra of Samantabhadra, the Primordial Buddha.

As explained earlier, Samantabhadra is the Ādibuddha, the primordial Buddha of the esoteric tradition and the Dharmakāya Buddha. The mantra has only seven syllables: “Ma-ma-guo-lin-sa-man-da”.

The Six-Realm Vajra Mantra is “A-a-xia-sa-ma-ha”. There is also the Mantra of the Oceanic Assembly of the Hundred Peaceful and Wrathful Deities. “Peaceful” refers to the peaceful assembly, the compassionate and dignified body of the true Dharma wheel. “Wrathful” refers to the wrathful assembly, the fierce and terrifying body of the wheel of command—that is, the body of a Wisdom King. “Oceanic Assembly of the Hundred Deities” means an immeasurable gathering of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, not merely one hundred.

They are as countless as the lotus-pool assembly in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss. This mantra is the dhāraṇī that encompasses the peaceful and wrathful maṇḍalas in this scripture; a maṇḍala is a sacred ritual space. To recite it once is equivalent to reciting the entire scripture. The power of mantra recitation is therefore immense. We even say that reciting the Kṣitigarbha Mantra is preferable to reciting the Kṣitigarbha Sūtra.

It is simple and concise, yet possesses limitless power. The Vajracchedikā Mantra is the Vajracchedikā Dhāraṇī. “Dhāraṇī” means “comprehensive retention”: gathering all meanings and retaining all dharmas. It is another term for a mantra or esoteric mantra.

One recitation of the “Vajra-Cutting Dhāraṇī” equals reciting ninety million volumes of the Diamond Sūtra. One volume of the Diamond Sūtra already has great power; ninety million volumes would be far more remarkable still.

The Diamond Sūtra does indeed possess great power. Let me relate an incident told to me by a colleague. A devoted married couple were separated when the husband died.

He appeared to his wife in a dream and said, “I am suffering greatly after death. Please recite scriptures to guide me to liberation.” He had felt no need for them while alive, but after death he asked his wife to recite for him. She thought, “How can I recite scriptures for him? I am a Communist Party member, and besides, I do not know how.”

Her younger sister suggested setting up a memorial tablet at a temple. Temples nowadays offer such tablets: a red longevity tablet cost one thousand, while a yellow tablet for the deceased cost five hundred. She arranged a tablet for her husband. Three days later, she dreamt of him again.

On both occasions she saw only his upper body, not the lower half. He said, “It was good of you to set up a tablet, but it has not helped me very much. There are so many tablets there, and those reciting are not truly concentrating.” This was indeed the case: the masters performing the recitations were merely going through the motions.

“It would be better for you to recite three copies of the Diamond Sūtra for me yourself.” She replied, “I do not know how to recite the Diamond Sūtra.” He said, “Obtain a copy. You can read, so simply read the words.” After discussing it with her sister, she obtained the text.

Every morning before dawn, she rose to recite it for her husband. She could not let anyone see her: as a Communist Party member, how could she openly recite scriptures? She therefore rose before daylight to do so.

Three days later she dreamed of her husband again, and this time he was no longer only half a body. He told his wife happily: “It’s all right now. You recited the Diamond Sūtra for me, and I have been liberated.” From this we can see that the Diamond Sūtra has great power, and the power of the “Vajra-Cutting Dhāraṇī” is even more inconceivable.

In the maṇḍala diagram of the peaceful assembly in esoteric Buddhism, five Buddhas occupy the five directions. Akṣobhya Buddha, for example, is in the east, and his mantra is the Rebirth Mantra of Akṣobhya Buddha. Amitābha Buddha is in the west, and his is the Rebirth Mantra of Amitābha Buddha.

Everyone knows Amitābha Buddha, for Pure Land practitioners who aspire to rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss invoke his name. Śākyamuni Buddha is our fundamental teacher. According to the explanation given here, his Dharmakāya is Vairocana Buddha, his Sambhogakāya is Rocana Buddha, and his Nirmāṇakāya is Śākyamuni Buddha.

His mantra is the Mantra of the King Who Destroys All Lower Destinies. It helps the deceased purify wrongdoing so that they may attain a favorable rebirth and avoid the three lower realms: hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals. These mantras are indispensable when guiding the deceased.

Someone may ask, “Is not the Buddha of the east the King of Lapis Lazuli Light?” Yes, but there are many Buddhas in the east. There are seven Medicine Buddhas alone, and the King of Lapis Lazuli Light—the Medicine Buddha who dispels calamities and prolongs life—is one of them. There are innumerable Buddhas, not merely one in each direction.

We choose the one with the closest affinity to beings in our Sahā world. Thus, for the east this teaching selects Akṣobhya Buddha, whom the speaker here also identifies with Vajrasattva and Vairocana, and regards as especially important in esoteric Buddhism. These matters will be introduced later. For now, everyone need only understand that Buddhas are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges.

In truth, all sentient beings are originally Buddhas. Delusion merely obscures their Buddha-nature. Seeing an attractive object, we want to possess it; hearing a pleasing sound, we want to continue listening. Deluded by sights and sounds, we lose sight of intrinsic nature. Yet everyone is a Buddha, inherently endowed with the Tathāgata’s wisdom and virtuous qualities.

If we can let go of everything and understand that forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible objects, and mental phenomena are all sensory defilements—dreamlike bubbles and shadows, illusory appearances that cannot be grasped—we can turn the light inwards to illuminate our Buddha-nature. If we cease chasing the six sense objects and return to our original nature, we attain Buddhahood. Thus there are countless Buddhas throughout the ten directions.

“The four” (　) refers to the four directions east, south, west, and north; above and below are two directions; and the southeast, northeast, southwest, and northwest corners are four directions; altogether, ten directions.

During practice, some people feel themselves descending rather than rising and become frightened: “I am going down; I am going to hell!” Do not be afraid. Below, too, are Buddha-fields; descending does not necessarily mean entering hell. A well-known encounter dialogue makes this clear. A woman entered meditative absorption beside Śākyamuni Buddha.

Those present felt uneasy because, at that time, female monastics were regarded as secondary to male monastics and were expected to remain behind them. They therefore believed that the woman should not be seated there.

Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, the embodiment of wisdom and teacher of the seven Buddhas, tried to bring her out of absorption. He raised her to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, but she did not emerge; he cast her down through the eighteen hells, but still she did not emerge. Śākyamuni Buddha said, “You cannot bring her out of absorption. A bodhisattva named Wǎngmíng in the realm below can do so.”

As soon as he had spoken, Bodhisattva Wǎngmíng appeared from below. This demonstrates that Buddhas and bodhisattvas also dwell in the direction below. The Amitābha Sūtra likewise speaks of the six directions. Going down does not necessarily mean going to hell.

In reality, spatial directions have no intrinsic existence. East, south, west, north, the intermediate directions, above, and below arise only because the discriminating mind distinguishes ascent from descent. Buddha-nature is a single great sphere, empty of all differentiation; every direction is the same. When guiding the deceased, it is therefore sufficient to recite the mantra of a Buddha in one direction.

Pure Land practitioners may recite Amitābha Buddha's mantra. If we know all the mantras and recite them all for the deceased, enabling that being to receive the blessings of all the Buddhas, the benefit is still greater. The most important requirement when reciting mantras for the deceased is unshakeable faith.

We must believe without doubt. If the least uncertainty arises and we test the method—"Will this mantra really work? Perhaps it will not"—our power diminishes. There must be no doubt whatever. As in the Pure Land tradition, rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss requires three conditions: faith, aspiration, and practice.

They are like the three legs of a tripod; not one can be omitted. First is faith. When we perform the practice and confer blessings upon the deceased, we must believe that we ourselves are Buddhas, that the mantra possesses immense power, and that it can certainly draw the deceased out of suffering and enable rebirth in a pure land.

The same applies when performing phowa. Visualize yourself as a Buddha and use the power of practice to guide the deceased person's qi from the soles of the feet up to the crown and out through the brahma aperture. Do not think, "Perhaps my power is insufficient; perhaps this will not work."

Faith is what matters most in believing in the Buddha. That is why the first of the stages of practice is the stage of the ten faiths. But until one has truly realized one's nature, there is subtle doubt and one is not fully convinced; only after truly realizing one's nature can one truly believe. So when we perform the practice we must believe and must not harbor the slightest doubt.

In our own practice, too, we must believe, "I will certainly attain Buddhahood." With this confidence, we can attain accomplishment. We are originally Buddhas. It is only because of deluded, inverted thinking—mistaking external forms and appearances for substantially real things and grasping them without letting go—that we have lost sight of our true nature.

Now our practice is to extinguish deluded thoughts and the deluded mind and to know that all external forms are false, illusory, and unreal; then we will surely succeed. Second, after having faith we must make great vows. A great vow is bodhicitta—the vow that we will become Buddhas and save sentient beings—and this power is also great.

We say there are several very great powers. One is the boundless power of the Dharma; another is the boundless power of karma—the power of the karma we have created is great, and it is because we are pulled along by karmic force that we cannot be liberated from the six realms; and another is the boundless power of vows—when one truly makes a great vow, its power is tremendous.

Whether one practices Esoteric Buddhism, Chan, or Pure Land, one must make great vows. In Chan, for instance, because of the support of the power of the vow, even if one does not awaken in this life, one can awaken when one comes back in the next; the power of the vow supports one so that one does not lose the human body, and after birth one awakens to a thousand things upon hearing one, advancing ever higher.

Once a Chan practitioner has genuinely realized the mind and seen intrinsic nature, even if habitual tendencies remain and cognitive obscurations have not been eliminated, at most seven births in heaven and seven returns to the human realm are required before birth and death come to an end. Pure Land practitioners should therefore not disparage Chan. Through the power of aspiration, we unite with the power of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in responsive communion. When we invoke the Buddhas, they respond.

By the same principle, when we reach the deceased person's consciousness, it responds. In other words, the practitioner's power holds the consciousness of the deceased, which then follows the instructions and can realize the Sambhogakāya. Third, after making the great vow, we must put it into concrete practice. This is actual cultivation.

Only by eliminating delusion and realizing truth can we fully realize the fruit of Buddhahood. A vow without diligent practice is an empty vow. Even when guiding the deceased, the practice must be performed conscientiously and meticulously. Faith, aspiration, and practice—the three indispensable conditions of cultivation—are therefore equally important when guiding the deceased to liberation.

Thus, if we recite the mantras described above with unwavering faith, responsive communion with the deceased becomes possible. Through the mantras' blessing power, the deceased can attain liberation; karmic obstructions cannot bind the being, who may be freed from their entanglement and realize the Sambhogakāya. When guiding and blessing the deceased, we should therefore recite every mantra in the appendix. The mantras are brief, but their power is great. The appendix describes their merits at length, so they need not be explained one by one here.

Point Twelve: Someone once asked, "Esoteric teachings are transmitted through secret empowerment and may not be taught publicly. By explaining this method openly, are we violating the rules of esoteric Buddhism?" It is true that esoteric Dharma normally requires empowerment and secret transmission. There are two reasons for this. First, it should not be transmitted to an unsuitable vessel.

Before transmitting an esoteric method, the master must determine whether the recipient has the appropriate capacity. If not, transmission will be of no use, because the person will be unable to carry the practice through. Second, it should not be transmitted to an unworthy person. The recipient must be genuinely upright and kind.

Esoteric Buddhism contains many kinds of method, including methods for activating functions and methods for realizing the essence. If a method for activating functions is given to someone with a corrupt mind, that person may misuse it to commit harmful acts. Esoteric teachings may therefore be transmitted only to people who are truly upright and good.

If an unworthy recipient uses such a method to harm others, the master who transmitted it also bears responsibility. For these reasons, esoteric Dharma must not be transmitted indiscriminately and is normally given in secret. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma and the Dzogchen (Great Perfection) teachings of the Nyingma school, for example, are transmitted in this way. Even so, our resolve to liberate sentient beings is impartial and makes no distinctions.

The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State, however, is intended to guide the deceased. It provides a final opportunity for liberation at the time of death. It is not a method for activating functions and cannot be used to harm others.

So this Dharma differs from other esoteric teachings: it may circulate openly, be widely propagated, and be explained in detail; it need not be taught secretly to one person only. Even with many people in the room, the text may be recited aloud for the deceased.

In this way, everyone can hear it, plant a seed in the field of the eighth consciousness, and form a good connection: “Oh, there is this method of deliverance in Esoteric Buddhism!” In this way everyone will know this Dharma and can escape the cycle of birth and death—how wonderful! So explain it to everyone in full detail, bringing out the meaning of the text.

When reciting it for a dying person, the blessing power of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas means that the reader need not necessarily have practiced esoteric Buddhism, possess spiritual attainment, or have great Dharma power. It is enough to understand the meaning of the text and articulate it clearly.

Someone confused about the text should not perform the practice, for confusion leads to mistakes. Nor should someone whose speech is indistinct recite it: if the dying or deceased person cannot understand the words clearly, a mishearing could cause harm. Everyone must pay close attention to these two requirements.

In the Buddhadharma, the word “secret” refers to the hidden treasury of our Buddha-nature. As the saying goes, “I have a treasure, secretly concealed within the mountain of form.” A great treasure is hidden within this visible shell of a body composed of the four elements.

Our practice is to open the treasury and discover that treasure, but diligent cultivation is essential. People today generally have limited capacities and heavy karmic obstructions. They are unwilling to apply themselves and practice only perfunctorily. I often hear people say, “While I invoke the Buddha and recite mantras, thoughts keep arising.

I think of one thing and then another. I tell myself to stop, but the thoughts will not settle.” Why will they not settle? Because in our daily activities we cling too tightly. We fail to see that appearances are illusory and false, and we chase them without letting go. When we sit down, therefore, wandering thoughts continue without a moment’s pause.

If during the day we genuinely maintain awareness at all times and in all places, understand that forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible objects, and mental phenomena are illusory and cannot be grasped, pay them no heed, and respond to circumstances as they arise, then far fewer wandering thoughts will occur when we sit down. If we are truly willing to let go, every one of us can succeed, for we are originally Buddhas.

The saying “Lay down the butcher’s knife and become a Buddha on the spot” is entirely correct. Yet people refuse to let go. They continually calculate gain and loss: “How can I become rich? How can I gain promotion? How can I enjoy myself more?”

If the mind is agitated all day, how could wandering thoughts fail to arise in meditation? How could confused dreams fail to arise in sleep? This will not do. We should therefore apply ourselves now. If our present practice nevertheless proves inadequate, this final method of liberation remains. Liberation is easiest in the intermediate state because the physical shell is gone.

Once the consciousness emerges, it is extremely acute. Upon hearing the instruction, it can merge with the luminosity of intrinsic nature and attain the Way. I do not say this to encourage you to neglect practice now. Do not think, “It does not matter if I fail to practice, because this method will liberate me in the end.” The more diligently we practice now, the better.

If our cultivation is genuine, we can attain liberation during the intermediate state at death, without waiting for the intermediate state of dharmatā. As soon as the breath ceases and we leave the physical shell, we can be liberated without anyone reciting the text for us. How excellent that is. It is therefore better to apply ourselves now.

If we refuse to let go now, we shall still have to let go in the intermediate state. If, even then, we cling to our family, how can we attain liberation? The great masters of old said, “To be reborn in the Western Pure Land, you must be willing to leave this Sahā world; otherwise, you are like someone rowing while the boat remains tied to a stake.”

The boat’s mooring rope is fastened to a stake on the bank, yet the person sits in the boat and rows. How could it move? Likewise, if you aspire to the Western Pure Land but remain attached to your family and cannot bear to leave, all your effort is

wasted.

We must let go. We shall have to do so at death in any case, so it is better to let go now. Nothing can truly be obtained. If even the body is not ours, how could external possessions be ours? How could spouse and children, gold, silver, and treasure belong to us? People remain preoccupied with these things, unaware that they are delusions and dreams, and refuse to awaken.

Emotionally conditioned views are indeed difficult to penetrate. This is why a bodhisattva is called an “awakening sentient being”: one must awaken from and eliminate such emotional attachment. Śākyamuni Buddha set us an example. He was a prince who could have become a king and had a wife and son, yet he left home and departed from them.

Many people, by contrast, are like bees boring toward the highest point: they want to become emperors or presidents, wield great power, and obtain whatever they desire. This creates karma. Our spouses and children come together with us through causes and conditions, and those conditions are like debts. Either we owe them or they owe us.

If one’s children are filial, they are repaying a debt to us; if they are unfilial, we are repaying a debt to them. A web of karmic debts binds us together. People remain deluded and unaware. If we could truly awaken and let go of everything, every one of us could attain the Way. Ultimately, then, we must remain undeluded during the intermediate state.

The later passages likewise instruct us not to cling to family or children, for nothing can be grasped, and above all not to cling to the body. The body is a great source of trouble and a heavy burden. Carrying it becomes a source of karmic obstruction. Human suffering and affliction arise because of this body.

We should understand this now and cease identifying with the physical form. A Chan verse expresses it well: “Take empty stillness as your essence; do not identify with the physical body. Take numinous awareness as your mind; do not identify with deluded thoughts.” To take empty stillness as the essence is to recognize the true ground as empty space—still, unmoving, and containing nothing.

The physical body is false and should not be taken as oneself. To take numinous awareness as the mind means to remain clearly aware without clinging to appearances and to bring deluded thoughts to rest. Deluded thought is ceaseless discrimination and unyielding attachment. This scripture therefore instructs us to let go of everything and recognize the light. In this way, liberation is attained.

Point Thirteen: The preceding point stated that anyone who speaks clearly and can explain the text correctly may perform the practice. Here the importance of transmission lineage in esoteric Buddhism is emphasized as a further qualification. In esoteric Buddhism, transmission from a master and continuity of lineage are indeed of paramount importance.

When guiding the deceased, one should therefore respectfully, earnestly, and warmly invite “a Vajra Ācārya who has received this method to transmit it; this is the proper procedure”. The invitation should not be casual or frivolous. An ācārya is a Vajra Master. “Vajra” signifies indestructibility and the wisdom of the true Dharma.

It is therefore best to invite a Vajra Master to transmit the method. The phrase “this alone is legitimate” is perhaps too absolute; “this is the more proper procedure” would be better.

What should be done if the necessary circumstances are absent and no Vajra Master is available? With the utmost respect and sincerity, visualize yourself as Guru Padmasambhava explaining this scripture to the deceased and guiding that person to liberation. Esoteric Buddhism places great emphasis on visualization. In any practice, one visualizes oneself as its yidam.

Because Guru Padmasambhava transmitted this method, simply visualize yourself as Guru Padmasambhava. Do not doubt this. Do not think, “I am an ordinary being; how could I possibly be Guru Padmasambhava?” At this moment, as I transmit the Dharma to guide the deceased, I am Guru Padmasambhava. There should be no doubt whatever.

It is the same when releasing captive animals. When we buy fish, snails, turtles, and other creatures and release them while guiding them to liberation, we should visualize ourselves as Buddhas. Thus, without doubt, visualize yourself as Guru Padmasambhava. If you are unfamiliar with Guru Padmasambhava, visualize yourself as Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva.

This instruction is particularly suited to people in Han Chinese regions, where Avalokiteśvara is deeply revered and enshrined in almost every household. The bodhisattva has the closest affinity with sentient beings in our Sahā world. As the Buddha approached parinirvāṇa, he instructed Avalokiteśvara: “You have the closest affinity with the Sahā world. After my parinirvāṇa, care for and protect its sentient beings, enabling them to leave suffering, find happiness, and turn calamity into good fortune.”

so that they can all leave suffering and attain happiness, and turn misfortune into good fortune.” He entrusted this not only to Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva but also to Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva: “You too have an affinity with the sentient beings of this world; you should universally liberate the sentient beings of the Sahā world.” So Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva liberates beings widely in the hells.

If you cannot visualize yourself as Guru Padmasambhava, visualize yourself as Avalokiteśvara, also known in Chinese as Guānzìzài, “Perceiver of Freedom”. Why is the bodhisattva also called by this name? According to the explanation given here, Guānshìyīn, “Perceiver of the World’s Sounds”, was the bodhisattva’s name at the causal stage.

The bodhisattva entered through perfect penetration of the faculty of hearing, attaining the Way by listening to the sounds of the world. The practice is to contemplate who hears sound. Ask yourself, "Who is hearing?" The bodhisattva was practicing on an island where the tide rose and fell. When it rose, the sea roared, and the sound was heard: "Who hears this sound?" When the tide receded, the wind and sea became still and there was no sound: "Who is it that hears the absence of sound?"

When the tide rose, the sea water roared "whoosh, whoosh…" and she heard it. She asked herself, "Who is it that hears the sound?" When the tide fell, wind and waves were calm and there was no sound. She asked herself again, "Who is it that does not hear the sound?" Thereupon she realized the Way: sound is the dust of sound, and the dust of sound arises and ceases.

When the tide rises, the sea water roars "whoosh, whoosh," and there is sound. When the tide falls, wind and waves are calm and there is no sound. So the sound of the sea arises and ceases, but our hearing-nature neither arises nor ceases! That is, the capacity to hear sound, the function itself, has no arising or ceasing.

Even when no sound is heard, are we not aware of silence? It is not that hearing has vanished. Ordinary people think that hearing no sound means hearing nothing, but the capacity to hear remains.

Thus, in this account, Guānshìyīn is the name at the causal stage, while Guānzìzài is the name after attainment and also indicates a method of practice. One maintains continual awareness, takes dharmatā rather than the deluded physical body as oneself, and contemplates the faculty that invokes the Buddha. Chan therefore asks, "Who is invoking the Buddha?" It is not the physical body.

When the breath ceases, the body has not yet decayed, yet it can no longer invoke the Buddha. What invokes is our capacity, our functioning—Buddha-nature itself. Contemplate Buddha-nature, which is nowhere yet everywhere, not confined to one place and absent from another. This is the meaning of "Perceiver of Freedom".

When Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva realized the Way, she attained great freedom. When we leave suffering, attain happiness, and attain great freedom, that too is called attaining freedom. So Avalokiteśvara ("Freely Observing") Bodhisattva is a name at the stage of fruition. Her great compassion is deeply felt; she regards all of us sentient beings as her own children.

We beings of the Sahā world, by contrast, are deeply selfish. We recognize only our own children and ignore those of others: no one may touch our children, while another's suffering seems none of our concern. Avalokiteśvara is not like this. Her compassion is profound, and she cares for us at every moment.

Pure Land practitioners who aspire to the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss therefore remain inseparable from Avalokiteśvara. They should invoke Guānzìzài and recite the Six-Syllable Great Mantra, continually receiving the bodhisattva's protection. Visualize yourself, then, as Avalokiteśvara.

If you do not dare to accept that you yourself are Avalokiteśvara (or Guru Padmasambhava), then visualize Avalokiteśvara (or Guru Padmasambhava) as your guru, above your head or in the air before you.

When guiding the deceased, recite the text together with Avalokiteśvara. Sustained by the bodhisattva's blessing power, your doubts will dissolve and you can recite with confidence. In truth, there should be no doubt: recognize yourself as Avalokiteśvara.

This is especially important in the intermediate state, where you must recognize the light as yourself and merge with it, thereby realizing the Sambhogakāya. If you dare not accept this, the result is less complete. You may regard the light as radiance emitted by a Buddha to receive you, follow it, and attain rebirth in the Western Pure Land, but you will not yet realize the Sambhogakāya.

Attainment depends upon one's courage, resolve, and breadth of mind. Great courage and a vast mind enable great accomplishment; timidity and narrowness do not. Spiritual capacity is therefore extremely important.

If you cannot accept that you are Avalokiteśvara, visualize the bodhisattva above your head or in the space before you and recite along with her. In this way, too, blessing is received. Layman Sun Jingfeng considered painstakingly the varying capacities of sentient beings.

This method benefits the living practitioner, the deceased, and everyone else who hears the teaching. When the necessary circumstances arise in future, however, one should still request a Vajra Master to confer the transmission, in accordance with the rules of esoteric Buddhism.

This method arises entirely from Guru Padmasambhava's great compassion. Wishing to guide the deceased out of the ocean of suffering, free them from the cycle of the six realms, and bring them to the other shore, he transmitted this method. We must therefore never use it to make money. Everyone should pay careful attention to this point. Many people today undertake such work for profit.

Some have not even entered the monastic life, yet join Buddhist services and recite scriptures for the deceased in order to earn money. This is extremely serious. I am not trying to frighten you: do not create the causes of rebirth in hell for the sake of temporary gain. Such conduct is unacceptable. Like Guru Padmasambhava, we should guide the deceased out of compassion, not for profit.

Guru Padmasambhava and Avalokiteśvara are both masters of this method. Guru Padmasambhava embodies Amitābha Buddha, Śākyamuni Buddha, and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva in a single form; therefore, Guru Padmasambhava is Avalokiteśvara. Like Avalokiteśvara, he never leaves us.

People in Han Chinese regions, however, are relatively unfamiliar with Guru Padmasambhava. Many do not know his principal mantra: "Oṃ Āḥ Hūṃ Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hūṃ." Tibetans recite it so fluently that it may be shortened in oral practice to "Oṃ Pema Benza Hūṃ."

If we recite it frequently, Guru Padmasambhava continually appears before us and guides us, enabling us to leave suffering, attain happiness, and be reborn in his Buddha-field. Like other Buddhas, he has his own pure Buddha-field. Here, everyone has faith in the compassionate responsiveness of Avalokiteśvara.

As the "Universal Gate" chapter says, whatever calamity we encounter, invoking Avalokiteśvara brings liberation. The bodhisattva is "at all times and in every place able to hear cries and respond to invocation".

" "Time" means time, "place" means space, and "constantly able" means always able, often able—not able today and unable tomorrow, able a moment ago and unable now. So this sentence means: whenever and wherever we invoke Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, she can manifest and respond, seeking out the sound and answering suffering.

She hears the cries of sentient beings and comes to their aid. If you invoke, "Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva ...", she hears and responds. When you recollect her, she can manifest before you. A book called *Records of Avalokiteśvara's Miraculous Responses* contains many accounts of such responses.

It is wrong, however, to put the teaching to the test. The "Universal Gate" chapter says, "Entering fire, one is not burned; entering water, one does not drown." Some people try an experiment: they light a candle, invoke "Namo Greatly Loving and Compassionate Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva", and hold a hand over the flame. "Ow! It hurts terribly.

Is it not said that one enters fire without being burned? Why does it still hurt?" Well! If one is not sincere but is testing Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, that is not good. We cannot interpret scripture by its literal words; we must explain it flexibly, not rigidly. "Entering fire without being burned" has many meanings; here the fire refers to the fire of afflictions.

Mental turmoil is a fire that burns down the forest of merit. When the flames of affliction arise, invoke Avalokiteśvara and recognize that all phenomena are empty; the afflictions then disappear. Is this not entering fire without being burned? What, then, does "entering water, one does not drown" mean? Water may signify the waters of attachment.

Tears flow when those we love are separated from us; saliva flows when favorite food is placed before us. This "water" therefore signifies craving and emotional attachment.

At such moments, invoke Avalokiteśvara and recognize that all appearances are insubstantial and illusory, like flowers in the sky or the moon reflected in water, and cannot be grasped. The waters of attachment then subside. Is this not entering water without drowning? Scripture becomes coherent when explained as a living teaching; a rigidly literal explanation is inadequate. The greatly loving and compassionate Avalokiteśvara is present everywhere and can manifest at every moment. If we invoke the bodhisattva in genuine suffering, we can attain liberation.

Point Fourteen: According to former customs in China, during the first three days after death the body remained on the bed and was not placed in a coffin. After three days it was placed in the coffin temporarily, but the lid was left open and no nails were driven. This was called the lesser encoffining. After seven days, the lid was closed and nailed down; this was the greater encoffining.

The old custom was therefore lesser encoffining after three days and greater encoffining after seven, although this is difficult to observe today. In hospitals nowadays, even before the breath has entirely ceased, people may say, "There is no hope—send the patient to the mortuary at once." In this respect, it may be somewhat better to die at home. Even at home, however, one must consider the season and circumstances.

In the heat of summer the body cannot remain there for three days and may instead be placed in refrigerated storage at a funeral home. Layman Sun Jingfeng surmised that this old custom arose because, during the first three or four days, the deceased person's consciousness has not completely left the body and remains in a dazed state.

In his account, the greater a person's meditative stability, the more slowly the consciousness departs; the weaker it is, the more quickly departure occurs. He therefore states that the body must not be cremated during the first three and a half to four days. Cremation during that period would, in his view, be disastrous, because the consciousness may not have completely departed and the person may only appear dead and could revive.

Such cases, he says, do occur. When I was lecturing at Huangya, a man told me, "I used not to believe at all in rebirth through the six realms. Now I believe in it without the slightest doubt." I asked, "What brought this about?" He replied, "Something happened while I was ill in hospital. My illness was not serious.

Some fellow patients were playing cards, and I stood nearby watching. Suddenly I saw a woman in the air beckon to me, and I followed her. I lost all sensation in my body and floated away until I reached a place with a great iron gate. Many nails were driven into it, and above it were the two characters 'Underworld'.

"The woman told me, 'Wait at the gate. You must not enter. I shall fetch someone.' She went inside. I waited a very long time, but she did not return, so I entered. The place was gloomy, with rooms one after another. Then I saw a friend of mine.

"He said, 'I asked you to come because I have something to entrust to you. My mother has grieved terribly since I left her. She has cried herself blind in one eye, and the other is nearly blind. Please tell her that I am well here and ask her not to grieve any longer.

"'Another concern is that my mother has no one at home to care for her. You are my good friend, and I would like to entrust her care to you. Will you agree?' 'Yes, yes,' I replied. 'Good! Then I will send you out quickly; it is not good to remain here.' He sent me away, and I floated back to the hospital.

"With a thump, I dropped back down. I saw the doctors administering oxygen and a cardiac stimulant. They exclaimed, 'Good, good—he has come back!' I asked, 'What happened?' They replied, 'You had just died.'

"One of the card players said, 'Your body suddenly fell against me with a thump. I saw that you had neither breath nor pulse.'" The speaker's consciousness had left, and his physical body had fallen against the card player. When the others saw that he was no longer breathing, they quickly summoned the doctors.

The man continued, "I had never known that such things could happen and never imagined they were true. Because everyone thought I had died, they telegraphed my mother and asked her to come.

I told her what had happened and asked, 'Has the son of the woman next door died? Has his mother cried herself blind in one eye, with the other almost blind as well?' "My mother answered, 'Yes.' "Thereafter, I supported his mother as he had requested.

Only after this experience did I believe that rebirth through the six realms truly exists." The speaker described this as apparent death. His consciousness followed the woman's summons and drifted away, but he had not truly died. Thus, according to this account, during the first three or four days the body may only appear dead and revival may still be possible.

The Buddhist monastic rule is not to place a deceased monastic in a coffin, but to cremate the body seated in a large vat. Many of you will have seen such a cremation vat, with the deceased person's name affixed to the outside. An opening at the bottom allows the fire to burn.

The body is seated cross-legged inside; firewood is piled beneath it, oil and incense are added, and the wood is ignited. The offering incense gives a fragrance to the fire. The cremation, however, is performed only after twenty-one days, not immediately. If the body were burned before three or four days had elapsed, the consciousness might not yet have departed.

If you cremate him, he will suffer terribly, so you cannot cremate so soon. This is because, according to this scripture's teaching, after a person dies the outer breath has stopped (that is, breathing through the nose has stopped) but the inner breath has not ended (that is, embryonic breathing still continues). It is the same in our practice: when practice is good and one enters samādhi, breathing disappears.

But embryonic breathing remains, still turning in the lower dantian, and the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) has not left. The ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) is also called the "consciousness of warmth and longevity"; if you touch the body and it is still warm, the person is not yet dead. For someone in cessation samādhi, the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) has not left: his body is cold, but the region of the heart is not yet cold.

The ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) is still within the pericardium, and the inner breath (embryonic breathing) remains. A practitioner who has realized embryonic breathing has not yet seen his nature, because the body has not yet been turned into emptiness. Only when it is completely emptied, until even empty space does not exist and only the absolute true mind appears, is that seeing one's nature! So reaching embryonic breathing only means that one's meditative concentration is very good; it is not seeing one's nature.

Embryonic breathing is also called the "state in which consciousness is dazed and cut off": the consciousness remains confined within the physical body and has not disengaged from it, as when someone is knocked unconscious or goes into shock through illness. In shock too, breathing stops; in ordinary speech this is called fainting. For most people, this post-mortem period lasts three and a half to four days; for practitioners with meditative stability, it may last four to seven days.

Only after seven days does the consciousness leave the body completely and cease to remain confined within it. The body should therefore not, according to this teaching, be cremated immediately. After it is taken to the funeral home, the source recommends preserving it for several days through refrigeration or other means. Immediate cremation is strongly discouraged.

Cremation is now practiced throughout the country. It is clean and has many advantages.

In the past, people had to buy coffins and burial plots, which was extremely wasteful. Some insisted upon fine cedar-board or hardwood coffins and numerous burial goods. Treasures are now excavated from ancient tombs and placed on display, but what benefit did they ever bring the deceased? Cremation is therefore preferable: the body is consigned to the flames and the matter is complete.

A death already creates many demands upon a family, and an elaborate funeral procession adds further trouble. I remember the great funeral processions once held in Shanghai. Vast numbers of people took part, like an army setting out. It was extraordinary.

Cremation saves money, materials, time, and land that can instead be used to grow crops. In the past, elaborate tombs were built like great gardens—an immense waste. The Buddhist approach is frugal: the body is cremated. The Buddhist rule, however, does not call for immediate cremation. The deceased is seated for several days in a shrine-like enclosure, a cremation vat, or, in later practice, a wooden niche.

If the person possessed genuine meditative attainment, the body might remain undecayed for a long time. The preserved body of Chan Master Wuxia at the Centenarian's Palace on Mount Jiuhua, for example, remained intact. I also remember Monk Yekai of Tianning Temple in Changzhou. A Hanlin scholar of the Qing dynasty who later became a monk, he had cultivated well.

Before entering parinirvāṇa, he instructed his disciples: "Open the vat after three days. If my body has not decayed, it may be gilded. If it has begun to decay, cremate it. This string of prayer beads belongs to so-and-so; please return it." Having made these arrangements, he entered the cremation vat and sat cross-legged.

The monastics gathered around it and invoked "Fundamental Teacher Śākyamuni Buddha", for he belonged to the Chan rather than the Pure Land tradition. When the vat was opened three days later, dark spots had appeared on his body, indicating that decomposition had begun. The community therefore cremated his remains.

Layman Sun Jingfeng repeatedly and earnestly cautioned: "For the safety of the deceased, one must never cremate in the evening someone who died that morning." If the consciousness has not yet departed when the body is burned, the deceased will suffer intensely. Such pain may arouse anger and lead to rebirth among venomous snakes, fierce tigers, or other non-human beings, preventing rebirth in the Western Pure Land.

Not only does the physical body suffer; in the source's account, the opportunity to realize the Dharmakāya may also be lost. For safety, therefore, never cremate a person on the same day as death. The body should remain refrigerated at the funeral home for several days. After at least three days, a memorial service and cremation may be held.

If the funeral home has no refrigeration, buy a simple, thin-walled coffin for temporary encoffining rather than an elaborate one. A thin-walled coffin costs less and will eventually be burned; what would be the use of a thick one? Use the thin-walled coffin temporarily and cremate it after seven days. Alternatively, follow the Muslim method.

The Muslim method is very good. After washing the deceased clean, wrap the body completely in white cloth from head to foot and place it in a box. The coffin is made from very thin boards; when its base is pulled out, the bottom comes away. It is therefore called a detachable-bottom coffin, small and light.

At the time of burial the bottom of the box is pulled out and the body goes into the ground, like the box of a mahjong set: one pull and it comes apart. It is not like the thick, clumsy coffins made in our folk custom. The coffins of Muslims are all rented from the mosque. They are rented, and after use returned to the mosque; they are not buried.

But I know that if you are not Muslim and you go to the mosque, they will not rent one to you. After the body has been encoffined and laid out for seven days, the spirit-consciousness has left, and then it can be cremated. In this way the dead rest in peace, and the living save money and materials. With fewer matters and less trouble, the family can be more at ease and not interfere with work. This passage was added by Layman Sun Jingfeng, hoping everyone will take care not to cremate in the evening one who died in the morning. Lay the body out for a week, or at least three or four days, before cremation.

This concludes the "Prefatory Remarks". We shall now begin the main text.

Main Text

The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State (Tibetan title: *Bardo Thodol*)

A Treasury of Heart Transmission from Guru Padmasambhava, the First Patriarch of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism

Revealed and circulated by the vidyādhara master Karma Lingpa, who brought it forth from Mount Gampodar on the bank of the Golden River

Respectfully translated by Sun Jingfeng, Vajra name Shougu Jingang, a disciple of the Vajrayāna Nomen

This scripture was composed by Guru Padmasambhava, the first patriarch of the Nyingma school of Tibetan esoteric Buddhism. Because the time and conditions were not yet mature, he concealed the completed text in a mountain cave rather than circulating it immediately. Later, according to the account given here, he manifested as the vidyādhara master Karma Lingpa, traveled to the place where the scripture had been concealed—Mount Gampodar on the bank of the Golden River—and brought it forth for circulation. It was subsequently translated by the Vajrayāna disciple and lay practitioner Sun Jingfeng.

Main Text, Volume One: The Intermediate State at the Time of Death and the Intermediate State of Dharmatā

Verse of Refuge and Homage

Dharmakāya Amitābha, Infinite Light;

Sambhogakāya lotus, peaceful and wrathful deities;

Nirmāṇakāya Guru Padmasambhava, protector of sentient beings:

Before the guru embodying the Three Kāyas, I pay homage.

The intermediate state at death comprises the first three and a half to four days after a person's breathing has ceased. During this period, the intermediate-state being remains dazed and has not yet separated from the physical body. On the fifth day, the intermediate-state being emerges from the body and becomes lucid. This marks the beginning of the intermediate state of dharmatā, which lasts fourteen days.

"Refuge and homage" means taking refuge, paying homage, and requesting blessing. To take refuge is to return home and rely upon a source of refuge; to pay homage is to bow respectfully; and to request blessing is to ask for sustaining spiritual power. The Verse of Refuge and Homage therefore expresses reliance upon Guru Padmasambhava, the patriarch of this Dharma, homage to him, and a request for his blessing.

"Amitābha, Infinite Light" means that Amitābha Buddha possesses infinite light and infinite life. He is complete in all respects, his Dharma power is boundless, and his radiance cannot be measured. This represents our Dharmakāya—Buddha-nature—which is the foundation of all dharmas. "Lotus" refers to the lotus body.

The peaceful deities constitute the body of the true Dharma wheel, adorned with the thirty-two major marks and eighty minor characteristics. The wrathful deities constitute the body of the wheel of command—the bodies of the Wisdom Kings—which terrify māras. Here, then, "lotus", "peaceful", and "wrathful" refer to supremely honored Buddhas and bodhisattvas and represent the Sambhogakāya.

"Nirmāṇakāya Guru Padmasambhava, protector of sentient beings" means, according to the explanation given here, that Guru Padmasambhava manifested through the combined activity of Śākyamuni Buddha, Amitābha Buddha, and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. "Protector of sentient beings" means that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are the refuge and protectors of the vast multitude of beings. The verse therefore expresses repeated and reverent prostration before the guru who embodies the Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya, and Nirmāṇakāya, together with a sincere request for the blessing of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

For yogins of intermediate capacity, the means of liberation in the intermediate state is this *Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing*. Its exposition has three divisions: preliminary guidance, the principal exposition, and the concluding synthesis.

Why does the text address yogins of intermediate capacity rather than those of superior capacity? Practitioners of superior capacity cultivate well and realize their own Buddha-nature before death. They can attain liberation without waiting for the appearances of the intermediate state. This esoteric teaching is therefore the most expedient method of liberation for people of intermediate capacity. A yogin is someone whose practice has become corresponding and integrated.

Yogins of intermediate capacity have not realized the Dharmakāya during life and cannot bring birth and death to an end while alive, but during the intermediate state after death they can attain liberation by hearing the instructions of this teaching. *The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State* is divided into three parts: preliminary guidance, the principal exposition, and the concluding synthesis. The preliminary guidance prepares the way before the Dharma is explained to the deceased.

The principal exposition is the core of the scripture and explains, step by step, how liberation is attained. The concluding synthesis draws the teaching together and summarizes it. These correspond to the three traditional divisions of a scripture: the introductory division, the principal division, and the circulation division.

[First] Introduction

This section sets forth *The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State*. In the Vajrayāna, practitioners are classified as having superior, intermediate, or inferior capacity. Those of superior capacity rely upon the "Stages of Guidance". A practitioner begins with exoteric Buddhism and, after cultivating to an appropriate degree and comprehending emptiness, enters an esoteric maṇḍala, receives empowerment and the profound teaching, and progresses in sequence through the Generation and Completion Stages. At the end of life, liberation is attained by relying upon these Stages of Guidance.

From the very beginning of practice, such practitioners rely upon guidance and are certain to attain liberation. If they have not already done so, then during the intermediate state at death—that is, when life comes to an end—they need not practice phowa, the transference of consciousness for rebirth, but may attain Buddhahood directly.

"Set forth" means to lay out and explain. The preliminary guidance describes how people of superior, intermediate, and inferior capacity attain liberation through *The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State*. A method that liberates a person of superior capacity will not necessarily liberate someone of intermediate capacity, still less someone of inferior capacity. The methods of liberation for the three capacities therefore differ.

In the parenthetical passage, the translator explains the sequence of esoteric practice. Practitioners of esoteric Buddhism must begin with exoteric teachings. If they do not understand exoteric doctrine, they cannot properly practice esoteric methods, for doctrine provides the general principles while esoteric practice supplies concrete methods. It is like studying: one must first understand the principles and then put them into practice.

Pure Land practitioners likewise first understand the doctrine and then invoke the Buddha; that is cultivation. If one understands no principle at all, how can one practice? Cultivation should therefore begin with exoteric Buddhism. After studying the doctrine to an appropriate level, it is best to comprehend emptiness before entering esoteric practice.

To comprehend emptiness is to understand that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. One no longer mistakes emptiness for blank or inert emptiness, annihilatory emptiness, analytical emptiness, or integral emptiness, but understands the principle that wondrous presence is true emptiness and true emptiness is wondrous presence. See "The Origins of the Translation (II)" in this text.

Without substantial grounding in exoteric Buddhism, emptiness is not readily understood. One should therefore comprehend emptiness before undertaking esoteric practice. Esoteric Buddhism employs mantra recitation, mudrās, and other methods. In comparison with exoteric Buddhism, it adds the expedient support of blessing—the sustaining power of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

As explained earlier, a mantra is a symbolic expression manifested from the meditative mind of a Buddha or bodhisattva. Reciting a mantra is likened to communicating with them by telegram: the mantra is the coded message, and the mudrā is like an antenna.

By forming mudrās and reciting mantras, we connect our own energy with the energy of the universe—that is, with the energy of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In this way the Buddhas and bodhisattvas bless us. Exoteric Buddhism relies entirely on one's own effort; in Chan meditation, for example, there is no blessing power from the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Esoteric Buddhism thus possesses expedient methods that require less effort and make accomplishment easier. Entering esoteric Buddhism requires "empowerment in a maṇḍala and transmission of the profound teaching". A maṇḍala is the ritual space established for conferring empowerment. Empowerment is a rite.

Buddhism arose in India, where a minister would perform an anointing ceremony when a prince succeeded to the throne. In deference to this precedent, a rite of empowerment is performed when esoteric teachings are transmitted. The empowerment for each practice differs because different mantras are used.

After empowerment and transmission, one progresses through the Generation and Completion Stages in sequence. "Generation" means bringing a visualized form into appearance from emptiness. Initial visualisations include the yidam and maṇḍala.

In the practice of "Oṃ Āḥ Hūṃ", for example, one visualizes red, white, and blue lights issuing respectively from the yidam's crown, throat, and heart and being absorbed into one's own heart. All habitual tendencies and impurities are then dissolved and eliminated. This visualized arising from emptiness is one method of the Generation Stage.

In the Completion Stage, the forms visualized into appearance are in turn dissolved into emptiness. Even the light cannot be grasped. Just as we remain surrounded by air all day without being conscious of it, the practice returns to non-attainment. The Heart Sūtra therefore says, "Because there is nothing to attain, by relying upon prajñāpāramitā one attains unsurpassed, perfect awakening." Non-attainment is true attainment; to grasp at something attained is mistaken. The Completion Stage thus culminates in non-attainment.

Esoteric practice must proceed gradually and in the proper sequence; stages should not be skipped. Some people today have not completed the preliminary practice but already want to move to the next. The Dzogchen (Great Perfection), for example, contains Trekchö and Tögal. Some practitioners attempt Tögal before they have properly accomplished Trekchö. How could they succeed?

If Trekchö has not been accomplished, the mind is still moving. It is like a mirror shaking while we try to see our reflection: the image cannot appear clearly. The preliminary practice must therefore be completed first. Once it is accomplished, the mind resembles a perfectly still mirror and the reflected image appears vividly and accurately. Some people have never practiced Trekchö and do not even know its state of accomplishment, yet attempt Tögal. Is this not reckless? One must not act irresponsibly without authentic transmission lineage.

Whether we practice Pure Land, Chan, or esoteric Buddhism, after reaching a certain level the realization is the same: we realize our own luminosity and see the mind and intrinsic nature. A person who reaches this level has superior capacity. As diligent practice approaches the opening in which intrinsic nature is seen, the breath may cease. Ordinary people become alarmed: "Oh! My breathing is stopping—I am dying!" Fear makes them draw back, which is a great pity.

At this point ordinary people are all in a panic: "Oh no, why is my breath stopping? I'm dying!" As soon as they get frightened they retreat, which is a great pity! So at this point do not be afraid; you must realize and see your nature and break out of this shell of form. The breath will certainly stop; this is called "empty space shatters, the great earth sinks level."

Practitioners of superior capacity have already reached this state. At death they are unafraid, because they have already "died" once and know the experience. They can attain liberation calmly and securely.

They therefore need neither the method for liberation in the intermediate state nor phowa. Even if they become slightly dazed at death, they can attain liberation by following the Stages of Guidance. The instruction is simply: "Your light is now manifesting. Merge with it and you will be liberated." Upon hearing this, the practitioner immediately awakens: "Ah, my luminosity has appeared!" Accomplishment follows. Diligent cultivation while alive is therefore of the greatest importance.

Yogins of intermediate capacity will certainly attain liberation at the end of life through this esoteric teaching. If they do not attain liberation then, they will do so when the intermediate state of dharmatā appears after the three-and-a-half- to four-day period following the end of life. It is therefore essential to practice this *Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing* earnestly and with great respect.

It does not matter if people of intermediate capacity have not realized intrinsic nature while alive. By relying upon this method for liberation in the intermediate state, they can certainly attain liberation. This exceptional teaching repeatedly reminds them which stage has arisen, which light is appearing, which Buddha is coming to receive them, and which bodhisattva is protecting them.

In this way, liberation may be attained during the intermediate state—whether the intermediate state at death, of dharmatā, or of becoming. With the aid of this esoteric teaching, even people of the lowest capacity need not be afraid. In "yogins of intermediate capacity", yoga means correspondence or union. Our practice must correspond with our mind: the mind of an ordinary being must become fully corresponding with the Buddha's mind.

Above, it corresponds with the mind of the Buddha; below, with the minds of sentient beings. When practicing, we must therefore be single-minded, thoroughly respectful, and deeply sincere. Only then can wandering thoughts be interrupted and practice become corresponding. Pure Land practitioners, for example, must invoke the Buddha in a way that becomes corresponding. Merely repeating the Buddha's name with the mouth while the mind wanders is not correspondence.

Buddha-invocation should involve "the mind invoking and the ear listening". The same applies to mantra recitation: hear every syllable distinctly, so that one's mind and the Buddha meet in responsive communion and become one. This is correspondence.

If a person of intermediate capacity does not attain liberation during the three and a half to four days of the intermediate state at death, that is not the end. The light appears twice during this period. If karmic obstructions are heavy and repeated instructions still fail to bring awakening and liberation, another opportunity remains. Liberation may still be attained when the light manifests during the intermediate state of dharmatā, from the fifth through the eighteenth day after death.

At that time, Buddhas repeatedly radiate light to receive the being, and bodhisattvas provide protection. Liberation is therefore still possible during the intermediate state of dharmatā, but we must approach this teaching with devotion and respect and never treat it lightly. Keep it constantly and earnestly in mind; do not forget it.

I. The Practice of Phowa

First, yogins should carefully observe the signs of death by means of the method for self-liberation through observing those signs. Ordinary people display signs of death before dying; see "Prefatory Remarks—Important Points to Observe When Guiding the Deceased, Point Four". When all the characteristic signs of death have appeared, phowa should be performed. Recalling the instructions, the practitioner attains self-liberation.

As explained in the Prefatory Remarks, everyone displays signs of death before the breath ceases. The body may become heavy, breathing rapid, the tongue swollen, and so forth. See “Prefatory Remarks—Important Points to Observe When Guiding the Deceased, Point Four”.

When guiding a dying person, observe these signs carefully. If the person practiced phowa during life, instruct him or her when the signs appear: “Do not panic or become distressed. Do not cling to your family or be reluctant to leave. Birth, aging, sickness, and death are natural features of human life.

Whatever is born must die; everyone dies. Remain composed and do not grieve. Do not let your mind become scattered.”

“This is the critical moment. You practiced phowa in life. Now visualize carefully: with ‘Hēi—’, raise the bindu to the crown of the head. Then visualize Amitābha Buddha or Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva lifting a foot from the crown aperture. With ‘Pā—’, the bindu leaves through the crown and enters the heart of Amitābha or Avalokiteśvara.

You can then be reborn in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.” If the dying person did not practice phowa in life, the person guiding the deceased should assist when the signs of death appear.

Using visualization, the practitioner concentrates qi in the hands and guides it upwards from the soles of the deceased person’s feet to the heart, then to the throat, and finally to the crown. While doing so, visualize the movement. At the end, with “Pā—”, visualize the person’s consciousness leaving through the crown. This method is very useful. The final passage through death is extremely important, and the method may be used to assist the deceased.

If the transference has been accomplished—that is, if the consciousness has already been transferred to a pure land through phowa—there is no need to practice this *Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing*. If the transference has not been accomplished, recite this teaching aloud beside the deceased person’s body. If the body is absent (see Note One), perform the practice seated at the deceased person’s bed or former residence.

How can one know whether the deceased person’s consciousness has been transferred to the Western Pure Land? The source gives a traditional method based upon the pattern in which bodily warmth disappears.

See whether the soles of his feet turn cold first, then his legs, then his belly, then his chest, and at last the top of his head is still warm; that proves that his spirit-consciousness has left from the crown. This is called “crown sage,” meaning he has ascended to the Buddha’s Pure Land. But when you feel, test gently; do not press too hard.

Do not prod it heavily or test it repeatedly from side to side. A person approaching the final breath may be in great pain, and being touched may arouse anger. There was once a king who practiced the Buddhadharma. As he approached death, someone fanned him to keep away flies. The fan accidentally struck his head.

The king became angry and, according to the story, was reborn as a python and failed to reach the Western Pure Land. Do not, therefore, repeatedly test the body’s temperature. Everyone should pay careful attention to this. If phowa has transferred the consciousness to a pure land, *The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State* and the subsequent scriptures and mantras need not be recited.

If consciousness has not left through the crown, the source takes this to show that the person has not reached the Western Pure Land. The esoteric teaching should then be recited aloud beside the deceased. If many people are present, it is best for one person to lead while the others recite along, without creating excessive noise.

[Note One]

Editorial note: If the deceased is far away, one may request by letter a photograph taken during life, a corner of clothing worn next to the body, or an object formerly used by the deceased. Place it before you and call the person by name; the deceased may respond to the summons and come.

Note One explains what to do if the person died away from home and the body is absent. Use a photograph, a corner cut from clothing worn next to the body, or an object the deceased used in life. Place it before the memorial tablet and call the person by name.

If he is called Zhang San, call out: “Zhang San, please come and receive offerings. I will explain the Dharma to you and can help you attain liberation.” Speak to him in this way, and the deceased can come in response to the call. For when the spirit-consciousness of a dead person comes out, it has left the shell of the body and has no obstruction, so it has spiritual powers (not, of course, complete like a Buddha’s: it lacks the power of the exhaustion of outflows). Even if it is a thousand or ten thousand miles away, it can sense this. When you call its name, it drifts there in an instant, very quickly. So when you meet such a case, perform the practice in this way.

II. Instructions for Recitation

The practitioner should first recite the “Verse of the Power of Truth” three or seven times, summoning the deceased to come before the practitioner and hear the Dharma.

Verse of the Power of Truth

(This verse must be recited before every performance of the practice.)

By the power of my sincere intention, By the blessing power of the Tathāgatas,

And by the power of the dharmadhātu,

May every object of contemplation, According to what is fitting, Appear swiftly and without obstruction.

Before each performance of the practice, the person guiding the deceased should recite the “Verse of the Power of Truth” three to seven times. “Truth” here means ultimate truth. “Power” means that we inherently possess wondrous functions and supernormal capacities—genuine power. If we arouse sincere intention and call the deceased by name, we can summon the being, explain the Dharma, and enable the teaching to be understood. The verse is explained below.

“I” refers to the practitioner. “Sincere intention” means willing and wholehearted intention, and “power” means efficacy. “By the power of my sincere intention” means that I wholeheartedly and willingly undertake the good act of guiding this deceased being to liberation, and that I inherently possess the capacity to do so. Everyone is endowed with the all-pervading dharmatā and its functions.

When we act with complete sincerity and receive the blessing power of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, we possess the power to summon and respond. At all times and in all places, whether or not we are consciously practicing, we remain inseparable from the sustaining power of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and the ten dharma realms—the four noble and six ordinary realms.

Pure Land practitioners therefore invoke not only Amitābha Buddha but also Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, seeking the bodhisattva’s continual blessing. In the Lotus Sūtra, too, the Buddha describes how a person who upholds the sutra and cultivates the Lotus Samādhi is to receive support.

If we perform good deeds, even spirits will protect us. If we commit wrongdoing, not only will the Buddhas and bodhisattvas disapprove—“Why is this sentient being committing evil?”—but spirits too will call us to account. This is the meaning of the saying, “Spirits dwell three feet above one’s head.”

Do not imagine that wrongdoing goes unseen; according to this teaching, spirits see it clearly. Now that we are undertaking the good act of guiding a deceased being, we receive the support of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, the ten dharma realms, and the eight classes of devas and nāgas.

“Every object of contemplation” means whatever I visualize or request. “According to what is fitting” means that an appropriate response occurs. “Appear swiftly and without obstruction” means that the response manifests quickly and encounters no obstacle.

The Verse of the Power of Truth thus invokes one’s own power together with the blessing power of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and ten dharma realms, so that the request receives a response and the deceased may be guided without obstruction. If we have no doubt and recite the verse, the deceased responds to the summons and is visualized as appearing swiftly before us.

After this verse has been recited, the deceased has been summoned. Immediately visualize the being coming to stand before you and listen to the Dharma, and begin reciting the scripture. At this time, relatives and loving spouses must not weep, for this obstructs the practice. If the body is present, then as the outer breath is about to cease, a lama, an accomplished and venerable practitioner, a friend whom the deceased trusted and revered in life, or a fellow student or companion should bring the lips near—but not touching—the ear and recite this *Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing*.

By reciting the Verse of the Power of Truth three to seven times, we summon the deceased. Visualize the being before us, listening to the Dharma, and then recite the scripture. The essential message is: “Do not let your mind become confused. Let go of everything. Merge with the light and attain liberation.”

At this time, the deceased person’s spouse, children, parents, and other relatives must not weep. Their weeping disturbs the deceased person’s mind and prevents the teaching from being heard. If we cry because we cannot bear to part, the deceased may likewise grieve and remain reluctant to leave, obstructing rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Pure Land practitioners therefore also teach that at the time of death people should not cry but should assist by invoking the Buddha. Through the blessing of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, the dying person can be received into the Western Pure Land. If family members cannot restrain their grief, they should go outside to cry. Weeping in the room disturbs both the deceased and the practitioner.

When the body is present, the practice should begin as the outer breath is about to cease. It may be performed by a lama—a Tibetan monastic—or by a venerable person accomplished in cultivation, a friend whom the deceased trusted and revered in

life, or, if none of these is available, a companion with whom the deceased shared a close understanding.

If you cannot find any of the people mentioned above, find a companion who is congenial and gets along with him to perform the practice for him. When performing it, so that he can hear this esoteric teaching clearly, do not stay far from the deceased; get close to his ear, but do not touch it—keep a little distance.

[Next] Main Explanation

III. Conducting the Recitation

The *Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing* is now explained. First make offerings to the Three Jewels. Those who are wealthy and able to arrange offerings should present them abundantly. Those of limited means may concentrate single-mindedly and visualize immeasurable, supremely excellent offerings manifested by the mind and filling the whole of space. These are not physical objects but exquisite offerings created in visualization, countless in number and pervading space. Then recite the following texts:

(I) Verse Invoking the Blessing of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

(II) Prayer for Deliverance from the Perilous Passage of the Intermediate State

(III) Root Verses of the Six Intermediate States

(IV) Prayer for Protection from Fear in the Intermediate State

The four verses above are all found in the appendix at the end of Volume Two. Recite each three to seven times, according to the time available.

Before reciting *The Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing* for the deceased, we first make offerings to the Three Jewels. This is the preparation for the practice. The scale of the offering depends upon one's means. A wealthy family may offer more.

Esoteric practice traditionally requires a maṇḍala and offerings and can therefore appear suited to the affluent. Older people may remember the elaborate esoteric maṇḍala once established at Jing'an Temple in Shanghai. Its arrangement was solemn and its offerings abundant.

The offerings are all gold, silver, treasures, pearls, and agate, and cost a great deal of money. On the maṇḍala images the painted materials are all precious, not ordinary pigments: the yellow is all gold (gold ground to powder and applied), the green is all emerald, the white is all silver, and the red is all agate, so only the rich and noble can afford to make such offerings.

If we are poor and cannot afford such offerings, we simply give according to our means. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas do not discriminate between fine and humble offerings. They do not bless the wealthy more and ignore those unable to offer; that would be the outlook of ordinary beings. Why, then, make offerings? To express our sincerity.

A Buddhist scripture tells of a beggar who wished to make an offering to the Buddha. After great effort, he obtained a little rice and selected the good, whole grains one by one. While Śākyamuni Buddha taught him the Dharma, he offered this small amount. Wealthy families, by contrast, thought nothing of offering eight or ten great loads of rice.

Yet the Buddha said that the beggar's merit was very great, because although poor he was profoundly sincere. We therefore offer to the best of our ability; extravagance is unnecessary. Those with ample means may give more.

Those with little may visualize their small gift as vast as Mount Sumeru, transformed into boundless exquisite offerings pervading all space and the dharmadhātu and presented to all the Buddhas. This is an offering made through visualization. Because our dharmatā pervades space and the dharma realm, we possess this capacity.

The absence of physical goods does not matter; wholehearted and sincere visualization is sufficient. Thus, continually offering the incense of the heart is the finest, unsurpassed offering. Once the maṇḍala and offerings have been arranged, recite the four verses above.

The first is the Verse Invoking the Blessing of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The second is the Prayer for Deliverance from the Perilous Passage of the Intermediate State.

The third comprises the Root Verses of the Six Intermediate States.

The fourth is the Prayer for Protection from Fear in the Intermediate State.

We shall now explain them in turn:

Verse Invoking the Blessing of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (Recite this text before performing the practice.)

Whenever a person is approaching death, first make a declaration and formulate the aspiration. Before the Three Jewels, arrange as many physical offerings as your means permit, or visualize through your own power a vast ocean of offering clouds. Holding excellent incense, pay homage with complete sincerity and make the following declaration and aspiration:

As explained above, before performing the practice we make offerings to the Three Jewels according to our means: the wealthy may offer more, and the poor less.

If we have nothing material to offer, concentrate single-mindedly and visualize offerings as vast as the ocean and as numerous as clouds in the sky. Holding excellent incense, invoke the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and pay homage with utter sincerity. Then make the declaration and aspiration in the words below. The preceding paragraph is explanatory and is not recited; what follows is the text of the Verse Invoking the Blessing of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

All Buddhas and bodhisattvas, Ever present throughout the ten directions,

Endowed with great loving-kindness and compassion, Foreknowledge, and the sacred eye:

These lines are straightforward. They invoke the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions who are ever present in the world. In truth, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas have never left us. As Śākyamuni Buddha entered parinirvāṇa, he said, “I have not left you. Sentient beings whose eyes are pure can see me; those whose eyes are clouded think that I have departed.” The Buddhas and bodhisattvas never abandon sentient beings and remain continually present. Yet they do not abide motionless in a particular place; theirs is non-abiding nirvāṇa.

The Buddhas and bodhisattvas always benefit sentient beings and are endowed with great loving-kindness and compassion. We rely upon sentient beings in order to attain Buddhahood. If no sentient beings suffered, how could great compassion arise in us? Without great compassion, we would make no great vows; without great vows, there would be no great conduct. The word “conduct” in the “Practices and Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva” arises from aspiration. Sentient beings are therefore provisions for our attainment of Buddhahood. We must possess great loving-kindness and compassion. Without compassion, Buddhahood is absolutely impossible.

“Foreknowledge” means that Buddhas and bodhisattvas know what occurred in the past and what will occur in the future. They possess the functions of the physical eye, divine eye, wisdom eye, and Dharma eye and see all things; this is the “sacred eye”. Sentient beings are obscured by delusion, inverted views, and attachment and cannot reveal these capacities.

If we cultivate diligently and break through delusion, inversion, and attachment, these supernormal powers can manifest. After death, consciousness separated from the physical shell is also said to possess a degree of foreknowledge and divine vision and to see over great distances, though these abilities are not as complete as those of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Protector of sentient beings, Never forsaking your great compassionate vows,

Pray descend and accept Our physical and mentally offered gifts.

“Protector” means a source of refuge. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas are our refuge and continually sustain and protect us. They never forsake their great compassionate vows to receive and guide sentient beings, and at every moment they hear cries of suffering and respond. We therefore pray that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas will descend to our maṇḍala and accept the offerings we present with complete sincerity—both physically arranged offerings and those offered from our intrinsic nature—and help us guide this deceased being to liberation.

All you greatly compassionate ones, Endowed with wisdom of wisdoms and compassion,

Whose enlightened activities Possess inconceivable power:

“All you greatly compassionate ones” refers to the many Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Later we shall see the numerous Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and divine mothers associated with the five directions: east, south, west, north, and center. “Wisdom of wisdoms” is one of the three kinds of wisdom. These are all-wisdom, wisdom of all wisdoms, and knowledge of all modes.

In the explanation given here, all-wisdom means that intrinsic nature is endowed with all wisdom and can know all things. It includes the wisdom of the Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddha paths. Wisdom of all wisdoms excludes those two vehicles and refers specifically to the wisdom of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Knowledge of all modes refers to knowledge of every distinct mode within the differentiated realm. One must understand that the forms and appearances of all dharmas ultimately return to the one—our Buddha-nature. This is the distinction drawn here among the three. The Buddhas and bodhisattvas possess incomparable compassion, perfect and unobstructed wisdom, and great, inconceivable power.

Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva, for example, is described as possessing immense power. When our cultivation reaches that level, we too shall possess such power. Because it exceeds what thought can conceive, it is called “inconceivable power”.

Here is [name of deceased], Who has left this present world for another, Departed

from this realm for elsewhere, And cast off the body of flesh and blood.

When performing the practice, do not say “Here is [name of deceased]”. Insert the person’s actual name: “Here is Zhang San” or “Here is Li Si.” The passage states that the deceased has left the body of flesh and blood in this world and is going elsewhere.

With neither refuge nor protector, Neither rescue nor aid;

The most extreme suffering Now appears before this being.

At sunset, the road exhausted, Leaving home for a foreign land;

Entering a dark and lonely realm, Bewildered, approaching the precipices.

After death, once the intermediate-state being emerges, it wanders without refuge or support. People habitually cling to the body and identify it as “I”. Separated from it, the being sees the corpse on the bed, hears the family weeping, and realizes that death has occurred.

The being is deeply grieved and longs to recover the body, trying to enter it again. Yet the physical shell has failed and cannot be re-entered. Distraught and anxious, the being drifts about like a headless fly, with no one to rely upon, protect, or assist it.

At the same time, karmic obstructions created during life appear scene by scene like a film: savage dogs pursue the being; black winds, torrential rain, and hail arise; yakṣas, tigers, and wolves appear. Thunderous sounds roar, and intense lights shine.

There seems to be no way forward: the sun is setting and the road has come to an end. The former home no longer belongs to the being, and attachment to it serves no purpose. The being must leave for another, dark and deserted place. Bewildered and at a loss, it sees three great precipices—manifestations of greed, anger, and ignorance—blocking the way, and suffers extreme fear and anguish.

Terrified, fleeing through wild forest, Pursued by the force of karma;

Perhaps falling upon limitless wastes, Or drifting across a vast ocean.

“Wild forest” here means a boundless expanse. The deceased runs in panic through an endless forest while frightening appearances—tigers, wolves, ghosts, yakṣas, and others—pursue from behind. These are manifestations of karma created during life. Powerless to control their course and fleeing the adverse appearances, some beings are driven toward hell, cast into boundless wastes, or forced to seek refuge in a vast ocean.

Having no freedom over the body, Driven and tossed by karmic winds,

Perhaps entering the midst of battle, And seized by hostile enemies.

“Karmic wind” means the powerful wind evoked by karma. The Lotus Sūtra contains the line, “Karmic winds blow one down into the land of rākṣasa ghosts.” Harmful actions create karmic winds that carry a being toward such a realm.

In the past, an official asked a Chan master, “What does ‘karmic winds blow one down into the land of rākṣasa ghosts’ mean?” The master replied, “You are not worthy to ask that question.”

The official immediately became angry: “I am not worthy to ask? Although I may not be a great spiritual teacher, I am certainly a distinguished man of letters. How am I unworthy?” The master said, “There! That is precisely what it means for karmic winds to blow one down into the land of rākṣasa ghosts.

I said only that you were unworthy to ask, and you immediately became angry.” The master’s explanation was excellent. When anger arises, we have already fallen into the land of the rākṣasas. Take great care.

Some people say, “Surely becoming angry once does not matter?” It certainly does. Anger is a karmic wind. It burns down the forest of merit and blows us toward the rākṣasa realm. Tossed by karmic winds, the intermediate-state being has no freedom and cannot determine its course. It may be blown into the midst of battle, captured and suspended by enemies, and subjected to great suffering.

With nowhere to find shelter, Perhaps encountering Yama’s messengers—

Cruel ghostly warders, Terrifying to behold.

At this point, the being has nowhere to take shelter and suffers intensely. It may encounter messengers sent by King Yama—the White and Black Messengers of Impermanence, yakṣas, and others. These cruel warders cast beings into cauldrons of boiling oil, impale them upon mountains of blades, and consign them to the eighteen hells. Alas, the appearances are terrifying to behold.

Suffering the painful fruits of karma, Dying and reviving without interval;

All strength to struggle now exhausted, Utterly destitute, alone, and afflicted.

The many sufferings experienced during the intermediate state are the results of karma created in life. We should therefore refrain from harmful deeds. Karma includes both wholesome and unwholesome actions. Good deeds create wholesome karma. Invoking the Buddha and cultivating the Dharma, for example, create pure karma. Wholesome karma can lead to rebirth in a heavenly realm and the enjoyment of blessings.

Harmful deeds create unwholesome karma and lead to suffering in hell. In the Avīci Hell, the source says, beings continually die yet can never remain dead. They are stabbed to death and then revived so that their suffering may continue.

Once revived, they are thrown into a cauldron of boiling oil, killed, and revived again; they are then subjected to the punishment of the burning pillar, revived once more, and sent to endure punishment in mire. Avīci is "without interval": death is followed by revival and revival by death, without a single moment's respite. The suffering exhausts every remaining strength until the being can endure no more.

Uninterrupted hell makes you die and revive, revive and die again, with no break for even a minute or a second, making you suffer forever. You suffer until your strength is exhausted and you have no strength left to endure. This is what we commonly call the suffering of ceaseless distress and wandering. So a person in the intermediate state suffers beyond description.

May all Buddhas and bodhisattvas Look upon this being with compassion and protection;

For this being who awaits deliverance, May you become refuge and protector.

Bestow your blessing power; Guard this being from the sufferings of the intermediate state.

Halt the red karmic winds; Drive back the terrors of Yama.

We make a great aspiration, praying that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas will look with compassion upon the deceased and provide rescue and protection. The deceased is waiting to be guided to liberation. We ask the Buddhas and bodhisattvas to bestow blessing, support, and protection, providing a refuge and freeing the being from the sufferings of the intermediate state. May the red winds of the intermediate state—the fiery radiance stirred up by karmic obstructions—be halted. May Yama's messengers, including the pursuing emissaries of death, be sent back, and may the adverse appearances manifested by karmic obstruction dissolve.

From the perilous passage of the intermediate state, May this being be brought safely out.

Alas, you greatly compassionate ones, Do not forsake your compassion.

The deceased is in the perilous passage of the intermediate state. A gorge is a dangerous place enclosed between two mountains, like the Three Gorges of the Yangtze. The prayer asks that the being be brought safely out of danger. "Alas" is an exclamation of sorrow, while "greatly compassionate ones" refers to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. We pray that they will not forsake their great compassionate vows, but will look upon the deceased with mercy, confer their blessing, and bring them to safety.

Never forgetting your vast vows, Free this being from every suffering.

We beseech the Buddhas and bodhisattvas: May the light of compassion shine upon and sustain this being.

Having made their vast vows, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas never forget them. We sentient beings should likewise remember the Four Great Vows: "Sentient beings are boundless; I vow to liberate them. Afflictions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them. Dharma gates are immeasurable; I vow to learn them. The Buddha Way is unsurpassed; I vow to accomplish it." "Free this being from every suffering" expresses the wish that the deceased escape pain. We beseech the Buddhas and bodhisattvas with complete sincerity: may their compassionate light shine upon the deceased and bless all sentient beings.

With the hook of great compassionate light, Do not let this being enter the three lower realms.

Supreme among the Three Jewels, Receive this being with compassion.

Bestow the power of great compassion, And free this being from the sufferings of the intermediate state.

The verse describes the greatly compassionate light of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas as a hook that catches and holds the deceased, preventing descent into the three lower realms: the hell, hungry-ghost, and animal realms. Among the Three Jewels—the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha—the Buddha is supreme. We pray that the Buddha will receive the deceased consciousness with great compassion, show kindness and bestow blessings, and use the power of great compassion to free the being from the sufferings and adverse appearances of the intermediate state. The deceased may then realize the Dharmakāya or Sambhogakāya and leave the three realms and the cycle of the six destinies.

This concludes the “Verse Invoking the Blessing of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas”. Much of the verse is repetitive. The speaker suggests that, when reciting it, the wording may be rearranged and shortened, provided that its essential meaning is preserved.

Prayer for Deliverance from the Perilous Passage of the Intermediate State (Recite this text before performing the practice.)

(I)

Ever present throughout the ten directions, All Buddhas and bodhisattvas;

Samantabhadra, peaceful and wrathful, And the oceanic assembly of noble ones:

The Buddhas and bodhisattvas are ever present throughout the ten directions. They do not abide in only one quarter, but are present throughout east, south, west, north, the four intermediate directions, above, and below.

“Samantabhadra” here does not refer to Samantabhadra Bodhisattva as commonly understood in Han Chinese Buddhism. In Tibetan, it refers to the Ādibuddha, rendered in Chinese as Samantabhadra Tathāgata, namely Vairocana Tathāgata, the dharmakāya Buddha revered as the primordial Buddha in the esoteric tradition. “Peaceful” denotes the compassionate, dignified, and complete body of the true Dharma wheel.

“Wrathful” denotes the vajra or wrathful body, which terrifies māras. Thus, “Samantabhadra, peaceful and wrathful” refers here to Samantabhadra Tathāgata’s body of the true Dharma wheel and body of the wheel of command. The “oceanic assembly of noble ones” means the vast retinues surrounding the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, numerous as the ocean is vast. Every Buddha has a great retinue. The Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, for example, also has an oceanic assembly: Amitābha Buddha is the teacher, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva stands foremost on one side, Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva on the other, and innumerable other bodhisattvas surround them.

Gurus and yidams, Ḍākinīs and Dharma protectors: Descend to this place;

Hear and grant our sorrowful request.

Every practice we do has a yidam. For example, in the practice of phowa, if we practice Avalokiteśvara phowa, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva is the yidam; if we practice Amitābha phowa, Amitābha Buddha is the yidam. Likewise, in practicing the Cundī method, Cundī Bodhisattva is the yidam. The yidam is our highest guru.

The bodhisattva retinue beneath the yidam consists of ḍākinīs, like the flying celestial figures in our paintings. We beseech the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, ḍākinīs, and Dharma protectors to grant our request, descend to this maṇḍala, and help us guide the deceased to liberation.

With utmost sincerity, I entrust my life To the gurus and ḍākinīs.

With minds of great compassion, Look upon me with mercy and guide me.

“Utmost sincerity” means the highest reverence, without the least falsity. “Refuge” means returning, while “entrusting one’s life” means placing one’s entire life in the care of the gurus, ḍākinīs, Dharma protectors, and the rest of the assembly. Our vital life force is entrusted entirely to the guru. We therefore pray that the yidam and guru will look upon us with great compassion and guide us.

(II)

Through delusion and confusion, We wander through birth and death;

Through hearing, reflection, and cultivation, May illumination arise in accordance with reality.

All forms and appearances are ungraspable, like dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows, yet sentient beings insist on being deluded by sights and sounds, taking them to be real and giving rise to all kinds of false emotions. The root of false emotion is clinging to this physical body as oneself, so on seeing something good one thinks, “I want it, I love it.” Love is false emotion; love produces water, and water flows downward.

Those who wish to be born in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss must not have romantic love; with romantic love one cannot ascend to heaven. So love is the worst, the root of revolving in birth and death.

To leave the cycle of the six realms we must hear the Buddha-dharma, and after hearing it we should reflect with the brain: Is what the Dharma teaches the truth? Were my past actions and thoughts mistaken? Should I correct them? After reflecting, we should actually practice. If we only listen and the brain does not reflect, it is the same as not having heard.

Hearing and reflecting but not actually practicing is likewise the same as not having heard. So hearing, reflecting, and practicing are all indispensable. “Illuminating in accordance with reality” means doing things truthfully according to what we have heard and understood. “Illuminating” means contemplation. When we contemplate with the mind, luminosity will appear.

Lineage gurus guide in front;

Supreme Mothers and ḍākinīs protect from behind.

Lineage gurus are the masters who transmit the Dharma and guide us in how to practice. “Supreme Mother” means that which gives rise to the myriad dharmas. As explained earlier, the Buddha Father represents the essential ground of Buddha-nature, while the Buddha Mother represents the arising of its wondrous functions. “Mother” signifies the capacity to give birth.

So all wondrous functions are produced by the mother, and the mother is possessed by the principal; this is the union practice. We must never give rise to lust toward it. This verse says that lineage gurus guide us from the front, while the Supreme Mother and ḍākinīs (including all the devas, dragons, and the eight classes of beings) protect us from behind.

May I be freed from the perilous passage

of the intermediate state And escorted upwards to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

We pray to be freed from the sufferings and frightening adverse appearances of the intermediate state and escorted to the pure fields of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. “Perfect awakening” means Buddhahood.

(III)

Blazing anger drives wandering through birth and death;

The luminosity of the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom shines forth.

Anger means becoming enraged and losing one’s temper. “Blazing anger” is fury that burns like a fierce fire and is one cause of wandering through birth and death. How excellent it would be never to become angry, yet we cannot do it. People often become angry involuntarily; refraining from anger is very difficult.

As practitioners, we must diminish it again and again until the harmful habit is eliminated. This cannot be accomplished in a day or two, but daily cultivation eventually brings success. When the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) is transformed into the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom, it illuminates the great trichiliocosm. Consciousness is transformed into wisdom, and Buddhahood is attained.

Vajrasattva guides in front;

Mother Māmaki protects from behind.

Esoteric Buddhism speaks of five Buddhas in the five directions: east, south, west, north, and center. Vajrasattva is presented here as a Buddha of the east. East signifies arising, while vajra signifies indestructibility. As the Diamond Sūtra suggests, a vajra destroys all things yet cannot itself be destroyed. “Sattva” is explained as an awakening sentient being, one who enables sentient beings to awaken.

Vajrasattva and what we in China call Samantabhadra Bodhisattva are the same entity under different names. Samantabhadra is the eldest son of all Buddhas. When he received the prediction with the touch on the crown from Mahāvairocana (Samantabhadra Tathāgata of Esoteric Buddhism), Mahāvairocana placed a vajra in his hand. So he is called Vajrasattva, and also Vajrapāṇi (“Vajra-in-Hand”).

Vajrasattva is accorded a high position in this account: the second Buddha of the esoteric tradition, after Vairocana. The verse says that Vajrasattva guides in front and Mother Māmaki protects from behind.

Māmaki is transcribed in Chinese as “ ,” and in some places as “ ” or “ .” Though the transcriptions differ, their meaning is the same. Here, ma ( ) means “mother,” and maji ( ) means “giving rise.” Mother Māmaki is the mother who gives rise to all kinds of wondrous conduct. She protects us from behind. Why is this? It is symbolic, again referring to Buddha Father and Buddha Mother in union: Buddha Father guides in front, and Buddha Mother protects from behind.

May I be freed from the perilous passage

of the intermediate state And escorted upwards to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

The meaning is the same as that of the final four lines of section

(II).

Blazing pride drives wandering through birth and death;

The luminosity of the Wisdom of Equality shines forth.

Greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt are called the five dull afflictions and are difficult to eliminate. Among a hundred people, it seems that all one hundred become angry. Each thinks, “I alone am best and highest; the rest of you are no good.”

This is haughty pride. A terrible temper and severe attachment are signs that pride is blazing.

Luminosity cannot appear, and wandering through birth and death continues without end. The Buddha has no pride and sees every sentient being as a Buddha. If we regarded all sentient beings as equal, pride would disappear.

But we humans do not even regard one another as equal, let alone other kinds of sentient beings. It is always “I am above, and others are not my equal.” Other kinds of beings, like chickens and cats, are of no concern at all. This is pride. We must transform the manas consciousness into the Wisdom of Equality, remove attachment to self, and regard all beings as equal, equal, and equal again; then we can emit great light and illuminate the great chiliocosm.

Ratnasambhava Tathāgata guides in front;

Buddha-Locanā protects from behind.

Ratnasambhava is the Buddha of the south. Our intrinsic nature is likened to a wish-fulfilling jewel capable of producing every treasure. When accomplishment is attained, every treasure is present; hence the name Ratnasambhava. Ratnasambhava guides in front, while Buddha-Locanā protects from behind. Her name means “Buddha Eye”. The Diamond Sūtra speaks of the Buddha eye, divine eye, Dharma eye, physical eye, and wisdom eye. Buddha-Locanā represents vision that sees and encompasses everything.

May I be freed from the perilous passage

of the intermediate state And escorted upwards to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

The meaning is the same as that of the final four lines of section (II).

Because of pride, we lack humility and the mind is neither empty nor pure.

Blazing craving drives wandering through birth and death;

The luminosity of the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation shines forth.

We human beings are deluded and insatiably greedy. With one thousand, we want ten thousand; with ten thousand, we want a hundred thousand, a million, ten million, and still more. We are never satisfied. Yet however much we acquire, we cannot take it with us. We come empty-handed and leave empty-handed.

Why is it said that after enjoying heaven one still falls into hell? Because having too much money and too much enjoyment is itself a crime! I think it is better to do more good deeds, but people are unwilling. So, with greed blazing, they revolve in birth and death and cannot leave the three realms. We must transform the sixth consciousness (our mind-consciousness) into the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation.

Among our eight consciousnesses the sixth, mind-consciousness, is the strongest and clings to appearances most easily, because at every moment it runs after the first five consciousnesses. If it were not for the mischief of the sixth consciousness, the first five would be fine.

For example, our eye is eye-consciousness; it is like a camera taking a picture and never discriminates what the image is, or whether it is good or bad, or whether it is wanted. It merely hands the direct perception to the sixth consciousness, passing the information on so that the sixth consciousness can decide.

The sixth consciousness is discriminating at every moment: What is this? Is it good or bad? Do I want it? Then it sends the information on to the manas consciousness, and the seventh passes it on to the eighth to be stored. In this way it goes on accumulating and storing.

The seeds in the ālaya consciousness (ālaya-vijñāna) accumulate more and more and never fill it (like our computers: a tiny floppy disk holds an unknown amount of information). When circumstances connected with these seeds are encountered, the seeds manifest. So the sixth consciousness is very strong. Our practice must begin with the sixth consciousness.

Maintain awareness of it at every moment and do not let it move after appearances. When an object appears, pay it no heed; it is illusory, so why cling to it? Live in accordance with conditions. In this way, “the sixth and seventh are transformed on the causal ground; the eighth and first five are perfected at fruition”. Only when the sixth and seventh consciousnesses are transformed in the causal stage can the eighth and first five be perfected as wisdom at fruition.

Do not pursue pleasure, for indulgence creates karma. Keep the mind empty and pure, cherish compassion, and regard the liberation of sentient beings as most important. Maintain contemplative awareness at every moment. This is the method of observing the mind, the practice of Chan. If we never forget awareness, the Way can be attained within three to five years.

But people forget at every moment; the moment a realm appears they forget and follow the realm. So the difficulty of our practice lies in not forgetting. If one could always remember to contemplate in walking, standing, sitting, and lying, there is no one who would not become a Buddha. On the other hand, it will not do either to practice rigidly until the practice is dead.

Yet practice must not become rigid or lifeless; it should remain vividly responsive. The Sixth Patriarch's sayings "When facing objects, mental activities repeatedly arise" and "Do not cut off the hundred thoughts" mean precisely this.

In cultivation, inwardly do not follow the flow of deluded thoughts; outwardly do not let circumstances turn the mind. Do not keep calculating over events or abide in any appearance. Let everything pass without leaving a trace. Practicing in this way brings accomplishment. The first difficulty is not forgetting contemplative awareness; the second is avoiding rigid fixation. Stagnant water harbours no dragon: practice must remain vividly alive. When the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation is truly realized and the mind no longer abides in appearances, great luminosity shines upon everything.

Amitābha, Buddha of Infinite Light, guides in front;

The White-Robed Buddha Mother protects from behind.

The Buddha of Infinite Light is Amitābha, the Buddha of the west. Amitābha means Infinite Light and Infinite Life. Amitābha guides in front, while the White-Robed Buddha Mother protects from behind. The White-Robed Mother is Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. We speak of White-Robed Avalokiteśvara because white symbolizes purity free from defilement.

May I be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state

And escorted upwards to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

The meaning is the same as that of the final four lines of section (II).

Among

Blazing jealousy drives wandering through birth and death;

The luminosity of the All-Accomplishing Wisdom shines forth.

Jealousy is one of our worst habitual tendencies. When someone is even slightly better than we are, jealousy arises. This is called the "red-eye disease" of envy. We may spread rumours and slander the other person in order to pull them down.

Such conduct is extremely harmful. Jealousy burns like a raging fire. Wandering through birth and death is driven by greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt. When the first five consciousnesses—eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body—are transformed into the All-Accomplishing Wisdom, no discriminative effort is required: whatever is to be seen appears, and whatever is to be heard is heard. This is luminosity shining forth.

Amoghasiddhi Tathāgata guides in front;

Mother Tārā protects from behind.

Amoghasiddhi is the Tathāgata of the north. True emptiness is empty yet not merely empty, existent yet not substantially existent; it is not annihilatory emptiness. True emptiness requires "emptying emptiness" itself. If one abides in emptiness, it becomes annihilatory emptiness. When emptiness itself is also emptied, this is called Amoghasiddhi Tathāgata. Amoghasiddhi guides in front and Mother Tārā protects from behind. Tārā signifies completeness without the slightest deficiency.

May I be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state

And escorted upwards to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

The meaning is the same as that of the final four lines of section (II).

Great luminosity can then shine throughout the trichiliocosm.

Ignorance blazes fiercely, causing us to wander through birth and death.

The Wisdom of the Dharma Realm shines with radiant light.

Everyone has greed, anger, and ignorance. Greed and anger arise because of ignorance. If we were not ignorant, we would not be greedy. Knowing that everything is empty and unreal, what would there be to crave? It is precisely because we do not understand that all appearances are empty and unreal, and take them to be truly existent, that our greed becomes insatiable.

Thus, of greed, anger, and ignorance, ignorance is the root. Those in whom ignorance blazes fiercely will continue to wander through birth and death and may fall into the animal realm, whose beings are deeply ignorant. Ignorance is therefore the root of wandering through birth and death. The Wisdom of the Dharma Realm refers to the inherent luminosity of our true nature, which is originally present. When greed, anger, and ignorance are removed, this inherent luminosity appears.

Vairocana guides from the front.

Dharmavaśitā protects from behind.

Vairocana is the Dharmakāya Buddha, the Mahāvairocana Tathāgata, and, in this account, the Samantabhadra Tathāgata. He is the Buddha of the central family and guides from the front. Dharmavaśitā means complete freedom with respect to all dharmas: fundamentally, not even a dharma exists. Since dharmas are originally without any fixed dharma and are entirely empty, there is freedom in every respect. Dharmavaśitā, the Buddha Mother, signifies that all dharmas are fundamentally nonexistent.

Thus Śākyamuni Buddha's Dharma-transmission verse says: “The Dharma is originally a Dharma that is no dharma; the dharma of no dharma is itself also Dharma. Now, when the Dharma of no dharma is transmitted, how could any dharma ever have been Dharma?” What dharma is there? So long as a dharma remains, attachment to dharmas remains. When dharmas are empty, attachment to dharmas is also absent and nothing whatsoever can be obtained. This is called Dharmavaśitā, who protects from behind.

I pray to be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state

and led to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

The meaning is the same as that of the final four lines of section (II).

Eye consciousness,

The five poisons blaze fiercely, causing us to wander through birth and death.

The four wisdoms unite and shine with radiant light.

The five poisons are greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt, as discussed earlier. Because they blaze fiercely, we wander through birth and death. The light of the four wisdoms refers to the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom, the Wisdom of Equality, the All-Accomplishing Wisdom, and the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation. When the light of these four wisdoms comes together (not counting the Wisdom of the Dharma Realm), it naturally shines brilliantly.

The Tathāgatas of the five families guide from the front.

The Buddha Mothers of the five families protect from behind.

We previously discussed the Buddhas of the five families—East, South, West, North, and Center: Vajrasattva in the East, Ratnasambhava in the South, Amitābha in the West, Amoghasiddhi in the North, and Vairocana in the Center. The Tathāgatas of the five families guide from the front, while the five Buddha Mothers—Māmaki, Buddha-Locanā, the White-Robed Buddha Mother, Tārā, and Dharmavaśitā—protect from behind.

I pray to be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state

and led to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

The meaning is the same as that of the final four lines of section (II).

(IX)

Deluded appearances blaze fiercely, causing us to wander through birth and death.

Light shines forth, dispelling fear.

“Deluded appearances blazing fiercely” refers both to the deluded appearances of our lifetime and to those of the intermediate state. During life, we cling to appearances; these delusive appearances constitute a deluded realm. After death, the intermediate-state being is likewise bewildered by the appearances of the intermediate state. Because of this delusion, we create karma, undergo its results, and wander through birth and death. To dispel the terrifying appearances of the intermediate state, we must illuminate them with light so that we may attain liberation.

The wrathful deities guide from the front.

The wrathful mothers protect from behind.

“Wrathful” refers to a wrathful form, also called the form of a Wisdom King, which can be extremely frightening. The wrathful deities guide from the front, while the wrathful mothers—just as there are male and female Buddha figures—assume terrifying forms and escort and protect us from behind.

I pray to be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state

and led to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

The meaning is the same as that of the final four lines of section (II).

Why is it said that, after enjoying heavenly pleasures, one may still fall into hell?

Habitual tendencies blaze fiercely, causing us to wander through birth and death.

Innate wisdom shines with radiant light.

“Habitual tendencies blazing fiercely” means that the habits to which ordinary people cling are very strong. We always think that things must be done a certain way and that no other way will do. For example, people from Sichuan, Hunan, and Guizhou enjoy spicy food. Gradually they become accustomed to it and cannot eat a meal without chillies. This is how a habitual tendency slowly becomes an established habit, and once formed it is difficult to change.

Smoking is another example. Many people quit and then start again, repeatedly, but still cannot give it up. As the saying goes, “It is easier to alter rivers and mountains than to change one's ingrained nature.” This refers to how difficult our habitual tendencies are to change.

Buddhist practitioners must change these habits. We must frequently go against them, resist them, and struggle with them: when a habit demands one thing, deliberately do otherwise and see whether you can get through it. Only in this way can habitual tendencies be changed and the light of wisdom appear. For someone newly awakened, habitual tendencies have only been slightly shaken; they remain deep and heavy.

Eliminating them requires repeated tempering amid circumstances and cannot be accomplished in a day or two. Chan Master Guifeng therefore said, “Constant vigilance is required.” This is the conclusion reached by the great masters of old through their practice. “Constant vigilance” means observing and examining oneself at every moment over a long period to see whether a habitual tendency is still being repeated.

Only by diminishing it again and again can one come into accord. Human habits are simply too deeply rooted. People want to eat chickens and prawns: killing chickens every day creates untold karma, while a single bowl of prawns contains who knows how many lives. Some say, “I do not eat major meat dishes or pork; I eat only minor meat dishes, such as snails.” Alas, who knows how many lives are contained in a bowl of snails? Deep-rooted habits must therefore be changed.

Innate wisdom refers to the inherent luminosity of our true nature, present from beginningless time. Yet innate ignorance has accompanied it, and innate wisdom is constantly obscured by innate ignorance.

Someone may ask, “If I practice diligently and attain realization now, will ignorance arise again in the future?” Such a person does not understand that this is innate ignorance, which has accompanied Buddha-nature from beginningless time, like a cow's two horns. A calf has two horns from birth; they do not arise one after the other.

This innate ignorance obscures our wisdom, causing us to cling to appearances and undergo karmic results. If we break through and completely eliminate ignorance, we will no longer become deluded or create karma and undergo its results. It is like gold extracted from ore: before refining, it is mixed with sand and stone; after refining, it becomes pure gold and will never again be mixed with them. Once ignorance is broken through, we will not become deluded again.

The heroic vidyādharas guide from the front.

The assembly of ḍākinīs protects from behind.

The heroic beings are wrathful figures ranked below the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, yet they are all benevolent beings who protect the Buddhadharma. Yakṣas, for example, may appear frightening, but they are excellent Dharma protectors. Nowadays people practice Fragrant Qigong, repeating, “Fragrance, fragrance, fragrance ...” Where does the fragrance come from? It comes from the gandharvas, the incense-bearing class among the eight classes of devas and nāgas. These eight classes all protect us. They guide from the front, while the assembly of ḍākinīs protects from behind.

I pray to be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state

and led to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

The meaning is the same as that of the final four lines of section (II).

(XI)

May the element of space not become my enemy;

May I behold the Buddha-field of blue light.

May the element of water not become my enemy;

May I behold the Buddha-field of white light.

May the element of earth not become my enemy;

May I behold the Buddha-field of yellow light.

May the element of fire not become my enemy;

May I behold the Buddha-field of red light.

May the element of wind not become my enemy;

May I behold the Buddha-field of green light.

Buddha-nature possesses the characteristics of seven great elements: earth, water, fire, wind, space, faculties, and consciousness. This verse discusses five of them—earth, water, fire, wind, and space—without treating faculties and consciousness (the faculties are our five sense faculties, while consciousness is our discriminating mind). These five great elements are the most important.

All mountains, rivers, the earth, plants, and forests are formed from earth, water, fire, wind, and space. People simply do not understand or believe that the mountains, rivers, and earth are also themselves. They think, “Only this body is me; the mountains, rivers, and earth have nothing to do with me.” They do not realize that the mountains, rivers, and earth are also formed from these five elements.

These are five great elemental characteristics within Buddha-nature. A “characteristic” here is like a seed capable of producing things. Sow rice seed and rice plants grow, yielding many grains. Likewise, the elemental characteristics of earth, water, fire, wind, and space can produce countless things;

The earth, sun, moon, and stars are all produced from it. Look at the earth and it is obvious: the crust is the earth element; the oceans, rivers, and groundwater are the water element; the fire underground that causes volcanic eruptions is the fire element; the earth’s rotation and revolution belong to the wind element; and the interior of the earth is hollow (if it were not hollow, how could it turn?!) and belongs to the space element.

Thus everything is the same: it is all ourselves. Because of ignorance, we appropriate a small portion of earth, water, fire, and wind as ourselves and identify this physical body as “I”. In truth, this body is a sac of impurities formed from the father's essence and the mother's blood, which develops into a human body in the womb; people then identify it as “I”.

This is entirely due to deluded thought and attachment. Buddha-nature fills space, pervades the Dharma Realm, and is present everywhere. When deluded thoughts do not stir and body, mind, and world dissolve into emptiness, nothing remains.

We then understand that this Earth is originally our own self. Thus it is said, “Is not one who gathers the myriad things back into oneself a sage?” A sage understands this principle: all things are oneself. As Laywoman Pang said, “Easy, easy, easy—the meaning of the coming from the West is found atop every blade of grass.” “Every blade of grass” does not refer only to grass, but represents all things. Which among the myriad things is not me? All are myself. We must understand this principle.

The scripture says: “May the space element not be my enemy.” When we see a hollow, we need not be afraid. Someone told me: “While meditating, a huge void suddenly appeared. I was about to fall in. I was scared to death!” That is the space element appearing; do not be afraid. If we are still afraid while practicing now, we will be even more afraid in the intermediate state.

“May I behold the Buddha-field of blue light.” We know that the sky turns blue when the weather is clear. A cloudless expanse of azure sky is blue light. Why is this so? Because our true nature itself possesses light of seven colors, and the element of space belongs to the Buddha-field of blue light.

“May the element of water not become my enemy; may I behold the Buddha-field of white light.” The water element belongs to white light, which is also inherent in our true nature; therefore, we should not be afraid when we see a great flood.

“May the element of earth not become my enemy; may I behold the Buddha-field of yellow light.” Why is the earth element yellow light? Because the ground in a Buddha-field is paved with gold, it is called the Buddha-field of yellow light. All these lights are inherent in the luminosity of our true nature. Therefore, when we see the earth as desolate and boundless, we should not be afraid.

“May the element of fire not become my enemy; may I behold the Buddha-field of red light.” A great fire is red light. We should not be afraid when we see it, for it is entirely a manifestation of our true nature.

“May the element of wind not become my enemy; may I behold the Buddha-field of green light.” The wind element appears as green light. When a great wind arises, we should not be afraid, for this too is a manifestation of our true nature.

May the rainbow light not become my enemy;

May I behold all Buddha-fields.

After the elements of earth, water, fire, wind, and space have passed, rainbow light appears. It is the great radiance emitted when all the colors of Buddha-light described above unite, just as the seven colors of sunlight combine and radiate together.

May this rainbow light not become my enemy; may I behold all Buddha-fields.

May I recognize all radiance as my own radiance;

May I personally recognize the appearances of the intermediate state;

May I personally realize the Three Bodies amid the experiences of the intermediate state.

During the intermediate state there are also sounds of explosions, thunder, and great firecrackers. Know that all these sounds arise from our true nature and do not come from outside; therefore, do not be afraid. Our true nature inherently possesses this capacity and these sounds.

All the lights we see—red, blue, white, green, yellow, and so forth—are likewise the light we ourselves emit, not something external. “Radiance” means emitted brilliance: light that flashes and sparkles as it streams forth. All appearances during the intermediate state are manifestations of our own true nature and nothing else. May we personally realize all the appearances and phenomena of the intermediate state, together with the Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya, and Nirmāṇakāya.

(The foregoing material was compiled from recordings of Elder Yuan Yin's lectures. The Root Verses of the Six Intermediate States and the Prayer for Protection from Fear in the Intermediate State appear in the appendices. What follows is the original text and preface compiled and translated by Layman Sun Jingfeng.)

Chapter 1: Changes at the Time of Death

Section One: Instructions on the Intermediate State at the Time of Death

A. First Instruction on the Initial Luminosity of the Intermediate State

First, in the “intermediate state at the time of death” (the clear light is the primordial light fully possessed by everyone within dharmatā, and it arises at this time; see Appendix Five for details), for those who, despite the instructions in the scripture, still find it difficult to become thoroughly familiar with it, or for ordinary beings who have already received guidance in due order, perform this method to enable them to recognize the essential luminosity. Penetrating to the source within emptiness devoid of substantial reality, they soar upward and at once realize the unborn dharmakāya. The procedure is as follows:

A. Instructions on the First Clear Light in the Initial Phase of the Intermediate State

First, in the “intermediate state at the time of death” (the clear light is the primordial light fully possessed by everyone within dharmatā, and it arises at this time; see Appendix Five for details), for those who, despite the instructions in the scripture, still find it difficult to become thoroughly familiar with it, or for ordinary beings who have already received guidance in due order, perform this method to enable them to recognize the essential luminosity. Penetrating to the source within emptiness devoid of substantial reality, they soar upward and at once realize the unborn dharmakāya. The procedure is as follows:

IV. Instructions for Practice

For a dying person, it is most excellent if a guru of the esoteric lineage from whom they have received empowerment can be present. Next best is a fellow practitioner and Dharma companion who has received the same samaya precepts, or a true and virtuous spiritual teacher of the same lineage. If none can be found, one should seek a wise person who understands the words and meaning of this text, is articulate, and has a clear voice. That person should read it aloud repeatedly and in accordance with the scripture. On hearing this Dharma, the dying person will certainly recall the meaning of the guru's instructions and, at once and without interval, recognize the essential luminosity and attain liberation. There can be no doubt.

The practice should be performed after the external breath has ceased and the light of wind-wisdom has dissolved into the central channel, Avadhūtī. (The “light of wind-wisdom” is what Laymen Zhang and Zhao, following the English text, translated as “psychic heat”.

The Sanskrit term dūti, also called avadhūti, refers here to the central channel within the human body. Our life-current is concealed within it. Winds entering from outside also gather there and are enveloped by the life-sustaining wind—that is, the light of wind-wisdom—remaining forever unmoving. If it moves, illness occurs; if it opens, death occurs.) Consciousness then manifests as the luminosity free from conceptual elaboration—that is, the essential luminosity free from conceptual elaboration.

Next, the breath reverses and escapes from the central channel into the left and right channels. At that moment the appearances of the intermediate state suddenly arise. The practice must therefore be performed before the breath in the left and right channels has disappeared. The available time, while the inner breath remains, is approximately the time needed to eat a meal—about twenty to thirty minutes.

When the dying person's breath is about to cease but has not yet stopped, the practitioner should first perform the phowa practice for the transference of consciousness and lead the person to accomplish the transference. If it is not accomplished, call the dying person by name and recite the following words:

(1) Instruction for Seeking the Great Way through the Clear Light (Recite this before the external breath has completely ceased.)

Ah! Virtuous man, [name]—if the person is a woman, say “virtuous woman”; the same applies below—the time has now come for you to seek the true Great Way. Your breath is ceasing but has not yet fully stopped. In the intermediate state, you must first recollect what your guru taught you concerning the so-called initial luminosity.

After your breath has completely ceased, all phenomena will be utterly empty and still, without remainder. Within this, luminous emptiness will arise, without center or boundary, wholly transparent, naked, and stainless. At that moment, your wisdom of inner realization will suddenly arise. (This is the lucid wisdom inherent in us from the very beginning, the aspect realized inwardly: the luminous essence of the wisdom of one's own mind. See the Prajñāpāramitā and Avataṃsaka scriptures for details.) Know this to be your Original Face. At the same time, I shall help point it out to you.

Give the foregoing instruction repeatedly beside the dying person's ear before the external breath ceases—that is, before the final exhalation—without counting the repetitions, so that it is deeply impressed upon the person's mind.

Before the external breath ceases, the body should be repositioned in advance and laid on its right side in the lion posture. (Lay the person on the right side, bend the left leg, place the left palm over the left kneecap, support the right cheek with the right hand, and close the right nostril with the little finger, leaving only the left nostril open for breathing. In the esoteric teachings this is the auspicious reclining posture.) Then monitor the pulse.

If the dying person seems to sink into deep sleep and the pulse stops in the meantime, press firmly at once to prevent sleep. The light of wind-wisdom will then remain in the central channel, Avadhūtī, without reversing, and consciousness will certainly depart through the Brahmā aperture at the crown. (See Note Two.)

[Note Two]

Note: The human body has nine orifices: the two eyes, two nostrils, two ears, the mouth, the urinary passage, and the anus. Besides these nine, there is an opening at the center of the crown called the Brahmā aperture. The opening of the crown and insertion of a blade of grass in phowa practice refer to this aperture.

When an ordinary person is dying, departure of consciousness through this aperture is the proper route for rebirth in a higher realm. Departure through any other orifice leads into a path of saṃsāra. As a scripture says: “From the crown, to the noble realms; from the eyes, to heaven; from the human realm, at the chest; from the hungry-ghost realm, at the abdomen; from the animal realm, at the knees; and from the soles, to hell.”

Thus, after the external breath has ceased, if the body cools from above downwards but warmth can still be felt at the soles, this is a sign of rebirth in hell. Because of heavy negative karma, consciousness departs through the lowly anal passage, indicating a fall into hell. If it departs through the eyes, one is born in the heavenly realm. Such is the principle of cause and effect governing ascent and descent within saṃsāra.

Although the instruction has been given beforehand, the practice must still be performed when the time comes. At that moment the so-called primordial clear light of the Dharma-nature in the initial intermediate state—the mind-seal of the Dharmakāya—appears and does not return. It arises from the single source shared by all sentient beings throughout their continuous wandering in saṃsāra.

Furthermore, after the external breath has ceased but while the inner breath remains—when the wind, meaning the light of wind-wisdom, dissolves into Avadhūtī—ordinary people enter what is called the “state of unconsciousness”. (This is broadly called fainting or unconsciousness; Western medicine regards it as apparent death. Consciousness has not yet completely left the aperture.) Its duration is not fixed, but depends on the strength of the body and the condition and sequence of the channels and winds.

Those well trained in practice, firm in meditative stillness, and possessing stronger channels generally remain in this state longer. At this crucial juncture, give the instruction repeatedly and exhort the person earnestly to arouse the resolve. This must be done before yellow fluid emerges from an orifice of the faculties. (After the external breath has ceased, yellow fluid necessarily flows from one orifice.

In those who committed much evil in life and whose physical strength and meditative stability are weak, it appears especially quickly—at the fastest, immediately after the breath ceases; more slowly, after the time needed to eat a meal. The slower the

better.) For those with extremely grave wrongdoing or very weak channels, it may emerge so quickly that it does not remain even for a finger-snap; in others it may remain for the time needed to eat a meal.

According to the scriptures, “Ordinary people remain unconscious for three and a half days.” (Other scriptures give four days; for one with meditative stability, this may extend to seven days.) Thus an ordinary person may remain for three and a half days before realizing the luminosity. This instruction must therefore be given with the utmost earnestness.

When practitioners are dying, if they have the strength to practice for themselves, they can merge directly with and realize the luminosity without another person's help. If they lack the strength, choose a Dharma companion whose mind and wisdom accord with theirs—that is, whose mind can unite with that of the dying person—to remain beside them. The companion should give the instructions on the dissolution of the four elements (see Note Three), then call the dying person by name and say the following:

(2) Instruction on the Dissolution of the Four Elements (Recite this together with text (1) above before the external breath ceases.)

Now the signs of the earth element dissolving into the water element have appeared! (Two further lines belong here: “the water element dissolves into the fire element” and “the fire element dissolves into the wind element”. Lamas who perform the practice can add them to the recitation themselves. They are omitted from the original scripture, but the practitioner must recite them in sequence.)

[Note Three]

The human body is formed by the conjunction of the four elements: earth, water, fire, and wind. At death they dissolve in a fixed sequence. First, earth dissolves into water, producing suffering like the crushing weight of a mountain. Next, water dissolves into fire, producing a cold, damp sensation as though one were immersed in icy water. Then the cold dampness disappears and becomes moist heat, as though one were in hot water.

Finally, fire dissolves into wind, and the body feels as though it were blown by the wind and reduced to fine dust. The dissolution of the four elements is as unbearable as stripping the shell from a living turtle. Only those practiced in cultivation, who know in advance that their time has come and are welcomed by the outstretched hands of the Buddhas, may have this suffering reduced or avoided through the power of their blessings.

As the signs of death appear one by one, the practitioner must speak gently and quietly, repeatedly exhorting the dying person beside the ear:

“Attend carefully! Attend carefully! Arouse the supreme resolve; listen intently and do not become confused.”

If the dying person is a teacher or senior, add only: “Venerable Master [or Venerable Elder], please attend carefully and recollect!”

For a vajra brother or sister of the same lineage, or for an ordinary person, call the person by name and recite the following text on arousing the resolve and recognizing the luminosity at the time of death (see Note Four):

(3) Text for Arousing the Resolve and Recognizing the Luminosity at the Time of Death (When the external breath is about to cease, recite this together with text (2) above and text (4) below.)

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], the death of which we speak has now come upon you. Reflect and arouse the following supreme resolve, thinking: “Alas, the time of my death has come. Taking this death as the condition, I shall vigorously arouse the compassionate mind of bodhicitta.

For the benefit and happiness of all sentient beings throughout the reaches of space, I shall realize the supreme siddhi of Mahāmudrā.” (Mahāmudrā is one of the great Tibetan systems of accomplishment; siddhi means attainment.) Having realized it, I shall benefit all sentient beings. Even if I do not realize it now, I shall recognize it in the intermediate state and realize the Mahāmudrā Body of Union in the intermediate state. Responding to circumstances with emanations, I shall benefit all sentient beings throughout space. Attend single-mindedly, arouse the resolve to merge with it, and hold fast without abandoning it. You must also remember without fail the instructions previously transmitted by your guru and the regular practices you performed in life.

[Note Four]

The sequence in which the four elements dissolve at the beginning of death has already been described in Note Three. After the wind element dissolves, it next dissolves into the space element. With the final breath, all the blood in the body gathers in the central channel, Avadhūtī.

Three drops of blood then pulsate in succession, and three long exhalations are emitted: the first travels one cubit, the second two cubits, and the third four cubits, after which the external breath ceases completely. The white essence received from the father at conception then descends rapidly from the crown, giving rise to various cognitive experiences.

These have outer and inner aspects: outwardly, an appearance like bright moonlight; inwardly, a hazy appearance like smoke. This is the sign of the luminosity arising at the beginning of death. In esoteric terminology, the experiences are called “appearance”, “increase”, and “attainment”, and are necessarily undergone at death.

During the first, appearance, the red essence received from the mother at conception rises rapidly from below the navel. Outwardly, the experience is like sunlight; inwardly, like the light of fireflies. This is called “increase”. Soon it changes into “attainment”. The white and red essences then meet, and the consciousness at the heart simultaneously contracts.

Outwardly, the experience is like the dark lunar disc appearing upon the sun during an eclipse; inwardly, like an oil lamp covered by a translucent shade. This is called “attainment”. It then changes into “near-attainment”, when everything is empty and nothing remains.

Outwardly, it appears like the eastern glow at dawn; inwardly, like a cloudless sky stretching for ten thousand miles. These three experiences—appearance, increase, and attainment—together with near-attainment, follow the dissolution of the five elements and constitute the initial process after death, from the earth element through near-attainment.

At near-attainment the luminosity appears. It is also called the luminosity of death and lasts only an extremely brief time. Those trained in practice can recognize it when they see it. Like a child meeting its mother, the Child and Mother Luminosities merge into one; Dharma-nature manifests without passage through the intermediate state. Otherwise, the intermediate state appears again.

From the dissolution of wind into space through the arising of near-attainment is the first instant after death. It is then that persons of highest capacity become Buddhas in the Dharmakāya without undergoing the intermediate state. Descent into the second instant follows, constituting the Sambhogakāya intermediate state. After death, breathing has completely ceased and ordinary awareness is entirely lost, but the faculty of hearing alone remains clear. Even deafness during life is no obstacle. Therefore, this instruction on luminosity is the easiest to comprehend and the most effective means of deliverance.

The practitioner should place the lips close to the ear and speak with the utmost clarity, without allowing a single instant of deluded thought to intervene, so that the dying person may experience it. As soon as the external breath has completely ceased, press firmly on the channels at both sides and state the instruction clearly. If the dying person is a teacher or a spiritual friend more venerable than oneself, say: “Venerable Elder, the essential luminosity is now appearing before you. Please begin the practice at once.”

If the dying person is a peer or someone else, give the following “Direct Instruction on the Luminosity”:

(4) Direct Instruction on the Luminosity (Recite this repeatedly beside the dying person's ear while the external breath is about to cease but has not yet stopped.)

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. The wondrous, clear, and pure light of Dharma-nature is now beginning to appear before you. Recognize it at once.

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], your present consciousness—the essence of self-realized wisdom—is brilliantly luminous. Its substance, appearance, shape, color, and intrinsic nature cannot be found; it is empty, serene, and lucid. This is Samantabhadrī, the Buddha Mother of Dharma-nature. Within primordial emptiness, your wisdom of inner realization is open, empty, and serene; it is quiescent yet unceasingly aware, brilliantly radiant. This is Samantabhadra, the Tathāgata of realized wisdom.

(For “Samantabhadrī, the Buddha Mother” and “Samantabhadra Tathāgata”, see the note below.) The wisdom of inner realization has no substantial entity whatsoever; its essence and appearance are empty and still. Yet it abides in radiant clarity, beyond discrimination. This is the Tathāgata's Dharmakāya. Luminosity and emptiness are inseparable and abide as a great mass of light: this is the indestructible Buddha of luminosity, beyond birth and death. Recognition of this is supreme. Recognize the empty and luminous nature of the wisdom of inner realization as Buddha; seeing it directly within that very wisdom is to abide in the Buddha's mind-seal.

Recite the foregoing aloud three to seven times. Once the dying person understands, first they recollect the guru's instruction; second, they experience the wisdom of inner realization, naked and stainless, and know it to be the luminosity; third, they recognize their Original Face and become the Dharmakāya, in which there is neither union nor separation. Liberation is then certain.

B. Instructions on the Second Clear Light in the Second Phase of the Intermediate State

B. Instruction on the Second Luminosity of the Second Intermediate State

If the dying person recognizes the primordial luminosity—the luminosity of the initial intermediate state described above—liberation occurs immediately. If they fail to recognize it and become doubtful and afraid, the so-called second luminosity appears. It arises about the time needed to eat a meal after the external breath has ceased.

In accordance with the person's wholesome or unwholesome karma in life, the light of wind-wisdom escapes from the central channel into the left and right channels and exits through the orifices of the faculties. Consciousness then becomes suddenly clear, generally for about the time needed to eat a meal, although the duration depends on the strength of the channels and on whether the person practiced. At this point consciousness leaves the body. The person is dead but does not yet know it, and may see relatives as in life and hear them weeping. Karmic illusions and fierce appearances have not yet arisen, and the terrors of Yama have not yet arrived. The practitioner must immediately instruct the person as follows.

Practitioners are divided here into those of the completion stage and those of the generation stage. (Yogins who have received the esoteric teachings and initially practice visualization of the yidam's maṇḍala are generation-stage practitioners; those who subsequently cultivate the winds, channels, and essences within their own bodies are completion-stage practitioners.)

For a completion-stage practitioner, call the person by name three times and guide them with section (4), “Direct Instruction on the Luminosity”. For a generation-stage practitioner, recite the familiar visualization of the yidam and maṇḍala that they practiced regularly. Call the dying person by name and say:

(5) Visualization of the Yidam and Maṇḍala (Recite this repeatedly beginning about half an hour after the external breath has ceased.)

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], visualize the yidam whom you venerated in life. (This means the yidam practiced and revered by the deceased. If the person practiced the Avalokiteśvara method, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva is the yidam; if they practiced the Mañjuśrī or Amitābha method, the yidam is Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva or Amitābha Buddha.) Do not let your mind become distracted. Arouse intense devotion and concentrate on the yidam. See every appearance as devoid of intrinsic nature, like the moon reflected in water; never regard it as substantial.

After giving the foregoing instruction, if the deceased is an ordinary person—one who received none of the exoteric or esoteric teachings—say:

Visualize the Great Compassionate Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. (In the Tibetan esoteric tradition represented here, Avalokiteśvara is depicted with two heads and four arms; see the illustration at the beginning of this scripture.)

Having said this, instruct the deceased how to visualize. Even one who failed to recognize the luminosity in the first intermediate state can recognize it now; have no doubt. A person who received a teacher's instruction in life but did not become proficient in practice, and so cannot personally realize the luminosity in the intermediate state, must be guided and instructed by the guru or a fellow practitioner.

Also, for one who has practiced thoroughly himself but, bound by serious illness at the time of death, cannot remember and recognize it, this “instruction on the intermediate state” is indispensable.

Also, for one who in life practiced the Way thoroughly but has broken the disciplines and lost the samaya (vow) and has thereby fallen into the evil destinies, this admonition is absolutely indispensable! In short, if the “initial intermediate state” is recognized, that is best. If it cannot be recognized, then in the “second intermediate state,” clear instruction can still open up the wisdom of realization, and liberation is still possible.

During the intermediate state one possesses an “illusory body” but does not yet know whether one is dead. When consciousness suddenly becomes clear and the meaning of the recited instruction is understood, the Mother and Child Luminosities naturally meet (see Note Five), shining brilliantly and incapable of being stained. Like sunlight dispelling darkness, this luminosity destroys the force of karma and brings liberation.

Next, the so-called second intermediate state gradually arises as the “mind-made body”, and the deceased sees appearances just as in life. Recognition of this instruction at that point is naturally beneficial, for karmically deluded appearances have not yet arisen and everything is still easily transformed.

[Note Five]

The Mother Luminosity arises from one's own Dharma-nature and does not come from outside. The Child Luminosity is attained through one's usual practice and does not arise from within. In other words, the Mother Luminosity is one's own primordial luminosity, while the Child Luminosity is Buddha-light.

During the three and a half days after death, luminosity appears twice. When consciousness suddenly becomes clear and understands the meaning of the instruction on the intermediate state being recited by the practitioner, the Mother and Child Luminosities absorb into one another. Like a child meeting its mother and entering her embrace, one attains Buddhahood.

During life, when generation-stage practitioners train in merging the two luminosities, they visualize the Buddha-light of the yidam being invited to merge with their own Mother Luminosity. The light produced through visualization is called “empty light” and is not the true Child Luminosity. If practice in life has been thorough, when the true Child Luminosity arrives in the initial intermediate state after death, it can meet the Mother Luminosity joyfully, like a child meeting its mother, without the danger of failing to recognize it. This instruction is used to guide and deliver deceased persons who had no previous practice.

Section Two: Instructions on the Intermediate State of Dharmatā

C. Instructions for the Third Phase of the Intermediate State

C. Instructions for the Third Intermediate State (The third intermediate state is the intermediate state of Dharmatā.)

One who failed to recognize the essential luminosity in the foregoing guidance—the luminosity of the first intermediate state—but recognizes the luminosity of the second intermediate state will attain liberation. If the deceased is bound by karma and, despite repeated guidance, remains unmoved and is not liberated, the so-called third intermediate state, the intermediate state of Dharmatā, immediately arises.

It is counted from three and a half or four days after the intermediate state at the time of death. Karmically produced, illusory and bewildering appearances then arise before the deceased. It is crucial to recite the esoteric instruction for the intermediate state of Dharmatā at once; its power and benefit are immense.

The deceased's consciousness is then clearer, as though just awakening from a dream. They can see relatives weeping and wailing, food utensils being removed, clothes changed, bedding swept, and the room cleaned, but no one can see them. They can hear what others say, but when they call out, no one responds.

Becoming distressed and realizing that they are dead, they seek rebirth and hesitate as they prepare to leave. The three appearances of sound, light, and radiance arise together, and they are wearied by three conditions: alarm, fear, and dread, not knowing what to do. The practitioner must immediately give the “Esoteric Instruction for the Intermediate State of Dharma-Nature”, call the deceased loudly by name, and recite the following verse in a clear voice:

(6) Instruction for the Intermediate State of Dharmatā and the Six Essential Verses (Recite this repeatedly for the deceased, as fully as possible, during the first four days after death.)

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], do not let your mind become distracted; listen intently. There are six intermediate states: the intermediate state of birth (also called the intermediate state in the womb), the intermediate state of dreams, the intermediate state of meditative absorption (also called the intermediate state of meditation), the intermediate state at the time of death (also called the intermediate state at life's end), the intermediate state of Dharmatā (also called the intermediate state of reality), and the intermediate state of becoming (also called the intermediate state of taking a body of the four elements in saṃsāra).

Virtuous man, you will now experience the latter three: the intermediate state at the time of death, the intermediate state of Dharmatā, and the intermediate state of becoming. All three are arising. Since yesterday you failed to recognize the clear light of Dharma-nature that appeared in the intermediate state at the time of death, and so you have wandered here without support. The intermediate state of Dharmatā and the intermediate state of becoming have now arisen. Recognize what this instruction points out and do not become confused.

Ah! Virtuous man, death has now come. You are not alone in leaving this world; everyone must do so. Do not crave or cling to this life. Even if you crave and cling, you cannot remain for long. As you wander through birth and death in saṃsāra, do not remain attached; recollect only the guru and the Three Jewels.

Ah! Virtuous man, however terrifying the appearances of the intermediate state of Dharmatā may be, remember these words and do not forget them. Maintain sincere right mindfulness and act according to their meaning. The essential instruction is given in this verse:

Alas!

Now the intermediate state of Dharma-nature appears before me; I shall sever all alarm and fear.

I shall recognize whatever appears as my self-realized wisdom, knowing it to be the appearances of the intermediate state.

At this crucial moment, when great benefit or obstruction may arise, I shall not fear the peaceful and wrathful forms manifested by my own consciousness.

Recite the foregoing instruction so that the deceased hears it and remembers its words. Whatever terrifying appearances arise, the person will certainly recognize them as their own Original Face. Impress this firmly upon them and do not let them forget.

(7) Instruction Enabling Recognition of One's Original Face (Recite this repeatedly during the first four days after death.)

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], as body and mind separate, the pure appearance of Dharma-nature—its subtle, intrinsic luminosity—shines in dazzling brilliance, startling and overwhelming, like a shimmering mirage over a spring meadow. This appearance

arises for everyone. Do not be alarmed or afraid; do not panic. Know it to be the primordial luminosity of your own Dharma-nature.

From within the light bursts the vast, reverberating primordial sound of Dharma-nature, like a thousand thunderclaps sounding at once. Recognize it immediately as the primordial sound of your own Dharma-nature. Remain composed and undistracted; do not be afraid. You now possess what is called the mind-made body of habitual tendencies, no longer an obstructive body of flesh and blood. Whatever sound, light, and radiance arise before you cannot harm you, for you now have no cause of death. If you recognize the primordial appearances manifested by your own consciousness, you will know them to be the intermediate state.

Ah! Virtuous man, if you do not recognize the present primordial appearances, then however much you may have practiced contemplation in the human world, unless you encounter this essential instruction you will certainly fear the light, be terrified by the sound, and dread the radiance. If you do not understand the essential points of this instruction and fail to recognize sound, light, and radiance, you will continue to wander through the ocean of suffering in birth and death.

Chapter 2: Karmic Illusions in the Intermediate State of Dharmatā

D. Attaining Recognition of the Peaceful Deities During the First Week

Recitation for the First Day (On the fifth day after death, two Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], you have remained unconscious for three and a half to four days. Awakening from that state, you ask yourself, “Why have such appearances arisen for me?” Know that this is the intermediate state. As you are now on the verge of returning to saṃsāra, every appearance manifests as a luminous Buddha-body, and the whole of space appears as azure-blue light.

At that time, from the central Buddha-field of Dense Adornment—also called the Buddha-field of the Valiant Manifestation of Bindu or the Akaniṣṭha Heaven—the World-Honored One Vairocana Tathāgata, also called Mahāvairocana or the Buddha of Universal Illumination, appears before you.

His body is white; he sits upon a lion throne, holds an eight-spoked golden wheel, and embraces Dharmadhātvīśvarī, the Mother Sovereign of the Dharma Realm. This is the naturally pure blue light of the form aggregate, the Wisdom of the Dharma Realm. Dazzling, adorned with bindus and minute points of light, brilliant and clear, it shines from the hearts of Vairocana and his consort, strikes your heart directly, and is so dazzling that you can scarcely open your eyes or bear to look at it.

At the same time, the undazzling white light of the god realm appears before you. Driven by the karma of ignorance, you fear the blue light and wish to flee from the light of the Wisdom of the Dharma Realm, while feeling pleasure in the undazzling white light of the god realm and wishing to enter it.

I tell you now: do not fear the brilliant, clear, dazzling blue light and do not flee. It is the Tathāgata's light of the Wisdom of the Dharma Realm. Arouse deep faith and joy in it, yearn for it, and think, “This is the compassionate light of the World-Honored One Vairocana.” Take refuge at once and pray reverently.

Vairocana will then guide you out of the perilous passage of the intermediate state. Do not delight in, crave, or cling to the undazzling white light of the god realm. Attachment to it leads to birth among the gods and renewed wandering through the six realms, obstructing the path to liberation. Turn your eyes away from it. Instead, rejoice in the flashing, dazzling blue light, arouse fierce resolve, yearn for Vairocana Tathāgata, concentrate sincerely, and recite the following verse, making this aspiration after me:

Alas!

Ignorance blazes fiercely, causing me to wander through birth and death; the Wisdom of the Dharma Realm shines with radiant light.

Vairocana guides from the front; Dharmadhātvīśvarī protects from behind.

I pray to be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state and led to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

Through this fervent and devout aspiration, you dissolve into rainbow light and merge into the hearts of Vairocana and his consort. In the central Buddha-field of Dense Adornment, you attain Buddhahood in the form of the Perfect Enjoyment Body.

Recitation for the Second Day (On the sixth day after death, six Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

Although the foregoing instruction has been given, the karmic obstructions of anger and hatred may cause the deceased to fear and flee from light and radiance. Despite making the aspiration, the person remains deluded and fails to awaken. On the second day, the sacred assembly of Vajrasattva-Akṣobhya appears together with the light of the unwholesome karma of hell. Call the deceased by name and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. On this second day, the pure white light of the water element appears before you. From the blue eastern Buddha-field of Manifest Joy—Abhirati in Sanskrit and Enbargawa in Tibetan—the World-Honored One Vajrasattva-Akṣobhya appears before you.

His body is blue; he holds a five-pronged vajra, sits upon an elephant throne, and embraces Māmaki. Kṣitigarbha and Maitreya Bodhisattvas, together with Lāsyā, the dancing goddess, and Puṣpā, the flower goddess, surround them in an oceanic rainbow maṇḍala. All six appear together.

This is the naturally pure white light of the consciousness aggregate, the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom. Dazzling and adorned with bindus and minute points of light, it shines from the hearts of Vajrasattva-Akṣobhya and his consort, strikes your heart directly, and is so dazzling that you can scarcely open your eyes or bear to look.

At the same time, the undazzling smoke-gray light of the hell realm appears beside the wisdom-light. Controlled by the karma of anger and hatred, you fear the white light and wish to flee from it, while taking pleasure in the undazzling smoke-gray light and wishing to enter it. I tell you now: do not fear the brilliant, transparent, dazzling white light and do not flee. It is the fully endowed power of your own wisdom of inner realization. Rest openly and naturally within the light in clear awareness, and arouse faith, joy, and yearning.

If you recognize it as the essential luminosity of your own wisdom of inner realization, the light of all the Buddhas will merge inseparably with you, even without devout aspiration, and you will attain Buddhahood.

If you do not recognize it, think, “This is the compassionate light of Vajrasattva-Akṣobhya,” take refuge at once, and pray sincerely. Know it to be the hook of his great compassionate light and do not flee.

Know that even if you try to flee, it cannot be separated from you, so do not be afraid; rejoice and pray. At that time Vajrasattva Akṣobhya Tathāgata will come to receive you and pull you out of the “perilous passage of the intermediate state.” Also, do not take delight in the smoky light of “hell,” which does not dazzle the eyes.

It is the seductive light produced by the accumulated obstructions of blazing anger and hatred. If you cling to it, you will fall into Naraka(hell) and sink into a mire of unbearable suffering with no prospect of release. It obstructs the path to liberation. Turn your eyes away, abandon anger and hatred, and do not crave or cling. Instead, deeply revere the brilliantly shining white light, concentrate sincerely upon Vajrasattva-Akṣobhya, arouse intense joyful aspiration, and recite after me:

Alas!

Anger and hatred blaze fiercely, causing me to wander through birth and death; the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom shines with radiant light.

Vajrasattva guides from the front; Māmaki protects from behind.

I pray to be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state and led to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

Through this sincere and devout recitation and aspiration, you dissolve into rainbow light and merge into the hearts of Vajrasattva-Akṣobhya and his consort. In the eastern Buddha-field of Manifest Joy, you attain Buddhahood as the Perfect Enjoyment Body.

Recitation for the Third Day (On the seventh day after death, six Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

Although the foregoing instruction has been given, some pudgalas—a term for sentient beings—are proud and conceited, burdened by grave negative karma, and flee in fear from the hook of great compassionate light. On the third day, the World-Honored One Ratnasambhava and his sacred assembly come to guide them, while the light of the human realm appears at the same time. Call the deceased by name and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. On this third day, the pure yellow light of the earth element appears before you.

From the southern yellow Buddha-field of Glory—Palden in Tibetan, meaning “auspicious” or “glorious”—the World-Honored One Ratnasambhava appears before you. His body is yellow; he holds a precious wish-fulfilling jewel, sits upon a horse throne, and embraces Buddha-Locanā. Ākāśagarbha and Samantabhadra Bodhisattvas, together with Mālā, the garland goddess, and Dhūpā, the incense goddess, surround them in an oceanic rainbow maṇḍala. All six appear together.

This is the naturally pure yellow light of the feeling aggregate, the Wisdom of Equality.

Dazzling and adorned with bindus and minute points of light, it shines from the hearts of Ratnasambhava and his consort, strikes your heart directly, and is so dazzling that you can scarcely open your eyes or bear to look. At the same time, the undazzling pale-yellow light of the human realm appears beside the wisdom-light and strikes your heart.

Controlled by the karma of pride, you fear the dazzling yellow light and wish to flee, while feeling pleasure in the undazzling pale-yellow light of the human realm and wishing to enter it. I tell you now: do not fear the brilliant, transparent, dazzling yellow light and do not flee.

It is the fully endowed power of your own wisdom of inner realization. Rest openly and naturally within the light in clear awareness, and arouse faith, joy, and yearning. If you recognize it as the essential luminosity of your own wisdom of inner realization, the light of all the Buddhas will merge inseparably with you, even without devout aspiration, and you will attain Buddhahood.

If you do not recognize it as the light of your own inwardly realized wisdom, then you should feel faith, joy, and longing toward it and think: "This is the compassionate light of Ratnasambhava." Take refuge at once and pray sincerely from the depths of your heart. Reflect: "This is the hook of the great compassionate light of Ratnasambhava; it cannot be escaped." Know that even if you try to flee, it cannot be separated from you. So do not be afraid; rejoice and pray.

At that moment Ratnasambhava will come to receive you and pull you out of the perilous passage of the intermediate state. Also, do not take delight in the pale-yellow light of the human realm. It is a light that lures you, arising from the habitual tendencies accumulated through your blazing pride. If you cling to it, you will fall into the human realm and again undergo the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death, sinking in the mire of birth and death with no hope of liberation. It is an obstacle that blocks the path of liberation.

Turn your eyes away, abandon pride and its habitual tendencies, and do not crave or cling. Instead, deeply trust and rejoice in the dazzling yellow light, concentrate sincerely upon Ratnasambhava, yearn for him, and recite after me:

Alas!

Pride blazes fiercely, causing me to wander through birth and death; the Wisdom of Equality shines with radiant light.

Ratnasambhava guides from the front; Buddha-Locanā protects from behind.

I pray to be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state and led to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

Through this sincere and reverent aspiration, you dissolve into rainbow light and merge into the hearts of Ratnasambhava and his consort. In the southern Buddha-field of Glory, you attain Buddhahood as the Perfect Enjoyment Body.

Recitation for the Fourth Day (On the eighth day after death, six Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

As the foregoing instruction has been given, even those of the lowest capacity will undoubtedly attain liberation.

Yet those who committed grave wrongdoing, broke the samaya precepts, or severed their roots of goodness may still fail to recognize the appearances. Controlled by craving and karmic obstructions, they fear and flee from sound and light. On the fourth day, the sacred assembly of the World-Honored One Amitābha, the Tathāgata of Infinite Light, appears together with the dim red light of the hungry-ghost realm produced by craving and miserliness. Call the deceased by name and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. On this fourth day, the pure red light of the fire element appears before you. From the western red Buddha-field of Ultimate Bliss, the World-Honored One Amitābha, the Tathāgata of Infinite Light, appears before you. His body is red; he holds a lotus, sits upon a peacock throne, and embraces the White-Robed Buddha Mother. Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī Bodhisattvas, together with Gītā, the song goddess, and Ālokā, the lamp goddess, surround them in an oceanic rainbow maṇḍala. All six appear together.

This is the naturally pure red light of the perception aggregate, the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation.

Dazzling and adorned with bindus and minute points of light, it shines from the hearts of Amitābha and his consort, strikes your heart directly, and is so dazzling that you can scarcely open your eyes or bear to look. Do not be afraid of it. At the same time, the undazzling dim red light of the hungry-ghost realm appears beside the wisdom-light. Do not delight in or cling to it.

Controlled by the karma of blazing craving, you fear the dazzling red light and wish to flee, while feeling pleasure in the undazzling dim red light and wishing to enter it. I tell you now: do not fear the brilliant, transparent, dazzling red light and do not flee.

It is the fully endowed power of your own wisdom of inner realization. Rest openly and naturally within the light in clear awareness, and arouse faith, joy, and yearning. If you recognize it as the essential luminosity of your own wisdom of inner realization, the light of all the Buddhas will merge inseparably with you, even without devout aspiration, and you will attain Buddhahood.

If you do not recognize it, think, “This is the compassionate light of Amitābha,” take refuge at once, and pray sincerely. Know it to be the hook of his great compassionate light and do not flee. Even if you try to escape, it cannot be separated from you; do not be afraid, but pray joyfully.

Amitābha will guide you out of the perilous passage of the intermediate state. Do not cling to the undazzling dim red light of the hungry-ghost realm. It is the seductive light produced by habitual tendencies accumulated through blazing craving. If you cling to it, you will fall into the hungry-ghost realm and undergo unbearable hunger and thirst. It obstructs the path to liberation.

So do not give rise to greed or attachment toward it; cut off habitual tendencies and do not give rise to love or longing. Instead, toward the dazzling red light, give rise to joy, and focus with longing on the World-Honored Tathāgata of Boundless Light and consort, the parents; recite the following verse and make this vow with me:

Alas!

Craving blazes fiercely, causing me to wander through birth and death; the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation shines with radiant light.

Amitābha guides from the front; the White-Robed Buddha Mother protects from behind.

I pray to be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state and led to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

Through this sincere and earnest aspiration, you dissolve into rainbow light and merge into the hearts of Amitābha and his consort. In the Western Buddha-field of Ultimate Bliss, you attain Buddhahood as the Perfect Enjoyment Body.

Recitation for the Fifth Day (On the ninth day after death, six Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

Following the foregoing instructions, even persons of the lowest capacity should attain liberation. Yet some sentient beings, long habituated to entrenched tendencies and finally overpowered by them, remain governed by the negative karma of jealousy. They fear sound and light, fail to recognize the hook of great compassionate light, and wander without support until the fifth day.

Then the sacred assembly and compassionate light of the World-Honored One Amoghasiddhi come to guide them, while the light of the asura realm, produced by the affliction of jealousy, also comes to entice them. Call the deceased by name and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. On this fifth day, the pure green light of the wind element appears before you.

From the northern green Buddha-field of Perfect Victory, the World-Honored One Amoghasiddhi appears before you. His body is green; he holds a crossed vajra, sits upon a garuḍa throne, and embraces Samaya-Tārā, the Green Tārā. Vajrapāṇi and Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin Bodhisattvas, together with Gandhā, the perfume goddess, and Naivedyā, the food-offering goddess, surround them in an oceanic rainbow maṇḍala. All six appear together.

This is the naturally pure green light of the formations aggregate, the All-Accomplishing Wisdom.

Dazzling and adorned with bindus and minute points of light, it shines from the hearts of Amoghasiddhi and his consort, strikes your heart directly, and is so dazzling that you can scarcely open your eyes or bear to look. At the same time, the undazzling dark-green light of the asura realm, produced by jealousy, appears beside the wisdom-light. Cultivate equanimity toward it—neither attraction nor aversion—and do not delight in it.

Toward it, do not give rise to love or hatred but practice equanimity (abiding in a state that is neither suffering nor pleasure is called equanimity); and do not rejoice in it either. At that time, controlled by the karma of blazing jealousy, you fear the dazzling green light and flee from it, while taking pleasure in the dark-green light of the asura realm, which does not dazzle, and wishing to enter it.

I tell you now: do not fear the brilliant, transparent, dazzling green light and do not flee. It is the fully endowed power of your own wisdom of inner realization. Rest openly and naturally within the light in clear awareness, and arouse faith, joy, and yearning.

If you recognize it as the essential luminosity of your own wisdom of inner realization, the light of all the Buddhas will merge inseparably with you, even without devout aspiration, and you will attain Buddhahood.

If you do not recognize it, think, “This is the compassionate light of Amoghasiddhi,” take refuge at once, and pray sincerely. Know it to be the hook of his great compassionate light and do not flee. Even if you try to escape, it cannot be separated from you; do not be afraid, but pray joyfully.

Amoghasiddhi will guide you out of the perilous passage of the intermediate state. Do not cling to the undazzling dark-green light of the asura realm. It is the seductive light produced by the karma accumulated through blazing jealousy. If you cling to it, you will fall into the asura realm and undergo the unbearable suffering of conflict. It obstructs the path to liberation.

Abandon those habitual tendencies and do not crave or cling. Instead, arouse faith and joy in the dazzling green light, concentrate and yearn for Amoghasiddhi and his consort, and recite after me:

Alas!

Jealousy blazes fiercely, causing me to wander through birth and death; the All-Accomplishing Wisdom shines with radiant light.

Amoghasiddhi guides from the front; Samaya-Tārā protects from behind.

I pray to be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state and led to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

Through this sincere and earnest aspiration, you dissolve into rainbow light and merge into the hearts of Amoghasiddhi and his consort. In the northern Buddha-field of Perfect Victory, you attain Buddhahood as the Perfect Enjoyment Body.

Recitation for the Sixth Day (On the tenth day after death, all forty-two Buddha figures come together to guide the deceased.)

During the foregoing five days the instructions have been given repeatedly. However meagre one's merit and conditions, if one failed to recognize the appearances the first time, one should recognize them the next. Recognition of any one of them invariably brings liberation.

Yet some, despite repeated instruction, are governed by deeply rooted habitual tendencies that have accompanied them through the long night. Unfamiliar with the wisdom of pure appearances and controlled by karma, they are led outwards by harmful habits even after the appearances have been pointed out. The hook of great compassionate light cannot draw them in; fearing light and radiance, they fall back into birth and death. On the sixth day, the Tathāgatas of the five families, their consorts, and their retinues appear simultaneously, together with the lights of all six realms. Call the deceased by name and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. Until yesterday, each of the Tathāgatas of the five families manifested its form. Although these were pointed out, harmful habits drew you into fear, and you remain here today.

Had you recognized the primordial wisdom-light of the five families as appearances of your own essential nature, you would already have dissolved into rainbow light within the Buddha-body of each family and become a Buddha of the Perfect Enjoyment Body. Because you did not recognize this, you still wander here. Observe truthfully and do not become distracted. The complete appearances of the Tathāgatas of the five families, called the “united light of the four wisdoms”, now come to welcome you. Recognize them.

Ah! Virtuous man, the four-colored lights of the purified four elements now appear.

From the central Buddha-field of Dense Adornment, Vairocana and his consort appear with their retinue; from the eastern Buddha-field of Manifest Joy, Vajrasattva and his consort appear with their retinue; from the southern Buddha-field of Glory, Ratnasambhava and his consort appear with their retinue; from the western Buddha-field of Ultimate Bliss, Amitābha and his consort appear with their retinue; and from the northern Buddha-field of Perfect Victory, Amoghasiddhi and his consort appear with their retinue. All emerge from the oceanic rainbow maṇḍala and appear before you.

Ah! Virtuous man, besides these five Buddha couples, the four Wisdom Kings guarding the gates also appear: Trailokyavijaya, Yamāntaka, Hayagrīva, and Amṛtakuṇḍalin. There are also the four female gatekeepers: Aṅkuśā, who holds a hook; Pāśā, who holds a noose; Śṛṅkhalā, who holds a chain; and Ghaṇṭā, who holds a bell. The six Buddhas of the six realms also appear: Indra, the Buddha of the god realm; Vemacitra, the Buddha of the asura realm (Vimalacitta in Sanskrit and Tasangri in Tibetan, also translated as Pure Mind);

Śākyasiṃha, the Buddha of the human realm; Siṃha the Steadfast, the Buddha of the animal realm; Jvālāmukha, the Buddha of the hungry-ghost realm; and Dharmarāja, the Buddha of the hell realm. Samantabhadra Tathāgata and Samantabhadrī, the primordial father and mother of all the Buddhas (see Note Six), also appear. These forty-two Sambhogakāya Buddha figures emerge from within your own mind and appear before you. All are manifestations of your originally pure state; recognize them.

[Note Six]

Samantabhadra Tathāgata is called Adharma in the Sanskrit transcription given here, meaning “unborn suchness”. His Tibetan name is transcribed as Kuntuzangpo. He is the primordial Dharmakāya Tathāgata.

(Śākyamuni Buddha is an emanation of this primordial Tathāgata.) The Dharmakāya is originally just as it is: perfect in wisdom and virtue, pervading the Dharma Realm, beyond thought and verbal expression, without beginning or end, and neither cultivated nor attained. It manifests as a naked Buddha couple, and thus there is Samantabhadrī, the Buddha Mother. The Nyingma school's doctrine of the nine vehicles honors them as the highest and unsurpassed deities.

In this scripture, Samantabhadra and Samantabhadrī head the forty-two peaceful deities and are therefore called the primordial father and mother of all the Buddhas.

Earlier, in the “Direct Instruction on the Luminosity”, the phrases “Samantabhadrī, the Buddha Mother of Dharma-nature” and “Samantabhadra Tathāgata of realized wisdom” briefly indicate the functions of Dharma-nature and realized wisdom embodied by this pair, which are originally one with us and inseparable from us. These principles cannot be understood without a profound knowledge of the highest esoteric teachings of Tibet. Because the name of this deity is unfamiliar to Chinese readers, and because the Chinese name “Puxian” is identical to that of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, one of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas, this note is provided to prevent confusion.

Ah! Virtuous man, these Buddha-fields are not elsewhere; they have always been fully present in the four directions and center of your own mind. They now emerge from your mind and appear externally before you. The Buddha-bodies likewise do not come from elsewhere; they arise naturally through the inherent power of your own wisdom of inner realization. Recognize them accordingly.

Ah! Virtuous man, these Buddha-bodies are neither large nor small but equal in size. They are complete in form and color, seated in their respective postures upon jewelled thrones, and each bears its emblem. They form five groups, each comprising a Buddha couple and surrounded by a halo of five-colored light. The male figures are the bodhisattvas belonging to the respective couples; the female figures are their consorts. Thus the complete maṇḍala gathers and appears perfectly before you all at once. These are the yidams upon whom you rely for refuge; recognize them.

Ah! Virtuous man, from the bodies of the Tathāgatas of the five families and their consorts streams the extremely subtle united light of the four wisdoms. Like dazzling sunlight, it shines upon your heart and appears before you.

First, from Vairocana's heart radiates the dazzling blue light of the Wisdom of the Dharma Realm. A platform of light touches your heart and merges with it as one. Upon the platform are blue bindus inseparable from the light, like an inverted turquoise canopy, brilliant and dazzling. It is further adorned with naturally arisen bindus in groups of five, without center or boundary, together with bindus and minute points of light, and appears before you.

From Vajrasattva's heart radiates the white light of the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom. Upon its platform are white bindus like inverted shining mirrors, adorned with bindus and minute points of light, appearing before you.

From Ratnasambhava's heart radiates the yellow light of the Wisdom of Equality. Upon its platform are yellow bindus like inverted golden bowls, adorned with bindus and minute points of light, appearing before you.

From Amitābha's heart radiates the red light of the Wisdom of Wondrous Observation. Upon its platform are red bindus like inverted coral canopies, adorned with bindus and minute points of light, appearing before you. The foundations of these four wisdom-lights are complete in brilliance, exceedingly vivid and so dazzling that you can scarcely open your eyes. Each is adorned with naturally arisen bindus in groups of five, without center or boundary. All are pervaded by bindus and minute points of light, just like the light of the Wisdom of the Dharma Realm. These appearances are intimately connected with your own mind; naturally arising, they unite and correspond with it.

Ah! Virtuous man, all these lights are manifestations of the fully endowed power of your own wisdom of inner realization; they do not come from outside. Merge with them unobstructedly and without fear. Gather your mind in meditative absorption and rest openly in non-discrimination. In that state, the Buddha-bodies and their light merge inseparably with your body, and you attain Buddhahood.

Ah! Virtuous man, the Buddha-light of the All-Accomplishing Wisdom alone does not shine upon you here, because the power of your own wisdom of inner realization is not yet complete and therefore does not manifest.

Ah! Virtuous man, this is called the “united light of the four wisdoms” and also the “four secret passages of Vajrasattva”.

At this moment, recollect the oral instructions given by your guru in the past. If you remember their meaning, faith and joy will arise toward the present appearances. Like mother and child meeting, or old friends long familiar with one another meeting again, you will recognize them immediately and without doubt. Recognize these appearances of your own essential nature as your Original Face and trust them as the unchanging true path of pure Dharma-nature. The “continuous-flow samādhi” will arise; you will merge into the great spontaneously present body of realized wisdom and attain Buddhahood as the Sambhogakāya, never to regress.

Ah! Virtuous man, together with the wisdom-lights, the six lights of the impure and delusive appearances of the six realms also arise: the undazzling white light of the god realm; the undazzling dark-green light of the asura realm; the undazzling pale-yellow light of the human realm; the undazzling dull-blue light of the animal realm; the undazzling dull-red light of the hungry-ghost realm; and the undazzling smoke-gray light of the hell realm. All six appear alongside the wisdom-lights.

Do not grasp at any of them; rest openly without an object of fixation. If you fear the pure wisdom-lights and cling instead to the impure lights of the six realms of saṃsāra, you will take the body of a being in one of those realms and suffer weariness in the great ocean of birth and death, with no prospect of liberation.

Ah! Virtuous man, if you did not receive your guru's instruction, you may fear the Buddha-bodies and pure lights described above while feeling attachment to the impure lights of saṃsāra.

Do not do so. Revere, trust, and rejoice in the dazzling pure wisdom-lights, thinking: “The compassionate wisdom-light of the World-Honored Tathāgatas of the five families has appeared before me to take me into its compassionate care; I take refuge at once.” Do not crave or cling to the delusive lights of the six realms. Concentrate sincerely and yearn for the Tathāgatas of the five families and their consorts, then recite the following verse and make this aspiration after me:

Alas!

The five poisons blaze fiercely, causing me to wander through birth and death; the four wisdoms unite and shine with radiant light.

The Tathāgatas of the five families guide from the front; the Wisdom Mothers of the five families protect from behind.

Free me from the impure, illusory lights of the six realms and lead me across the perilous passage of the intermediate state;

Lead me to the five pure Buddha-fields.

By making this aspiration and recognizing the appearances of one's essential nature, one merges inseparably with them and attains Buddhahood. Those of middling capacity recognize them through sincere devotion and are liberated. Those of lower capacity, through the power of pure aspiration, close the gates of birth in the six realms, realize the true appearance of the united four wisdoms, and attain Buddhahood through the secret passages of Vajrasattva.

Recitation for the Seventh Day (On the eleventh day after death, ten vidyādhara figures come to guide the deceased.)

Many are liberated by recognizing what is explained in these detailed instructions. Yet those of the very lowest capacity, who were never habituated to the true Dharma in human life, committed grave wrongdoing, or broke their samaya, remain deluded by karma. Even when instructed, they fail to recognize the appearances and continue to wander. On the seventh day, the sacred assembly of the vidyādhara family comes to guide them from the Pure Buddha-field of the Ḍākinīs. At the same time, the light of the animal realm, produced by the afflictions and ignorance, comes to entice them.

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. On this seventh day, naturally pure, multicoloured light arises before you. The sacred assembly of vidyādharas comes to guide you from the Pure Buddha-field of the Ḍākinīs, coalescing into an oceanic rainbow maṇḍala.

At the center of the maṇḍala is the Supreme Vidyādhara of Karmic Maturation, named Lotus Dance Sovereign. His body gleams with five-colored light. His consort, the Red Wisdom Ḍākinī, embraces him; holding a curved knife in her right hand and a skull-cup filled with blood in her left, she assumes a dancing posture and, with a fierce gaze, looks into space as they appear before you.

In the east of the maṇḍala, the Earth-Abiding Vidyādhara has a white body and a slight smile. His consort, the White Ḍākinī, embraces him; holding a curved knife in her right hand and a skull-cup filled with blood in her left, she assumes a dancing posture and, with a fierce gaze, looks into space as they appear before you.

In the south of the maṇḍala, the Vidyādhara with Power over Life has a yellow body and is magnificently adorned. His consort, the Yellow Ḍākinī, embraces him; holding a curved knife in her right hand and a skull-cup filled with blood in her left, she assumes a dancing posture and, with a fierce gaze, looks into space as they appear before you.

In the west of the maṇḍala, the Mahāmudrā Vidyādhara has a red body and a slight smile. His consort, the Red Ḍākinī, embraces him; holding a curved knife in her right hand and a skull-cup filled with blood in her left, she assumes a dancing posture and, with a fierce gaze, looks into space as they appear before you.

In the north of the maṇḍala, the Spontaneously Present Vidyādhara has a green body, half wrathful and half smiling. His consort, the Green Ḍākinī, embraces him; holding a curved knife in her right hand and a skull-cup filled with blood in her left, she assumes a dancing posture and, with a fierce gaze, looks into space as they appear before you.

Around these vidyādharas gather countless assemblies of ḍākinīs and celestial mothers: the ḍākinīs of the eight great charnel grounds, the four families, the three abodes, the ten abodes, and the twenty-four sacred places, together with heroes, heroines, kiṃkaras, Dharma protectors, and messengers. All wear the six bone ornaments and bear thighbone trumpets, skull-drums, banners of rākṣasa skin.

They also bear canopies and standards of human skin, ointments of human fat, and countless musical instruments. Filling all worlds and making heaven and earth tremble, they appear amid a sea of blood. Their music arrives in a clamour that seems to split the head, while they perform many dances. They welcome deceased persons whose samaya is intact and admonish those whose samaya is broken.

Ah! Virtuous man, the naturally pure light of innate wisdom associated with habitual tendencies is complete in five colors. Like multicoloured threads, it ripples across the sky, flashing and quivering, brilliant, transparent, startling, and dazzling. It shines from the hearts of the five vidyādhara lords, strikes your heart directly, and appears before you with such intensity that you cannot bear to look. At the same time, the undazzling blue light of the animal realm appears beside the wisdom-light.

Driven by habitual tendencies and drawn by delusive appearances, you fear the five-colored light and wish to flee, while becoming attached to the undazzling light of the animal realm and wishing to enter it.

Do not fear the dazzling five-colored light; recognize it as wisdom-light. Within it, the primordial sounds of the intrinsic nature of all phenomena arise like a thousand thunderclaps sounding at once—booming and shaking, howling and roaring, mingled with wrathful mantras.

Do not fear, avoid, or dread them. Recognize them immediately as the power of realized wisdom within your own primordial appearances. Do not crave or cling to the undazzling blue light of the animal realm. If you cling to it, you will fall into the ignorant animal realm and suffer the servitude of darkness and unknowing, with no prospect of release. Instead, rejoice in the brilliant, dazzling five-colored light, concentrate single-mindedly, and yearn for the World-Honored vidyādhara masters, thinking:

"Sacred vidyādhara assembly, heroes, ḍākinīs, and all noble deities, you have come before me to guide me into the pure abode of the ḍākinīs. I pray that you hear and accept me with compassion. I, a sentient being, have not accumulated the provisions. In the past, the Tathāgatas of the three times and the sacred assemblies of the five families came to take me into their care with compassionate light, but through ignorance I failed to recognize them and have wandered until now—truly lamentable! I now entreat the sacred vidyādharas: from this moment, never abandon me. Take me with the hook of compassion and lead me to rebirth in the Pure Buddha-field of the Ḍākinīs."

Concentrating and supplicating in this way, recite the following verse and make this aspiration after me:

Alas!

Sacred assembly of vidyādharas, graciously hear and accept me; arouse compassion and guide me onto the true path.

Habitual tendencies blaze fiercely, causing me to wander through birth and death; innate wisdom shines with radiant light.

The heroic vidyādharas guide from the front; the ḍākinī Buddha Mothers protect from behind.

I pray to be freed from the perilous passage of the intermediate state and led to the Buddha-field of perfect awakening.

Through this sincere and earnest aspiration, you dissolve into rainbow light and merge into the hearts of the vidyādhara assembly. You will undoubtedly be born in the Pure Buddha-field of the Ḍākinīs. All those of the lineage of spiritual friends need only recognize the appearances according to the foregoing instruction to attain liberation; even those with negative karma and habitual tendencies will certainly be liberated.

This concludes the complete Direct Instruction on the Luminosity in the Intermediate State at the Time of Death and the Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing for the Peaceful Appearances in the Intermediate State of Dharmatā.

E. Attaining Recognition of the Wrathful Deities During the Following Week

Overview

We shall now explain the appearance of the wrathful forms in the intermediate state of Dharmatā. Like the peaceful forms described above, these involve seven successive perilous passages, and instruction has been given for each experience in turn. Even if one fails to recognize one, countless beings recognize another and attain liberation. Yet although many are liberated, there are also many whose negative karma is heavy, whose karmic obstructions are piled like mountains, and whose ingrained habits, ignorance, and delusion continue without end or diminution. Even when instructed, such people are not liberated but continue to drift and sink; they are indeed numerous.

Next, the sacred assembly of peaceful deities, vidyādharas, and ḍākinīs who came to guide the deceased fades away. The fifty-eight blazing, blood-drinking wrathful deities then appear. They are transformations of the preceding peaceful assembly. (The wrathful assembly occupies the same directions as the peaceful assembly; only its manifested forms and appearances differ.)

These wrathful appearances are intensified by alarm, fear, and dread, making recognition extremely difficult. The wisdom of inner realization loses its freedom; one falls unconscious, awakens in confusion, and then repeatedly loses consciousness and awakens again, unable to control the cycle. Yet recognition during a lucid interval makes liberation easy.

Why? Because, when the three experiences of alarm, fear, and dread arise, the wisdom of inner realization no longer scatters but remains single-pointedly alert. Without encountering this instruction, learning vast as the ocean is useless.

Even great Vinaya masters and teachers of the exoteric vehicle will continue to wander through birth and death if they fail to recognize the appearances at this point. Ordinary people are still more numerous: panicked by alarm, fear, and dread, they fall into the ravine of the lower realms and suffer greatly for a long time. Mantrayāna yogins are different. Even those of the very lowest capacity recognize the wrathful blood-drinking deities as familiar acquaintances and trust them to be their own yidams; merging inseparably with them, they attain Buddhahood.

Those who, during human life, practiced the direct visualization—that is, the generation stage—of these wrathful blood-drinking deities, made offerings and praises to them, or even saw their painted or sculpted images will recognize the forms when they appear at this moment and thereby attain liberation.

Furthermore, there are great masters who in human life upheld the vinaya, and masters of the exoteric vehicle, who, however diligent in the right Dharma and however skillful in teaching it, at death do not show signs such as sacred bones, śarīra, or rainbow light.

This is because during life they never gave their minds to the secret mantras, and they slandered and disrespected the mantras; they formed no connection with the holy assembly of the mantras. So even though the realms of the intermediate state appear, they do not recognize them; seeing suddenly what they have never seen before, they take them for enemies and at once give rise to anger; with this as the condition, they proceed to the evil realms.

Thus, however skilled one is in the precepts and in the doctrines of characteristics and nature, if inwardly one has no practice of mantra, signs such as sacred bones, śarīra, and rainbow light do not appear; that is the principle.

But a mantra practitioner, even of the lowest of the low capacities, rough in manner and behavior, unskilled in teaching the Dharma, and not practicing properly, if he has deep faith in the Dharma of the Mantra Vehicle, gives rise to no wrong views or doubts about those realms, and is able to practice, will still be liberated at that time. Even if his conduct in human life was not restrained, at death at least one auspicious sign appears: sacred bones, śarīra, rainbow light, or a Buddha image, because the blessing power of mantra is the greatest.

Mantra-yoga practitioners of middling or higher capacity who cultivated the generation and completion stages, recited heart-mantras, and performed other practices need not enter the intermediate state of Dharmatā. As their breath is about to cease but has not yet stopped, vidyādharas, heroes, and ḍākinīs will welcome them into the Pure Buddha-field of the Ḍākinīs.

The signs are a cloudless sky, dazzling rainbows, showers of flowers, pervasive fragrance, celestial music and resonant sounds, sacred bones, śarīra, Buddha images, and other subtle manifestations.

Therefore, according to this text, Vinaya holders, exoteric teachers, mantra practitioners with broken samaya, and ordinary people have no other expedient equal to this Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing.

Great practitioners of Dzogchen—the Nyingma school's highest system of accomplishment—and Mahāmudrā—the Kagyu school's highest system—can recognize the luminosity in the intermediate state at the time of death and realize the Dharmakāya; they need no recitation of this teaching, for recognition at death is itself the realization of Dharmakāya, as explained above.

Recognition of the peaceful and wrathful appearances in the intermediate state of Dharmatā brings realization of the Perfect Sambhogakāya. Recognition in the intermediate state of becoming brings realization of the Emanational Nirmāṇakāya and rebirth in a favorable realm, where, having encountered this Dharma, one may find conditions for practice in a future life.

This Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing is a method for attaining Buddhahood without practice; a method for attaining liberation through hearing alone; a method for leading those with heavy sins out of the perilous passage; a method by which differences are decided in a single instant; a method by which equal enlightenment is realized in a single instant. It is truly profound! There has never been a sentient being who encountered it and yet fell into the evil realms.

Used together with the Tadröl mantra text—Tadröl in Tibetan means the Wish-Fulfilling Jewel of Liberation by Wearing, also called the Scripture of Unconditioned, Instantaneous Wondrous Wisdom, a mantra text worn on the body to bring liberation—it is like adorning a golden maṇḍala with jewels, making it still more beautiful.

Recitation for the Eighth Day (On the twelfth day after death, six Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

Having explained the importance of liberation through hearing, we shall now give the instruction for the arising of the wrathful appearances in the intermediate state of Dharma-nature. Call the deceased by name once more and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. You failed to recognize the peaceful appearances when they arose earlier in the intermediate state of Dharmatā, and so you still wander without support. On this eighth day, the sacred assembly of wrathful blood-drinkers appears before you. Do not become confused; recognize them.

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], this most glorious principal deity is Buddha-Heruka, the World-Honored One of the blood-drinking Buddha family. His body is dark brown, with three faces, six arms, and four legs extended in a standing posture. His right face is white, his left red, and his central face dark brown. A mass of light blazes like fire around his body.

His nine eyes are wide open in a terrifying wrathful gaze; his eyebrows flash like lightning; his fangs are bared. He roars with laughter, crying “a-la-la” and “ha-ha”, and makes “ga-u” and other great, piercing sounds. His red-yellow hair blazes upwards. He wears a crown of skulls symbolizing the sun and moon, and his body is adorned with black snakes and fresh human heads.

Of his six hands, the upper right holds a wheel, the middle right an axe, and the lower right a sword; the upper left holds a bell, the middle left a skull-cup, and the lower left a plough.

His consort, Buddha-Krodhīśvarī, embraces him, her right arm around his neck. In her left hand she holds a red conch-bowl filled with male generative essence and offers it to his mouth. They make sucking sounds and a roar like thunder. Wisdom-fire streams brilliantly from the pores of the blazing vajra flames. With the right legs bent and the left extended, he stands upon a garuḍa throne.

This form emerges from the center of your brain and appears before you. Do not be startled, frightened, or afraid. Recognize it at once as the body of your own realized wisdom, your yidam. In truth, it is still Vairocana and his consort in union; therefore, do not fear. Recognition brings immediate liberation.

Once this is clearly explained and recognized as one's yidam, one merges inseparably with it and realizes the Perfect Sambhogakāya.

Recitation for the Ninth Day (On the thirteenth day after death, two Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

If the deceased is frightened, flees, and fails to recognize the appearance, the World-Honored One of the blood-drinking vajra family comes to guide them on the ninth day. Call the deceased by name and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. On this ninth day, Vajra-Heruka, the World-Honored One of the blood-drinking vajra family, appears. His body is dark blue, with three faces, six arms, and four legs extended in a standing posture. His right face is white, his left red, and his central face blue.

Of his six hands, the upper right holds a vajra, the middle right a skull-cup, and the lower right an axe; the upper left holds a bell, the middle left a skull-cup, and the lower left a plough. His consort, Vajra-Krodhīśvarī, embraces him, her right arm around his neck. In her left hand she holds a red conch-bowl filled with male generative essence and offers it to his mouth as they embrace in union.

This form emerges from the eastern quarter of your brain and appears before you. Do not be startled, frightened, or afraid. Recognize it as the body of your own realized wisdom, your yidam. In truth, it is Vajrasattva and his consort in union; therefore, rejoice. Recognition brings immediate liberation.

If this is clearly explained and recognized as one's yidam, one merges inseparably with it and realizes the Perfect Sambhogakāya.

Recitation for the Tenth Day (On the fourteenth day after death, two Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

As explained above, some persons burdened by grave karmic obstructions become afraid of the appearances and flee without realizing them. On the tenth day, the World-Honored One of the blood-drinking jewel family comes to guide them. Call the deceased by name and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen carefully. On this tenth day, Ratna-Heruka, the World-Honored One of the blood-drinking jewel family, appears. His body is dark yellow, with three faces, six arms, and four legs extended in a standing posture. His right face is white, his left red, and his central face dark yellow.

Of his six hands, the upper right holds a jewel, the middle right a khaṭvāṅga, and the lower right a club; the upper left holds a bell, the middle left a skull-cup, and the lower left a trident. His consort, Ratna-Krodhīśvarī, embraces him, her right arm around his neck. In her left hand she holds a red conch-bowl filled with male generative essence and offers it to his mouth as they embrace in union.

This form emerges from the southern quarter of your brain and appears before you. Do not be startled, frightened, or afraid. Recognize it at once as the body of your own realized wisdom, your yidam. In truth, it is Ratnasambhava and his consort in union; therefore, revere and trust it. Recognition brings immediate liberation.

If this is clearly and truthfully explained and recognized as one's yidam, one merges inseparably with it and realizes the Perfect Sambhogakāya.

Recitation for the Eleventh Day (On the fifteenth day after death, two Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

Although the foregoing instruction has been given, habitual tendencies may produce fear, causing the deceased to flee and mistake the yidam for Yama, the Dharma King, and thus fail to realize it. On the eleventh day, the World-Honored One of the blood-drinking lotus family comes to guide them. Call the deceased by name and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. On this eleventh day, Padma-Heruka, the World-Honored One of the blood-drinking lotus family, appears. His body is dark red, with three faces, six arms, and four legs extended in a standing posture. His right face is white, his left blue, and his central face dark red.

Of his six hands, the upper right holds a lotus, the middle right a khaṭvāṅga, and the lower right a club; the upper left holds a bell, the middle left a skull-cup filled with blood, and the lower left a small drum. His consort, Padma-Krodhīśvarī, embraces him, her right arm around his neck. In her left hand she holds a red conch-bowl filled with male generative essence and offers it to his mouth as they embrace in union.

This form emerges from the western quarter of your brain and appears before you. Do not be startled, frightened, or afraid. In truth, it is Amitābha and his consort in union; therefore, rejoice in and revere it. Recognition brings immediate liberation.

Once this is clearly explained and recognized as one's own yidam, one merges inseparably with it and realizes the Perfect Sambhogakāya.

Recitation for the Twelfth Day (On the sixteenth day after death, two Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

Although the foregoing instruction has been given, harmful karma and habitual tendencies may draw the deceased outwards into fear and flight, preventing recognition of the yidam. On the twelfth day, the sacred assembly of the blood-drinking karma family appears. From this day onwards, the eight charnel-ground goddesses called Gaurīs, the eight animal-headed goddesses called Piśācīs, the four animal-faced wrathful female gatekeepers, and the twenty-eight powerful goddesses with diverse heads called Īśvarīs also come to guide the deceased. Failure to recognize them produces fear, so instruction must be given.

Call the deceased by name and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], on this twelfth day, Karma-Heruka, the World-Honored One of the blood-drinking karma family—karma in Sanskrit means “activity”—appears. His body is dark green, with three faces, six arms, and four legs extended in a standing posture. His right face is white, his left red, and his central face dark green, displaying a fierce and terrifying expression.

Of his six hands, the upper right holds a sword, the middle right a khaṭvāṅga, and the lower right a club; the upper left holds a bell, the middle left a skull-cup, and the lower left a plough. His consort, Karma-Krodhīśvarī, embraces him, her right arm around his neck. In her left hand she holds a red conch-bowl filled with male generative essence and offers it to his mouth as they embrace face to face.

This form emerges from the northern quarter of your brain and appears before you. Do not be startled, frightened, or afraid. Recognize it at once as the body of your own realized wisdom, your yidam. In truth, it is Amoghasiddhi and his consort in union; therefore, revere it and yearn for it deeply. Recognition brings immediate liberation.

Once this is clearly explained and recognized as one's own yidam, one merges inseparably with it and realizes the Perfect Sambhogakāya.

Following the guru's oral instructions, recognize the appearances of your essential nature as nothing but your own wisdom of inner realization. It is like a lion skin: one who has seen such a skin recognizes it and is immediately reassured, while one who does not know it becomes afraid. When its nature is explained clearly, the fear vanishes at once.

The same applies here. The sacred blood-drinkers have enormous bodies and massive limbs, as vast as space, and their appearance inevitably causes fear. Yet when this instruction is heard and clearly understood, they are immediately realized as appearances of one's essential nature or recognized as one's own yidam. The luminosity cultivated in life—the Child Luminosity—then meets the naturally arising luminosity—the Mother Luminosity. In lucid reassurance, like meeting an old acquaintance, one suddenly awakens. Without this instruction, even the wise can scarcely avoid regression and continued wandering through the ocean of birth and death.

Recitation for the Thirteenth Day (On the seventeenth day after death, sixteen Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

Thereafter, the eight charnel-ground goddesses called Gaurīs and the animal-headed goddesses of various forms called Piśācīs emerge from the deceased's brain and appear before them. Call the deceased by name and say:

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. From the eight directions of your brain, eight Gaurīs now emerge and appear before you. Do not be afraid of them. They are described as follows:

From the eastern quarter of your brain emerges a white Gaurī, raising a staff made from a human corpse in her right hand and holding a skull-cup filled with fresh blood in her left.

From the southern quarter of your brain emerges a yellow Caurī, drawing a bow and arrow.

From the western quarter of your brain emerges a red Pramohā, holding a makara-banner.

From the northern quarter of your brain emerges a black Vetālī, holding a vajra in her right hand and a skull-cup filled with fresh blood in her left.

From the south-eastern quarter of your brain emerges a reddish-yellow Pukkasī, holding human intestines in her right hand and eating them with her left.

From the south-western quarter of your brain emerges a dark-green Ghasmarī, holding a skull-cup filled with fresh blood in her right hand, stirring it threateningly with a vajra in her left, and drinking it.

From the north-western quarter of your brain emerges a pale-yellow Caṇḍālī, tearing apart a human body and head, plucking out the heart with her right hand, and eating the body with her left.

From the north-eastern quarter of your brain emerges a dark-yellow Śmaśānī, tearing apart and devouring a decaying corpse.

These eight Gaurīs occupy the eight directions and surround the deities of the five blood-drinking families. They emerge from your brain and appear before you. Do not fear or dread them.

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], beyond the eight directions just described, eight animal-headed goddesses called Piśācīs appear before you:

In the east, a dark-purple lion-headed Siṃhamukhī crosses her arms, holds a corpse in her mouth, and shakes her mane.

In the south, a red tiger-headed Vyāghramukhī crosses her arms below, fixes her gaze, bares her teeth, and furrows her brow.

In the west, a black fox-headed Śṛgālamukhī raises a sharp blade in her right hand and holds human intestines in her left, chewing flesh and sucking blood.

In the north, a dark-blue wolf-headed Śvānāmukhī tears apart a corpse with both hands and stares fixedly.

In the south-east, a pale-yellow vulture-headed Gṛdhramukhī carries a huge corpse upon her shoulder and raises a skeleton.

In the north-east, a blue owl-headed Ulūkamukhī holds a vajra in her right hand and a knife in her left, cutting and eating human flesh.

In the south-west, a dark-red bird-headed Kaṅkamukhī also carries a huge corpse.

In the north-west, a black raven-headed Kākamukhī raises a skull-cup in her left hand and cuts out the heart and liver with a sharp sword in her right.

These eight animal-headed Piśācīs surround the deities of the five blood-drinking families. They emerge from your brain and appear before you. Do not fear or dread them. Recognize every appearance as a primordial appearance and as the power of realized wisdom.

Recitation for the Fourteenth Day (On the eighteenth day after death, thirty-six Buddha figures come to guide the deceased.)

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], on this fourteenth day—this sentence appears in the English translation but not in the Tibetan text—four wrathful, animal-faced female gatekeepers emerge from within your brain and appear externally before you. Recognize them at once. They are described as follows:

From the eastern quarter of your brain emerges a white tiger-faced goddess, holding a hook in her right hand and raising a red skull-cup filled with fresh blood in her left.

From the southern quarter of your brain emerges a yellow sow-faced goddess, holding a noose.

From the western quarter of your brain emerges a red lion-faced goddess, holding a chain.

From the northern quarter of your brain emerges a green snake-faced goddess, holding a bell.

All four hold blood-filled skull-cups in their left hands. These four wrathful female gatekeepers emerge from your brain. Know them to be your yidams and recognize them.

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], outside the thirty wrathful Heruka forms are twenty-eight powerful yoginīs, called Īśvarīs, with diverse heads and appearances and bearing various weapons. They emerge from your brain and appear before you. Do not fear them. Recognize everything that appears as the power of realized wisdom within your primordial appearances. At this moment of crucial obstruction or great benefit, examine them carefully and remember your guru's instructions.

Ah! Virtuous man, from the east of your brain emerge a dark-purple bull-headed rākṣasī holding a vajra and skull-cup; a reddish-yellow snake-headed Brahmā goddess holding a lotus;

The dark-green leopard-headed Mahādeva goddess holds a steel fork; the blue monkey-headed goddess of desire holds a wheel; the red bear-headed maiden holds a short spear; the white brown-bear-headed Śakra's daughter holds a string of intestines. These six yoginī sovereigns of the east all emerge from the east corner of your brain and appear before you; do not be afraid of them!

Ah! Virtuous man, from the south of your brain emerge a yellow bat-headed vajra goddess raising a sharp blade; a red makara-headed peaceful goddess holding a precious vase; a red scorpion-headed nectar goddess holding a lotus; a white kite-headed

moon goddess holding a vajra; a green fox-headed staff-bearing goddess holding a staff; and a dark-yellow tiger-headed rākṣasī holding a blood-filled skull-cup.

These six southern yoginīs emerge from the southern quarter of your brain and appear before you. Do not fear them.

Ah! Virtuous man, from the west of your brain emerge a dark-green vulture-headed flesh-eating goddess holding a club; a red horse-headed joyful goddess holding a torso; a white garuḍa-headed powerful goddess holding a staff; a yellow dog-headed rākṣasī holding a vajra in one hand and cutting with a knife in the other; a red hoopoe-headed goddess of attachment drawing a bow and arrow; and a green deer-headed wealth-protecting goddess holding a precious vase.

These six western yoginīs emerge from the western quarter of your brain and appear before you. Do not fear them.

Ah! Virtuous man, from the north of your brain emerge a blue wolf-headed wind goddess unfurling a banner; a red sheep-headed wondrous goddess holding a human spike, a pointed implement used for torture; a black sow-headed goddess holding a string threaded with teeth;

The red crow-headed vajra goddess holds a child's corpse; the dark-green elephant-headed big-nosed goddess holds a huge corpse and drinks blood from its skull; the blue snake-headed water goddess holds a snake noose. These six yoginī sovereigns of the north all emerge from the north corner of your brain and appear before you; do not be afraid of them!

Ah! Virtuous man, four gate-guarding yoginīs also emerge from your brain and appear before you.

From the eastern quarter emerges a white cuckoo-headed vajra goddess holding a hook; from the southern quarter, a yellow goat-headed vajra goddess holding a noose; from the western quarter, a red lion-headed vajra goddess holding a chain; and from the northern quarter, a green snake-headed vajra goddess holding a bell. All four emerge from your brain and appear before you. These twenty-eight powerful goddesses are manifestations of the inherent power of the wrathful Heruka deities; recognize them.

Ah! Virtuous man, the peaceful deities manifest from the empty and quiescent aspect of the Dharmakāya; know them to be your Original Face. The wrathful deities manifest from its vivid, luminous aspect; recognize them likewise. When the fifty-eight sacred blood-drinkers emerge from your brain and appear before you, understand every appearance as the primordial luminosity of your own wisdom of inner realization. You will immediately merge inseparably with them and attain Buddhahood.

Ah! Virtuous man, if you do not recognize them at once, you will inevitably panic and try to flee, undergo great suffering, and find liberation difficult. Failing to recognize them, you will see the sacred blood-drinkers as Yama, the Dharma King. Terrified by your blood-drinking yidams, you will tremble and lose consciousness, mistake appearances of your essential nature for demonic forms, and sink into the ocean of birth and death. If you remain unafraid, you will attain Buddhahood.

Ah! Virtuous man, of these sacred peaceful and wrathful assemblies, the largest figures are as vast as space; those of medium size are as large as Mount Sumeru; and even the smallest are eighteen times your height. Do not be afraid.

The world of sentient beings and its environment manifests as a body of light, and all appearances arise as luminous forms. Recognize them as the primordial luminosity of your own wisdom of inner realization. Your own light and body merge inseparably, and you attain Buddhahood. Child of the Buddhas, whatever terrifying appearance you see, recognize it as a manifestation of your own consciousness and do not be afraid. Recognize the luminosity as the primordial luminosity of your own wisdom of inner realization. Recognition in this way certainly brings Buddhahood at once; this is what is meant by "realizing perfect awakening in a single instant". Trust and accept this wholeheartedly.

Ah! Virtuous man, if you fail to recognize these appearances and become frightened, all the peaceful deities will appear in the form of the protector Mahākāla—the Great Black One, a major protector in Tibetan Buddhism—and all the wrathful deities will appear in the form of Yama, the Dharma King. Primordial appearances will turn into demonic forms, and you will sink into the ocean of suffering in birth and death.

Ah! Virtuous man, if you cannot recognize the true appearances, then even mastery of all scriptures and treatises and aeons of Dharma practice will not bring Buddhahood. If you recognize them, a single essential point or phrase can bring realization of Buddhahood. If you fail to recognize them, the forms of Yama, the Dharma King, appear without interval after death in the intermediate state of Dharma-nature. The largest are as vast as space, those of medium size as large as Mount Sumeru, and the smallest eighteen times your height. Innumerable and filling the world, they appear before you.

Biting their lips and grinding their teeth, with glass-like eyes, hair tied upwards, huge bellies and narrow waists, topknots bound upon their heads, and punishment boards in their hands, they cry "Kill!", drink brain-marrow, tear bodies and heads apart, and gouge out and devour hearts. In these forms they fill the world and appear before you.

Ah! Virtuous man, when such appearances arise, do not be afraid. Your body is now the mind-made body of habitual tendencies; even if cut down or killed, you cannot die. In truth, its nature is emptiness, so do not fear.

The Yama figures that appear likewise arise from the primordial luminosity of your own wisdom of inner realization and have no substantial existence. Emptiness cannot take advantage of emptiness. Apart from manifestations of the power of your

realized wisdom, none of the peaceful, wrathful, or blood-drinking assemblies, diverse heads and forms, rainbow lights, or terrifying images of Yama possesses substantial existence.

Recognizing this, all fear is immediately released; merging inseparably with the appearances, you attain Buddhahood. If you cannot recognize them, think, "This is my yidam, come to guide me out of the perilous passage of the intermediate state; I take refuge." With deep faith and joy, recollect the Three Jewels and the yidam you venerated. If the deceased did not practice the esoteric teachings and has no particular yidam, take Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva as the yidam. Call the sacred name and chant:

Sacred yidam, graciously hear me. I now wander amid the hardships of the intermediate state.

Holy One, come quickly to save me; take me into your compassionate care and protect me.

Then recollect your guru by name and supplicate:

I now wander in the intermediate state. Come quickly to save me; do not withhold your compassion, but graciously bestow your protection.

Then make an aspiration before the sacred blood-drinking assembly and recite the following verse after me:

Alas!

When habitual tendencies blaze fiercely and I wander in the intermediate state, may I cast aside all appearances of alarm, fear, and dread.

May the sacred peaceful and wrathful assemblies guide from the front, and the wrathful Mother Sovereign of the Dharma Realm protect from behind.

I pray to be freed from the terrifying passage of the intermediate state and led to the state of perfect awakening.

Now I travel alone, parted from relatives and friends; before me are only empty appearances reflected by my own mind.

May the compassionate power of all the Buddhas rescue me; may all alarm, fear, and dread of the intermediate state be dispelled.

When the lights of the five wisdoms appear, may I neither fear nor dread them, but recognize them as my true appearances.

When the peaceful and wrathful forms arise, may I trust firmly, remain unafraid, and recognize them as the intermediate state.

When karmic power causes me every kind of suffering, may my celestial yidam dispel my afflictions.

When the primordial sound of the Dharma-nature yidam resounds like a thousand thunderclaps, may it be transformed into the sound of the six-syllable great mantra.

When karmic forces pursue me and I have lost all protection, may the Lord of Great Compassion be my refuge.

Whatever pain I undergo through karmic habits, may I realize the samādhi of the blissful pure light.

May the realms of the five great elements not become my enemies; may I behold the Buddha-fields of the five families.

If one makes the vow with such reverence and earnestness, all terrors will surely vanish, and one will certainly attain the sambhogakāya Buddha stage; so this is extremely important. Recite it sincerely three to seven times; however grave the deceased's sins and however poor his merit, there is no one who is not liberated. If there is someone who, even though the practice has been performed for him many times, still fails to recognize and be saved, he then enters the "later intermediate state," that is, the "intermediate state of becoming." The instructions for it are given in the lower volume.

F. Summary of the Sublime Merits of This Dharma

This esoteric teaching is the heart-essence of the tantra section among all Dharmas and the essential instruction for the intermediate state. Liberation is attained merely through hearing it; seeing it also brings liberation. At death, people are generally bewildered by each of their habitual tendencies, and apart from this Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing, no other expedient is offered here.

Only the most accomplished practitioners, thoroughly trained in life and possessing direct instruction and experience of realized wisdom, have strong power of recognition when body and mind separate, Dharma-nature manifests, and the luminosity first appears in the intermediate state at the time of death. It is therefore essential to recite this teaching during life, memorize it clearly, and never forget it. Savour and investigate the meaning of its words and phrases until they are thoroughly understood;

ponder it, understand it thoroughly, give it proper attention, and recite it at the three times of day until it becomes habitual. If one understands the meaning of the lines and keeps it firmly in mind, then even with a hundred ghosts chasing one away, one will not forget this meaning. And if someone hears it even once, though that person has accumulated the great sin of the uninterrupted offenses, he will still be liberated.

So this subtle esoteric teaching should be recited widely before assemblies, so that people may hear it once. Even if they do not understand its meaning, in the intermediate state the wisdom of inner realization will suddenly open and the memory will be stronger than in life, more than nine times; at that time not one word will be forgotten, and it can all be remembered.

It should therefore be explained widely, recited to the sick, and read beside the ears of the deceased. This wondrous Dharma should circulate widely. Those with the karmic connection to encounter it are extremely fortunate. Those who have not accumulated roots of goodness and provisions or purified their defilements and obstructions rarely encounter it; even when they do, they may be unable to trust and accept it, thereby losing a great benefit. Anyone who reads this teaching need only avoid inverted and deluded views toward it to be liberated. It should therefore be treasured.

End of the Instructions for the Intermediate State of Dharma-Nature.

Main Text, Volume Two: Instructions on the Intermediate State of Becoming

Verse of Refuge and Homage

I take refuge in the protecting deities, the guru, and the Three Jewels;

May they take me into their compassionate care and liberate me in the intermediate state.

The instructions in the preceding volume reached the intermediate state of Dharmatā. We shall now explain the method of liberation in the intermediate state of becoming.

Chapter 1: The Realm After Death

The previous volume gave detailed guidance concerning the intermediate state of Dharmatā. Apart from those who understood the true appearances of reality, possessed pure conduct and wholesome karma, practiced according to the instructions, and attained liberation, some failed to understand or possessed unwholesome karma. Because their karmic forces blazed fiercely, they did not understand reality; or, drawn by karma, they became alarmed and afraid. Despite the guidance, they lost the opportunity for deliverance. If, by the end of the second week, they still have not attained realization, recite the following words and impress them upon the person's mind.

A. The Arising of the Intermediate-State Body and Its Special Abilities

The practitioner should first make the fullest possible offerings before the Three Jewels and, in accordance with the procedure specified under “Performance of the Recitation” in the preceding volume, properly recite the verses supplicating the Buddhas and bodhisattvas for blessings. Call the deceased by name and repeat the following guidance three to seven times.

[Guidance One]

Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. After death, a person may fall into hell, be born in the god realm, or take on an “intermediate-state body”, also called a “supernormal body”.

After death, you first underwent unconsciousness for three and a half or four days. When you awoke, you passed through the intermediate state of Dharmatā, where the sacred peaceful and wrathful assemblies appeared, wisdom-light shone brilliantly, and various skilful manifestations came to guide you. Regrettably, through foolish ignorance you became afraid and failed to realize them. Delaying and misleading yourself, you have reached the present moment, still feeling as though you have just awakened from a dream. At the same time, you have assumed a luminous body resembling the physical body you possessed in life. As a verse from the esoteric scriptures teaches:

You obtain an illusory form resembling both your former body and the body of your next birth;

All six faculties and their powers of perception are present; your movement is unobstructed and you can roam at will;

You possess karmically produced supernormal powers, and your form is seen by those of the same kind and by the pure eye of the gods.

This verse describes your present experience. The luminous body is explained in the scripture as “resembling both your former body and the body of your next birth”. It means that the body now assumed by the deceased accords with the form and adornments merited through past karma. It is called the “mind-made body”, but is illusory and unreal, changing in accordance with karma.

Thus, if your previous karma is to produce birth among the gods, the appearances of the god realm arise immediately. If you are to be born among asuras, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, or hell beings, the appearances of that realm arise in response. All are karmic results following like a shadow.

In the phrase “resembling the former body”, “former body” implicitly means the flesh-and-blood body abandoned three and a half or four days after death; “body of the next birth” means the circumstances of the future place of rebirth. The line should therefore be understood as a body resembling both the abandoned physical body and the body to be assumed in the next birth.

Whatever appearances of such a body arise, do not crave embodiment and do not become faint-hearted. Craving a body out of weakness will cast you back into saṃsāra and endless suffering.

Until yesterday, you still failed to understand the intermediate state of Dharmatā and have therefore wandered until now without a place of refuge. Follow the instructions transmitted by your guru. Without distraction, rest properly in natural, uncontrived non-action; the primordial luminous appearances of your own wisdom of inner realization will then arise by themselves. If you can do this, you will be liberated and will not enter a womb for another birth.

If you cannot, visualize with faith and devotion your guru, yidam, or the Lord of Great Compassion above your head, sheltering you. Supplicate earnestly with intense joyful aspiration, maintain single-pointed trust, and do not let go.

If the deceased understands this guidance and holds to it as instructed, liberation follows and there is no further descent into the ocean of suffering in birth and death. If the person remains drawn by karma and has not understood or realized it, call the deceased by name again and say:

[Guidance Two]

Virtuous man, [name], listen intently and do not become confused. The line above, “All six faculties and their powers of perception are present”, means that in life you may have been blind, hard of hearing, unable to walk properly, or impaired in any of the faculties. Now, in the intermediate state, your eyes can see, your ears can hear, and all six faculties are intact, acute, and fully endowed. This proves that you have left the human world and are wandering in the intermediate state. Understand this principle and remember it without fail.

The phrase “your movement is unobstructed and you can roam at will” means that you now possess the mind-made body of the intermediate state and have left behind the obstructive body of flesh and blood. You therefore have special abilities and can go wherever you think.

You may pass unobstructedly through boulders, mountains, hills, earth, houses, and even Mount Sumeru and the four continents. The only exceptions are Bodhgayā—the Vajra Seat in India, where the Buddhas of this fortunate aeon manifest the attainment of Buddhahood—and the impure gate of a mother's womb. Apart from these, you can pass even through Mount Sumeru without obstruction. This proves that you are wandering in the intermediate state. Understand this clearly, recollect the guru and yidam earnestly, and pray wholeheartedly to the Lord of Great Compassion. This is essential.

[Guidance Three]

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], the phrase “You possess karmically produced supernormal powers” does not refer to powers attained through the merit of practice or through meditative absorption. These powers arise from karma and belong to a karmic result similar to its cause: the effect flows from and resembles the cause, and the branch resembles the root.

In a single instant, you can circle Mount Sumeru and the four continents, and you can travel wherever you wish, arriving as quickly as a strong person bends or extends an arm. Whatever you recollect or do not recollect can appear before you. You can now manifest without obstruction. Recognize this and ask your guru to confirm it.

[Guidance Four]

Ah! Virtuous one ([name]): “Your form is seen by the pure divine eye of beings of the same class” means this: in the intermediate state, beings of the same class with equal karmic force can fully see one another’s forms, and likewise those who are to be born in the god realm can see one another; so it is with the other realms. But do not be attached to them; instead contemplate the Great Compassionate Protector.

As for “forms seen by the divine pure eye”: this is accomplished through the power of merit of the gods and so on. Moreover, the divine pure eye truly cultivated through meditative concentration can also see, but it does not see everything: it sees what it attends to; if it does not attend, it does not see; and if the mind is distracted outward, it also cannot see.

B. The Special Conditions of the Intermediate-State Body

[Guidance Five]

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], through this intermediate-state body you see familiar scenes of the human world, relatives, and old friends as though in a dream. Although you see them and speak to them, they hear nothing and give no reply.

You see your family mourning and your relatives weeping and wailing, and think, “Am I dead? What can I do?” As soon as this thought arises, you experience pain as intense as that of a fish being fried in a hot pan. You are undergoing this now. Yet you have already left this world; what use is vain suffering? Do not cling. If you had a guru in life, supplicate that guru while visualizing and supplicating your yidam or the Lord of Great Compassion. Your pain will cease and your fear will be dispelled.

[Guidance Six]

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], the winds of karma drive, buffet, and pursue you. Unable to control yourself, you lose your freedom. Your wisdom of inner realization has nothing upon which to rely, like a feather tossed up and down by the wind, or like a person suffering upon a wild horse galloping at full speed, breathless and without support.

Suddenly you hear someone call your name and weep. Although you tell the person not to cry, they do not hear or respond. You think, “Am I dead?” and again feel immense pain. Do not grieve.

The light you see, by day or night, is like the pale gray light of dawn. You may remain in the intermediate state for one, two, three, four, five, six, or seven weeks—up to forty-nine days. The suffering of the ordinary intermediate state of becoming generally lasts twenty-two days, but its duration varies according to karma.

[Guidance Seven]

Ah! Virtuous one ([name]): at this time the red wind of the ocean of karma, extremely terrifying and unbearable, blows violently from behind you, pushing and driving you onward. Do not be afraid of it; know that it is really the appearance of the illusory realm of your own consciousness.

There is also a place of extremely terrifying darkness, the most unbearable of all, which now appears before you. At this time the sounds of “Strike!” and “Kill!” arise, and all kinds of terrifying enemies also appear before you. Do not be afraid of them.

Furthermore, for those whose wrongdoing is extremely grave, flesh-eating ghosts and man-devouring rākṣasas appear carrying various weapons, crying “Strike!” and “Kill!”, howling and surging toward you with great ferocity. Terrifying wild beasts also pursue you. Fierce winds, torrential rain, heavy snow, dense fog, and crowds chase and attack you. Great sounds arise like mountains collapsing, oceans surging, fire erupting, and furious winds roaring.

Terrified, you flee in every direction without choosing a path, until three enormous precipices—one white, one black, and one red—block your way. Thousands of feet high and bottomless, they leave no path of escape, and you are about to fall. Ah! Virtuous man, the three precipices are craving, anger, and ignorance; they are not substantial. Know that this is the intermediate state of becoming. Recollect the name of the Lord of Great Compassion, call yourself by name, and chant:

Protector of Great Compassion, noble Avalokiteśvara, guru, and Three Jewels, bestow your compassionate blessing;

Save me from this perilous passage and do not let me be swept into the three lower realms.

Pray earnestly in this way and do not forget.

[Guidance Eight]

Those who accumulated provisions and followed the Buddha's teaching with purity are met with merit protecting them from behind and happiness guiding them from the front. Those whose wholesome and unwholesome deeds in life were equal experience neither suffering nor happiness, but only a dull, bewildered, and neutral appearance.

Virtuous man, [name], whatever appearances arise, if any of the five sensory pleasures—form, sound, smell, taste, or touch—appears agreeably before you, do not crave or cling to it. Dispel every thought of desire and think only:

I offer all this wholesome happiness to the guru and the Three Jewels.

This means that whenever you experience pleasure, think single-mindedly of offering it upwards to the guru and the Three Jewels; do not crave it for yourself. If a neutral appearance arises, neither painful nor pleasant, let your wisdom of inner realization rest in the state of Mahāmudrā—uncultivated, uncontrived, undistracted, and settled. This is essential.

[Guidance Nine]

Virtuous man, [name], if you encounter bridges, the eight great stūpas, temples, or similar places, you can rest there only briefly and cannot remain long, because your consciousness has separated from the body and you are no longer in control. You

become distressed, afflicted, and sorrowful; your knowing consciousness is wavering, unstable, and without support. You think, “Alas, I am dead. What can I do?” Once this thought arises, you lose heart and lament deeply as intense suffering gathers before you.

Since you cannot remain in one place and must move elsewhere, do not form all kinds of desires; rest openly in the unmoving primordial state of your wisdom of inner realization. You can partake only of food specially dedicated to you and have no right to taste other offerings.

No relative or friend can help you. These are the signs of the mind-made body wandering in the intermediate state of becoming.

Pain and pleasure now arise according to karma. You see your home and surroundings, relatives, and even your corpse, and lament, “I am dead—what can I do?” In despair you think, “If only I had a body, what could I not accomplish?” Thus you wander about searching for a physical body; you are already experiencing this.

Even if you try to enter your corpse nine times or more, too much time has passed in the intermediate state of Dharmatā: in winter the corpse has frozen, in summer it has decayed, or your relatives have cremated or buried it, cast it into water, or offered it to birds of prey and wild animals. You cannot enter and inhabit it again.

You cannot re-enter it. With nowhere to dwell, you become deeply unhappy and feel that you are being thrown into fissures among cliffs and rocks. All the suffering you now experience is the intermediate state of becoming. Seeking a body brings only suffering. Do not cling to embodiment; rest openly in natural, uncontrived non-action.

If the deceased's consciousness follows the foregoing instruction, liberation is naturally attained within the intermediate state.

C. The Scene of Judgment in the Underworld

If, despite the foregoing guidance, the person cannot attain realization because of unwholesome karma, call the deceased by name again and say: [Guidance Ten]

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], listen carefully. The suffering you now undergo results from your own karma; no one else can bear it for you. Only wholehearted supplication of the Three Jewels can protect and save you.

If you neither supplicate them, know how to contemplate Mahāmudrā, nor visualize the yidam, then a deity born with you and responsible for wholesome deeds counts your good deeds in life with white pebbles, while another, responsible for unwholesome deeds, counts your evil deeds with black pebbles. (In the Tibetan esoteric tradition these are abbreviated as the Five Innate Deities, born with a person and never leaving them, overseeing good and evil at five places in the body. They are compared here with the Three Corpse Spirits of Chinese Daoist texts, and a specific practice is devoted to them.)

You panic, tremble, and lie, saying, “I did no evil.” Yama then says, “I have the mirror of karma; it can reveal everything,” and holds it up. Every wholesome and unwholesome deed of your life appears clearly and without the slightest error; lying is useless.

Then King Yama ties a rope around your neck and drags you from behind down from the hall. He cuts off your head, cuts out your heart, pulls out your intestines, sucks up your brains, drinks your blood, eats your flesh, and gnaws your bones. Though you are in pain, you do not die; though your body is shattered, it becomes whole again, and being cut again you suffer great pain once more.

At that time, while you are being dragged along as the pebbles are used to weigh your good and evil, do not be alarmed and do not lie, and do not be afraid of the wardens of the King of Hell. Know that you now have a “mind-made body,” and even if you are hacked and cut to pieces you have no cause of death. In truth, the nature of your body is originally emptiness; why be afraid?

What you see consists of delusive appearances of your own consciousness—forms within emptiness. The mind-made body of your habitual tendencies is essentially empty and originally without form; being formless, it cannot be touched. Everything described above is a transformation of delusive appearances of your own consciousness. Although Yama, wardens, spirits, blood-drinking rākṣasas, bull-headed beings, and others appear externally, nothing substantial can be found.

Know this to be the intermediate state and cultivate the samādhi of Mahāmudrā. If you do not know how, observe as fully as you can the nature of that within you which becomes afraid, and see through it. You will realize that this nature cannot be found and is empty: this is the Dharmakāya. This emptiness is not mere nothingness but emptiness that is “not empty in accordance with reality”.

Awareness arises in lucid clarity: this is the esoteric meaning of the Sambhogakāya. Luminosity and emptiness are non-dual and originally inseparable; their immediate nature is empty, and emptiness and luminosity do not differ—naked and completely free. Resting at that moment within the unbearable experience is the Svabhāvikakāya. Its inherent power, unceasingly manifest throughout, is the compassionate Nirmāṇakāya.

Ah! Virtuous man, observe calmly and do not become distracted. Recognition of the Four Bodies described above certainly brings liberation and Buddhahood. This is the dividing line between Buddhas and sentient beings. At this moment, freedom from distraction is paramount; otherwise, you will remain in the mire indefinitely, with no prospect of escape.

"The distinction is made in a single instant; perfect awakening is attained in a single instant." This is that moment. Before yesterday, distraction caused you to lose opportunities for deliverance. When the intermediate state first appeared, you failed to recognize it and immediately became afraid. If distraction now makes you lose this opportunity again, the compassionate gaze of the noble beings will be interrupted midway. You will not be liberated but will have to follow your karma.

The foregoing guidance brings liberation even without full recognition. If the deceased is an ordinary person who does not know how to contemplate, call the person by name again and say: [Guidance Eleven]

Ah! Virtuous man, [name], if you do not know how to contemplate according to the foregoing guidance, recollect the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, and supplicate the Lord of Great Compassion. Whenever terrifying appearances arise, visualize only the Lord of Great Compassion and your yidam. If in life you received a Dharma name from a guru who granted you a particular empowerment, recite that name and the name of your root guru, and declare them to Yama, the Dharma King. Even if you have fallen into a precipitous ravine or perilous passage, nothing can harm you and you will certainly be freed from suffering.

D. Redirecting the Power of All Thoughts

As instructed above, those who recognize these appearances will all be liberated. If you have still not been liberated, I shall repeat this earnest exhortation: call the deceased by name, recite the following, and address them: [Guidance Twelve]

Alas! Good man (name), in your present state, joy arises one moment and sorrow the next. Feelings of pleasure and pain are exceedingly intense, like arrows and cannon-fire rushing toward you. Allow all these fluctuations to rise and subside of themselves, and purify your mind of attachment and aversion; the appearances will then cease naturally. If you possess the cause for birth in a heavenly realm, its appearances will arise at once.

If your relatives, not understanding cause and effect, kill many living beings and make offerings and give alms to pray for blessings for you, impure appearances will arise in you and you will fly into a rage, and because of that your rebirth is joined and you are born in hell. (If one kills on behalf of the dead, the karma of that killing falls heavily on the dead, who must bear the retribution.

When the deceased, in the intermediate-state body, sees this, he immediately cries out for it to stop, but his relatives ignore him as if they heard nothing and go on killing as before, and so he flies into a rage. For this reason you are now instructed that anger must never arise, or you will be born in hell.) Therefore anger must never arise!

Furthermore, you may remain attached to the property you left behind, or become angry on learning that others have seized and are enjoying it. Understand that, however much attachment and anger arise, you can no longer intervene, and they will bring you no benefit. Do not cling to your former possessions. Resolve to relinquish them completely; whoever takes or uses them, do not begrudge it, but maintain a generous mind. Sincerely and reverently imagine offering them to the guru and the Three Jewels, and abide without attachment.

Furthermore, rituals may be performed to liberate you, including recitation of the "Gangani Dhāraṇī" and the "Mantra of the King Who Destroys All Lower Realms" (the two principal mantras used for the deceased; Gangani is the rebirth mantra of Akṣobhya in the east—see the appendix).

Yet the practice may not be pure or properly conducted: the officiant may be drowsy or negligent, may have broken samaya, may lack pure discipline, may behave carelessly and slight the true Dharma, or may profane the authentic teaching by using rites from a black teaching.

Because you possess subtle karmic perception, you can see this. You may lose confidence in the officiating monks, develop wrong views, and become frightened and uneasy, thinking, "Alas, I have been deceived by them!" Disappointed and dejected, you may cease to trust pure appearances, develop wrong views, lose faith, and thereby establish the continuity of rebirth in a lower realm. This will not benefit you.

However impure the Buddhist rites performed for you by the spiritual teachers invited by your descendants may appear, think: "This impurity is an appearance of my own consciousness. How could the sacred words of the Buddha be impure? It is like seeing my own soiled face reflected in a mirror: the impurity belongs to me. Moreover, these spiritual teachers are the Saṅgha in body, the Dharma in speech, and the essence of the Buddha in mind. I shall therefore take refuge in them, regard them with pure conviction, and sincerely delight in pure perception. The rites performed by my descendants will then certainly benefit me." Give rise to pure perception in this way and never forget it.

Furthermore, if you possess causes for birth in a lower realm, its appearances will arise immediately. Yet when your descendants and relatives perform pure Buddhist rites for your misdeeds, unmixed with heterodox sorcery, and the invited guru or ācārya conducts the ritual excellently in body, speech, and mind, the sight of it will bring you joy and great happiness.

The very arising of that joy can redirect the continuity of rebirth: although your karma would otherwise lead to a lower realm, this merit will certainly raise you to a higher realm. Therefore, do not entertain impure thoughts; neither should you become partial or discriminating toward appearances in which you have faith and delight. Take the greatest care.

Alas! Good man (name), in short, your self-realized wisdom now lacks a physical support. At its slightest movement, appearances of virtue and non-virtue arise with tremendous force. If an unwholesome appearance arises, do not dwell upon it; remember any practice you performed during life. If you had no practice, give rise to joy, take refuge with utter sincerity, supplicate the Lord of Great Compassion, and fervently make the following aspiration:

Alas!

Now I travel alone, parted from relatives and friends; before me are only empty appearances reflected by my own mind.

May the compassionate power of all the Buddhas rescue me; may the fears of the intermediate state be dispelled.

When karmic force makes me undergo suffering, may my celestial yidam dispel all my afflictions.

When the primordial sound of Dharma-nature roars like a thousand thunderclaps, may it become the sound of the great six-syllable mantra.

When karmic force pursues me and I have no protector, may the Lord of Great Compassion be my refuge.

When habitual karma makes me undergo suffering, may I realize the samādhi of blissful pure light.

Recite this aspiration firmly and earnestly. You will certainly receive the guidance for which you pray; it will not deceive you. Once you recite it and recognize its meaning, you will be liberated.

E. The Dim Lights of the Six Realms of Ordinary Existence Appear

After the foregoing has been recited repeatedly, liberation should follow. If, constrained by karma, you are still unable to understand, these instructions should be explained and recited again and again; this will bring great benefit. Call the deceased by name once more, recite the following, and address them: [Guidance Thirteen]

Alas! Good man (name), if you remember but fail to retain the preceding guidance, your former body will now gradually fade and disappear, while the body of your next existence will become increasingly distinct. Overcome by distress, you will think, “Alas, I have suffered so much. Whatever kind of body it may be, I must go and seek one.” As soon as this thought arises, you will hurry to and forth, drifting without knowing where to go. At this time, the six realms of saṃsāra will appear. The light of the realm toward which your karma impels you will shine most strongly.

Alas! Good man (name), listen attentively. What are the lights of the six realms? The light of the god realm is greyish white; that of the asura realm is dark green; that of the human realm is pale yellow; that of the animal realm is dark blue; that of the hungry-ghost realm is pale red; and the light of the hell realm alone resembles smoke. When these lights appear, your own body will assume the color of the realm in which you are to be born.

Alas! Good man (name), at this time the instruction is of the greatest importance. Whatever light appears, visualize it as light radiating from the Lord of Great Compassion. Imagine that the light drawing gradually nearer is itself the supremely compassionate Avalokiteśvara. This is an extremely profound and essential instruction, able to close the place of rebirth.

Alternatively, visualize any yidam you have practiced as an illusion, entirely without intrinsic nature. Through sustained contemplation, recognize this as the “pure illusory body”. Next, visualize the yidam’s form gradually dissolving from the outside in until it can no longer be found, and rest for a moment in the expanse of luminous emptiness, without grasping.

Again visualize the yidam, then the clear light, alternating the two. Then let your self-realized wisdom also dissolve gradually from the outside in. Emptiness pervades everything, luminosity pervades everything, and Dharmakāya pervades everything. Rest evenly in the Dharmakāya, free from conceptual elaboration. In this state, the place of rebirth will naturally be closed and you will attain Buddhahood.

Chapter 2: Methods of Rebirth

F. Avoiding Rebirth by Closing the Womb Entrance

There are also many who have practiced and possess intense aspiration but, because they did not become thoroughly familiar with the practice during life, still fail to recognize what is happening. They remain bewildered and wander near the womb-gate. For them, the instruction on closing the womb-gate is of the greatest importance. Call the deceased by name once more, recite the following, and address them:

[Guidance Fourteen]

Alas! Good man (name), if you still fail to recognize the foregoing guidance, karmic force will now cause appearances of moving upwards, traveling horizontally, or looking downwards. At this time, remember and meditate upon the Lord of Great Compassion.

Furthermore, as described before, appearances of violent wind and rain, heavy snow and dense fog, hail and darkness, and pursuing crowds will arise. Though you try to escape, those of little merit will flee toward places of suffering, while those rich in merit will reach places of happiness.

Good man, at this moment all the appearances of the continent and realm in which you may be born will arise before you. Many exceedingly profound and essential instructions apply at this critical time. Do not become distracted; listen single-pointedly. Because you have neither recognized the essential points already given nor become skilled in practice, you must now choose where to go. Listen with undivided attention.

The method of closing the womb entrance is extremely important. There are two methods of closing the womb entrance: (1) closing off the pudgala who enters; (2) closing off the pudgala who is entered.

(1) Instruction Preventing the Deceased from Entering the Womb-Gate

Alas! Good man (name), visualize any yidam you have practiced as an illusion, devoid of intrinsic nature yet vividly apparent like the moon reflected in water. If you have no particular yidam, take the supremely compassionate holy Avalokiteśvara as your yidam and visualize the form clearly and brilliantly.

Then visualize the yidam gradually dissolving from the outside in until no form remains; wherever it dissolves, recognize it as unfindable luminous emptiness. This is a profound essential point and an excellent means of avoiding the womb-gate. Contemplate in this way. If the gate is still not closed and you are preparing to enter a womb, listen to the next instruction:

(2) Instruction for Closing the Womb-Gate to Be Entered

The profound instruction for closing the womb-gate to be entered has five steps. Listen attentively.

First Step in Closing the Womb-Gate

[Guidance Fifteen]

This verse says:

Alas!

When the intermediate state of becoming arises for me, I shall maintain single-pointed, wholehearted intention;

I shall strive to sustain the excellent karmic connection and remember to turn back, forever closing the womb-gate;

At the one time when pure perception is needed, I shall abandon jealousy and visualize the guru and consort in union.

Recite these verses in a clear voice to arouse the deceased's attention. Visualize their meaning and practice the steps in sequence. This is vital—truly vital.

Here, "When the intermediate state of becoming arises for me" means that you have now entered the intermediate state of becoming, as its appearances themselves confirm. Look into water or a mirror: you will see neither your form nor your shadow. This is because you have left behind the obstructive body of flesh and blood and now possess a mind-made body, wandering without support—a clear sign that you have entered the intermediate state of becoming. Therefore maintain single-pointed, wholehearted intention, above all with undivided devotion.

As a rider controls a horse with the reins, focus single-pointedly and press forward, lest negative karma pull you away and change your intention. Recall any connection you formed in the human world with the true Dharma—with the guru's empowerments and instructions, the sacred scriptures, or this Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State—and "strive to sustain the excellent karmic connection" without distraction.

The boundary between ascent and descent lies in this very moment. To lose it through negligence for even an instant is the advent of suffering; to maintain single-pointed intention for an instant is the advent of happiness. Therefore, "maintain single-pointed, wholehearted intention" and "strive to sustain the excellent karmic connection". The time has now come to close the womb-gate: "remember to turn back, forever closing the womb-gate" and recognize "the one time when pure perception is needed".

As stated above, at this time the womb-gate must first be purified, after which the means of closing it is taught in five steps. The first step has been explained. Remember well the second, third, fourth, and fifth steps that follow.

Second Step in Closing the Womb-Gate

[Guidance Sixteen]

Alas! Good man (name), when the appearance of a man and woman in union arises before you, firmly resolve not to enter between them. Visualize the prospective father and mother in union as the guru and consort. Pay homage, make offerings in your mind, and with wholehearted reverence request the Dharma. Through single-pointed concentration, the womb-gate will certainly close.

If it still does not close and you are about to enter, visualize the prospective parents in union as your yidam, or as the Lord of Great Compassion and consort in union. Make offerings mentally transformed by your own mind and request the bestowal of siddhi. If you do this with complete sincerity, the womb-gate will close.

Third Step in Closing the Womb-Gate

[Guidance Seventeen]

Furthermore, if the womb-gate remains unclosed after the foregoing and you are about to enter, the third step teaches how to dispel attachment and aversion. There are four modes of birth: birth from an egg, birth from a womb, spontaneous birth, and birth from moisture. Of these, egg birth and womb birth operate alike.

As explained before, the union of a man and woman will appear before you, and at that moment attachment or aversion will draw you into the womb. Once you enter, you may be born as a horse, chicken, dog, human being, or any other creature.

If you are to be born male, you assume a male aspect, feel intense aversion toward the father, and become attached to the mother. If you are to be born female, you assume a female aspect, become deeply jealous of the mother, and feel attachment toward the father. Through these conditions, you enter the womb at the moment when the parents' red and white essences unite.

After experiencing "innate joy" (one of the four joys in the esoteric teachings), bliss and conceptual thought give way to dullness and confusion, and the embryonic body congeals as the kalala (the first week in the womb) and then the arbuda (the second week). Emerging from the womb and opening your eyes, you may discover that you are a dog suffering in a kennel.

In the same way, you may be born in a pigsty or an anthill, or as a calf or lamb, unable to return, dull and ignorant, suffering every kind of misery in despair. You may wander endlessly into hell or among hungry ghosts, circling ceaselessly through the six realms and tormented by immeasurable suffering; or you may become a Mahoraga, a great-bellied crawler. Those who cling without understanding and feel no fear are pitiful indeed; the thought makes the heart tremble.

Without the guru's sublime instruction, who would not fall into the perilous abyss just described? Once fallen, you will sink into birth and death with no prospect of escape. Therefore listen to me and keep this instruction firmly in mind. Listen carefully to and retain the instruction that dispels attachment and aversion and closes the womb-gate.

This is the meaning of: "Remember to turn back, forever closing the womb-gate; at the one time when pure perception is needed, abandon jealousy and visualize the guru and consort in union." As stated above, one who is to be born male loves the mother and hates the father, while one who is to be born female loves the father and hates the mother; thus jealousy arises. At this time there is a profound essential instruction. Alas! Good man, the moment thoughts of attachment or aversion arise, contemplate as follows:

Alas! I am a sentient being burdened by grave karma, sunk in birth and death and dependent upon attachment and aversion. If I do not free myself but continue to cling to them, I shall cast myself again into birth and death, drowning for endless aeons in the boundless ocean of suffering, never to escape. From this moment on, I shall abandon attachment and aversion and never act upon them again. Alas! Never again shall I give rise to attachment or aversion.

Reflect in this way, reproach yourself, and maintain this resolve fiercely, wholeheartedly, and single-pointedly. As the scriptures say:

This vow alone can close the womb-gate.

Alas! Good man (name), do not let your mind become distracted. Maintain single-pointed, wholehearted intention. This is of the utmost importance.

Fourth Step in Closing the Womb-Gate

[Guidance Eighteen]

If, despite the preceding guidance, the womb-gate remains unclosed and you are about to enter, there is a further instruction on the illusory and unreal nature of appearances by which the gate may be closed. Contemplate as follows:

Alas! Alas! The prospective parents in union, the violent rain and wind, the crashing thunder, the frightening appearances, and the entire world of beings and their environment—all substantial forms and appearances—are by nature illusory. However they appear, they are not truly existent. Everything is deceptive and unreal, like a dream or illusion, impermanent and uncertain. Why become attached? Why be afraid? This is seeing what does not exist as existent. All phenomena arise from mind; mind itself is illusory and primordially nonexistent. How, then, could there be any actual destination to reach?

Alas! From beginningless time, because you have wandered in delusion, you have taken nonexistence to be existence, the false to be real, and illusion to be true, and have remained in birth and death until now. If you still fail to recognize appearances as illusory and unreal, you will remain forever in the ocean of suffering, mired in every misery without end.

Therefore contemplate everything as a dream, an illusion, an echo in an empty valley, a mirage, a reflection in a mirror, a floating speck before the eyes, or the moon in water. Not even for an instant can any reality be found. Maintain single-pointed, wholehearted intention; discard belief in the reality of appearances and sustain this focus continuously. You will certainly recognize your error and turn back in time. With the firm understanding that these appearances are unreal, the womb-gate will close of itself.

Fifth Step in Closing the Womb-Gate

[Guidance Nineteen]

Even after receiving the essential instruction on contemplating appearances as illusion, you may still take them as real. If the womb-gate remains unclosed and signs of confused entry into a womb arise, there is the following instruction on clear light.

Good man (name), if the womb-gate is still not closed, the fifth step is to close it by contemplating clear light. Contemplate as follows:

Alas! I observe all phenomena as my own mind; this mind itself is empty, unborn and unceasing.

Contemplate in this way and let the mind rest in the natural realm of non-doing, like water poured into water and naturally mingling. Settle securely in the original ground; let the mind remain naturally and at ease, uncontrived and unmoving. Then the gates of all four modes of birth will certainly close.

The profound instructions for closing the womb-gate have now been given in many ways. Among pudgalas (sentient beings) of superior, middling, and lesser capacity, none will fail to be liberated.

Why? First, consciousness in the intermediate state possesses “defiled supernormal powers”, so what I say appears directly before it as soon as it is heard. Second, even one who was blind or deaf in life now possesses all six faculties and can understand whatever is said. Third, because you are constantly pursued by fear and terror, you carefully consider what to do; your mind is undistracted and your memory strong, so whatever I say comes to mind as soon as you reflect upon it. Fourth, consciousness has lost its support and longs for pleasure; as soon as it is directed, it goes there at once and is easily guided.

At this time, moreover, memory is clear and acute—nine times stronger than during life. Even if you were dull in life, karmic force now makes the wisdom of inner realization shine clearly, enabling you to connect and understand all instructions and grasp their essential point. Buddhist rites performed for the deceased at this time will therefore certainly be effective and beneficial.

It is thus vitally important that this Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing be read earnestly to the deceased throughout the forty-nine days. If the first guidance does not liberate them, the next will; and if that does not, repeated guidance will bring liberation.

G. Choosing a Womb Entrance

Furthermore, the karmic power of sentient beings is inconceivable. Many have accumulated very little wholesome habituation from beginningless time, while the force of their unwholesome habituation is strong. Because their karmic obscurations are so heavy, they remain difficult to liberate even after repeated guidance and wholehearted contemplation. Since the womb-gate could not previously be closed, the following profound instruction explains how to choose one:

First recite the “Verses Invoking the Blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas”, followed by the “Four Refuges” (both are found in the appendix). Then call the deceased by name, recite the following, and address them:

Alas! Good man (name), listen attentively. Although the preceding instructions have already been given to you, you did not understand them. The womb-gate remains open and the time for rebirth has arrived. You must therefore choose a womb-gate for yourself. Listen carefully with the utmost sincerity and trust; accept this teaching and do not lose it.

1. Overview of the Various Places of Birth

[Guidance Twenty]

Alas! Good man (name), signs indicating where you may be born are now appearing before you. Recognize and examine them carefully so that you may choose the best continent.

If you are to be born in Pūrvavideha, the eastern continent, you will see a splendid lake upon which male and female geese pursue one another in play. Do not go there; turn back at once. Although happiness may be found there, the Buddhadharma does not spread on that continent. Therefore, do not enter.

If you are to be born in Jambudvīpa, the southern continent, you will see magnificent palaces. If you seek rebirth there, you may enter.

If you are to be born in Aparagodānīya, the western continent, you will see a splendid lake with herds of mares and stallions. Do not go there; turn back at once. Although that continent is prosperous, the Buddhadharma does not spread there. Therefore, do not enter.

If you are to be born in Uttarakuru, the northern continent, you will see a lake adorned with cattle or with trees. Recognize that birth there entails the five appropriated views: the view of a self, wrong view, the extreme views, attachment to views, and attachment to rules and observances (see the entry on the five views on p. 367 of the Practical Dictionary of Buddhism). Do not enter there either. Although that continent offers longevity and merit, the Buddhadharma does not spread there. Therefore, do not enter.

The general signs of birth in each of the four continents have now been explained. Distinguish them clearly and take great care not to enter lightly.

Further, if one is to be born in a heavenly realm, one sees wondrous heavenly palaces made of many jewels; the mind is delighted, and through merit one is drawn to this place and can go and take birth there.

If you are to be born in the asura realm, you will see delightful groves or circles of fire rotating toward one another. Do not enter; turn back at once.

If you are to be born in the animal realm, you will see mountain caverns, rocky caves, and terrifying deep holes filled with smoke. Under no circumstances should you enter.

If you are to be born in the hungry-ghost realm, you will see desolate plains devoid of people and vegetation, cracked ground with shallow holes, profound darkness, or densely wooded islands.

If you go there, you will be born among hungry ghosts and suffer every kind of hunger and thirst. Whatever happens, do not enter. Turn back immediately and resolutely refuse to go.

If you are to be born in the hell realm, the force of unwholesome karma may cause you to hear singing, or you may lose control of yourself and be compelled to enter. You may see dark islands with birds, black houses, red houses, or dark underground holes. All such appearances may arise. Once you enter, you will undergo the unbearable heat and cold of hell with no prospect of escape. Resolve courageously never to go there.

At that time, it is essential to recite the foregoing instructions in sequence.

2. Protection from the Pursuing Agents of Death

[Guidance Twenty-One]

Alas! Good man (name), although you wish not to go, you may have lost control of yourself. Karmically produced wardens pursue you from behind, depriving you of freedom and leaving you unable to resist; other wardens and agents of death drag you from the front. Black mist, a great red karmic wind, deafening roars, violent storms, heavy snow and dense fog, hailstones, and blades of ice press in upon you, leaving nowhere to escape.

Seeking refuge, you may see the magnificent houses mentioned before, cliff caves, holes in the ground, dark and secluded paths, or lotus flowers (for some beings in the god realm are born spontaneously from lotuses). Desperate to escape, you may enter one without examining it carefully and become sealed inside. You hide there, afraid to emerge, but thereafter you may be unable to leave.

You remain because you believe that leaving will bring suffering; you become attached to your shelter, while the frightening appearances of the intermediate state make you afraid to emerge. Thus doubt and fear arise and you remain hidden and still. Yet once you have entered and assumed any kind of body, you will undergo many sufferings. All of these are appearances of obstructing spirits. At this time there is a profound and essential instruction. Listen attentively, remember it, and do not lose it.

At that moment, when wardens pursue you, you have lost control, and terrifying appearances arise, instantly generate unwavering faith. Visualize Great Victorious Heruka (a blood-drinking deity), Hayagrīva (a wrathful deity of the esoteric tradition), Vajrapāṇi, or the yidam you practiced during life. Visualize that immense and terrifying wrathful vidyārāja standing before you, with a mighty body and powerful limbs, able to pulverize every obstacle.

Through the blessing of the deity's great compassionate power, you will escape the wardens and regain the freedom to choose a womb-gate at leisure. This is a profound and genuine instruction; retain it without fail.

Good man (name), the gods of the meditative heavens are born through the power of samādhi. Hungry ghosts, harmful spirits, and rākṣasas, however, arise when thought changes during the intermediate state; they assume mind-made bodies and display many kinds of supernatural transformation.

The hungry ghosts dwelling in the space above and below, and the hungry-ghost images conjured in the air, number as many as eighty-four thousand. All are "mind-born bodies of the intermediate state" that have taken this form through changes in thought. At that time, if one can recall the meaning of the "Mahāmudrā of emptiness," that is best. If one cannot practice it, then practice "illusory yoga"; if one cannot do even that, then, without greed or attachment to anything, contemplate the yidam, the "Great Compassionate Protector," and one will naturally attain the sambhogakāya Buddha. (Illusory yoga is also the highest accomplished esoteric Dharma in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism.)

H. Choosing Between Transference of Consciousness to the Pure Land and Rebirth in the Human Realm

[Guidance Twenty-Two]

First comes the instruction for transference to a pure realm of the ḍākinīs. Make the following aspiration and think:

Alas, how painful! For countless aeons until this very day, I have remained sunk in the mire of birth and death. Now I shall renounce it. In former lives I encountered the Buddhas for a long time, yet failed to attain liberation—how lamentable! I have now become weary of saṃsāra; it is frightening and repellent, and the time has come to escape it swiftly. May I therefore be born from a lotus at the feet of the Blessed Amitābha Buddha in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

Reflect in this way and pray with intense yearning, wholehearted concentration, and sincere devotion.

Alternatively, aspire to be born in whichever Buddha-land inspires your faith and delight: Abhirati in the east, the Buddha-land of Akṣobhya; the central realm of Ghanavyūha, the Buddha-land of Vairocana; Alakāvatī, the City of Wealth in the north, abode of Vajrapāṇi and Vaiśravaṇa; or the Palace of Lotus Light in the west, in the presence of the great Oḍḍiyāna master Padmasambhava. Choose a Buddha-land in which you have faith, focus upon it with joyful longing and wholehearted devotion, and aspire without distraction. You will be born there immediately.

If you wish instead to go to Tuṣita's Inner Court and draw near to the loving Lord Maitreya, think only: "Now, during the intermediate state, the time is ripe for me to go to Tuṣita's Inner Court and draw near to the loving Lord Maitreya." With intense longing and wholehearted concentration, you will be born there from a lotus before Maitreya.

2. Rebirth in a Human Womb and Return to the Human World

[Guidance Twenty-Three]

Furthermore, if you cannot be born in a Buddha-land and wish to enter a womb, or if entry into a womb is unavoidable, there is the following instruction for choosing a womb-gate within impure saṃsāra. Listen carefully. As explained above, choose the continent with care. Using your supernormal perception, survey all places thoroughly and enter where the authentic Buddhadharma flourishes.

If you are to be born through a particular womb-gate, an impure clot of blood will appear. Mistaking it for something fragrant and delicious, you may become attached and thus take birth. Therefore, when any of the foregoing appearances arise, give rise neither to attachment nor to love and hatred. Choose only an excellent womb, focus upon it wholeheartedly, and seek it with joyful aspiration. This is of the utmost importance. At this time make the following aspiration:

Alas! To benefit sentient beings, may I be born as a universal monarch; into a brahmin family like a mighty śāla tree; as the child of a great siddha; into a family belonging to a pure and undefiled lineage of the authentic Dharma; or into a family whose parents possess genuine faith. May I assume a meritorious body able to bring benefit and happiness to all sentient beings.

After making this aspiration, enter the womb with firm resolve. At the same time, radiate light to bless it and visualize it as a sublime palace. Visualize the Buddhas and yidams of the ten directions, together with the Lord of Great Compassion, compassionately blessing your entry into the womb. This is essential.

Furthermore, when choosing a womb, karmic force may cause you to mistake a good womb for a bad one and a bad womb for a good one. The essential method of choosing is therefore extremely important. The instruction follows.

When the signs of a good womb appear, do not become attached to it; when the signs of a bad womb appear, do not feel aversion toward it. Neither accept nor reject good or bad. Free from both attachment and aversion, abide in equanimity. This is the profound essential point for entering a womb.

Apart from those able to receive the foregoing guidance, others may have inveterate unwholesome habits that are difficult to remove, may be unable to relinquish attachment and aversion, or may be of lesser capacity, heavily burdened by wrongdoing, and as dull as animals. They should be protected by being led to take refuge in the Three Jewels. Call the deceased by name once more, recite the following, and address them:

[Guidance Twenty-Four]

Alas! Good man (name), since you can neither choose a womb-gate nor relinquish attachment and aversion, whatever appearances arise, recite only the names of the Three Jewels, take refuge with devotion, and supplicate the Lord of Great Compassion. Raise your head, concentrate, and proceed forwards. Recognize the true nature of the intermediate state. Immediately relinquish attachment to the relatives, children, and closest friends of your former life, for none can benefit you now. You may enter the white light of the god realm or the yellow light of the human realm. You may enter exquisite jewelled palaces or delightful gardens.

Repeat the foregoing guidance as many as seven times. Then recite three times each: (1) the "Verses Invoking the Blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas"; (2) the "Verses of Rescue from the Fearful and Perilous Passage of the Intermediate State"; (3) the "Six Root Verses of the Intermediate State"; and (4) the "Aspiration for Rescue from the Fears of the Intermediate State". Next recite (5) the "Verses for Liberation from Karmic Habits" and (6) the "Dhāraṇī for Eliminating Fixed Karma". (The first four appear in the appendix and the fifth and sixth in the supplementary appendix. If time is extremely short, these recitations may be omitted.)

[Conclusion]

When this method is practiced properly, highly realized yogis can transfer consciousness at the time of death through phowa. Without entering the intermediate state, they penetrate the source directly and realize the Dharmakāya at once. Next are practicing pudgalas who, after the intermediate state of dying, recognize the clear light of Dharma-nature and ascend directly.

Next, during the seven days of the intermediate state of Dharma-nature, peaceful and wrathful appearances arise in sequence. Depending upon conditions and individual capacity, recognition of even one brings liberation. The intermediate state contains many perilous passages; wherever recognition occurs, liberation occurs.

Those of dull capacity and burdened by heavy karmic obscurations descend into the intermediate state of becoming, wandering alone amid doubt and fear. The various instructions are therefore given more than once, like the successive rungs of a ladder: failing to recognize at one level, they may recognize at another and be liberated.

Those of still heavier karma and lesser capacity who fail to recognize and are overwhelmed by fear nevertheless receive the instructions on choosing a womb-gate, presented step by step in different forms. If they fail to recognize one instruction but recognize another, then by practicing as taught and gaining strength through contemplation, they can still acquire immeasurable merit and be born in a higher realm.

Even those as low and dull as animals receive the benefit of taking refuge in the Three Jewels. Though they enter a lower realm, they may still turn back, enter a human womb, and obtain a body endowed with the freedoms and advantages (the eight freedoms and ten advantages). In a future life they will meet lamas, gurus, and spiritual teachers, preserve their discipline unimpaired, and attain liberation as they aspire.

Applying this esoteric instruction during the intermediate state of becoming enables sentient beings with wholesome karma to continue their wholesome causes, like clearing a blocked irrigation channel so that water flows freely into its course. Even those guilty of the gravest wrongdoing can be liberated upon hearing this teaching.

Why? At that time the supreme peaceful and wrathful deities come to guide them, while obstructing forces accompany them. As soon as they hear this teaching, their appearances change and they are liberated. Moreover, the deceased have relinquished the body of flesh and blood and lost their physical support, so they can change easily.

Wherever they may wander during the intermediate state, subtle supernormal perception enables them to see; when called, they appear immediately; when reminded, they understand at once; and in a single instant their minds can be redirected. This teaching therefore has immense power.

It is like a crossbow whose bolt unfailingly strikes the target; like a great log that a hundred people cannot lift, yet which, once afloat, travels easily wherever one wishes; or like a wild horse that is difficult to tame but becomes manageable when controlled by the reins.

Therefore, for every newly deceased person, this teaching should be recited repeatedly beside the body, if it is present, until blood or yellow fluid flows from the nostrils. During this time, do not move the body. Perform practices and dedicate the merit to the deceased in accordance with the samaya of the yidam in whom they had faith. Do not kill any living being.

Relatives must not wail or weep beside the body, but should perform Buddhist rites for the deceased as extensively as possible. Other practices may also be appended to this Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State and

recited at the end; this is excellent.

Furthermore, this teaching should be recited regularly during life and its words committed to memory. When the allotted span of life is exhausted and the unmistakeable signs of approaching death appear, recite it yourself and reflect upon its meaning if you still have the strength. If you lack the strength, a companion should read aloud from this text, pronouncing every word and phrase clearly. Liberation will certainly follow; there is no doubt.

This profound instruction requires no prior meditative practice: liberation is attained upon encountering the teaching. It is also a profound means of rescuing those burdened by grave karmic obscurations from the narrow passage. Those fortunate enough to encounter this profound and wondrous teaching should not forget its words even if pursued by seven barking dogs. At the moment of death, among all the Buddha's teachings and all the power of the Buddhas of the three times, none surpasses this.

Here ends the Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State, an instruction on the intermediate state that can liberate all sentient beings of the same nature.

May everything be auspicious. Excellent!

Appendix

Appendix to the Esoteric Teaching of Liberation through Hearing in the Intermediate State

A Concise Visualization and Recitation Practice of Four-Armed Avalokiteśvara, the Lord of Great Compassion

First visualize a white eight-petalled lotus, about one foot wide, above your head. Upon it is a flat white moon-disc, on which four-armed Avalokiteśvara, the yidam and protector, sits cross-legged, about one foot high. He has two heads and four arms. His body is entirely white; the upper head is the red Amitābha Buddha.

His first pair of hands are joined at the heart in the gesture of prayer. Of the second pair, the left holds an open red-and-white lotus and the right a crystal rosary. He wears a jewelled crown and is adorned with necklaces.

At the yidam's heart is a white eight-petalled lotus, about two inches wide, bearing a white moon-disc. At its center stands a white seed syllable 'shá' [], surrounded by a mantra-wheel arranged from right to left. Every syllable is white and upright; the mantra syllables turn to the right while the light turns to the left.

Recite the mantra a number of times—at least 108. Visualize the syllable of the mantra-wheel radiating the five colors of Buddha-light—white, blue, yellow, red, and green. The light expands until it fills the Buddha-lands of the ten directions and makes offerings to all the Buddhas there. The Buddhas of the ten directions radiate five-colored light in return. The two lights mingle as one and dissolve into the seed syllable[ ] at the yidam's heart.

Recite the mantra a further number of times. Then visualize the seed syllable [] radiating five-colored light throughout the six realms. The Buddhas of the ten directions also radiate light upon the beings of the six realms. Through the merit of encountering this light, their karmic wrongdoing is purified; they all become the yidam, inseparable from the yidam, and radiate brilliant light in return. This light re-enters the seed syllable[ ] of the yidam, from which white nectar then flows throughout the yidam's body.

It descends through the lotus-seat beneath the yidam, enters the crown of your head, and fills your entire body. Black water flows from every pore, signifying the purification of karmic wrongdoing accumulated since beginningless time. Your whole body is washed by nectar, becoming luminous and white as karmic wrongdoing and obscurations are purified.

The yidam praises you for having purified your obscurations and karma, and great joy arises. The yidam's body then contracts to the size of a grain of rice, descends through the crown of your head, and enters your heart. You thereby become the yidam, unobstructedly luminous and endowed with every quality.

From the seed syllable [] at your heart, five-colored light radiates as offerings to the Buddhas of the ten directions. They radiate light in return; the two lights mingle as one and dissolve into the seed syllable [] at your heart. Recite the mantra a further number of times. The seed syllable [Ha] at your heart then radiates brilliant light throughout the six realms. The Buddhas of the ten directions also radiate light, from which boundless streams of nectar flow and purify the karmic wrongdoing of sentient beings.

All beings of the six realms become the yidam and radiate brilliant light back upon you. This light dissolves into the seed syllable[ ] at your heart. Recite the mantra a further number of times, dedicate all merit to the beings of the six realms, and conclude the session. Maintain this visualization while walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, and dedicate it to the well-being of the country and peace throughout the world.

First: Mantra of the Heart of Great Compassion

OṂ ĀḤ HRĪḤ HŪṂ

Second: The Great Six-Syllable Mantra

OṂ MAṆI PADME HŪṂ



The foregoing ritual was transmitted by the venerable Nona, Trinlé Gyatso, the twenty-fifth lineage master of the Nyingma school. Ideally, the practitioner should receive it from a lama, guru, or ācārya of the same lineage. If this is not possible, respectfully open the text before an image of Guru Padmasambhava and supplicate him. Visualize Guru Padmasambhava as inseparable from the lineage of this practice and as personally bestowing it upon you. To begin the practice in this way is also reasonably complete.

The minimum is to recite this mantra one hundred thousand times. The scriptural canon states that those who lack food and wealth will obtain them through its recitation, and that women will attain a male body.

Reciting it from one to seven times purifies karmic obscurations accumulated over hundreds of billions of aeons; reciting it one hundred or one thousand times produces merit equal to reciting the entire scriptural canon; reciting it ten thousand times closes the gates to birth in the three lower realms; reciting it one million times leads to the stage of non-retrogression; and reciting it ten million times brings realization of the Dharmakāya, Sambhogakāya, Nirmāṇakāya, Svabhāvikakāya, and Bodhikāya, and thus accomplishment.

To treat illness, empower clean water through mantra recitation and give it to the patient to drink. Those who sincerely pray for worldly happiness and success will see their wishes fulfilled. Although this mantra consists of only six syllables, it is vast and complete, its wondrous applications inexhaustible and its power unsurpassed. It is an exceedingly important practice of the esoteric tradition.

As an esoteric scripture explains: OṂ represents the god realm; MA, the asura realm; ṆI, the human realm; PAD, the animal realm; ME, the hungry-ghost realm; and HŪṂ, the hell realm.

Recitation of these six syllables cuts through saṃsāra and brings liberation from the three realms. Moreover, OṂ arises from bodhicitta and marks initial entry into the ten stages of faith; MA leads into the ten abodes; ṆI into the ten practices; PAD into the ten dedications; ME into the ten bhūmis; and HŪṂ into Vajrayāna and the stage of great awakening. Reciting the six syllables can therefore transcend the ten bhūmis at once and bring unsurpassed awakening.

This is the profound symbolic meaning of the six ordinary realms. The six syllables are also the heart of all mantras and are therefore called the Mantra of the Heart of Great Compassion. Whether one has committed wrongdoing or not, merely hearing this mantra can bring immediate liberation; how much more, then, can it benefit those who sincerely aspire to birth in a pure land? When it is recited for the deceased, its merit will certainly support their birth there. Amitābha Buddha dwelling above Avalokiteśvara's head symbolizes Avalokiteśvara's guidance of sentient beings. Because this esoteric teaching repeatedly instructs those without a yidam to take the Lord of Great Compassion as their yidam, his sacred image has been respectfully placed at the beginning of the volume and this visualization and recitation practice appended, providing readers with a support for practice.

Vajra Guru Nona also taught: "The Great Six-Syllable Mantra is Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva's subtle mind-seal. It possesses boundless, inconceivable qualities and is praised by all Buddhas of the ten directions. To write the six syllables is equivalent to writing the Tripiṭaka. To recite them purifies karmic obscurations of the three times, brings liberation from birth and death, and leads ultimately to accomplishment.

The mantra cuts through ignorance, opens wisdom, subdues māras, cures illness, increases wealth, relieves poverty, averts calamity, prolongs life, rescues beings from hundreds of thousands of sufferings, destroys greed, anger, and delusion, and closes the road of saṃsāra. Relatives of former generations are raised to a higher birth, and even the worms in one's intestines attain the true fruition. It contains immeasurable gateways to samādhi and daily brings the full merit of the six pāramitās.

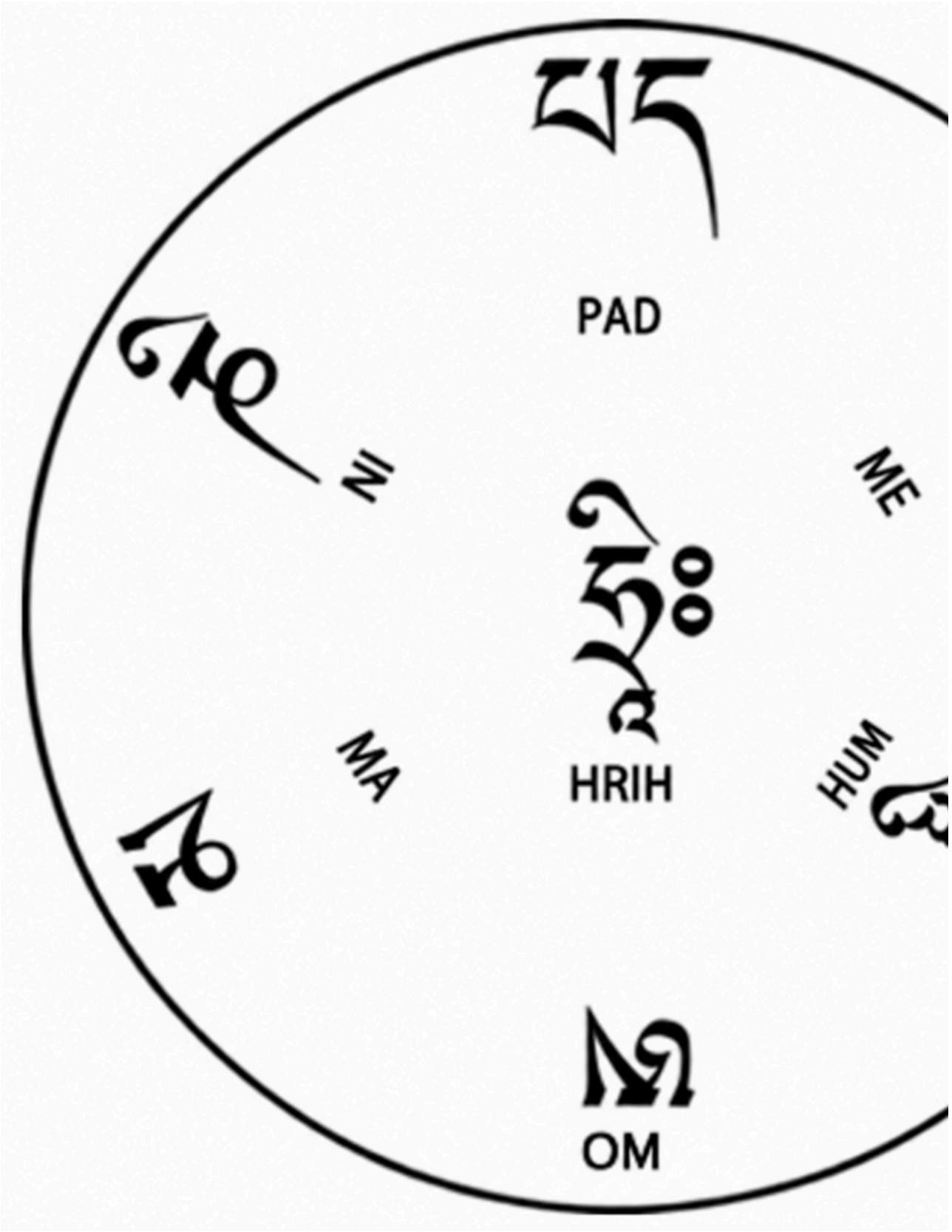
All vajra Dharma-protectors, devas, nāgas, and the eight classes of beings rejoice and offer protection. Birth in whichever Buddha-land one desires will be accomplished as wished.

Merit arises not only from reciting, writing, and visualizing the mantra: merely wearing it, touching it, hearing or seeing it, keeping it at home, writing it upon a door, or displaying it on a fluttering banner plants in every being who encounters its Dharma-flavour the cause of liberation from birth and death and the virtue of attaining the fruit of awakening. Misfortune becomes good fortune and adversity becomes auspicious.

For those who have not yet attained Buddhahood, every wish—for longevity, children, merit, authority, or protection from dangers and disasters arising from earth, water, fire, wind, and space—is fulfilled like a wish-granting jewel. In short, even the Buddha's wisdom could not exhaust the qualities of the six-syllable mantra over the course of an aeon. To explain only those recorded in the present Tibetan canon would take three years."

The sublime qualities of this mantra may also be understood by reading the Mahāyāna Sūtra of the Sublime Treasure King.

Mantra-Wheel of the Great Six-Syllable Mantra



The syllable "shá" is the seed syllable of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva's mind seal. Its ancient translation is "Kri," a three-syllable word. Because many people today are not proficient in Sanskrit, the syllable "shá" is noted as also pronounced " xiē " When visualized, it should be viewed as ( ).

Verses Invoking the Blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (recited before the ritual)

As death approaches, the dying person should first make this invocation and aspiration. Before the Three Jewels, arrange as many material offerings as possible, or visualize vast cloudbanks of offerings formed by the mind. Holding fine incense, pay homage with complete sincerity and make the following invocation and aspiration:

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, ever abiding throughout the ten directions, endowed with great loving compassion, foreknowledge, and sacred vision;

refuges of sentient beings, never abandoning your great compassionate vows: please come here and accept these offerings, both materially arranged and mentally created.

Lords endowed with great compassion, your wisdom and loving compassion, enlightened activities, and power are inconceivable.

The person named (name) has departed from this world and gone to the next, leaving behind the body of flesh and blood.

Without support or protector, without rescue or assistance, the appearances now arising bring the greatest suffering.

The day is ending and the road is exhausted; leaving home for a foreign land, the deceased enters darkness in bewilderment and approaches a precipice.

Driven by karmic force, the deceased runs in terror through wild forests, falls into a boundless wilderness, or drifts upon a vast ocean.

Without control of the body and buffeted by karmic winds, the deceased may enter the midst of battle or be seized by hostile enemies.

With nowhere to take shelter, the deceased may encounter Yama's terrifying and merciless agents.

Undergoing the sufferings produced by karma, dying and reviving without respite, exhausted from struggling and utterly alone —how grievous!

Lead this being safely out of the perilous passage of the intermediate state. O Lords of Great Compassion, do not withdraw your loving mercy.

Remember your vast vows and free this being from every suffering. I implore the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas: let the radiance of your light pour down.

Bestow the power of great compassion and free this being from the suffering of the intermediate state.

The officiant should intone the foregoing verses reverently and solemnly, with everyone present repeating them three times. When the ritual is performed by one person alone, no responsive recitation is required.

Aspiration for Deliverance from the Fearful and Perilous Passage of the Intermediate State (recited before the ritual)

(1) Buddhas and Bodhisattvas ever abiding in the ten directions, Samantabhadra, peaceful and wrathful deities, and ocean-like assembly of noble beings;

gurus, yidams, ḍākinīs, and Dharma-protectors: descend to this place and, I beseech you, hear and grant this prayer.

With all my heart I take refuge in the gurus and ḍākinīs; in your great compassion, please guide me.

(2) When through delusion I wander in saṃsāra, may the light-path of undistracted study, reflection, and meditation shine;

may the lineage gurus lead before me and the supreme mother ḍākinīs protect me from behind;

may I cross the fearful and perilous passage of the intermediate state and be brought to a Buddha-land of perfect awakening.

(3) When through blazing anger I wander in saṃsāra, may the luminous path of mirror-like wisdom shine;

may Vajrasattva lead before me and Māmakī protect me from behind;

may I cross the fearful and perilous passage of the intermediate state and be brought to a Buddha-land of perfect awakening.

(4) When through blazing pride I wander in saṃsāra, may the luminous path of the wisdom of equality shine;

may Ratnasambhava lead before me and Buddha-Locanā protect me from behind;

may I cross the fearful and perilous passage of the intermediate state and be brought to a Buddha-land of perfect awakening.

(5) When through blazing desire I wander in saṃsāra, may the luminous path of discriminating wisdom shine;

may Amitābha lead before me and Pāṇḍaravāsinī protect me from behind;

may I cross the fearful and perilous passage of the intermediate state and be brought to a Buddha-land of perfect awakening.

(6) When through blazing jealousy I wander in saṃsāra, may the luminous path of all-accomplishing wisdom shine;

may Amoghasiddhi lead before me and Tārā protect me from behind;

may I cross the fearful and perilous passage of the intermediate state and be brought to a Buddha-land of perfect awakening.

(7) When through blazing ignorance I wander in saṃsāra, may the luminous path of the wisdom of the dharmadhātu shine;

may Vairocana lead before me and Dhātvīśvarī protect me from behind;

may I cross the fearful and perilous passage of the intermediate state and be brought to a Buddha-land of perfect awakening.

(8) When through the blazing five poisons I wander in saṃsāra, may the harmonious light of the four wisdoms shine;

may the Buddhas of the Five Families lead before me and the Mothers of the Five Families protect me from behind;

may I cross the fearful and perilous passage of the intermediate state and be brought to a Buddha-land of perfect awakening.

(9) When through blazing deluded appearances I wander in saṃsāra, may the light that dispels all fear shine;

may the wrathful deities lead before me and the wrathful mothers protect me from behind;

may I cross the fearful and perilous passage of the intermediate state and be brought to a Buddha-land of perfect awakening.

(10) When through blazing habitual tendencies I wander in saṃsāra, may the light of co-emergent wisdom shine;

may the heroic vidyādharas lead before me and the assembly of ḍākinīs protect me from behind;

may I cross the fearful and perilous passage of the intermediate state and be brought to a Buddha-land of perfect awakening.

(11) May the element of space not rise as my enemy; may I behold the Buddha-land of blue light.

May the element of water not rise as my enemy; may I behold the Buddha-land of white light.

May the element of earth not rise as my enemy; may I behold the Buddha-land of yellow light.

May the element of fire not rise as my enemy; may I behold the Buddha-land of red light.

May the element of wind not rise as my enemy; may I behold the Buddha-land of green light.

May rainbow light not rise as my enemy; may I behold all Buddha-lands.

May I recognize all sounds as my own sounds and all lights as my own light;

may I recognize all radiance as my own radiance and recognize the appearances of the intermediate state for myself;

may I directly realize the three kāyas within the intermediate state.

The Six Root Verses of the Intermediate States (recited before the ritual)

(1) Alas! When the intermediate state of this life arises for me, I shall forever abandon indolence, for there is no leisure in life;

through undistracted study, reflection, and meditation, I shall realize the true meaning, and, with mind and appearances lucid, directly realize the three kāyas.

Having obtained this body endowed with the freedoms and advantages just once, I shall not cast it away upon the path of delusion.

(2) Alas! When the intermediate state of dreams arises for me, I shall forever abandon the heedless, corpse-like sleep of ignorance;

single-pointedly and without distraction, I shall rest in reality and sustain the dream practice of illusion and clear light.

May I not sleep long like an animal; may I cherish sleep and unite direct experience with practice.

(3) Alas! When the intermediate state of meditation arises for me, I shall forever abandon every form of distraction and dullness;

without distraction or grasping, I shall rest steadily beyond extremes; may the two stages of generation and completion be revealed to me.

At this time of one-pointed practice, all other activity abandoned, I shall not fall under the power of deluded afflictions.

(4) Alas! When the intermediate state of dying arises for me, I shall forever abandon every craving and attachment;

without distraction, I shall merge with the meaning of the clear instructions and let awareness roam in the unborn expanse of self-cognizing wisdom.

As I am about to leave this obstructive body of flesh and blood, I shall recognize the arrival of impermanence and death.

(5) Alas! When the intermediate state of Dharmatā arises for me, I shall forever abandon all fearful and terrifying appearances;

I shall recognize every appearance as self-realized wisdom and know these to be appearances of the intermediate state.

At this critical moment of immense consequence, why should I fear the peaceful and wrathful forms, which are transformations of my own awareness?

(6) Alas! When the intermediate state of becoming arises for me, I shall maintain single-pointed, wholehearted intention;

I shall strive to sustain the excellent karmic connection and remember to turn back, forever closing the womb-gate.

At the one time when pure perception is needed, I shall abandon jealousy and visualize the guru and consort in union.

Death is uncertain and comes with extreme swiftness; do not waste this life on meaningless activities.

If resolve is weak, the great benefit will be lost, and now I shall return empty-handed.

What is needed is firm conviction in the sublime yidam practice. If I do not practice this sublime yidam now,

or rest securely in the guru's instruction spoken by a great siddha,

I cannot afford to self-deceive. Truly understanding these Six Root Verses is vital.

Aspiration for Rescue from the Fears of the Intermediate State (recited before the ritual)

(1) When my allotted lifespan is exhausted and the time of departure comes, no relative from my former life can help me.

As I wander alone along the path of the intermediate state, may the compassionate power of the peaceful and wrathful deities

dispel the darkness of ignorance.

(2) Parted from my beloved companions and wandering alone, when the illusory appearances of my own awareness arise,

may the compassionate power of the Buddhas rescue me, so that the perils of the intermediate state inspire no fear.

(3) When the five luminous lights of wisdom appear, may I recognize my true face without fear;

when the forms of the peaceful and wrathful deities draw near, may I recognize the intermediate state with certainty and without fear.

(4) When karmic force brings suffering, may the Lord of Great Compassion dispel my afflictions;

when the primordial sound of Dharma-nature roars like thunder, may it become the sound of the great six-syllable mantra.

(5) When karma pursues me and I have no refuge, may my celestial yidam dispel my suffering;

when karmic force pursues me and I have no protector, may I realize the samādhi of pure light.

(6) When I take spontaneous birth in the intermediate state of becoming, may no māra pervert the prophecy I receive;

when the power of thought carries me wherever I intend, may I not be confused or frightened by unwholesome karma.

(7) When fierce beasts roar, may their voices become the wondrous Dharma-sound of the six syllables;

when black wind, rain, and snow pursue me, may I attain the divine eye of luminous wisdom.

(8) When I encounter others of my kind in the intermediate state, may other be born in a higher realm without jealousy;

when great afflictions of hunger and thirst arise, may the sufferings of hunger, thirst, heat, and cold be dispelled.

(9) When I see my future parents in union, may I visualize them as the Lord of Great Compassion and consort;

may I have freedom in taking birth for the sake of others and obtain a luminous body endowed with the excellent marks.

(10) Having obtained a perfect human rebirth, I wish to quickly comprehend everything I see and hear;

may unwholesome karma not pursue me, and may I strive to increase every store of merit.

(11) Wherever I may be born, in every lifetime may I behold my yidam face to face;

may I be able to speak and understand the great way from birth, never forget former lives, and attain perfect retention.

(12) Whatever the qualities—superior, middling, or lesser—may I know them merely by hearing, reflecting, or seeing;

wherever I am born, may all be auspicious and all sentient beings be happy.

(13) Just like the forms of the peaceful and wrathful Buddhas, their retinues, lifespans, and pure realms,

Just like their supreme and beautiful names, may I and all beings completely achieve the very same.

(14) The great Oḍḍiyāna master Padmasambhava composed this Aspiration for Rescue from the Fears of the Intermediate State.

Until saṃsāra is emptied, may this profound and wondrous Dharma endure forever.

Invocation to Dharmakāya Samantabhadra in Union and the Lineage Gurus for Protection from the Fears of the Intermediate State

I supplicate Dharmakāya Samantabhadra in union and the Sixth Vajradhara: protect me from the fears of the intermediate state.

I supplicate the innumerable peaceful and wrathful Sambhogakāya deities and the guide Vajrasattva: protect me from the fears of the intermediate state.

I supplicate the nirmāṇakāya guru Garab Dorje and the supreme wisdom master Śrī Siṃha: protect me from the fears of the intermediate state.

I supplicate the vidyādhara Guru Padmasambhava and the sovereign of the ocean of wisdom ḍākinīs: protect me from the fears of the intermediate state.

I supplicate the great treasure-revealer of the Island of Karmic Pledges and the great siddha Sun-Moon Buddha: protect me from the fears of the intermediate state.

I supplicate the loving Dharma-heir Sun-Moon Guru and Suru Tsandra Raśmi: protect me from the fears of the intermediate state.

I supplicate the profoundly gracious root guru and all lineage gurus: protect me from the fears of the intermediate state.

I supplicate the noble assembly of the yidam maṇḍala and the gathering of mother ḍākinīs: protect me from the fears of the intermediate state.

I supplicate the vajra brothers, sisters, and friends—the ocean of oath-bound protectors of the sacred teaching: protect me from the fears of the intermediate state.

May all doubt be severed in the intermediate state of this life; may I be freed from illusory appearances in the intermediate state of dreams.

May I sustain the original face in the intermediate state of meditation; may attachment be purified in the intermediate state of dying.

May I recognize my own nature in the intermediate state of Dharmatā; may I not be held by attachment in the intermediate state of becoming.

Non-Dual Invocation to Guru Padmasambhava

Dharmakāya Samantabhadra, the Sixth Vajradhara, the primordial teacher Vajrasattva, and the sovereign sage Śākyamuni;

protectors Amitāyus and Avalokiteśvara: I supplicate Guru Padmasambhava, who is non-dual with them.

The essence of enlightened body is glorious Yamāntaka; the essence of enlightened speech is mighty Hayagrīva;

the essence of enlightened mind is true Heruka: I respectfully supplicate the wish-fulfilling jewel, the guru.

The quality that eclipses all is Great Victorious Heruka; the essence of enlightened activity is Vajrakīlaya in youthful form.

I respectfully supplicate the powerful Garlanded One, the perfect sovereign and lord of the mother ḍākinīs.

Your form and color appear as peaceful and wrathful forms; the melody of your speech possesses twelve branches;

the objects of your mind are lucid and all-pervading: I respectfully supplicate the guru, lord of the ḍākinīs.

Your body displays prophetic signs, your speech reveals the secret treasure, and your mind-seal is entrusted to disciples with karmic affinity;

your compassionate testament is remembered throughout Tibet: I supplicate the supremely gracious nirmāṇakāya.

Remembering the profound kindness of the unsurpassed precious guru, I pray that you keep your pledge and compassionately embrace me.

In this degenerate age, there is no refuge but you. I implore the Oḍḍiyāna nirmāṇakāya to regard me with compassionate eyes.

Bestow your power to avert the conflicts of this degenerate age, and confer the great blessing of wisdom empowerment.

May the power of experience and realization continually increase; may I possess the great strength to spread the teaching and benefit sentient beings;

may I directly realize perfect Buddhahood in this very body.

The foregoing Non-Dual Invocation was spoken personally by Guru Padmasambhava and possesses immense power of blessing. It was concealed on the Island of Karmic Pledges and later revealed and circulated by the incarnate treasure-revealer Chögyur Dechen. In Kham and Tibet it became a principal recitation of Nyingma practitioners, and was subsequently brought to China proper by Vajra Guru Kunga of Kham.

The guru taught: “When this invocation is added before any ritual or scripture, the practitioner receives Guru Padmasambhava’s inconceivable power of blessing and swiftly attains accomplishment.”

He also instructed: “While reciting it, visualize yourself as the yidam. At the same time visualize all sentient beings—friends and enemies alike—assembled before you. Within a sphere of five-colored light, visualize the primordially pure, vast Buddha-land and the objects of refuge. Light radiates from your mind, inviting the Buddhas of the ten directions, the root guru, the great siddhas of India and Tibet, the ḍākinīs, Dharma-protectors, and others to assemble and take their seats. With sincere reverence of body, speech, and mind, generate faith and make the aspiration that all sentient beings be freed from suffering, attain happiness, and realize unsurpassed Buddhahood.

To gain such power to benefit beings, resolve to practice and realize the Buddhahood of the three-kāya guru. Reflect further: in this degenerate age, the supreme result can be obtained only by supplicating the supremely compassionate Guru Padmasambhava for blessings. As the invocation says, ‘In this degenerate age, there is no refuge but you.’ Therefore recite this Non-Dual Invocation with sincere and unwavering faith.”

寂静相尊唐卡

