# Essential Teachings of Amitābha Buddha

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## Contents

Main Text

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Essential Teachings on Amitābha

Lectures Given in the Winter Month of a Ren Year

For forty-nine years, the Buddha taught the Dharma, employing various skillful means, all for the sake of gathering sentient beings' minds into oneness. One must attain this oneness and cease pursuing profit alone; only then can one cross beyond all suffering and adversity. He responds and manifests according to circumstances; there is no fixed Dharma. The dharma gate of Buddha-remembrance is one such skillful means. One must not insist that Buddha-remembrance consists solely in reciting the Buddha's name. Whether one contemplates one's own nature inwardly or studies sūtras and treatises outwardly, all of it is Buddha-remembrance.

For thousands of years, many have practiced Buddha-recitation, but few have attained accomplishment. The reasons are: (1) they want the benefits without bearing the hardship of practice; (2) they do not understand the essential point of mind, and their strength is inadequate; (3) they divide into schools and factions, giving rise to views of purity and impurity; and (4) they do not obtain the key to the method of holding the name.

I shall first have you all understand: What is it that practices Buddha-remembrance? And what is it that lives in suffering and delusion all day long and wanders through birth and death? Only then should you undertake Buddha-remembrance. Once the mind-ground is clear, I do not depart from the Buddha, and the Buddha does not depart from me; Buddha and I share the same light, essence and function abide in thusness, every place is the Pure Land, and everywhere is the West. I ask you to investigate together with me the essential point of mind that I have gained, though my understanding is only partial. Everyone must understand that the matter of birth and death is grave. If you earnestly exert yourselves and diligently advance, rebirth

in the Western Pure Land will not be difficult, and avaivartika can certainly be realized in this very life.

In cultivating the Pure Land, one must cultivate both aspects, not merely one. What is single cultivation? It is to believe only in Amitābha of the Western Pure Land, make vows for rebirth there oneself, and rely exclusively on the Buddha to come and guide one, while making no effort oneself to change and eliminate habitual tendencies. This is called single cultivation. What is dual cultivation? It is to understand one's own original mind-ground: its light is immeasurable and its life is immeasurable; it is nondual with Amitābha, and they commune in response.

Wherever one may be, if this mind is present, the Buddha comes without coming, and I go without going. Abide in this morning and evening. When neither the one who recites nor what is recited can be found, that very moment is rebirth. This is called dual cultivation. But if one speaks of it while the mind does not put it into practice, clings to holding the name, and does not give rise to faith and vows in the mind, this is single cultivation. When mind and speech accord, this is dual cultivation. In truth, dual cultivation is easy, while single cultivation is difficult. Dual cultivation brings freedom; single cultivation is instead laborious. Dual cultivation certainly brings rebirth; single cultivation is absolutely of no use. One must cultivate in this way, taking it as proper cultivation and proper practice. This practice of Buddha-remembrance has several prerequisites:

(1) One must first recognize what the "Pure Land" is.

(2) One must first understand the meaning of the three Chinese characters (Amitābha), and what it is of mine that is reborn in the Pure Land.

(3) One must understand the stages of the dharma gate of cultivation. If these three matters have not been understood, then even if one holds the name ten thousand times, one is merely like a parrot learning human speech, and it is of no use whatever. This is what is called being turned by the sūtra, rather than turning the sūtra.

I will explain each in turn.

(1) The "Pure Land" has both the Pure Land of principle and the Pure Land of phenomena. The Pure Land of phenomena is the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss, where there truly is a Buddha land adorned with dependent and principal recompenses. The Pure Land of principle is the Buddha land of the pure intrinsic nature of my own mind-ground: everywhere is the West, and the ten directions are no different from the West.

Let us further explain the two Chinese characters (Pure Land) separately. Jing ( , "pure") means sweeping away all habitual tendencies so that there is no defilement; tu ( , "land") refers to the original mind-ground. The wondrous substance of my fundamental awakening is originally also of immeasurable light, illuminating lands in the ten directions without obstruction. Its life too is immeasurable and boundless; it is of one essence and nondual with the Buddha. Amitābha and I have fundamentally neither coming nor going, and fundamentally no separation. When deluded, the Western Pure Land becomes Avīci; when awakened, Avīci itself is the Western Pure Land. Therefore, the sūtra says: "If one wishes to purify one's land, one must first purify one's mind. As one's mind is purified, so the Buddha land is purified."

(2) Furthermore, "Amitābha" means thusness, immovability, neither arising nor ceasing, and the great freedom of Vairocana's treasury-nature. "A" means non-arising, "mi" means great freedom, and "tuo" means thusness and immovability. Since the wondrous mind of perfect enlightenment, my fundamental essence, is identical with Amitābha, the expression "rebirth" is only an expedient way of speaking, adopted out of necessity.

Since there is neither coming nor going, why speak further of "going"? Since there is neither arising nor ceasing, why speak further of "birth"? What is reborn, then, is not my physical body with its form, but my tathāgatagarbha nature. This nature neither arises nor ceases, neither comes nor goes, and remains ever unchanged.

(3) On the dharma gate of cultivation.

First, let us discuss the four aspects of faith, vows, practice, and realization:

First, "faith" does not mean that one has generated faith merely by believing in the adorned Buddha land of the West. One must at the same time deeply believe that one's own intrinsic nature is Amitābha and that one can originally become a Buddha in the same way. Everyone can become a Yao or a Shun; all sentient beings can become Buddhas. The only difference is between delusion and awakening. This faith is extremely difficult.

If one's faith does not turn back, then with a single thought of pure faith one has already planted various good roots before immeasurable millions of Buddhas and has gone beyond the state of an ordinary being. Therefore, unless faith is genuine and steadfast, the power of one's vows will not be strong. The ancient worthies said: It is easy to believe in the Buddha as fruition, such as believing that Śākyamuni and Amitābha are Buddhas; it is difficult to believe in the Buddha as cause, that is, to believe that all sentient beings and oneself, at the causal stage, can become Buddhas. Thus it is called "a Dharma difficult to believe." The sūtra says: "At the time of first arousing the mind, one has already accomplished perfect awakening." Therefore, faith is the mother of all practices.

Second, “vows” means making vows. A vow is an aspiration. What does a scholar devote himself to? To cultivating a lofty aspiration. To make vows is to establish one’s aspiration. To vow to become a Buddha is to establish the unsurpassed aspiration. But if one concentrates solely on vowing for rebirth in the West, longing for its meritorious adornments of form, one still has not departed from attachment and craving; this is not genuine vow-making.

The sūtra says: “Those who delight in lesser dharmas are attached to the views of self, person, sentient being, and life span; therefore, they cannot hear, receive, read, or recite this sūtra.” Hence, one’s vows must be great. Great vows bring great accomplishment; small vows bring small accomplishment. To accomplish such meritorious adornments, one must make great vows: “I now vow to be reborn in that land, for the sake of becoming a Buddha myself and for the sake of all suffering sentient beings, not out of craving to obtain something.” This is genuine vow-making. Therefore, the sūtra contains three instances of “one should make vows.”

Third, “practice” means cultivation. Cultivation does not consist merely in reciting the name. One must at all times grow weary of and renounce birth and death, never forget Amitābha from thought to thought, recite the name aloud and live by it inwardly. With continuous and seamless contemplation, one enters the state of the yoga of the three mysteries. As it is said, when pure dharmas have strength, defiled dharmas have no strength. One is able not to cling or crave, not to think in anger, and not to abide in ignorance because recollection of the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha has gained strength.

If one is not mindful of this, one is mindful of that. If one is not mindful of the West, one is mindful of hell. This is so at the very moment; there is no need for hesitation. If one cultivates with such singleness and sincerity for one to seven days, the mind will not be inverted; even an inverted mind cannot be found. Naturally, one attains one-pointedness of mind without distraction. One mind is no mind; the mind cannot be found. This is proper cultivation.

Furthermore, cultivation means breaking through the turbidity of views. If one holds a view of purity, then a view of impurity immediately stands opposite it; this cannot be called cultivation. The sūtra says: “This Dharma is equal, without high or low.” The Buddha expounded all dharmas as skillful means for sentient beings; all belong to the Pure Land. Because Mañjuśrī held a view of Buddha, he was even demoted to the Iron Ring Mountains. Therefore, if one’s view is impure, one’s mind is impure, and the land is impure. Thus, steadfast faith and great vows, combined, constitute proper practice. Practice does not consist merely in holding the name with the mouth.

One phrase of Amitābha suddenly transcends the grave offenses of birth and death accumulated over eight billion kalpas. Both past and future are cut off. Where mental activity ceases, there is originally the unborn Dharma; this is moreover the unsurpassed Secret Vehicle. The sūtras translated by Dharma Master Xuanzang are based on right mindfulness and contemplation, while those translated by Dharma Master Kumārajīva emphasize holding the name. In truth, they are nondual. For when one contemplates, one does not depart from recitation by mouth; and when one recites by mouth, one does not depart from practice in the mind.

People of old gave equal weight to contemplation and recitation; they were not like people today, who are rigidly attached to one side. Esoteric Buddhism explains Amitābha in four ways: the superficial and abbreviated, the profound and secret, the secret within the secret, and the profound secret within the secret. Yet these are all simply the meaning that Amitābha of the Western Pure Land and Amitābha of one's intrinsic nature are of one essence and nondual. Therefore, one phrase of Amitābha is Esoteric Buddhism; they cannot be divided into separate schools.

Fourth, "realization" means actual realization. To comprehend and penetrate through mind and states is called "realization." The sūtra says: "Only a Buddha together with a Buddha can fully realize and know." This means using mind to seal mind: only one knows for oneself; others cannot fathom it. Moreover, realization changes in accordance with the three of faith, vows, and practice. As one cultivates faith, vows, and practice, so is what one realizes. If one thoroughly understands the empty characteristics of all dharmas, then in terms of principle there is naturally no cultivation, no attainment, and no realization. But when principle and phenomena are perfectly integrated, how could one discard cultivation? When one cultivates, realization is contained within it.

This concludes the explanation of the four aspects.

Let us now further explain the dharma gate of Buddha-recitation:

The dharma gate of Buddha-recitation relies on the Buddha's power. But if one's power of response is weak, the Buddha's responsive power is also weak. I practiced Buddha-remembrance for ten years, yet from beginning to end I did not dare trust that I had a firm grasp. After taking up the Heart-of-Heart Dharma in 1929, I returned to Buddha-recitation and only then understood the subtle wonder of this dharma gate and awakened to the meaning and state of avaivartika. One-pointedness of mind without distraction must certainly be accomplished in ordinary times; it cannot be arranged at the last moment.

Therefore, in addition to the dharma gate of Buddha-recitation, one should investigate Esoteric Buddhism as the principal aid. Its state is truly inconceivable. I acknowledge that my former errors in separating Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhism

were as sinful as slandering the Buddha. When the Buddha was alive, there was originally no division between Chan and Esoteric Buddhism. Later people made a provisional distinction as an expedient in order to seek concentration; they did not deliberately establish sectarian boundaries. As it is said, the ultimate return is not two, while skillful means have many gates.

If one stubbornly clings to one's own views and rigidly establishes sectarian boundaries, one remains attached; how can liberation arise? Consider this: when one realizes the forbearance of the unborn dharmas, even mind does not exist. Who then establishes such boundaries? Who realizes? In Master Lianchi's text on making vows, he says, "May I, in Chan contemplation and in dreams, behold Amitābha Buddha," and so forth. How could he have excluded the Chan school? People today insist that they will practice nothing but Pure Land and oppose Esoteric Buddhism, yet they themselves recite the Rebirth Mantra.

Therefore, we know that holding the name is one expedient dharma gate for cultivating the Pure Land. All dharmas are Buddha-Dharma. By cultivating all wholesome dharmas without clinging to the marks of self, person, sentient being, or life span, one attains unsurpassed bodhi. How could it be that, if one cultivates other dharmas, Amitābha would not permit one's rebirth? Now, taking up the single invocation of Amitābha, recite until the myriad dharmas return to the One; then recite until even the One cannot be found. Only then is there accomplishment.

Even by holding other dharmas, one may attain accomplishment in the same way. Yet the power of one's vow toward the West must not be divided. When recitation reaches a single thought free of thought, this is called right mindfulness. When a single characteristic is without characteristics, this is called true reality. Upon seeing true reality, the mind naturally has no thoughts to which it is bound. Freedom from bound thoughts is liberation. The sūtra says: "Liberation is the Tathāgata; it is nirvāṇa." Practitioners must never content themselves with the inferior and lesser, thinking that this cannot possibly be accomplished in this lifetime. Still less may they regard others as inferior and lesser. To hold such a view is arrogance; it is not understanding the Pure Land, and one will certainly not attain rebirth.

The method of Buddha-recitation: at the beginning, one should recite together with the assembly, and one's pitch should accord with theirs. There is no need to voice every character; use the method of breath to regulate and subdue the mind, changing the breath from time to time. During pauses, mental recitation should nevertheless remain uninterrupted. First, one must harmonize with the assembly and recite in one voice.

Next, reciting with the assembly is not as good as reciting with a few people; reciting with a few people is not as good as reciting alone. Reciting six characters is not as

good as reciting four, and reciting four is not as good as reciting one. The original pronunciation of “Namo Amitābha Buddha” is given here as “ ” (in principle, it should be recited only after transmission; in this it is no different from holding an esoteric practice). To recite one character means to emphasize one character among the four.

For example, emphasize the character tuo ( ), while leaving space for visualization; this is most effective. Moreover, the time spent in Buddha-recitation must not be too long. Uninterrupted mindfulness is best. It is best to recite for fifteen minutes and meditate for fifteen minutes, alternating visualization and recitation. People today consider large numbers superior and loud voices lofty, yet in the end do not understand what merit and virtue is.

They mistakenly treat the merit and virtue of Buddha-recitation as though it were foil spirit money deposited in an otherworldly treasury; their foolishness is beyond compare. Let us provisionally establish a scale of merit and virtue: when Buddha-recitation has become familiar to the extent of one part, that is one part merit and virtue; when one receives the benefit to the extent of ten parts, that is ten parts merit and virtue; when one removes one part of habitual tendencies, that is one part merit and virtue; when one removes ten parts of habitual tendencies, that is ten parts merit and virtue. Familiarity lies within one’s own mind, and one’s own mind is precisely the treasury. If one were to say that reciting until realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature constitutes merit and virtue, people would surely be alarmed and refuse to believe it.

As stated earlier, reading sūtras is also a form of Buddha-remembrance; therefore, one cannot fail to study and investigate the scriptures. Let us now take the Amitābha Sūtra as our fixed text for inquiry. Only by examining the words in light of one’s own mind-ground can one gain benefit. I shall provisionally identify, one by one, the principal expressions in the sūtra and discuss them with you, that you may perhaps awaken to the subtle wonder of the realm of the Western Pure Land:

“From”—“from” refers to this world. The Land of Ultimate Bliss is indeed west of this land, taking Sahā as its point of reference. If Sahā lay further west of Ultimate Bliss, then Ultimate Bliss would be to the east. Therefore, one must not cling to the idea that the Land of Ultimate Bliss is fixed in the west.

“Ultimate Bliss”—Ultimate Bliss means that there is no suffering. This word “suffering” includes worldly pleasures, for worldly pleasures are ultimately not final and still return to suffering. Only when both suffering and pleasure are exhausted can it be called Ultimate Bliss.

“Accomplished”—accomplished means complete. This refers to the gate of accomplishment in the West: the accomplishment of meritorious adornments.

“Transformations”—what is produced by transformation does not refer exclusively to the proclamation of Dharma sounds. It refers to how the sentient beings and mental environments of that land each change in accordance with the times; it is simply the difference in the mutual responses of the two sides.

“The five faculties and five powers,” and so forth—one would ordinarily cultivate all thirty-seven aids to the Way. Yet this sūtra begins only with the five faculties, showing that the preceding categories are no longer needed by those who cultivate the Pure Land.

“Naturally”—this means the accomplishment of habituation. The disposition of Ultimate Bliss arises spontaneously.

The passage beginning “immeasurable light…” indicates that Amitābha Buddha and sentient beings throughout the Dharma realm in the ten directions share this same Dharma essence; therefore, they share the same light and are equally unobstructed. Amitābha neither comes and yet comes; sentient beings do not go and yet go. Like Indra’s net of jewels, lights interpenetrate perfectly with lights; there is only the distinction between delusion and awakening, brightness and darkness. Therefore, this must not be spoken of as referring only to Amitābha on one side.

The passage beginning “immeasurable life…” has the same meaning as above. In the Tathāgata-garbha nature, which neither arises nor ceases, there are no sages or ordinary beings, no east or west, no coming or going.

“One should make vows”—how solemn is the injunction expressed by the two Chinese characters (“should”). There are three particular exhortations here.

“Not with few good roots, blessings, virtues, causes, and conditions”—good roots, blessings, virtues, causes, and conditions must be abundant and complete; if they are few, accomplishment cannot be attained.

“From one day” to “seven days”—this has three meanings: (1) if it is not accomplished in one day, it will certainly be accomplished by seven days; (2) sometime from the first through the seventh day, though one cannot know on which day, one realizes one-pointedness of mind without distraction; and (3) from one day through seven days, every day is thus. All refer to one-pointedness of mind without distraction.

“One mind”—one mind means no mind. Upon realizing the unborn, there is no longer anything that can be disturbed; naturally there is one-pointedness of mind without distraction. If one rigidly grasps at one mind as mind, this one mind can still be clung to and turned upside down. Therefore it is said: “When one thought is no thought, this is called right mindfulness.”

“The sūtra protected and kept in mind”—we should consider whether this sūtra refers to the Amitābha Sūtra. If it refers exclusively to the written Amitābha Sūtra, then before the Buddha had spoken this sūtra, what sūtra did the Buddhas of the ten directions protect and keep in mind?

“Those who have already made vows, now make vows, or will make vows; those who have already been born, are now born, or will be born”—this means that at the time vows are made, one is no different from one who has attained rebirth. This is because the capacity of mind has absolutely no obstruction.

“The turbidity of views”—among the five turbidities, this turbidity is the hardest to remove. For all the inversions of sentient beings arise from the view of self; it is the root of all illnesses and the chief of a hundred demons. Yet sentient beings are particularly unwilling to believe that this view is a turbid view.

“A Dharma difficult to believe”—it is difficult to believe for five reasons: (1) people doubt that the Western Pure Land possesses such meritorious adornments and are alarmed by this, so they find it difficult to believe; (2) they fear that Amitābha’s manifestation body will not come to receive them at death, so they find it difficult to believe; (3) they doubt that, given what they see as their limited capacities and wisdom, they can become Buddhas, so they find it difficult to believe; (4) obstinate sentient beings are difficult to tame and subdue, so they find it difficult to believe; and (5) they do not know that they themselves share the nature of Vairocana Buddha, and though this is urgently explained to them, they do not believe it, so they find it difficult to believe.

“They paid homage and departed”—the final sentence of other sūtras usually says, “They faithfully accepted and put it into practice,” whereas this one says, “They paid homage and departed.” The word “departed” means that their minds aspired toward it. This shows that all the listeners at that time had already made vows: those already born, now being born, or yet to be born.

This concludes the explanation of those points in the sūtra text that should be investigated.

Let us further discuss the sequence of the sūtra text as follows:

1. The Amitābha Sūtra is in the form of the Buddha speaking alone, without questions and answers. This sufficiently proves that all who heard it at that time already had deep and unwavering faith; everyone present at the Dharma assembly had entered the state of accomplishment.

2. This sūtra uniquely presents the dharma gate of holding to the Buddha’s name. It provides a convenient basis for latter-day sentient beings who cultivate the Pure

Land.

3. This sūtra presents the West alone as the gate of accomplishment. Therefore, Mahāvairocana is Amitābha, and one gate is the universal gate.

4. This sūtra gives greatest weight to the two words “faith and vows.” It specifically presents this as a Dharma difficult to believe and gives three exhortations that vows should be made.

5. This sūtra guides those who first arouse the resolve in Sahā, stage by stage, until they attain rebirth in Ultimate Bliss; its order is impeccably clear. In brief: (1) it identifies the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss and states that there is a Buddha there named Amitābha. (2) It explains the meritorious adornments of that land’s characteristics in order to provide guidance.

(3) From adorned characteristics, it leads into formless merit and virtue, allowing the mind of Buddha-remembrance, Dharma-remembrance, and Saṅgha-remembrance to arise naturally. (4) It points out such essential matters as immeasurable light and immeasurable life. (5) It shows that all sentient beings who are reborn there must possess the qualification of nonretrogression. Moreover, they must cultivate until they share the same disposition as the many supreme good people before they can assemble together in one place.

This word “together” is most important. (6) It indicates the method of holding to the Name. (7) One must not merely hold it with the mouth; one must also remember it in the mind, until one-pointedness of mind without distraction is attained. (8) Fearing that sentient beings might cling exclusively to the West and not understand the meaning of the perfect interpenetration of the ten directions, it says that there are also Buddhas in the East, and so forth. (9) It shows that all the Buddhas of the ten directions share this protection and mindfulness. (10) It shows the greatness of vow-power: once vows are made, one already belongs among those attaining rebirth. (11) It says that this sūtra is a Dharma difficult for the world to believe, specifically emphasizing five instances of the word “difficult.” (12) Finally, it shows that all who joyfully, faithfully accept it will certainly attain ultimate rebirth.

The foregoing has been a brief account of the meaning of the sūtra.

Those who read the sūtra and wish to seek profound interpretations of its words should consult Dharma Master Yuanying’s lectures, which are most lucid and fluent. Yet they must first clearly understand the prerequisites set forth above. May everyone diligently advance and together realize unsurpassed bodhi.

Namo Amitābha Buddha.

Appendix:

A Rebirth Verse by Venerable Xingyuan

I now make the vow to be born in the West, with grief as piercing as though I had lost my parents.

Why deliberate over rebirth in the West? Prepare your provisions at once.

The accomplishment of such merit and virtue depends entirely on the mind-ground.

If one seeks the Buddha's guidance through external conditions, inferior wisdom vainly calculates convenience.

For one-pointedness of mind without distraction, first understand the dependent arising of faculties and objects.

Once the mind can nowhere be found, one realizes bodhi directly, here and now.

Recite the Buddha's name until recitation is free of thought, and the innate workings of samādhi and wisdom will naturally emerge.

The West and the ten directions are nondual; how does one gate differ from the universal gate?

All dharmas are Pure Land; those who delight in lesser dharmas do not know this.

May each of you diligently advance without retreat; in the future you will certainly be born in the West.

When I paid visits to Master Xingyuan at Nianhua Temple, on more than ten occasions before and after, our conversations were deeply congenial. The Master often assisted me with Chan principles. I suddenly gained insight and became ever more diligent and earnest, anxious as though I had lost my parents. Since 1929, I have followed Acharya Dayu in cultivating the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, and have received instruction in the principle of jointly investigating Chan and Esoteric Buddhism. I have thereby come to believe even more deeply in the subtle wonder of the Pure Land dharma gate.

In terms of holding the Name, the six characters are fundamentally an esoteric mantra; in terms of visualization, freedom from distraction belongs to meditative stability. Thus, apart from Chan and Esoteric Buddhism, there is no Pure Land; and the Pure Land in turn comprehensively encompasses the wonders of Chan and Esoteric Buddhism. If one cultivates both Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhism and confirms them through Chan principles, the greatness of the accomplishment is beyond conception. Very few people in the world truly believe this principle; some

are even suspicious and alarmed, slandering it as the words of demons. It is painful to speak of.

The masters of recent times have been no less compassionate than the ancients in teaching and guiding others, but regrettably few can recognize people's capacities. Those who can discern capacities and assist with both Chan and Pure Land, like Master Xingyuan, are not easily found. Master Xingyuan entered the Buddhist gate as a learned Confucian; like a tiger with horns, his strength was naturally great. More than thirty years ago, the bottom of his bucket had already dropped out. One can see the power of his whole life in his Dharma words.

Now, at the time of his departure, he unexpectedly left behind this principle of harmonizing Chan and Pure Land, forming karmic affinities with the assembly. It is clear that he did not wish people of the world to cling to a single medicine and thereby harm themselves. At the juncture of the ren and gui years, at the invitation of various benevolent people in the south, I taught the Dharma in Shanghai, Ning, Xia, and elsewhere. I too took the integration of the various traditions as my guiding purpose. While expounding the essential meaning of Amitābha, I received news of Master Xingyuan's passing. I therefore gathered together what I had discussed in order to commemorate Master Xingyuan. I can only practice Buddha-remembrance sincerely, in gratitude for Master Xingyuan's words of recognition and understanding.

Recorded by Wang Xianglu, a former judicial official, at Mind-Seal Vihara.