Practicing the Buddha Dharma Is Not Difficult—Simply Contemplate Your True Nature

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Practicing the Buddha Dharma is not difficult, for all sentient beings inherently possess the Tathāgata's wisdom and virtuous attributes; all have Buddha-nature. Yet because they fail to recognize it, they pursue external conditions, grasp at appearances, forget their original face, create karma, undergo its retributions, and sink through the six realms of rebirth. As long as we awaken, turn the light inward, cease pursuing external phenomena, and stop clinging to outward appearances, we need only turn back—it is right there.

The most obvious example of the functioning of Buddha-nature is the way we perceive the external world. It is not the eyes alone that see. Modern science likewise explains that sight does not depend on the eyes alone, but involves the brain.

Yet even this does not reach the root. The cranial nerves are merely like wires and an electrical grid, while the eyes are like lightbulbs: even if the grid is laid out and the bulbs are connected, they will not function if the electricity is not flowing. What is this electricity? It is our true mind. Our capacities to smell, taste, speak, and move are all functions of Buddha-nature. Once we understand this point, cease clinging to external appearances, and constantly turn the light inward, we will succeed. Thus, practicing the Buddha Dharma is not difficult.

Master Hanshan once said, "The reason the cultivation of prajñā (wisdom) can succeed so swiftly is that everyone is inherently endowed with this light of mind." All sentient beings possess this light of mind; it is not acquired through outward

seeking. The Buddhas, no longer deluded, have realized this light and can manifest spiritual powers and wondrous functions. Sentient beings, deluded and unaware, wander through the six realms of reincarnation, and suffer in their upside-down perceptions.

If we can recognize this inherent light of mind and turn the light inward, apply this cultivation thought after thought, then we apply our effort before a thought arises. The instant a thought arises, we become aware of it and do not follow it. Using the light of wisdom, we gradually purify away all the seeds of attachment stored in the field of the eighth consciousness (ālāyavijñāna). If we practice in this way, attainment will not be difficult.

The Mind-Ground Dharma Gate gives birth to a prince who will surely become a Buddha. If one instead cultivates other methods or pursues extraordinary powers, they amount only to peripheral accomplishments. No matter how profound one's practice or how great one's supernatural powers, one can only bow as a minister and can never become the emperor—that is, attain Buddhahood. Therefore, we must cultivate at the mind-ground; this is the most fundamental Dharma.

In fact, all dharmas are ultimately expedient. The Diamond Sūtra uses the simile of the Dharma as a raft. After Master Linji was struck three times by Master Huangbo, he awakened and declared, “After all, there is not much to Huangbo’s Buddhadharma!” There is nothing mysterious or complicated about it; our attachment to mystery is what makes it complicated.

The Sixth Patriarch likewise taught that Buddha-nature is inherently endowed with all spiritual powers and wondrous functions. In other words, everyone possesses them. They do not manifest now because deluded thoughts, inverted views, and attachments obscure our inner innate luminosity. If we can constantly turn the light around and illuminate within, remain unattached to outward appearances, and disperse the dark clouds of attachment, our original luminosity will shine forth again.

The first phrase of the Heart Sutra is “Guānzìzài Bodhisattva”—Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. The words ‘Guānzìzài’ instruct us how to practice. 'Guan' means contemplative awareness: constantly observing the point from which thoughts arise without being shaken by them. 'Zi' means oneself.

But what is our true self? We mistakenly take the physical body to be ourselves. We demand pleasure for it, along with good food, fine clothing. Our greed then becomes insatiable, causing us to create karma and undergo its retribution. Yet the physical body is not the self. It is merely the house in which we dwell. Within is a True Person, and this True Person is the real self.

It is precisely what now shines through the gateways of the six sense faculties—the capacity to see and hear.

In the present moment, when not a single thought arises—the preceding thought has already ceased, and the subsequent thought has not yet arisen—there is no thought in between. At this time, although not a single thought arises, it is not insentient like wood or stone; rather, it is vividly clear and luminous. There is seeing, yet no object is grasped; hearing, yet no sound is grasped. The seer and the seen, the hearer and the heard, are all unobtainable: subject and object both fall away. This is our true nature; this is the self.

Chan Master Guifeng said, “Do not mistake the physical body for the self; take emptiness and quiescence as its essence.” Our true nature is like empty space: empty space is me, and I am empty space. If there were an empty space outside me and another emptiness apart from me, that would not be it. Do not seek outwardly; simply let go. Do not seek the true—only put delusion to rest.

You are originally a Buddha to begin with, so what Buddha is there to seek? When the deluded mind comes to rest, that itself is bodhi. Bodhi means right awakening—that is, enlightenment. When we contemplate ourselves like this, at the very beginning we have only grasped the underlying principle. The mind remains unmastered and still runs after external circumstances. It requires dedicated cultivation to guard it, contemplating whether our intrinsic nature remains in its original state.

When cultivation reaches maturity, one advances further by relinquishing even contemplation. At first, contemplation is a deliberate practice; later, one must enter into effortless functioning. Within the unconditioned Dharma (asaṁskṛta), all things are ungraspable, and thus contemplation itself is rendered unnecessary. However, take caution: only when mastery reaches this exact stage can contemplation be abandoned. If you discard contemplation before reaching this stage, you will inevitably drift.

Some say that practicing at all times is itself an attachment. At the beginning, however, you need to stay with the practice; otherwise, you will follow external conditions.

The Heart-of-Heart Dharma works in the same way. From the outset, it asks you to observe, remain steady, and not move. Without meditative stability, that is impossible. Therefore, it gives you one Dharma to hold so that you can drop everything else. This is a method of redirecting and transforming the mind —just like chanting the Buddha's name, which is also a transformative method. When we chant the Buddha's name, the mind is the Buddha, and the Buddha is the mind. By

recollecting the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, we cease dwelling on greed, anger, and ignorance.

Yet, going without any focus from the very start is impossible; because of deeply ingrained habits built up over countless eons, we still need a method to cultivate. Esoteric Buddhism employs many functional methods. Many people practice in pursuit of spiritual powers or wealth, not realizing that the Heart-of-Heart Dharma trains one in the Great Way and develops great capacity.

To obtain a minor psychic ability through some method is not merely useless; it may also bring trouble, because the mind is not yet empty. Some people develop the so-called Divine Eye, see frightening images, and become mentally disturbed by them. Non-Buddhist practitioners may cling to appearances in their cultivation. Even projecting the spirit outside the body is not beneficial and may lead one into deviant states.

Yet people are fascinated by such experiences. If one pursues them, one cannot become a great vessel for the Dharma or transcend the six realms of rebirth. What is needed is to refine the mind until it is empty, abide nowhere, and allow the spiritual powers inherent in our own nature to function. Even when they manifest, it is as though there were no powers at all—just as dressing and eating are entirely ordinary, with nothing mysterious or extraordinary about them.

It is because all sentient beings inherently possess these functions. They are not manifest at present because deluded thoughts, inverted views, and attachments obscure them. Human beings are generally more intelligent than animals because their obscurations are lighter and fewer, whereas those of animals are heavier and denser. We need only remove these obscurations.

In the Heart Sūtra, 'Guānzìzài' (Avalokiteśvara) calls us to engage in actual practice—contemplate and observe ourselves, remaining unwavering in our original state. ‘Zizai’ means that our true nature is always present. Ordinarily, however, we are not present; we run after external circumstances. Chan Master Yuanwu Keqin said, “If you are absent for even a moment, you are no different from a dead person”—merely a walking corpse. We must remain present at all times.

Once this presence is thoroughly familiar, even the “self” (zì) must be let go; as long as there is still a “self,” there remains contrivance. The Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment states: At all times, do not give rise to deluded thoughts. Yet, with regard to deluded mind, do not seek to extinguish it. Dwelling amid the realm of delusion, do not superimpose any further knowing. And in the absence of such knowing, do not discern what is the ultimate reality.

There is no need to extinguish the delusional mind, because the delusional mind is itself the true mind—waves are none other than water; if you remove the waves, no water remains. Thus, when a delusional thought arises, do not suppress or extinguish it. Simply transform it—refraining from pursuing it is enough. Chanting the Buddha's name or reciting mantras is the most lively and effective way to transform delusional thoughts: by anchoring the mind on the Buddha or the mantra, delusional thoughts are naturally transformed.

"Dwelling amid the realm of delusion, do not superimpose any further knowing." means that one should not cling to oneself, but continuously abide in one's true nature at every moment. At this point, even "knowing" is no longer needed; only sheer presence remains.

"In the absence of such knowing, do not discern what is the ultimate reality" means that nothing whatsoever can be attained. The true is the false and the false is the true; the distinction between the sacred and the ordinary vanishes entirely. Everything merges back into oneself—neither present nor absent, until even "presence" itself is gone. The essential meaning of all the sūtras points here. The Heart Sūtra is a teaching for attaining Buddhahood, not something to be merely recited. Any sentient being who can practice ‘Guānzìzài’—contemplating one’s true nature and abiding freely in its presence—is the Bodhisattva spoken of in the Heart Sutra. If you cannot do so, you remain an ordinary sentient being.

Practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma utilizes the empowerment of the Three Esoteric Practices—mudra, mantra, and contemplation—to dissolve your delusional mind. The sense faculties and their objects fall away; people, phenomena, the world, space, and all things vanish. The vast earth sinks away and empty space shatters, allowing you to personally experience and realize this truth firsthand—this is none other than the manifestation of Buddha-nature.

Yet many people still doubt: “Surely this cannot be it. Why have no spiritual powers appeared? Then this clearly cannot be it!” In fact, this is precisely it—genuine and real. Spiritual powers do not yet manifest because the habitual tendencies of attachment remain and have not been exhausted.

Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi said, “Although the truth is suddenly realized, these habitual deluded tendencies are difficult to eliminate immediately. One must continuously maintain mindful awareness, diminishing them again and again.” We may understand the principle, yet habits accumulated through countless eons of wandering in the six realms are deep and tenacious. They cannot be removed immediately. We must remain aware at every moment, train amid circumstances, and diminish them again and again.

Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi put it well: “Recognize that the frozen pond is entirely water, yet it must rely on the warmth of the sun to melt. Awaken to the fact that an ordinary being is none other than Buddha, yet one must rely on the power of the Dharma for gradual cultivation. Only when the ice melts does the water flow and nourish, revealing its ability to irrigate and cleanse. Only when deluded thoughts are exhausted does the mind become spiritually unobstructed, and only then do its spiritual powers and radiance begin to manifest.”

When we practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, we use it as a raft to cross the river; we must not become attached to the Dharma itself. The late Master Xianglu said that one thousand sittings in this practice could be sufficient. Many people become confused by the number, thinking that if they do not succeed within one thousand sittings, the practice is useless and should be abandoned.

That is not what he meant. “One thousand sittings” indicates the strength of this Dharma: it can open what is original and allow us to see our true nature. Once true nature has been seen, we should no longer cling to the method.

Those who meditate know this from experience. During the first four or five hundred sittings, there may be discomfort: aching hands, numb legs, and tightness in the chest. The mind is like a monkey long accustomed to jumping about. It wants to jump, yet you do not permit it, so discomfort arises. After five or six hundred sittings, the mind settles and practice becomes comfortable. The Four Dhyānas are described as a gradual progression: the second dhyāna brings joy, and the third brings bliss.

At this point the body changes, qi and blood circulate freely, and a sense of bliss naturally arises. Three meditative experiences may appear in sitting: emptiness, bliss, and luminosity. Emptiness means that body and mind dissolve into emptiness; bliss is incomparable joy. Some people avoid Dharma practice because they fear hardship, but this is a mistake.

Dharma practice is not suffering—it is enjoyment, and its bliss is inexhaustible. Luminosity means that when the mind becomes empty, great radiance shines forth.

Yet none of the three—emptiness, bliss, or luminosity—may be grasped. Grasping bliss prevents transcendence of the desire realm, because subtle desire remains. Grasping luminosity prevents transcendence of the form realm, whose forms are subtle and luminous rather than coarse and turbid. Grasping emptiness prevents transcendence of the formless realm and the four formless heavens. Thus, when the late Master Xianglu said not to sit after one thousand sittings, he meant not to cling to the method.

Even the Dharma cannot be grasped; it is borrowed for practical use. Do not misunderstand this point. The actual work is done off the meditation cushion. Sitting is for sharpening the blade; after rising, we use it and test its edge: can it cut through emotional attachment? The Śūraṅgama Sūtra teaches that human beings have two major impediments: emotional attachment and conceptual thought.

Emotional attachment is the more troublesome because it arises with affection. When loved ones part, tears flow; when delicious food appears, saliva flows. Affection gives rise to water, and water flows downward; therefore, when emotional attachment arises, it draws one downward.

Pure Land practitioners who cannot sever emotional attachment cannot be reborn in the Western Land. The Western Land is described here as a higher realm: if one cannot rise, one flows downward. Masters Hanshan and Zibo both taught that the effectiveness of Buddha-recitation depends on whether the sword of the Buddha's name is sharp enough to cut through the threads of attachment.

If those threads are severed, one can be reborn in the West. If they remain like fibres clinging to a broken lotus root, one stays in the Sahā world. Why can one not leave? Because emotional attachment has become heavy. It is like rowing a boat still tied to a post on the shore: the boat cannot move. Conceptual thought, meanwhile, includes thoughts of wealth, loved ones, and worldly pursuits; such thinking will not work.

The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says, "Pure thought brings flight." If we direct our thoughts toward the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss and Amitābha Buddha, such pure thought enables us to rise. The work of spiritual practice is to cut through emotional attachment and fixed views while maintaining contemplative awareness at every moment. My true nature is utterly bare and unstained by a speck of dust; there is nothing to love or cling to.

Nor is this body worth clinging to: no one escapes birth, aging, illness, and death. What, then, of possessions outside the body? We must therefore possess great wisdom. Once we understand, all these things are naturally released. To let go without attachment is to realize the Way, and the radiance grows day by day. When it first appears, it resembles the pale, fish-belly glow of dawn.

Gradually it brightens and emits great light, yet a dark spot remains at the centre while the edges shine. Why? Because ignorance is still present. The teaching on liberation in the intermediate state describes the light that appears at the moment of death in the same way. This is actually no different from the process of our Dharma practice: when ignorance is dissolved, the darkness disappears, leaving only pure radiance.

In our practice, we must understand the essential key. This key is to recognize that when not a single thought arises, the clear, luminous knowing is our true nature—and from there, to continuously and seamlessly preserve it until we fully realize Buddhahood. Never seek the miraculous or cling to the mysterious. Know that the ordinary mind, in which not even the finest thread can be found, is the wondrous essence through which we realize the Way.

Safeguarding realization unfolds in several stages. Initial awakening is like a newborn infant that must be carefully nurtured and protected; otherwise, it may perish in its swaddling clothes. Many people think that once they awaken to true nature, they have attained something extraordinary, and so they begin to behave recklessly. That is where things go wrong.

Because their habitual tendencies still remain, they may fall into delusion after awakening—a very dangerous state. Therefore, after initial awakening, realization must be carefully safeguarded while walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, without the slightest negligence. Yet one must not hold it too tightly. Excessive tension may cause tightness in the chest and pressure in the head. Like the string of a musical instrument, if it is too tight it will snap; if too loose, it will not sound.

Learn to tune the practice, loosening when too tight and tightening when too loose. Constantly safeguarding realization is not easy. Because our habits of attachment are strong, once we become caught up in affairs we forget and return to our old ways. At this stage we must take hold of awareness and, the moment we forget, bring it back. Once safeguarding becomes thoroughly mature, deliberate safeguarding is no longer needed.

Yet it is then difficult to leave it behind, because the old habit of clinging to things has been replaced by a habit of clinging to the Dharma. It therefore takes another period of time before one can finally leave this deliberate safeguarding behind.

Advancing further, one reaches the point where safeguarding can truly be left behind. Yet a subtle sense that “safeguarding is no longer needed” still remains. The process is extremely fine. Even this notion of having left safeguarding behind must be removed and completely forgotten. Only then does one settle into the original ground of non-action. At this point, spiritual powers arrive on their own without you ever seeking them.

Because the covering and obstructions above have been removed, the inherent functions of one's true nature manifest freely, and these spiritual powers appear spontaneously. Such powers are the natural expression of one's intrinsic nature. By contrast, powers that depend upon a particular method, a mantra, or—at an even lower level—upon ghosts, spirits, or other subtle beings are merely dependent powers. They are not the spiritual powers revealed by the True Nature.

When one truly reaches the state of non-action (wuwei), even 'non-action' is unattainable—there is no longer any concept of non-action. “A carefree person of the Way, beyond learning and free of contrivance.” Great wisdom may appear foolish, like a simpleton. Yet people prize cleverness. Worldly intelligence and cleverness cling to appearances; they are not true wisdom. Even when practice makes one appear simple or foolish, the journey is not complete.

One must advance until all distinctions merge away in mutual forgetfulness. Then great radiance shines forth and illumines the entire cosmos: all Buddhas enter my body, and I enter the bodies of all Buddhas. The Avataṃsaka Sūtra compares this to ten mirrors mutually reflecting and containing one another without obstruction. Yet even this is not the end. Ultimately, there is no Dharma to explain and nothing to say.

Consider this Chan encounter: A monk asked Caoshan, “What is it like when the bright moon is directly overhead?” Caoshan replied, “You are still a person below the steps.” The monk said, “Master, please lead me up the steps.” Caoshan answered, “We shall meet when the moon has set.” But how can they meet once the moon has set? All is seamlessly transformed and mutually forgotten—even the reason for forgetting is forgotten. Practice at this stage is like living in air all day without being conscious of the air. At such a moment, nothing can be put into words. “Hai!”—with a sweep of his sleeve, the master returns to his quarters.

The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is neither empty nor existent. If one calls it empty, it still employs mudrā and mantra. If one calls it existent, the mudrā and mantra offer no conceptual meaning on which discursive thought can move. Single-minded mantra recitation carries the practitioner forward. When the mind empties to the appropriate degree—like rice reaching the proper point of cooking—it naturally breaks open.

A Japanese analogy puts it well: practice is like adding gunpowder to a container, a little today and a little tomorrow. At the point of saturation, it suddenly explodes. In practicing the Dharma, we must strictly avoid seeking—seeking to enter samādhi, seeking enlightenment, or seeking supernatural powers. This ruins the practice: you will not achieve samādhi, you will fail to realize enlightenment, and you certainly will not manifest supernatural powers.

Some people say that practice has brought them no great benefit. I say: this great treasure has been given to you, but you lack the blessing to make use of it because you sit there indulging in wandering thoughts. Our practice must therefore be earnest and wholehearted. We cannot recite a mantra while entertaining deluded thoughts; we must put everything down.

Yesterday, a lay practitioner made an excellent point. He said, “I was ill and in unbearable pain. What could I do? I made a firm resolve: so be it—even death no longer mattered. Once I completely let go and sat down, the mind became settled. The body disappeared, and so did the pain.” Chan also teaches that we must not wait for awakening with an expectant mind.

In practice, do not seek anything; proceed as naturally and ordinarily as though nothing special were happening. Our inherent spiritual powers are obscured by ourselves. We are covered by the five hindrances of wealth, sensual desire, fame, food, and sleep. The very mind that seeks wealth is itself ungraspable, yet everyone wants to become rich. Some overseas Chinese and Hong Kong Buddhist practitioners, in particular, ask to be taught a wealth-deity practice in the hope of becoming rich.

Esoteric Buddhism is described here as having nine levels: three secret, three inner, and three outer. The first of the inner three is called the ritual activity practice and includes pacifying calamities and increasing benefit, with practices of the Yellow, Black, and White Jambhalas, among others. These are the methods people desire.

A young monk in Hong Kong once said, “When people heard that a Wealth Deity empowerment would be given, several thousand arrived at once to receive it.” They flocked to it. Such esoteric practices are transitional methods: “First draw beings in through desire; later lead them into Buddha-wisdom.” They initially accommodate the wishes of sentient beings in order to bring them through the gate. Once inside, practitioners are taught to open wisdom.

With Buddha-wisdom, they understand that nothing can be attained. Acquiring wealth through a Wealth Deity practice may, however, be dangerous and bring trouble. In genuine Dharma practice, we must commit ourselves completely, for fundamentally nothing can be attained. We come empty-handed and leave empty-handed. Rather than being forced to let go at the end of life, it is better to awaken wisdom and release things now; then we may realize the Way and be free of birth and death.

Refusing to let go when nothing can ultimately be taken with us is ignorance. Of the Three Poisons—greed, anger, and ignorance—ignorance is the root. With wisdom instead of ignorance, one no longer craves and therefore no longer gives rise to anger. The six realms of rebirth may be understood in terms of greed, anger, and ignorance: Greed corresponds to the realm of hungry ghosts. Anger corresponds to the realm of asuras. Ignorance corresponds to the animal realm. When all three are fully present, this corresponds to the hell realm.

The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is a formless esoteric practice that can uncover our original nature, enabling us to see it directly and immediately. Chan is the wondrous

mind of nirvāṇa and the treasury of the True Dharma Eye—our own original nature. When what is original opens and true nature is seen, this is Chan. Thus, the Heart-of-Heart Dharma takes Chan as its essence. Ultimately, Pure Land teaching says that land is mind and mind is land. When the mind is pure, that very moment is the Pure Land.

A mind without scattered thoughts, afflictions, attachment, or seeking is itself the Pure Land. When our mind is pure, the Sahā world is the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss. It is no different from the adorned Buddha-land of the West, Maitreya's Inner Court of Tuṣita, or the Eastern Pure Lapis Lazuli World: all are Pure Lands.

Out of concern that we might not attain realization through our Dharma practice in this lifetime, Grandmaster Dayu taught us the Maitreya Mantra so that we could form an affinity with Maitreya Buddha and prepare for future rebirth in the Inner Court of Tuṣita. The Buddha Heart Sūtra states that the fourth mudrā of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is for attaining rebirth in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss.

By forming the fourth mudrā and resolving to be reborn there, one can attain rebirth in that land. Indeed, according to one's vow, rebirth may occur in any of the worlds of the ten directions, for the Pure Land is not limited to the West: east, south, west, north, the four intermediate directions, above, and below are all Pure Lands. Some people believe that only by reciting Amitābha Buddha's name can one be reborn in the Western Pure Land. This is a misconception held by some Pure Land practitioners.

In Buddhist practice, reciting sutras, chanting mantras, and performing good deeds can serve the same purpose as Buddha-recitation. Amitābha Buddha radiates light not only to illuminate and guide those who practice and study the Dharma; he also radiates light to receive and guide those who do not practice Buddhism, shining brightly upon all sentient beings.

The teaching on liberation in the intermediate state says that the Buddhas radiate light upon sentient beings: Amitābha Buddha radiates red light, Avalokiteśvara white light, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta blue-green light. Their radiance illuminates and receives all beings. Yet those with heavy obscurations become frightened by the light and flee toward darkness; some run into the hell realms.

Practitioners of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma who aspire to rebirth in the Western Pure Land need not add Amitābha-recitation as a separate practice. Yet they may certainly recite Amitābha's name, since both methods redirect and transform the power of mind. Some Pure Land practitioners mistakenly believe that Pure Land practice consists only of reciting Amitābha Buddha's name and that other Dharma gates, such as Esoteric Buddhism, are inferior.

They do not realize that the Great Compassion Mantra, Śūraṅgama Mantra, Ten Short Mantras, Rebirth Mantra, and similar recitations are themselves esoteric methods. They are within esoteric practice without recognizing it, yet they criticize Esoteric Buddhism. This is like reviling one's own ancestors and thereby bringing consequences upon oneself. We need not abandon our present practice and begin Pure Land practice from scratch. To do so would be like already being Buddhas yet still searching and begging for a Buddha outside ourselves.

Chan therefore says that we sit beside a basket of food and starve because we do not know to eat. Many people today apply genuine effort to qigong, although it is only a provisional method. Qigong can be beneficial for physical health and longevity; its limitation is that practitioners may cling to qi and be unable to empty the mind or move beyond qi. It is therefore not ultimate.

Yet they practice this provisional method sincerely. I have seen people on streetcars still attending to the qi, circulating it through the Small Heavenly Circuit and opening the channels. I told them, "You are truly diligent." By contrast, those of us who practice the true Dharma are often less diligent. We should maintain contemplative awareness while walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, yet we forget. Some Pure Land practitioners receive a true Dharma but practice it superficially. They recite Amitābha's name while gossiping about Zhang San's good points and Li Si's faults. How could such distracted practice lead to accomplishment? They are not even as earnest as the qigong practitioners. This is truly regrettable.

We now know where to begin: maintain contemplative awareness and watch the point from which thoughts arise. As soon as a thought appears, bring up the mantra or the Buddha's name, and the thought is transformed. To watch closely is to apply contemplative effort. Do not relax it, and progress will follow.

How do we test our progress? Ask: Am I still attached to appearances? Is anything still lodged in the mind? When pleasant or wholesome circumstances arise, do I delight in them or become moved? When adverse circumstances appear, do afflictions arise? We must remain unmoved by the Eight Worldly Winds. If we are still shaken, the practice has not matured.

We readily notice our reactions to adverse circumstances, but they are harder to detect when conditions are favorable and we feel happy.

There is a Chan koan about this: A disciple took leave of his master to travel on pilgrimage. The master told him to be careful along the way. The disciple replied, "Yes. I am careful when speaking with people. I put a 'high hat' on them—I flatter them—so that they will not take offence or oppose me." The master said, "You certainly know how to handle people."

The disciple answered, “Everyone likes to wear a high hat; only you, Master, do not.” The master replied, “Indeed, I do not like high hats.” At that very moment, however, a high hat had already been placed on his head. Without noticing, we become attached to favorable things. Therefore, in our cultivation, we must maintain continuous and seamless contemplation—sustained continuously, tight without any lapse, and attentive at every moment. Those huatous and koans are precisely tests to see whether your mind remains empty at all times—luminous, empty, and non-abiding.

Practicing the Buddha Dharma is the undertaking of a person of great resolve. It requires generosity, openness, and the willingness to relinquish everything. Those of narrow capacity find it difficult to accord with the Dharma, whereas those of expansive spirit enter the Way more readily. All worldly phenomena are themselves the Buddha-Dharma. We must remain vigilant and aware at every single moment, willing to sacrifice everything.

Some people ask, “Should I become a monastic or remain a lay practitioner?” They hesitate, wanting to leave home yet fearing to do so. In fact, everything is the wondrous functioning of mind. So long as the mind abides nowhere, whether monastic or lay poses no obstruction.

Today, monastic practice is also difficult. Most monasteries perform sūtra recitations and repentance rituals; some charge tens of thousands of yuan for a single Water and Land Dharma Assembly. They conduct these services to generate income, without which they could not build Buddha halls, repair bell towers, and maintain the monastery. A few monasteries do not conduct such rituals, but their monastics must then farm; without farming, they have nothing to eat.

Gaomin Monastery in Yangzhou is a Chan monastery and only rarely conducts repentance rituals; such Chan monasteries have become scarce. Tiantong Monastery in Ningbo and Lingyin and Jingci Monasteries in Hangzhou are also Chan monasteries, yet they no longer engage in Chan meditation. At present, Gaomin Monastery in Yangzhou, Jinshan Monastery in Zhenjiang, and Wolong Monastery in Xi’an still maintain Chan practice.

I heard a young monk say that after an exhausting day, he has no energy left by evening and merely dozes off whenever he sits in Chan meditation. What a great pity! Lay practitioners face the troubles that arise from spouses, children, and family affairs.

But this does not mean that Dharma practice is difficult for both monastics and laypeople—not at all! We must train ourselves amid the circumstances of daily life. Most important is first to recognize our true nature, understand that everything is the mind’s wondrous functioning, and remain non-abiding. Once this is understood,

either monastic or lay life can serve as practice. We must train amid circumstances, abiding nowhere at every moment and recognizing that the very capacity that functions is our Buddha-nature.

Begin contemplative awareness here; seated meditation is not always necessary. Being able to maintain contemplation is itself the point of entry. If, however, awareness cannot be sustained amid circumstances, the mind follows external conditions, and there is no meditative stability, one should still set aside time for seated meditation.

Most important is first to understand oneself. The great golden-winged Garuḍa can fly hundreds of thousands of miles with a single beat of its wings, yet it depends on one push from its feet. Without touching the ground, it cannot launch into the sky.

Do not underestimate recognizing true nature. To recognize this point with unwavering confidence is to have placed your feet on the ground; in time, you will soar ten thousand miles like the Garuḍa. Master Linji instructed us to recognize that “on this lump of red flesh is a True Person of No Rank, who is precisely the one now speaking and hearing the Dharma.” The capacity through which we hear and speak is our original nature. Have deep confidence in this, seize this point, and apply your practice right here.

The wonder of our Dharma lies in how it combines the cultivation methods of both Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta and Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta teaches us that in Buddha-recitation, we must 'gather in all six sense faculties and sustain pure mindfulness in uninterrupted continuity.' Seizing control of our thoughts is what is meant by 'gathering in all six sense faculties'—bringing together the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

Most people take “pure mindfulness in uninterrupted continuity” to mean calming down, reciting the Buddha’s name without other thoughts, and allowing only the Buddha’s name to continue without a break—that this is pure mindfulness in uninterrupted continuity. In fact, this is not yet so. As long as there is a mind that recites and a Buddha who is recited, subject and object remain opposed. Where subject and object remain, there is not yet purity; this is not pure mindfulness.

Only when subject and object both fall away—when the reciting mind and the Buddha recited drop away together, leaving empty purity—does it become pure mindfulness. The same applies to mantra recitation: it must reach the point at which subject and object both fall away. When one thought accords, that thought is Buddha; when thought after thought accords, every thought is Buddha. When this single thought is released, its purity is Buddha. If every thought is so, then every thought is Buddha, continuously and without interruption.

To maintain 'pure mindfulness in uninterrupted continuity' is exceedingly difficult. You may be able to do so today, yet tomorrow the thoughts may no longer fall away, and you may not be able to maintain it. Today during sitting meditation your mind may explode into awakening, but tomorrow the state does not return. Why is this? It is because your practice is still raw and unfamiliar.

To achieve continuity, it must be so today, so tomorrow, and so the day after—thus every single day. One must apply intensive effort to the practice; it is not a matter of succeeding through a single, sudden explosion. Maintaining this continuity in stillness—being able to do so during sitting meditation—is not enough; you must also maintain continuity in the midst of activity.

In all dynamic actions and functions, the mind must remain completely empty, identical to the state of sitting meditation: empty, pure, and non-abiding. Whether in the morning or in the evening, whether in times of ease or in times of hardship, it must always be thus, without any difference; only then is it true continuity. True continuity is the oneness of movement and stillness. The cultivation of the Pure Land tradition is in fact very profound.

Yet many people do not apply themselves wholeheartedly to the practice. They recite the name of Amitābha a few times and think that is enough. They say, "It doesn't matter. Amitābha Buddha has vowed to receive us. At the time of death, we can be reborn in the Pure Land while still carrying our karma. So it doesn't matter if I do a few bad deeds now—Amitābha Buddha will still receive me. If He does not receive me, then the Buddha would have spoken falsely."

In truth, they are entirely mistaken. Rebirth while carrying karma does not mean carrying this kind of karma. Committing offenses while knowing the law only doubles one's guilt; this type of karma cannot be carried away. what is carried are the residual habitual tendencies, which have not yet been completely purified. Even an Equal Enlightenment Bodhisattva still has one final trace of ignorance that has not been emptied out—and this is precisely what karma is. Karma is simply the stirring of the mind; the moment a thought stirs, it is karma.

The Buddha does not physically run up to you to receive you; the Buddha is an image manifested within your own mind, just like the reflection of the moon appearing in water. If your mind is not pure, the reflection cannot appear. It is not that the Buddha fails to come.

The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is itself Pure Land School. When the reciting mind and the mantra being recited fall away together, rebirth in the Western Pure Land naturally follows. There is absolutely no need to start anew by practicing another Pure Land method.

Many people think that the Pure Land school is more reliable, but they are mistaken. They do not understand the wondrous function of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. It takes Chan as its essence, Esoteric practice as its function, and the Pure Land as its ultimate destination. This Dharma was obtained by Grandmaster Dayu only through immense hardship. In the Tibetan Esoteric tradition, this teaching is not transmitted until one has undergone twenty or thirty years of training in form-based esoteric practices. It is a profound and advanced Dharma, belonging to the final division of the Secret Three of Esoteric Buddhism. For all of you to be able to receive such a Dharma is truly an unsurpassed blessing; you must know to treasure it and cultivate diligently!