A Brief Explanation of the Inscription on Awakening to the Mind

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The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is practiced with the compassionate blessings of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. It therefore makes it easier to attain samādhi, uncover one's original nature, and realize the true mind. To use the analogy of travel, practitioners relying solely on their own strength must walk on their own two feet, whereas practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is like taking a boat, a car, or even an airplane. It is thus swift and reliable, yielding twice the result with half the effort.

To help practitioners of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma realize the true mind more swiftly and transcend the ordinary to enter sagehood, my late teacher, Master Wang Xianglu, composed "Inscription on Awakening to the Mind." It consists of forty four-character lines, totaling 160 characters. Though brief, it is rich in meaning and profound in principle. It fully sets forth the truth of attaining Buddhahood and the essential instructions for cultivating the mind.

It may truly be called an essential work, concise in language yet rich in meaning, and a rare modern commentary on awakening to the mind. If students, in addition to practicing the Dharma, recite it several times each day until they know it by heart, then over time, when touched by circumstances and conditions, they will spontaneously awaken and bring forth great capacity and great functioning from the true essence. In order to help later students understand its profound, implicit purport and more readily awaken to the mind, I shall offer a simple explanation line by line. I sincerely hope practitioners will cherish it and not take it lightly.

The Complete Text of "Inscription on Awakening to the Mind"

It is neither an existent mind nor a nonexistent mind; yet it is not without seeing or hearing.

Clearly aware and knowing, yet not attached to seeing or hearing; utterly without abiding—this is called no-mind.

If the mind abides nowhere, on what can delusion stand? Once delusion has no footing, past karmic obstacles dissolve of themselves.

Ask where the mind comes from: it arises in response to objects. Objects, too, have no true existence; both are illusory images.

Wondrous functions, countless as the sands of the Ganges, all depend on the mind engaging with objects. Where that engagement comes to rest, one suddenly realizes the unborn.

The unborn reality cannot be seen with the eyes. Deep and obscure, within it is a luminous essence.

Realizing this is called seeing one's true nature. Therefore, seek nothing; the mind naturally becomes peaceful and unified.

With no mind to be deluded, this is great samādhi. Those who attain great samādhi have neither movement nor stillness.

Without gain or loss, without joy or anger, one does not depart from the original ground, yet responds to the myriad circumstances.

Unchanging yet according with conditions, one is free of birth and death. The essential instruction for becoming a Buddha is no more than this.

A Brief Explanation

"Inscription on Awakening to the Mind" begins: "It is neither an existent mind nor a nonexistent mind."

These two lines fully portray both the essence and wondrous functioning of the marvelously luminous true mind. The marvelously luminous true mind neither belongs to existence nor is it nonexistence. If you say that it exists, it has no form that can be seen and no sound that can be heard. If you say that it does not exist, then whether speaking or silent, moving or still, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, there is nothing in which it is not functioning.

Ancient worthies compared it to "the taste of salt in the sea" and "the glue within blue pigment." Though it cannot be seen with the eyes, its substance is certainly not absent. Śākyamuni Buddha tells us that it is the great treasury of true emptiness and wondrous presence, of wondrous presence and true emptiness. What is called true emptiness differs from inert emptiness and annihilationist emptiness. Because it is

wondrous presence, it is empty yet not empty, and not empty yet empty. What is called wondrous presence differs from delusive existence and substantial existence. Because it is true emptiness, it exists yet does not exist, and does not exist yet exists.

In its appearances and functioning, too, it is neither existent nor nonexistent, neither nonexistent nor existent. If you say it does not exist, countless forms appear distinctly before you, and its wondrous functions are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges. If you say it exists, all forms arise from causes and conditions and lack any intrinsic substance; their activities and functions are like the moon reflected in water or flowers in empty space, impossible to grasp.

The Heart Sūtra says: “Form is emptiness; emptiness is form.” This means that form and emptiness are nondual, neither existent nor nonexistent. All forms are manifestations of the wondrous essence of true emptiness, while that wondrous essence cannot manifest its functioning apart from forms, nor does it exist separately from them.

It is like waves arising from water: water is waves, and waves are water. Apart from waves, water cannot be found; apart from water, waves cannot be found. In our practice, we must neither cling to forms as substantially real nor depart one-sidedly from forms, reject existence, and attach to emptiness. Therefore, whether cultivating samādhi on the meditation cushion or functioning after leaving it, we must neither grasp nor reject. Only then do we accord with the principle of the Middle Way and enter the great path of true emptiness and wondrous presence.

When practitioners reach the point where deluded thoughts dissolve, the reciting mind and the mantra being recited fall away together. Inwardly, body and mind; outwardly, the world—all dissolve at once, leaving nothing to grasp. Utterly bare, without a thread of attachment, and wholly pure, unstained by a single speck of dust, one nevertheless remains clearly aware, unlike wood or stone.

What is this wholly empty and luminous presence, free of every attachment? If it is not the marvelously luminous true mind of each person—neither existent nor nonexistent—vividly present, then what is it? At such a time, neither form nor emptiness can reach it, and neither existence nor nonexistence can encompass it. When spoken of as nonexistent, it pervades the dharma realm; when spoken of as existent, not even the finest hair is established. The hundred schools of thought, all crafts and skills, even the Pure Lands of the Buddhas and sentient beings as countless as the sands of the Ganges—all are integrated within it.

The second pair of lines says: “Yet it is not without seeing or hearing.”

This teaches us to practice dynamically, training the mind through circumstances, rather than rigidly and lifelessly. We should not shut our eyes to avoid seeing or block our ears to avoid hearing. We must practice the seeing of non-seeing and the hearing of non-hearing; only then can we function freely and wondrously and realize the great Way.

I often see people who practice incorrectly: they close their eyes so as not to see things and block their ears so as not to hear sounds, thinking that in this way they can empty the mind and realize the Way. They do not realize that, although when their eyes are closed and ears blocked and the mind is not engaging with objects, they may make the mind seem dead and unmoving, once they open their eyes and unblock their ears, and the mind encounters objects, the deluded mind will again inevitably follow forms and sounds, ceaselessly moving about.

Eliminating objects in order to extinguish the mind is not true realization. Moreover, while the eyes are closed and ears blocked, the inner mind may still be secretly stirring. Furthermore, closing the eyes and blocking the ears entails a great danger: if practitioners use such a closed-off method and truly make the mind dead and unmoving, they will end up sitting behind a dark mountain, sunk in a stagnant pool. Not only will they be unable to become Buddhas, but they may even degenerate into earth, wood, metal, or stone.

Therefore practitioners must be cautious. To truly ensure that the mind is not turned by circumstances, one must rely on tempering it amid circumstances. As the Chan school says: “Where one falls to the ground, there one must rise again.” To leave circumstances behind and pursue emptiness will ultimately prove an illusion.

The Diamond Sūtra says: “All appearances are illusory.” All forms and sounds arise from causes and conditions and have no substantial reality. No matter how beautiful the form before you or how exquisite the sounds filling your ears, they are no more than heat haze, flowers in empty space, or a mirage—temporary illusory appearances.

Once this principle is clear, time and repeated, arduous training amid circumstances naturally bring peace and stillness to the mind, so that it remains at ease and unmoved when circumstances arise. In his Verses on the Five Ranks of Ruler and Minister, Chan Master Dongshan describes the fourth rank, “Arrival within the Relative,” the stage of cultivating the Way: “Arrival within the relative: when two blades cross, there is no need to evade. The adept is like a lotus in fire; a person of resolve has aspirations that soar to heaven!” This teaches us to practice dynamically and train the mind amid circumstances, without avoiding seeing and hearing, so as to prepare for great capacity and wondrous functioning.

The third pair of lines says: “Clearly aware and knowing, yet not attached to seeing or hearing!”

This follows the preceding pair, “It is not that one does not see; it is not that one does not hear,” and further explains how to practice dynamically without going astray. We practice to become living Buddhas. We cannot realize the Way merely by sitting rigidly motionless, sinking into emptiness and stagnant stillness, as though sitting behind a dark mountain.

Yunmen said: “This very seeing and hearing are not seeing and hearing; no other sounds or forms can be presented to you!” He plainly and clearly tells us: Do you wish to see through to the true mind? It is precisely where you now see forms and hear sounds.

Realize who it is that sees forms and hears sounds. Apart from this seeing of forms and hearing of sounds, there is nowhere to seek it. But if you become attached to seeing forms and hearing sounds, then you will be deluded by sounds and forms and will not see it either.

What flexible practice this is! How could one see the Way merely by sitting rigidly unmoving, neither seeing nor hearing? Another saying goes: “The profound, empty great Way is originally without attachment; when seeing forms and hearing sounds, there is no need to become deaf!” This shows that practice must be alive, not dead. Dead practice not only cannot realize the Way; it also risks falling into the paths of demons and non-Buddhists.

My late teacher therefore told us to apply the practice dynamically in walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, in activity and stillness, and whether busy or at leisure. We must remain clearly aware, rather than insensible like wood or stone, while staying free of attachment to sounds and forms. In other words, practice the seeing of non-seeing and the hearing of non-hearing; do not cease seeing and hearing. Only then can functioning be free and wondrous. Even in seated meditation, right mindfulness must remain bright and clear; we must not lapse into blank unawareness, dullness, or an indeterminate state.

Master Yongjia said: “Alert and still is right; alert and wildly thinking is wrong. Still and alert is right; still and indeterminate is wrong.” This is precisely a commentary on “Clearly aware and knowing, yet not attached to seeing or hearing.”

The fourth pair of lines says: “Utterly without abiding—this is called no-mind.”

We ordinarily take no-mind to mean that not a single thought arises, and take this in turn to mean suppressing thoughts so that they cannot arise.

Thus everyone applies the rigid practice of suppression, holding thoughts down and not allowing them to arise. They think that having no thoughts at all is good practice, and further believe that extending the time during which not a single thought arises, from short to long, is the highest advance in practice. They do not realize that if they continue this rigid practice, not only will they fail to become Buddhas, but they may well become earth, wood, metal, or stone. For a Buddha is a vividly alive great awakened one, a great person of wondrous functioning as countless as the sands of the Ganges. How could a Buddha be like a hard, lifeless lump of wood or stone, or a sculpted image without the slightest awareness?

If, instead of training ourselves amid diverse circumstances so that the mind abides nowhere, we merely suppress thoughts and prevent them from arising, what wondrous functioning could there be?

Have you not seen the koan of the Sixth Patriarch's rescue of Chan Master Wolun? At first, Wolun thought that suppressing thoughts so they would not arise was good practice, and therefore composed this verse: "Wolun has a skill: he can cut off a hundred thoughts. When facing circumstances, the mind does not arise; bodhi grows day by day." When the Sixth Patriarch saw it, he knew that Wolun had entered the mistaken path of stagnant stillness, and so rescued him with these words: "Huineng has no skill; he does not cut off a hundred thoughts. When facing circumstances, the mind often arises; how could bodhi grow?" Wolun recognized his error and corrected it; only then did he enter the Way.

Thus we know that no-mind does not mean suppressing thoughts so that they do not arise. Still less does it mean that progress consists in extending the duration of thought-free moments from short to long. The true practice of no-mind is to respond to conditions and engage with things while the mind abides nowhere; to manage the myriad affairs of daily life while the mind remains unstained. It is like drawing on water: the moment a stroke is made, the surface immediately closes again, leaving no trace at all. This is the truly excellent practice of no-mind.

The Diamond Sūtra says: "Give rise to this mind without abiding anywhere!" People often take ying ( ), the first character in ying wu suo zhu ( ), to mean "should" or "ought to."

But this is not so. This ying is the ying in "responding to conditions and engaging with things." It teaches us that, in daily life, when dealing with all events and responding to all people, the mind should abide nowhere and remain utterly free from defilement. It does not merely tell us, at the level of principle, that we ought not to abide in attachment. If we can respond to conditions without abiding anywhere, then the agile true mind of countless wondrous functions will naturally appear at every moment, unobscured.

Thus, no-thought is alive: it responds to conditions without abiding in or being defiled by them. It is not the suppression of thoughts so that they do not arise, leaving one inert and motionless. So long as, when thoughts arise, we do not abide in them, do not cling to conditions, and do not linger—using them as needed and letting them cease when their function is fulfilled—this is no-thought.

In former times, a monk asked Zhaozhou, “What is no-thought?” Zhaozhou said, “Hitting a ball atop rushing water!” Later, Zhaozhou in turn asked Touzi, “What is the meaning of hitting a ball atop rushing water?” Touzi said, “Thought after thought does not linger!” Thus it is evident that when thoughts arise without abiding, this is no-thought; it is not only when not a single thought arises that there is no-thought.

Chan Master Niutou Farong, also known as Lanrong, says in his “Song of No-Mind”: “Precisely when mind is at work, no mind is at work; no-mind is precisely at work, and in constant functioning no mind is found.” That is, even while the mind is functioning, no mind can be found as the agent of that functioning. These words fully express the meaning and wondrous functioning of no-mind.

The fifth pair of lines: “If the mind abides nowhere, on what can delusion stand?”

Every practitioner dislikes the deluded mind and wants to eliminate and overthrow it. Yet they do not realize that delusion has never truly existed; it is merely the mischief of thought. All external circumstances are like the moon reflected in water: none truly exist. Sentient beings, in their ignorance, mistakenly take them to exist and cling to them without letting go; this then becomes delusion. If one awakens at once and sees through the illusory realm, delusion vanishes into nothing. It is like dreaming: while dreaming, one also takes it to be real, but upon awakening not even a trace remains.

This is because the true mind is like a mirror’s radiance, while all forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, and mental objects are like reflections appearing in that mirror.

Ordinary beings are ignorant and deluded. Turning away from the mirror’s radiance, they grasp at its reflections; they create karma, undergo retribution, and cannot transcend birth and death. Sages of the two vehicles, although they do not cling to the dusty realm of objects, turn away from the reflections and abide in the radiance. Because they still abide somewhere, this too becomes delusion through attachment to dharmas; they have ended only segmented birth and death, not transformational birth and death. Students of the One Vehicle thoroughly realize both Buddhadharma and worldly dharmas: they neither identify with the mirror’s reflections nor separate themselves from them.

All reflections are formed by the mirror's radiance: the mirror is the reflection, and the reflection is the mirror. Without the mirror there is no reflection, and without the reflection there is no mirror. Thus, we must not turn away from the mirror to abide in its reflections, nor need we leave the reflections to seek the mirror. Once we deeply understand that neither is a place to abide, the mind can be free of love and hatred, without clinging to objects through grasping or rejection.

Therefore, students need not fear delusion. So long as they deeply accord with the profound meaning of the One Vehicle and neither grasp nor reject circumstances, neither rejoice nor become angry, delusion will naturally be eliminated.

Moreover, many students regard ignorance as difficult to destroy; some are as frightened by its very mention as by the sight of a tiger. Yet so-called "ignorance" is also not truly existent. It is merely the mischief of the deluded mind: clinging to sense objects, becoming deluded without awakening, and being given a provisional name. If practitioners can suddenly awaken with resolute clarity, the deluded realm will be shattered and ignorance will naturally dissolve.

It is like a lamp illuminating a dark room that has been dark for a thousand years: there is no need to dispel the darkness gradually over time. Thus, what is called ignorance or the deluded mind arises only because we do not awaken. If we can contemplate at all times and remain alert everywhere, making the mind clear, empty, open, and lucid, without abiding in attachment, then why fear that ignorance will not be shattered or that the deluded mind will not cease?

The sixth pair of lines: "Once delusion has no footing, past karmic obstacles dissolve of themselves."

The mind is originally spiritually responsive and unobstructed; obstacles arise only because it becomes deluded by circumstances and clings to appearances. So-called past karmic obstacles are the deluded habitual tendencies accumulated through creating karma while being confused by appearances over many lives and eons. These deluded obstacles obscure the luminosity of our original nature, preventing us from freely enjoying its function and bringing endless pain, hardship, and affliction.

Now that we know all phenomenal appearances to be originally empty, the mind retains no obstruction. Since karma itself has no true existence, where could illusory obstacles lodge? Chan Master Damei said: "For one who has realized the Way, all karmic obstacles are like ice melting in hot water or darkness dispelled by light: they have nowhere to remain." Obstacles are merely provisional names, without substantial reality. A scripture says: "Wrongdoing arises from mind; through mind it is also extinguished." It also says: "When mind arises, all kinds of obstacles arise; when mind ceases, all kinds of obstacles cease." If one directly realizes no-mind,

delusion has no footing. Once delusion has no footing, past karmic obstacles dissolve of themselves.

Some say, “Present karma is easy to eliminate, but fixed karma is hard to escape; mental karma is easy to remove, but bodily karma is hard to extinguish.” Yet this cannot be stated categorically. Did not Bodhidharma tell Shenguang, the Second Patriarch: “You will face karmic retribution in which your life is taken. Yet, to prevent the true Dharma from being slandered, you may forgo repaying this debt.”

Another ancient worthy suffered a stroke that twisted his mouth. His attendant laughed and said, “Master, all day long you berate Buddhas and scold patriarchs. Today you are receiving your retribution.”

The ancient worthy replied, “You have attended me for decades, yet this is how you see me? You should know that, for a patriarch, all karmic obstacles are like flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water. Even while repaying retribution, it is as though nothing were repaid. Moreover, if I choose to repay it, I do; if I choose not to, I do not. Look—is my mouth crooked or not?” As he spoke, he slapped his mouth, and it immediately straightened. He then rebuked the attendant: “You beings who cling to appearances conceive of karmic obstacles within what is originally empty, and conceive of repayment where there is nothing to repay. That is why your karmic obstacles never end and you suffer endless burdens.”

From this we may know that all karmic obstacles depend on the mind. If the mind is truly empty, there is no such thing as an obstacle, much less a question of repayment or non-repayment. Precisely because there is neither repayment nor non-repayment, one need not cling to non-repayment as non-repayment; one may simply repay, while it is still as though there were no repayment.

A monk asked an ancient worthy, “What are karmic obstacles?” The worthy said, “Originally empty!” The monk further asked, “What is originally empty?” The worthy said, “Karmic obstacles!” Original emptiness is not inert emptiness or annihilationist emptiness; it means that all things and karmic obstacles, in their very nature, are originally empty and devoid of anything. Therefore, although the Second Patriarch, Master Shenguang, received the First Patriarch’s instruction, after transmitting the Dharma to the Third Patriarch he still went to repay the debt of having his life taken, without the least sign of distress. At the time of execution, he sang loudly: “When the head meets the white blade, it is like a spring breeze being cut!” What magnificent bearing! This is truly a grand model of complete realization.

The seventh pair of lines: “Ask where the mind comes from: it arises in dependence on circumstances.”

“Mind is originally unborn; it exists in dependence on objects.” This is a famous saying of Viśvabhū Buddha. Our mind—that is, thought—does not originally exist as an entity. Images arise when we encounter objects; by clinging to them without letting go, we give rise to deluded thoughts. This is what is called mind.

This mind arises from the conjunction of the faculty—the mind—and the object—the environment. Hence it is called “the mind as the gathering and arising of conditions.” It is the shadow left behind by the six sense objects, wholly illusory and without any substantial entity.

The word “mind” in such scriptural statements as “all is created by mind” and “the three realms are mind-only; all phenomena are consciousness-only” refers to this illusory image-mind, which arises as a reflection of objective external circumstances. Thus it too is an external circumstance, an object; nor is it separate from matter. It must not be regarded as a subjective mind and treasured as a “true god” that rules the world.

In our cultivation, we must neither cling to the external realm of the myriad phenomena nor fail to eradicate this illusory, deluded mind. Only when the inner body and mind and the outer world all fall away together does the wondrously luminous true mind appear. Conversely, if this illusory mind is taken to be a subjective entity, true nature is obscured and cannot be seen. Therefore, when we speak of the “mind” in “all is created by mind,” we treat it as an object to be eliminated; we do not mean that it is the ruler of all things. Buddhist practitioners must clearly understand this and not misconstrue it.

The eighth pair of lines: “Circumstances too do not truly exist; they likewise belong to illusory images!”

A sūtra says: “Mind is not mind in itself; because of circumstances, it is mind. Circumstances are not circumstances in themselves; because of mind, they are circumstances.” This makes entirely clear the mutually dependent relationship between mind and circumstances, and between circumstances and mind. Since mind exists in dependence on circumstances, circumstances likewise cannot exist independently apart from mind, for they arise from causes and conditions and have no self-nature.

Take reflections in a mirror. Though they may display countless differing forms, without the mirror’s radiance the reflections cannot appear. Circumstances are the same: without mind, no realm of circumstances can be formed. Even if there is beautiful scenery and an excellent setting, if there is no mind to receive and appreciate them, their existence is no different from nonexistence. Circumstances are not circumstances in themselves; they do not themselves proclaim that they are beautiful and superb realms.

Since mind and objects arise in dependence on one another, neither can be found without the other. It is therefore clear that neither has true existence: both are illusory images. Someone may object: “All the scenery of the Sahā world is the karmic result of our collective karma. It is illusory rather than real, so it may be called an illusory image. But the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss is the real realm brought about by Amitābha Buddha’s diligent practice over many lives and eons, his work to benefit sentient beings, and his accumulation of merit and virtue, when conditions ripened and fruition was complete. Surely it should not be called an illusory image.”

This point indeed requires careful discussion. Many people now cultivate the Pure Land practice. Unless they clearly understand the true nature of the Pure Land and what it ultimately is, it will be difficult for their practice to gain strength, much less for them to deeply realize the Buddha-recitation samādhi and attain rebirth in the highest grade.

First, in terms of appearances, Sahā is the defiled result, marked by the five turbidities, of the karma created by karmically obstructed sentient beings. Ultimate Bliss is the pure realm brought about by Amitābha’s fulfilled vows and perfected virtues. One is foul and defiled; the other is beautiful and adorned—a great difference. Yet lands arise from mind: apart from mind there is no land, and apart from land there is no mind. Mind is land, and land is mind. Thus a scripture says: “To purify your land, first purify your mind”; and “As the mind becomes pure, the Buddha-land becomes pure.” These words teach us to recognize what the Pure Land is, so that we may begin the practice and realize it, instead of merely grasping at external appearances and going astray.

Since there is no mind outside the land and no land outside the mind, and mind and land are inseparable, while the One True Dharma Realm—the true mind—does not increase in sages or diminish in ordinary beings, the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss flows forth from the pure and wondrous true mind. How, then, could the defiled land of Sahā be found apart from pure Buddha-nature? Therefore, although Ultimate Bliss is pure and Sahā is defiled, both are images appearing within the true mind, like reflections appearing within a mirror’s radiance. Though their forms differ and there is a distinction between purity and defilement, both are like the moon in water, wholly unobtainable. One must never mistakenly suppose that the moon-image of Ultimate Bliss can be grasped merely because it is pure.

Next, speaking in terms of what is real and what is false, the Diamond Sūtra says: “All appearances are illusory.” As stated above, appearances are like reflections in a mirror: they cannot truly be grasped. Thus, they are false rather than real; their reality or falsity is absolutely not determined by whether they are pure or defiled,

beautiful or ugly. Therefore, although the Land of Ultimate Bliss is wholly good and beautiful, it too is an illusory appearance.

Furthermore, to call something real or false is entirely the error of us ordinary beings, who cling to appearances, establish names, and impose deluded distinctions. So-called reality and falsity exist only in contrast to one another; apart from one, the other cannot be found. Thus, both are merely provisional names. Since reality and falsity arise in dependence on one another, when one speaks of the real, the false is already contained within it; when one speaks of the false, the real is likewise contained within it. As the proverb says, "When the false is taken for the real, the real too becomes false." To fabricate reality and falsity where neither exists —is this not the self-inflicted vexation of ordinary people?

Furthermore, a mirror necessarily displays reflections. Where there is true mind, illusory appearances are not absent; without appearances, true mind could not be revealed. Thus the Amitābha Sūtra sets forth the adornments of Ultimate Bliss. Reflections, in turn, are inseparable from the mirror: where there are illusory appearances, true mind is not absent; without true mind, those appearances could not arise. Thus the Diamond Sūtra reveals the wondrous essence, in which not a single dharma is established.

Since intrinsic nature and appearances do not part from one another, but are as intimately related as water and waves, seeing appearances is seeing intrinsic nature. Since there is not a single thing that can be taken as real, it is said that the wholly false is precisely the real. Seeing intrinsic nature does not negate appearances, but perfects the wondrous functioning of distinctions; therefore, it is said that the wholly real is precisely the false. Real and false, false and real—these are entirely the mischief of our deluded minds. In truth, the numinous and wondrous true mind establishes not a single thing. What reality or falsity could there be to speak of?

Thus, if one says that the Land of Ultimate Bliss is real, then the Sahā world is also real; if one calls the Sahā world false, then the Land of Ultimate Bliss is likewise false. Therefore, both the pure and defiled lands flow forth from the One True Dharma Realm. One must never deny the numinous nature of ordinary beings entangled in bondage, deluded about the true mind, and undergoing karmic retribution for actions they have created, claiming that the karmic appearances of the defiled land they manifest do not flow forth from the true mind of Buddha-nature.

Moreover, the Land of Ultimate Bliss has distinctions of four lands and nine grades of rebirth. In the lowest, the Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages, there are various wondrous and adorned appearances. Yet in the Land of Expedient Means with Residue and the Land of True Reward and Adornment, the higher the land, the purer, subtler, and more refined its appearances become. At the

highest level, the Land of Eternal Quiescent Light is still purer, more wondrous, subtle, and luminous, and not a single appearance is established. Although not a single appearance is established, it does not lie outside the three lands mentioned above.

Therefore, those who practice while clinging to appearances can attain only rebirth in the lower grades; only those who empty appearances and see their true nature can be reborn in the higher grades. For this reason, those who truly practice Pure Land do not cling to appearances, yet do not discard them. They simply let go of everything, sit upright and properly, with sincere and reverent hearts uphold the Buddha's name, using their breaths as counting beads. Day and night, throughout the six periods, they recite continuously and seamlessly. If they persist for a long time without slackening, they will naturally attain the samādhi of Buddha-remembrance. By then, even before death and rebirth in the Western Pure Land, they will already have secured a lotus seat in the higher grades.

The ninth pair of lines: "Wondrous functions, countless as the sands of the Ganges, all depend on the mind engaging with objects."

As stated above, in doing the practice, we must not rigidly suppress thoughts so that they do not arise, in an attempt to extinguish the deluded mind completely. We need only turn it around flexibly: when thoughts arise, do not heed them, and do not allow object-seeking attachment to continue. The reason is that in the future we must give rise to great capacities and great functions, and we will still rely on this deluded mind. If this deluded mind is suppressed to death, the true mind will have no way to give rise to wondrous functioning.

For example, water gives rise to waves because of wind. If the waves were entirely removed, the water too would be gone. After saying, "At all times, do not give rise to deluded thoughts," the Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment immediately adds: "Yet, with regard to deluded mind, do not seek to extinguish it." This teaches us to use a living practice in order to open forth the future wondrous functioning of prajñā.

In the daily activities of us ordinary beings, as well as in every act of creation and invention, there is nothing that is not a wondrous function of this "deluded mind." Without it, we would be like fools and simpletons, unable to accomplish any undertaking. At the level of ordinary beings, it is already at work; when one later becomes a worthy or a sage, the vast spiritual powers that arise likewise cannot be separated from it. Yet at the level of ordinary beings, because there is attachment and abiding, it is called the deluded mind or consciousness-spirit; at the level of sages and worthies, when all clinging bonds have been removed, it is simply called prajñā or numinous knowing.

I once asked someone, “How far apart are consciousness-spirit and suchness?” Those who heard this were greatly startled, saying that suchness and consciousness-spirit—one being true mind and the other deluded consciousness—could hardly be mentioned in the same breath. They further cited a verse by Chan Master Xuansha as proof: “Those who study the Way do not recognize the true; they have always recognized only the consciousness-spirit. The root of birth and death throughout measureless kalpas, fools call the Original Person!” On hearing this, I could not help bursting into laughter.

I said: “Do you recognize the Original Person? If you do not recognize it, suchness becomes consciousness-spirit; if you do recognize it, consciousness-spirit is suchness. How could there be any difference between them?” As stated above, waves are originally water, and water does not leave waves. If one leaves the waves to seek water, where could water be found? Moreover, water that does not rise in waves is merely stagnant water; how could it be magnificent and vast? If suchness did not make use of consciousness-spirit, it too would be like a foolish child, with no way to function.

Xuansha’s verse does not say that consciousness-spirit is bad. The crux of the matter is whether one recognizes the Original Person. If one recognizes it, consciousness-spirit is directed by its master and accomplishes every magnificent and far-reaching wondrous function. If one does not recognize it, then an evil servant overmasters the master and rebels into disorder.

The tenth pair of lines: “Where that engagement comes to rest, one suddenly realizes the unborn.”

A sūtra says: “When the frantic mind comes to rest, that itself is bodhi.” This principle is like the examples of reflections and mirrors, water and waves, given above. Reflections and waves cannot be separated from mirrors and water; likewise, the deluded mind cannot be separated from bodhi, perfect awakening. Precisely because it cannot be separated, if the deluded mind were removed, there would be no perfect awakening.

To directly realize the true nature of suchness, which neither arises nor ceases, practitioners must not try to eliminate the deluded mind. They need only practice “resting”: bring to rest the deluded mind’s clinging to objects. Just as water is present where waves subside, the wondrously luminous true mind then becomes clearly manifest.

If practitioners truly know that all external objects are like a shimmering mirage or flowers in empty space, without any substantial reality, they will not cling to them or give rise to deluded thoughts. Then the spirit is tranquil and wisdom clear; intrinsic luminosity shines alone, and the inner mind is bright and pure. Like a mirror

reflecting objects, it neither grasps nor rejects, neither loves nor hates. Though clear and distinct, not a single thought arises; though not a single thought arises, it remains clear and distinct. In that very moment, one directly realizes the unborn reality. There is no need to exert any clumsy effort beyond bringing the mind to rest.

All dharma gates, whether Buddha-recitation, mantra recitation, or Chan investigation, are no more than tools and methods for the practice of “ceasing.” They teach you, through Buddha-recitation, mantra recitation, or Chan investigation, to bring the frantic mind to rest, thereby opening what is original and clearly seeing the true mind. They are not for obtaining some strange or mysterious thing from Buddha-recitation, mantra recitation, or Chan investigation.

Ancient worthies said: “There is no place in the Buddhadharma for you to apply your mind.” They also said: “Putting on clothes and eating food are themselves it; raise the mind and stir a thought, and you have already gone astray.” Since all sentient beings inherently possess Buddha-nature, it is not acquired from outside. There is no need to seek or grasp it, and therefore no need to exert effort. On the contrary, if one strives to pursue it externally or asks for it from others, the more one seeks, the farther away it becomes; the more forcefully one tries to obtain it, the less one can attain it.

Thus the Buddhadharma is the greatest labor-saving undertaking. Unlike worldly pursuits, it does not require painstaking planning and anxious contrivance before it can be attained. Laozi said: “In pursuing the Way, one diminishes day by day.” If practitioners can let go of everything they understand, know, and possess, then, where the frantic mind comes to rest, they suddenly realize the unborn. As the saying goes, “After wearing out iron shoes in a fruitless search, one finds it without the slightest effort.” There is good reason for these words.

The eleventh and twelfth pairs of lines: “The unborn reality cannot be seen with the eyes. Deep and obscure, within it is a luminous essence.”

This wondrous nature of suchness—neither arising nor ceasing, neither coming nor going, neither increasing nor decreasing—is the equal and true reality, vast without outside and minute without inside. The Diamond Sūtra says: “All appearances are illusory.” All appearances that have form arise from causes and conditions, have no intrinsic substance, and are therefore unreal and illusory. The appearance of reality is the great, pure, and wondrous appearance of no appearance.

Because this great appearance is formless, it cannot be seen by the eyes. But when one’s practice reaches the point where the bottom drops out of the bucket and subject and object both fall away, the dharma eye of the mind-ground can see the Way. Yet this “seeing” is not seeing with the eyes; it means view, understanding, experiential realization, and awakening.

Although it is deep and obscure, with no appearance to see and no scent to smell, it is not annihilation or inert emptiness. Rather, it possesses “true essence” and a “wondrous essence.” In other words, this “true essence and wondrous essence” is numinous knowing free from thought. When your practice reaches the point at which sense faculties and their objects fall away, and self and phenomena are both forgotten, you will naturally, when the time is ripe, suddenly awaken and verify that this pure, naked, utterly exposed, numinous and luminous true essence is your original fundamental nature.

Having realized this wondrous nature, one then looks back and sees that, because reflections do not leave the mirror, the vast array of appearances seen by the eyes, heard by the ears, and touched by the body are none other than manifestations of it —this true essence. None is other than its wondrous functioning; none is other than its annotation. When practitioners reach this stage, they hear the Way at all times and see intrinsic nature everywhere. The Sixth Patriarch said: “A person who truly sees intrinsic nature sees intrinsic nature even while wielding a blade on the battlefield!” Dahui said: “One who has thoroughly awakened can see the Way even with the physical eyes!” In a single statement, this fully expresses the wondrous principle that intrinsic nature and appearances are nondual.

The thirteenth pair of lines: “Realizing this is called seeing one’s true nature.”

Modern practitioners all regard the expression “realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature” as an exalted matter belonging to sages and worthies, beyond the reach of us ordinary beings.

To transcend birth and death, they think they can only recite Amitābha Buddha thought after thought and seek rebirth in the West. They do not realize that realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature is not difficult, much less beyond reach. (I have explained the principles involved in great detail in the essay “A Brief Discussion of Realizing the Mind and Seeing One’s True Nature,” so I will not repeat them here.)

We need only follow the method described above: bring the frantic mind to rest, remain unattached to objects before us, refrain from extinguishing right mindfulness, and seek nothing strange or mysterious. Then, within clear awareness, not a single thought can be found; yet, though no thought can be found, awareness remains clear, without lapsing into dullness or blank indeterminacy.

This is the “luminous essence” in the words quoted above, “Deep and obscure, within it is a luminous essence.” It is also the great Way that Master Yongjia described as “still yet alert, alert yet still.” Practitioners should seize the moment: at this decisive instant of clarity without thought, grasp it directly—this is called seeing one’s true nature. If you pause to reflect, its shadow will delude you again. If you

abandon this to seek elsewhere, suspecting some further mystery, it will remain beyond your reach.

In his Verses on the Five Ranks of Ruler and Minister, Chan Master Dongshan says of the stage of seeing the Way, “The Absolute within the Relative”: “The absolute within the relative: an old woman who has missed the dawn encounters an ancient mirror. Clearly face to face, there is no other reality; do not lose sight of your own head and mistake the reflection for it again!” This admonishes us to rouse our full attention at the critical moment, recognize it inwardly, and not miss the opportunity. Understood in this way, how difficult is realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature?

It is regrettable that practitioners in the Dharma-ending age are slow to understand and burdened with deep habitual tendencies. Many are preoccupied with spiritual powers; when they do not see anything miraculous or mysterious at such a time, they mistakenly think it is not the truth and hurriedly pass it by. The ancient worthies often sighed: “Precisely because it is so intimate, realization comes all the more slowly.” This is deeply lamentable!

After a practitioner first sees their true nature, the matter is not thereby finished. They must still maintain contemplation at all times, temper the mind through circumstances, diligently polish it, and eliminate habitual tendencies before they can be liberated from birth and death. Otherwise, when encountering circumstances, the mind arises; deluded thoughts continue to surge and stir. This is called becoming deluded after awakening, and birth and death remain unresolved.

Therefore, after awakening, the ancient worthies often undertook the practice of herding the ox, safeguarding realization continuously and closely until it reached full maturity. It cannot be concluded with a single awakening. Although there are occasionally those who awaken suddenly, cultivate suddenly, and realize suddenly, and who need not undertake the work of safeguarding realization, they are few in number and must not be treated as the general rule.

After describing “The Absolute within the Relative,” the stage of seeing the Way, Chan Master Dongshan goes on to describe “Arrival within the Relative,” the stage of cultivating the Way. He thus teaches us not to be satisfied with a little after seeing the Way. We must continue to train the mind amid circumstances, eliminate deluded habits, and advance until realization is complete.

The Chan school speaks of three barriers in this connection. First, one breaks through the fundamental question and clearly sees one’s true nature. This is breaking through the first barrier—cutting off the many streams. Second, one safeguards realization closely and nurtures the sacred embryo, becoming free and unobstructed amid all circumstances, until even without safeguarding it one never goes astray. This is breaking through the second barrier—encompassing heaven and

earth. Third, one acts freely, with nothing outside the Way, able to enter the realm of Buddhas or the realm of māras. As the saying goes, “The road is home, and home is the road.” This is breaking through the final barrier—going with the current.

The fourteenth pair of lines: “Therefore, seek nothing; the mind naturally becomes peaceful and unified.”

An ancient worthy said: “When a person has no seeking, their character is naturally elevated!” Whatever a person seeks is precisely a sign of clinging to circumstances and attachment to appearances. If the mind is truly empty and sees not a single thing, what is there to seek? Someone may say: “I do not seek other things; I seek rebirth in the West and Buddhahood.” The reply is: “You are originally a Buddha; there is no need to seek. If you seek, you do not see.” As said above, to cease the frantic mind is itself bodhi. One need only let the frantic mind come to rest; there is no need to seek. Lay Master Fu said: “Every night I embrace the Buddha in sleep; every morning I rise together with him.” It constantly shines at the gateways of your six sense faculties, lacking not the slightest bit. What, then, is there to seek?

As for seeking rebirth in the West, one need only practice one-pointed Buddha-recitation. Apart from Buddha-recitation, there should be no other thought. As it is said, the whole Buddha is mind, and the whole mind is Buddha; when mind and Buddha are in communion and become continuous and undivided, one will certainly be reborn in the Pure Land.

Amitābha is the Buddha of one’s own mind, and the Pure Land is the Ultimate Bliss inherent in that mind. Buddha-recitation awakens this Amitābha, and rebirth is in this inherent Pure Land. What need is there to seek? The essential point in Buddha-recitation is one-pointedness, and one-pointedness is no-mind. With no-mind, what is there to seek? Deliberately reciting a Buddha outside the mind and seeking a land outside the mind takes one far from the Way. Furthermore, consider one who attains the samādhi of Buddha-remembrance.

For such a person, there is no distinction among mind, Buddha, and sentient beings, or between east and west. Though birth is manifested, there is ultimately no birth; though birthless, it excludes no manifestation of birth. Why, then, seek rebirth? Moreover, when seeking reaches its utmost, there is no seeking. Those who pursue it to the end thus return to neither seeking nor grasping. Rebirth in the West rests on faith, vows, and practice. Since practice encompasses faith and vows, diligent, unremitting, one-pointed Buddha-recitation already includes both.

If we can truly attain no seeking and no gaining, the mind, without seeking peace, naturally becomes peaceful; without desiring oneness, it naturally becomes one. When practice reaches this point, one may sit securely at home, a carefree person of the Way beyond learning and contrivance, passing one’s days in ease and freedom.

The fifteenth pair of lines: “With no mind to be deluded, this is great samādhi.”

With regard to attaining samādhi, everyone assumes that there is a distinction between entering and emerging from samādhi. Sitting here without moving, thinking, eating, or urinating is called entering samādhi; once one moves or speaks, it is called emerging from samādhi. In fact, this misunderstands the meaning of samādhi. For sitting here without moving is dead samādhi, not great samādhi. Great samādhi has no entering or leaving.

It is to remain undeluded by any circumstance, to function in accordance with conditions without abiding anywhere; it is not dead sitting without movement and entering into some state. Confucianism also described this principle: “Even if Mount Tai collapses before one, one’s expression does not change; even if a herd of deer rises to one’s left, one’s eyes do not blink.”

Sitting rigidly motionless merely suppresses thoughts; extinguishing feeling and perception is not true liberation. Even if you remain in samādhi for a million eons, when that time ends you will again give rise to thoughts, cling to appearances, create karma, and undergo its results. Thus, even after attaining the four formless absorptions and being born in the Heaven of Neither Perception nor Non-Perception, one remains in saṃsāra, unable to transcend birth and death. Ancient worthies compared such lifeless samādhi to weighing down grass with a stone: remove the stone, and the grass grows again. It is therefore not ultimate. Nanyue’s polishing a brick to guide Mazu was intended to rescue him from this lifeless samādhi.

Those who cultivate Mahāyāna Buddhadharma do not take up this kind of dead samādhi, because it is not ultimate and affords no genuine benefit. In the past, Emperor Wu of Liang went hunting and found an old meditator who had been in samādhi for five hundred years. Greatly astonished and admiring, he wished to compare his attainments with those of Chan Master Zhigong. He therefore ordered palace women to bathe naked with the two men.

At first, the old meditator could still see and hear normally. Then he closed his eyes and could not move; later, he had no choice but to push the palace women away and flee. By contrast, Zhigong spoke and laughed as usual, unperturbed and unalarmed. Without the power of living samādhi, how could he have attained this? Thus, attaining samādhi does not lie in dead sitting without movement, much less in the length of time spent in such dead sitting. One must temper the mind through circumstances, remain undeluded when encountering them, and give rise to great responsive functioning without any attachment; only then is it true samādhi.

Further, the story of Chan Master Zhihuang’s entry into the Way in the Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch, together with the Chan koan of the woman in samādhi,

offers clear proof of the truth that samādhi has no entering or leaving. Students need not doubt it.

Pairs sixteen through eighteen: “Those who attain great samādhi have neither movement nor stillness. Without gain or loss, without joy or anger, one does not depart from the original ground, yet responds to the myriad circumstances.”

Above, it was said that attaining great samādhi means that the mind is free from delusion; it does not mean dead sitting without movement. Here, the conduct of one who remains undeluded in the face of circumstances is described further. Practitioners can often remain settled in stillness but become unsettled amid activity; they can remain settled on the cushion but become unsettled once they rise from it. Some rejoice when they gain and become troubled when they lose; when things accord with their wishes, they are pleased, and when circumstances go against them, they become angry.

Those who can abide without movement only in stillness, but whose minds arise when confronting circumstances, thereby splitting themselves into two, do not possess true samādhi.

Those who truly attain great samādhi are equally at ease in activity and stillness, busyness and leisure. In dealing with affairs, they do not cling to success or failure, gain or loss, love or anger, grasping or rejection. Inwardly, they are free from the emotional bonds of joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, and from defilement through seeing, hearing, sensing, and knowing. With minds empty and clear, they respond freely to conditions and function as needed. They are not settled only in quiet mountain forests and confused in bustling cities; nor do they lose awareness when events arise and depart from the original ground.

Thus, great samādhi transcends the surface of things and roams freely beyond emotional defilements. It is not swayed by any circumstance and affords genuine benefit. It is not like wearing a cangue and chains, binding one’s hands and feet, and remaining there motionless in death.

When, in our daily activities, we train ourselves to respond to things and engage circumstances with minds free from clinging and attachment, this is not shifting from the original ground. This original ground is the position of the One Vehicle Dharma Realm; it is also the Buddha-ground. The Lotus Sūtra says: “Dharmas abide in their dharma positions; the appearances of the world are ever-abiding.”

Simply put, one does everything without conceiving oneself to be doing it; speaks without conceiving oneself to be speaking; and manifests the myriad appearances without conceiving oneself to be manifesting them.

Thus, although one does, one has never done; although one speaks, one has never spoken; although one manifests, one has never manifested. Yet this does not mean not doing, not speaking, or not manifesting. This is not shifting from the original ground; this is responding to the myriad occasions; and this is the ever-abiding nature of worldly appearances.

(Concerning the principle that worldly appearances are ever-abiding, let us briefly explain further: 1. All phenomenal appearances arise from the true mind; this is called abiding in dharma positions. Since the true mind is ever-abiding, phenomenal appearances are likewise ever-abiding. 2. Phenomenal appearances undergo change, as in the transformation of seas into mulberry fields, yet their continuity is unbroken and they are not annihilated. Water and the moon may flow away or wax and wane, yet there is ultimately no cessation of the flow or increase and decrease.

3. All phenomenal appearances are illusory and unborn, and therefore do not cease.) The Avataṃsaka Sūtra says: “The ten periods of time, past and present, beginning and end, do not depart from the present thought; boundless oceans of worlds, self and other, are not separated by the tip of a hair.” The appearances of time and space all arise through the arising and ceasing of deluded thoughts and through discrimination. If not a single thought arises, one vertically transcends the three divisions of time and horizontally pervades the ten directions of empty space.

Even events of the remote past are vividly present. When Great Master Zhizhe recited the Lotus Sūtra as far as the “Medicine King” chapter and entered the preliminary stage of Lotus Samādhi, he directly experienced the assembly at Vulture Peak, still present and undispersed. This is conclusive evidence that worldly appearances are ever-abiding.

The nineteenth pair of lines: “Unchanging yet according with conditions, one is free of birth and death.”

As everyone knows, studying Buddhism and cultivating the Way are undertaken in order to resolve birth and death. But how can birth and death truly be transcended? I fear that not every Buddhist practitioner knows the answer. What is called birth and death has two forms: segmented birth and death, and transformational birth and death. Segmented birth and death is the cycle of rebirth in the six realms, and this is relatively easy to understand.

Transformational birth and death is a further, formless birth and death beyond the cycle of rebirth in the six realms. It is a dharma-obstruction resulting from practice that is not ultimate, and so ordinary people find it more difficult to understand.

To explain briefly: arhats and other sages of the Lesser Vehicle have eliminated the delusions of views and thoughts and no longer suffer segmented birth and death.

Yet they incline toward the principle of emptiness, thinking there is a dharma to practice, a Way to attain, birth and death to end, and nirvāṇa to realize. They remain attached to pure lands beyond the three realms, brought about with cognitive hindrances as supporting conditions. Abiding in dharmas, they do not seek to transform their bodies and liberate beings in accordance with conditions. Their cognitive delusion is not exhausted. This is another form of birth and death: attachment to the dharma of freedom from birth and death.

To resolve this birth and death, one must first know that practicing dharmas is only like taking medicine and must not be clung to without letting go. Next, one must clearly understand that birth and death, nirvāṇa, and the like are flowers in empty space: there is no birth and death to resolve, no nirvāṇa to attain, not a single dharma is established, and there is no wisdom and no attainment. Then, one must further awaken to the fact that one should give rise to great responsive functioning, transform in accordance with conditions, and liberate sentient beings widely while the original ground remains unchanged, rather than abiding motionlessly in dharmas.

The Heart Sūtra teaches us first to realize the emptiness of ordinary beings' deluded attachment to sense faculties, sense objects, and consciousnesses; next, to realize the emptiness of the Lesser Vehicle sages' attachment to the Four Noble Truths and the twelve links of dependent origination; and finally, to realize the emptiness of bodhisattvas' attachment to wisdom. Only by bringing forth great capacity and wondrous functioning and returning to nothing to be attained can one realize anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi.

Those who have truly transcended birth and death have no dharma to attain and therefore remain unchanged while according with conditions. Though they may rise and sink amid the six realms, they see no distinction between birth and death or among the different realms. Though they transform their bodily forms in accordance with conditions and liberate all sentient beings, their original ground remains unchanged, and they see no sentient being as having been liberated. Long ago, a monk asked Chan Master Dasui, "Where was your venerable teacher reborn after his passing?" Dasui replied, "My teacher becomes a horse in an eastern household and an ox in a western household!" The monk praised him for having thoroughly awakened and brought the matter to completion: not establishing a single dharma, he accords with conditions and proceeds among the different classes of beings, while the fundamental essence does not shift in the slightest.

In the final verse of his Verses on the Five Ranks of Ruler and Minister, on "Arrival within Integration," Chan Master Dongshan says: "Without entering into existence or nonexistence, who dares respond? Everyone longs to leave the ordinary current; in the end, one returns to sit among the coals." This describes the final rank: those who

truly transcend birth and death take not ending it as truly ending it. Truly transcending it does not mean leaving the six realms to abide in the Pure Land. Thus, nirvāṇa without remainder means that there is no nirvāṇa to attain: nirvāṇa that abides nowhere.

Unchanged while according with conditions: from essence arises function. According with conditions while unchanged: function is gathered back into essence. Essence and function are thusness itself—without abiding or defilement, without movement or difference. This is truly to transcend birth and death.

The twentieth and final pair concludes: “The essential instruction for becoming a Buddha is no more than this.”

The preceding thirty-eight short lines fully set forth the mysteries and essential instructions for attaining Buddhahood. Some may say that these words seem commonplace, with nothing unusual or mysterious about them.

Could becoming a Buddha really be such an unremarkable matter? Is it not said that Buddhahood entails boundless Dharma power and vast spiritual powers? Yet nothing here has been said about spiritual powers or mysterious wonders! What people do not realize is that the Buddhadharma has nothing inherently extraordinary about it, nor may it be understood merely as a matter of doctrine. Do not create trouble where there is none. We need only let the mind abide nowhere, live our days in accordance with conditions, and become a person of the Way with nothing to do.

To become a Buddha at the stage of fruition fully endowed with the six spiritual powers, one must first awaken to one’s intrinsic nature at the causal stage. After clearly seeing one’s true nature, one must diligently eliminate habitual tendencies and gradually break through ignorance; only then can spiritual powers manifest. One cannot immediately become a Buddha at the stage of fruition endowed with the three kāyas and with all six spiritual powers simultaneously manifest.

Concerning awakening to one’s intrinsic nature, some people take spiritual powers as the criterion. They think that only when spiritual powers have manifested has one realized the mind and seen one’s true nature; otherwise, one has not seen one’s true nature. This is all the bad habit of ordinary beings who cling to existence and are attached to the marvelous. Those who cling to this bad habit not only mislead themselves but also mislead others. For so-called true nature is not elsewhere; it shines forth at the very gateways of one’s own six sense faculties.

As it is said in the Chan school: “The child in the eye is the person before one’s eyes; the golden crow beneath the sea is the sun in the sky.” Not recognizing it themselves, they do not know to nurture it until it matures into Buddhahood.

Instead, they reproach those who recognize it as being wrong and tell them not to acknowledge it. Is this not both lamentable and laughable?

Speaking in terms of spiritual powers, every raising of a hand, every step, every word, every smile, every spitting or cough is a wondrous function of spiritual power. As Layman Pang said, “Spiritual powers and wondrous functions: carrying water and hauling firewood!” In these movements, words, coughs, spitting, and actions, what is not the true mind exercising its wondrous function? Can a dead person’s hands, feet, mouth, and tongue speak, smile, or perform actions? Though people dwell in this spiritual functioning all day without knowing it, they instead seek spiritual powers elsewhere. Is this not what the Chan school calls “Sitting beside a rice bin while countless people starve to death”?

Moreover, to cling to the existence of spiritual powers is to hold that there is a dharma to be attained; this is dharma-attachment. In the future, not only will one fail to become a Buddha, but one may instead have a share in becoming a demon! You must understand that in so-called spiritual powers, shen ( ) refers to the wondrous functioning of the true mind, while tong ( ) means unobstructed and unhindered functioning, free of abiding attachment. They must not be understood in terms of miraculous or mysterious marvels. Once one entertains thoughts of the miraculous and extraordinary, poison enters the mind, obstructing one’s own gate of awakening, and one will have no prospect of realizing the Way.

Of every hundred practitioners today, every one is captivated by the miraculous and mysterious. They busy themselves with sleight of hand and minor spiritual powers, pleased with themselves and imagining these to be signs of realizing the Way. They do not know that they are merely playing with the deluded consciousness—the very consciousness-spirit Xuansha rebuked: “Those who study the Way do not recognize the true; they have always recognized only the consciousness-spirit.” Have they ever even dreamed of the Buddhadharma? These ignorant people waste their lives on irrelevant details instead of attending to proper practice.

When the final day arrives—the “thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month”—their so-called spiritual powers are nowhere to be found, and they muddle off to report to Yama. Because they flaunted marvels and boasted of their abilities in life, clinging to appearances and creating karma, they must also suffer grievous karmic retribution.

These foolish fellows neither set themselves on the right track nor cultivate the fundamental Dharma, yet they still use spiritual powers to test and assess others.

How could they know that learning Buddhism is a matter of one’s own cultivation and awakening? Whether others have awakened is no concern of yours. If another person has awakened, you cannot realize the Way because of it; if another has not awakened, you lose nothing. Why must you test them? Furthermore, if you wish to

assess others, you must first possess insight surpassing theirs. If you use spiritual powers to assess people, you have already fallen behind. For the foundation of awakening lies in not being deluded when encountering circumstances, not in whether spiritual powers manifest. If confusion arises when you encounter circumstances, then no matter what great spiritual powers you may manifest, they bring no true benefit and cannot enable you to transcend birth and death.

Those whose foundation is not yet clear cannot remain undefiled when they encounter circumstances. Even if they gain powers through practice, or through dependence on others—spirits, ghosts, or essences—because they cling to circumstances and abide in appearances, their afflictions remain unchanged and they cannot attain freedom. Conversely, those who are not deluded when encountering circumstances have minds as empty and clean as if freshly washed, without the slightest adhesion. Though spiritual powers have not yet manifested for a time, before long all five powers will naturally manifest together.

To be undeluded when encountering circumstances is itself the power of the exhaustion of outflows. Once the root is secure, there is no need to worry that the branches and leaves will not flourish. Therefore, we should constantly examine and test ourselves: when we encounter circumstances, are we truly unmoved? If we have not yet become stable and still waver, but can progress from much movement to less movement and then to no movement, this is the highest advancement and a sign of realizing the Way.

Do not focus on spiritual powers and mistakenly suppose that the manifestation of such powers is awakening to the Way. Still less should you test others by your own subjective states, lest deluded thoughts proliferate and you lose your own resolve for the Way. At the same time, even if spiritual powers manifest, do not use them. Since there is neither abiding nor attainment, they must not be displayed to others.

Finally, there is another important matter that students must understand. Some young people think that they can practice the Way only when body and mind are unoccupied and their surroundings quiet and secluded. Therefore, they repeatedly fail to seize the moment and cultivate diligently, sitting instead and waiting for favorable times and ideal circumstances to arrive.

They do not realize that ordinary beings face heavy obstacles and endless affairs. As the saying goes, “Before one task is finished, another arrives.” When will there ever be a time with nothing to do? Nor need one trouble over choosing a place. Buddhist practice calls for work on the mind-ground, rather than rigid sitting in mountain forests. As explained above, true practice is to meet circumstances without clinging or defilement.

To remain undefiled by circumstances, how can one cultivate an unmoving mind by avoiding the world of sense objects and sitting rigidly in mountain forests? One need only recognize that all sense objects—forms, sounds, and the rest—are images manifested by one's own true mind, like images appearing in a mirror's light, and thus cannot be grasped or clung to. At the same time, the true mind cannot be found apart from sense objects, just as mirror images are none other than the mirror's light, and the mirror's light does not leave the images. Therefore, there is nothing to reject either.

Contemplate and train in this way at all times. With mind empty and spirit at ease, let things take their natural course in freedom, seeking nothing and attaining nothing: this is the natural Buddha. Why wait for some ideal circumstance or favorable time to arrive? I urge everyone: while you are young and capable, seize the opportunity and strive diligently. Do not idly waste your time and miss this good opportunity, only to let your youthful head turn white and grieve in vain! Take care!