

Studying Buddhism Is Not Difficult; Simply Contemplate with Ease

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Learning the Buddhadharma is not difficult, for all sentient beings possess the Tathāgata's wisdom and virtuous characteristics; all have Buddha-nature. People simply fail to recognize this. Chasing after external circumstances and clinging to forms, they forget their Original Face, create karma, undergo retribution, and sink into the six realms. So long as we awaken, turn the light inward, cease pursuing external circumstances, and do not cling to outward forms, we need only turn back.

The clearest example of Buddha-nature's functioning is that, when we see external objects, it is not the eyes themselves that see. Modern scientists also say that eyes alone cannot see; seeing is possible because of the brain's activity.

But this does not yet reach the root, for the brain and nerves are only like electrical wires and a power grid, while the eyes are like lightbulbs. Even if the grid is in place and the bulbs are connected, nothing functions if the electricity does not flow. What is this electricity? It is our true mind. Our ability to smell, taste, speak, and move is all the functioning of Buddha-nature. Once we understand this, do not cling to outward forms, and constantly turn the light inward, we will succeed. Thus learning the Buddhadharma is not difficult.

Master Hanshan said: "The reason cultivation of prajñā succeeds so swiftly is that everyone inherently possesses this light of mind. ..." All sentient beings inherently possess this light of mind; it is not acquired through seeking outside oneself. The Buddhas are no longer deluded and have realized this light of mind, enabling them to manifest wondrous functions and spiritual powers. Sentient beings are deluded and unaware, and so revolve through the six realms, suffering through inverted views.

If we can understand that we inherently possess this light of mind, turn the light inward, and cultivate through a single thought, then we apply effort before a thought arises; when a thought arises, we see it and do not follow it. Using the light of wisdom to clear away all the seeds of attachment in the field of our eight consciousnesses, we practice in this way, and attainment will not be difficult.

The Mind-Ground Dharma Gate produces a prince who will certainly become a Buddha in the future. If one employs some other dharma to cultivate some supernormal power, that is merely a peripheral rank of merit. However good one's practice may be, however great one's spiritual powers, one can only bow and become a subject; one cannot become the emperor—that is, become a Buddha. Therefore, one must cultivate on the mind-ground. This is the most fundamental dharma.

In fact, all dharmas are superfluous. The Diamond Sūtra says, “the parable of the Dharma as a raft.” After Patriarch Linji was struck three times by Patriarch Huangbo, he awakened and said, “It turns out that Huangbo's Buddhadharma is not so much after all.” There is nothing mysterious or complicated about it. It is our attachment to mystery that makes it complicated.

The Sixth Patriarch said that Buddha-nature inherently possesses all spiritual powers and wondrous functions. This means that everyone has spiritual powers; our present inability to discover them is caused by our deluded thoughts, inverted views, and attachments, which obscure our light. If we can constantly turn the light inward, refrain from clinging to outward forms, and disperse the dark clouds of attachment, the light will be restored.

The first words of the Heart Sūtra are “Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva.” “Avalokiteśvara” instructs us to practice. “Avalokita” means contemplation: constantly observe where thoughts arise, without wavering. “Īśvara” means oneself.

What is oneself? We all mistakenly take this physical body to be ourselves: “My body must enjoy itself; it must eat well and dress well.” Insatiable greed thus creates karma and brings retribution. This physical body is not the self; it is the house in which we dwell. Within it is a true person, and that true person is the self.

This true person is that which now shines forth at the gates of the six sense faculties—the capacity to see and hear.

When, in the present moment, not a single thought arises—when the preceding thought has ceased and the subsequent thought has not yet arisen, and there is no thought in between—then, although not a single thought arises, we are not insensate like wood or stone. Rather, there is clear and distinct awareness: seeing yet not seeing, hearing yet not hearing. The seer and what is seen, the hearer and

what is heard, are all unobtainable; subject and object both fall away. This is our original nature; this is the self.

Chan Master Guifeng said: "Do not take the physical body for the self; take empty quiescence as the essence." Our original nature is like empty space: empty space is myself, and I am empty space. If there were empty space apart from me, and another emptiness besides that, it would not be so. We should not seek outwardly; simply let go. Do not seek the true; only cease deluded thoughts.

Do not seek! You are originally a Buddha, so what Buddha is there to seek? To rest the deluded mind is bodhi. Bodhi means right awakening, realization. When we contemplate this self, at the beginning we merely understand the principle, but the mind cannot yet be held and still runs after circumstances. We must practice, keep watch over it, and observe whether this original nature remains on its original ground.

Once the practice is mature, we proceed further and no longer need even contemplation. Contemplation is functioning with effort; we must proceed to functioning without effort. In the unconditioned dharma, everything is unobtainable, and contemplation too is no longer needed. But take note: only when practice has reached this stage may one dispense with contemplation. If your practice has not reached it and you abandon contemplation, you will drift astray.

Some say that practicing at all times is an attachment. At the beginning, attachment is necessary. If you do not remain with the practice, you will follow external circumstances.

The Heart-of-Heart Dharma follows the same principle. At the outset, it tells you to abide in contemplation without moving. This cannot be done without meditative stability, so it gives you a dharma on which to abide, and you cast aside everything else. This is a method of transformation. Like Buddha-recitation, it too is a method of transformation. When we recite the Buddha's name, the mind is mindful of the Buddha, and Buddha is mind. When we are mindful of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, we are not mindful of greed, anger, and ignorance.

Yet at the outset, it is impossible simply not to think. Through countless lives and kalpas, our habitual tendencies have become deeply ingrained, so we still need a dharma to cultivate. Esoteric Buddhism has many methods for initiating function. Many people practice in order to gain spiritual powers or seek wealth, not realizing that cultivating the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is meant to enable them to cultivate the great Way and become great vessels.

If one uses some method now to acquire a little supernormal power, it is not only useless but may also bring trouble, because the mind is not yet empty. Some people

acquire divine-eye powers, see terrifying appearances, and become mentally ill from fright. Non-Buddhists cultivate by clinging to appearances; even leaving the body is no good thing, for it can lead one to demonic states in the future.

But people all like such things. Those who seek them cannot become great vessels or escape the cycle of rebirth in the six realms. We must still train the mind to emptiness, abiding nowhere, and allow the spiritual powers inherent in our original nature to function. Even when they manifest, it is as though there were no spiritual powers at all—just as our ability to dress and eat is now entirely ordinary, with nothing mysterious or strange about it.

All sentient beings inherently possess this capacity. It has not yet manifested because it is obscured by deluded thoughts, inverted views, and attachments. Why are humans more intelligent than animals? Because human obscurations are fewer and lighter, whereas animals' obscurations are heavier and denser, making them far more dull-witted than humans. Once we can remove these obscurations, all will be well.

When the Heart Sūtra speaks of "Avalokiteśvara," it tells us to practice: observe that the self remains on its original ground without wavering. "Īśvara" means that this original nature is always present. Yet ordinarily we are not present; we run after circumstances. Patriarch Yuanwu Keqin said, "If one is absent for a single instant, one is no different from a dead person." One becomes a walking corpse. We must always be "present."

Once "being present" is familiar, even "self" is no longer needed, for having a self still involves contrivance. The Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment teaches: "At all times, do not give rise to deluded thoughts; yet, with regard to deluded mind, do not seek to extinguish it. Dwelling amid the realm of delusion, do not superimpose any further knowing; in the absence of such knowing, do not discern what is the ultimate reality."

Do not extinguish the deluded mind, because the deluded mind is the true mind. Waves are water; if the waves are removed, there is no water. Therefore, when deluded thoughts arise, do not suppress or extinguish them. Simply turn them, and do not follow them. Buddha-recitation and mantra recitation are the best lively methods for transforming deluded thoughts: place the mind on the Buddha or the mantra, and deluded thoughts are transformed.

"Dwelling amid the realm of delusion, do not superimpose any further knowing" means that one should not cling to oneself, continually identifying oneself with oneself. At this point, "self" is no longer needed; only presence remains.

“In the absence of such knowing, do not discern what is the ultimate reality” means that everything is unobtainable. The true is the false, and the false is the true; there is no further distinction between sages and ordinary beings. Everything returns and merges into oneself. There is neither presence nor absence of presence; even “presence” is gone. This is the meaning taught by all the scriptures. The Heart Sūtra is a dharma for becoming a Buddha; merely reciting it will not do. If all sentient beings can contemplate freely, they are the bodhisattvas spoken of in the Heart Sūtra; if not, they remain sentient beings.

In cultivating the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, one uses the three secrets of mudrā, mantra, and contemplation to receive empowerment, thereby dissolving the deluded mind. The sense faculties and their objects fall away; persons, phenomena, appearances, the world, empty space—everything vanishes. The great earth levels and sinks; empty space shatters to powder. You are enabled to realize this directly for yourself. This is the manifestation of Buddha-nature.

Yet everyone remains doubtful: “Surely this is not it? Why have spiritual powers not manifested? Evidently it is not!” In fact, this is it—this truly is it! Spiritual powers cannot yet manifest because your habitual attachments remain and have not been completely removed.

Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi said: “Although the true principle may be suddenly realized, these emotional habits are difficult to remove at once; one must remain aware for a long time, reducing them again and again.” We may understand the principle, but through immeasurable kalpas of turning about in the six realms of rebirth, our habitual tendencies have become profound and our attachments exceedingly strong. They cannot be removed immediately. We need constantly to remain aware, temper the mind through circumstances, and reduce them again and again.

Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi expressed it well: “Though one knows that an icy pool is wholly water, one relies on the sun’s warmth to melt it. Though one realizes that an ordinary being is itself a Buddha, one depends on the power of the Dharma to cultivate and permeate. When ice melts, water flows and moistens, then its power to irrigate and cleanse appears. When delusion is exhausted, the mind becomes numinously unobstructed, and only then does the functioning of supernormal luminosity manifest.”

In cultivating the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, we rely on this dharma to cross the river, but we must not cling to the dharma. The late Master Xianglu said that one thousand sessions of Heart-of-Heart Dharma practice are sufficient. Many people become confused over these one thousand sessions, thinking that if they have not practiced them well, they are of no use and there is no need to continue practicing.

But that is not what it means. One thousand sessions indicates that this dharma has such great power that it can open up one's original nature and allow one to see one's true nature. Once one has seen it, one should no longer cling to the dharma.

Those of us who meditate have experienced this. During the first four or five hundred sessions, there is some suffering: aching hands, numb legs, and tightness in the chest. Ordinarily, the mind is accustomed to leaping about like a monkey; it insists on jumping, but you do not allow it to jump, so it becomes distressed. After five or six hundred sessions, when the mind has settled, one feels comfortable. The progressive principle taught in the four dhyānas is this: joy in the second dhyāna and bliss in the third.

This is because the body then undergoes changes, and as the qi and blood circulate freely, this joy arises naturally. Meditation has three kinds of experience: emptiness, bliss, and luminosity. Emptiness means that one is transformed into emptiness. Bliss means incomparable happiness. Some say that they fear hardship and therefore do not practice the Dharma. They are mistaken.

Practicing the Dharma is not hardship but enjoyment—its joy is inexhaustible. It is great bliss, beyond comparison with worldly happiness. Luminosity means light: once the mind is empty, it emits a great radiance.

Yet one must not abide in any of these—emptiness, bliss, or luminosity. If one abides in bliss, one cannot leave the desire realm, for bliss still contains desire. If one abides in luminosity, one cannot leave the form realm; the appearances of the form realm are subtle and luminous, unlike the coarse turbidity of the desire realm. If one abides in emptiness, one cannot leave the formless realm and cannot reach the four formless heavens. Thus the late Master Xianglu said that after one thousand sessions, one should not sit any longer; this means that one should not become attached to the Dharma.

For the Dharma, too, is unobtainable; it is merely borrowed for temporary use. Do not misunderstand this point. The actual work of practice takes place off the meditation cushion. Sitting is like sharpening a knife: one sharpens the knife while seated; after getting up, one uses it, to see whether the knife is sharp—can it cut through attachment and passion? The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says that people have two great faults: emotion and thought.

Emotion is the worst, because it arises together with attachment. When people who love each other must part, tears come. When one sees delicious food, saliva naturally comes. Attachment can produce water, and water flows downward; therefore, when emotion arises, it flows downward.

For those who practice in the Pure Land school, if this emotion cannot be cut off, they cannot be reborn in the Western Pure Land. The Western Pure Land is a higher realm: if you cannot fly upward, you will flow downward. Master Hanshan and Master Zibo both said that whether Buddha-recitation is effective depends on whether the precious sword of the Buddha's name is sharp enough to cut through the threads of emotion.

Only by cutting through the threads of emotion can one be reborn in the West. If they cannot be cut, then, though the lotus root is severed, its fibers remain joined, and one can only remain in the Sahā world. Why can one not depart? Because when emotional thoughts are strong, it is like "rowing while tied to a post": a mooring rope fastens the boat to a wooden post on the shore, so the boat cannot move. And thoughts? Thinking of becoming rich, thinking of one's beloved—such thoughts will not do.

The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says, "Pure thought brings flight." When we think of the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss and think of Amitābha Buddha, such thought is pure thought, and we can fly upward. Our practice consists in cutting off these emotional views and maintaining contemplation at every moment. My intrinsic nature is utterly bare and unstained by a single speck of dust; there is nothing to which I can cling.

This body, too, is nothing to cling to. No one can escape birth, old age, sickness, and death; still less are there any external possessions worth clinging to. Therefore, we must have great wisdom. Once we understand this, we naturally let everything go. When one can let go and not cling, one realizes the Way, and the light rises day by day. When luminosity first appears, it is like the newly risen sun: the pale white of a fish's belly.

It gradually brightens and emits a great light, yet there are still black spots within it, while the edges are bright. Why? Because ignorance remains. This is also what is described in the teachings on deliverance in the intermediate state: when a person is at the point of death, the clear light of death appears in the same way. In fact, it is just like our process of practice. When ignorance is eliminated, the darkness disappears, and there is brightness.

In our practice, we must understand the essential key. This key is to recognize that, when not a single thought arises, the clear and distinct numinous knowing is our true nature. From there, one safeguards realization through continuous and seamless contemplation, and fully realizes Buddhahood. Never seek the extraordinary or become attached to the mysterious and subtle. Know that the ordinary mind in which not a single thread can be obtained is precisely the wondrous basis for our realization of the Way.

Safeguarding has several stages. At the time of initial awakening, one is like a newborn infant and must be carefully nourished and protected; otherwise, one will die young, perishing in the swaddling clothes. Many people think that once they awaken, they understand their intrinsic nature and are therefore extraordinary; they become wildly unrestrained. That is a mistake.

For habitual tendencies remain, and one falls into delusion after awakening. This is very dangerous. Therefore, at the time of initial awakening, one must safeguard it strictly and must not relax in walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. Yet one must not grasp too tightly either. If one is too tight, the breath becomes constricted and the head swells, like the strings of a musical instrument: too tight, and they break; too loose, and they produce no sound.

One must skillfully regulate the proper balance between looseness and tightness: loosen a little when too tight, and tighten a little when too loose. It is not easy to safeguard realization at every moment, because our habitual tendency to cling is strong. Once we become entangled in affairs, we forget and return to our old ways. At such times, we must grasp hold of ourselves: as soon as we forget, quickly draw ourselves back. Once safeguarding has truly matured, safeguarding is no longer needed.

Yet at this point it is still not easy to leave safeguarding behind and forget it. Once safeguarding has matured, it is as though one has exchanged one habitual tendency for another: the former habit of clinging to things has been replaced by the habit of attachment to the Dharma. One must still pass through a period of time before leaving safeguarding behind.

Going a step further, when one can truly leave safeguarding behind, there still remains the notion that there is no need for safeguarding. The process of practice is very subtle and precise: even this leaving behind of safeguarding must be removed, until everything is forgotten. At this stage, one abides in the original ground of non-contrivance. Then spiritual powers come of themselves, without being sought.

This is because the obscurations above have been removed, the functions of one's intrinsic nature unfold, and spiritual powers arise naturally. Only then are they spiritual powers manifested from intrinsic nature. Those that depend on a particular method or mantra—and, at a still lower level, on ghosts, spirits, or the like—are dependent powers, not spiritual powers manifested from intrinsic nature.

When one truly reaches this state of non-contrivance, even non-contrivance is unobtainable; there is no such thing as non-contrivance. "A carefree person of the Way, beyond learning and contrivance." Great wisdom appears foolish, like an idiot or a simpleton. Yet people are fond of being clever. Worldly cleverness and intellectual brilliance are cleverness attached to appearances, not true wisdom. Even

when practice reaches the point of seeming like an idiot or simpleton, one has not yet truly arrived home.

One must progress further, until all distinctions are merged and forgotten. Great luminosity shines forth, brilliantly illuminating the great thousand-world system; all Buddhas enter my body, and I enter the bodies of all Buddhas. The Avataṃsaka Sūtra compares this to ten mirrors, mutually reflecting and containing one another without obstruction. Even at this stage, the practice has not yet arrived home. In the end, there is no Dharma to speak of and nothing to say.

Let me tell a koan. A monk asked Caoshan, "What is it like when the bright moon is directly overhead?" Caoshan said, "You are still a man below the steps!" The monk said, "I ask the Master to receive me onto the steps." Caoshan said, "We shall meet when the moon sets." How can they meet when the moon has set? All distinctions are merged and forgotten—one forgets even the reason why. When practice reaches this point, it is like our being in the air all day long without knowing that it is air. At that time one cannot open one's mouth; with a "Hey!" one flicks one's sleeve and returns to the abbot's quarters.

The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is neither empty nor existent. To call it empty: it has mudrās and mantras. To call it existent: the mudrās and mantras have no meaning to discuss, and no thoughts can arise. You are taught to hold to the mantra single-mindedly, which carries you forward. When the mind becomes empty to the proper point, it is like cooking rice until the heat is right: it naturally bursts open.

The Japanese express this well. They say that practicing the Dharma is like putting gunpowder into a jar: a little today, a little tomorrow; when it reaches the saturation point—boom!—it explodes. In our practice, we must absolutely avoid seeking: seeking samādhi, seeking awakening, or seeking spiritual powers. This ruins the practice. You will be unable to enter samādhi, unable to awaken, and still less able to develop spiritual powers.

Some people even say that practicing the Dharma brings no great benefit. I say: this great treasure is given to you, but you lack the blessings to receive it—you sit there indulging in deluded thoughts! Therefore, we must apply ourselves with deep earnestness. We must not recite mantras while simultaneously entertaining deluded thoughts; we must let everything go.

Yesterday, a lay practitioner put it very well. He said, "I was ill and in unbearable pain. What should I do? I made up my mind: 'All right, let me die!' Then things improved: after I sat down, I entered samādhi; my body was gone, and all pain was gone." The Chan school also says that one must not wait with the mind for awakening.

In our practice, we must not deliberately seek anything, but be as ordinary and unconcerned as though nothing were happening. Our spiritual powers are obscured by ourselves. We have the five hindrances of wealth, sex, fame, food, and sleep. The thought of becoming rich is unobtainable, yet everyone wants wealth. Some overseas Chinese and Hong Kong people in particular study Buddhism in hopes of being taught a wealth-deity practice so that they may make a little money.

Esoteric Buddhism has the nine vehicles: the three outer vehicles, the three inner vehicles, and the three esoteric vehicles. The first vehicle among the three inner vehicles is the activity practice, which includes rites for averting calamities and increasing prosperity, such as practices of the Yellow Wealth Deity, Black Wealth Deity, White Wealth Deity, and others. People all want such practices.

A young monk in Hong Kong said, “When word spread that an empowerment for a wealth-deity practice would be given that day, everyone came. Several thousand people suddenly came seeking empowerment.” They flocked to it like ducks! Such Esoteric Buddhist practices are transitional methods: “First entice them with desire, then lead them into the Buddha’s wisdom.” One first satisfies sentient beings’ desires and leads them through the gate. Once they have entered, one teaches them to develop wisdom.

With the Buddha’s wisdom, one understands that everything is unobtainable. Once one gains wealth through a wealth-deity practice, it is very dangerous; trouble may arise. When we truly apply ourselves to practicing the Dharma, we must do so wholeheartedly. Fundamentally, everything is unobtainable: we come empty-handed and go empty-handed. Rather than being forced to let go at the time of death, it is better to develop wisdom now and let go early. Then one may realize the Way and be liberated from birth and death.

If you do not let go, in the end you cannot take away even the smallest thing. That is ignorance. Of the three poisons—greed, anger, and ignorance—ignorance is the most fundamental. If one is free of ignorance and has wisdom, one does not greedily seek and therefore does not become angry. The six realms of rebirth may also be understood in terms of greed, anger, and ignorance: greed is the hungry-ghost realm, anger the asura realm, ignorance the animal realm, and the possession of all three is the hell realm.

The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is formless esoteric practice. It can open up one’s original nature and enable one to see one’s true nature directly. Chan is the wondrous mind of nirvāṇa, the Treasury of the True Dharma Eye; that is, it is our intrinsic nature. When it is opened and we see our intrinsic nature, that is Chan. Therefore, the Heart-of-Heart Esoteric Dharma takes Chan as its essence. Ultimately

speaking, in the Pure Land teaching, the land is mind and mind is the land. When the mind is purified, that very moment is the Pure Land.

When the mind has no stray thoughts, no afflictions, no abiding anywhere, and no demands, that is the Pure Land. Once our minds are pure, the Sahā world is the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss. It is no different from the magnificent Buddha-land of the West, Maitreya Buddha's Inner Court of Tuṣita, or the Eastern Lapis Lazuli World; all are Pure Lands.

Fearing that we might not attain accomplishment through practice in this lifetime, Patriarch Dayu taught us the Maitreya Mantra, enabling us to form an affinity with Maitreya Buddha and preparing us for future rebirth in the Inner Court of Tuṣita. The Buddha-Heart Sutra says that the fourth mudrā of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is for rebirth in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss.

When forming the fourth mudrā, as long as we make the vow to be reborn in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss, we can be reborn there. Moreover, we may be reborn in any of the worlds of the ten directions according to our vows, for the Pure Land is not only the Western Pure Land: east, south, west, north, the four intermediate directions, above, and below are all Pure Lands. Some people believe that only reciting Amitābha Buddha enables one to be reborn in the West. This is a misunderstanding among practitioners of the Pure Land school.

In learning the Buddhadharma, reciting sūtras, upholding mantras, and doing good deeds are all the same as Buddha-recitation. Amitābha Buddha not only emits light to illuminate and guide those of us who practice the Dharma and study Buddhism; even for those who do not study Buddhism, the Buddha emits light to guide them, shining brightly upon sentient beings.

The Liberation Rite for the Intermediate-State Body says that the Buddha emits light upon sentient beings: Amitābha Buddha emits red light, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva emits white light, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva emits blue-green light. They all shine brightly upon sentient beings and guide them. Yet sentient beings with heavy karmic obstacles become frightened when they see the light and run toward darkness; some even run into the hells.

Those who practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma and wish to be reborn in the West need not additionally recite Amitābha Buddha apart from this practice. Yet it is equally possible to recite Amitābha Buddha, because both transform the power of our minds. Some Pure Land practitioners mistakenly believe that Pure Land practice consists only in reciting Amitābha Buddha, and that other dharma gates, such as Esoteric Buddhism, are inferior.

They do not know that reciting the Great Compassion Mantra, the Śūraṅgama Mantra, the Ten Minor Mantras, the Rebirth Mantra, and so forth are all esoteric practices. They are within Esoteric Buddhism without knowing Esoteric Buddhism, and say that Esoteric Buddhism is bad. This is tantamount to reviling their own ancestors, and thus they incur wrongdoing. We need not start anew and practice the Pure Land school again; otherwise, it would be like being Buddhas already while still seeking and praying to Buddhas outside ourselves.

Therefore, the Chan school says that we all sit beside a basket of food yet starve to death without knowing to eat. Those who practice qigong nowadays truly cultivate a provisional method. Qigong is also very good and can strengthen the body and promote longevity; it is only that they cling to qi and cannot empty it, so it is not ultimate.

Yet they can truly cultivate a provisional method. I have seen people still diligently watching their qi on the tram, opening the channels of the Microcosmic Orbit. I said, "You are truly diligent, while we who practice the true Dharma are instead not so diligent. We should cultivate through contemplation while walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, but we forget." Some Pure Land practitioners, too, practice a true Dharma falsely: while reciting Amitābha Buddha, they speak of Zhang San's strengths and Li Si's shortcomings. How can such confused practice lead to accomplishment? They are actually inferior to those who practice qigong. This is truly regrettable.

Now that we know where to begin, we should contemplate at all times and watch where thoughts arise. As soon as a thought comes, bring up the mantra or the Buddha's name, and the thought will be transformed away. To watch means to cultivate through contemplation. Do not relax, and you will make progress.

To what degree have you progressed? Test yourself: Do I still cling to appearances? Is there still anything in my mind? When favorable and wholesome circumstances arise, do I still delight in them and become stirred? When adverse and unpleasant circumstances arise, do I still become afflicted? One must remain unmoved by the eight worldly winds. If one is still moved, it will not do.

We easily notice adverse circumstances, but when circumstances are favorable and we are happy, it is difficult to notice.

There is a Chan koan: A disciple took leave of his master to go on pilgrimage. The master instructed him to be careful and prudent along the way. The disciple said, "Yes. When I speak with people, I am careful: I put tall hats on them, so they do not take offense or oppose me." The master said, "You really know how to manage people."

The disciple replied, “Yes, everyone likes tall hats; only you, Master, do not like them.” The master said, “I do not like tall hats.” Thus, a tall hat had already been placed upon him. Without realizing it, one becomes attached to wholesome and favorable things. Therefore, in cultivation we must engage in continuous and seamless contemplation—uninterrupted and close, never sparse—remaining attentive at all times. Those huatou and koans test whether your mind is empty at all times, empty, luminous, and non-abiding.

Learning the Buddhadharma is the undertaking of a great person: one must be generous and open-hearted, and dare to make sacrifices. Those of narrow capacity find it difficult to accord with Buddhism, while those who are generous and open-hearted easily enter the Way. All worldly dharmas are Buddhadharma; one must remain alert and aware at every moment and be willing to sacrifice everything.

Some ask, “Would it be better for me to leave home or remain a lay practitioner?” They waver over this question, wishing to leave home yet fearing to do so. In fact, everything is the wondrous functioning of our own minds. As long as one is non-abiding, it makes no difference whether one leaves home or not.

It is also difficult to practice after leaving home nowadays. Most temples now conduct repentance rites and sūtra services. Some charge tens of thousands of yuan for a single Water and Land Dharma Assembly, conducting Buddhist services and repentance rites to earn money; otherwise, they would have no income to build Buddha halls, repair bell towers, and so forth. A few temples do not conduct such rites, but must first farm the land, for without farming they have nothing to eat.

Gaomin Temple in Yangzhou is a Chan practice center and only rarely conducts repentance rites. Such Chan practice centers are now very rare. Tiantong Temple in Ningbo, Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou, and Jingci Temple are all Chan practice centers, but they no longer practice Chan meditation. At present, Chan meditation is still practiced at Gaomin Temple in Yangzhou, Jinshan Temple in Zhenjiang, and Wolong Temple in Xi’an.

I heard a young monk say that after a tiring day, he had no energy at all by evening; when he sat in Chan meditation, he only dozed. This is truly regrettable. As for laypeople, they have the afflictions of matters involving wives and children.

But this does not mean that it is difficult to practice whether one leaves home or remains a lay practitioner. No! We must train amid circumstances. Most important is first to understand ourselves and understand that everything is the wondrous functioning of mind, without abiding. Then it makes no difference whether one leaves home or not. We must train amid circumstances, remaining non-abiding at all times and understanding that what can function is our own Buddha-nature.

This is where one begins contemplation; it is not necessary to sit in meditation. Being able to contemplate is the point of entry. If you cannot contemplate amid circumstances, but follow them instead, with no meditative stability at all, you still need to set aside time to sit in meditation.

Yet most important is first to understand oneself. The great garuḍa can fly hundreds of thousands of miles with a single wingbeat. Its ability to fly so far depends on a small force beneath its feet; unless its feet press against the ground, it cannot soar into the air.

Do not underestimate recognizing your intrinsic nature. If you can recognize this point and have unwavering faith in it, then your feet have already pressed against the ground, and one day you will surely fly ten thousand miles like the garuḍa. Patriarch Linji instructed us to recognize that “within this lump of red flesh there is a True Person of No Rank: the very one who now speaks the Dharma and hears the Dharma.” This capacity by which we hear and speak is our intrinsic nature. Have unwavering faith in this, grasp this point, and cultivate right on this point.

The wonder of our Dharma lies in its method of cultivation, which combines Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva teaches us that in Buddha-recitation we must “gather in the six sense faculties and sustain uninterrupted pure mindfulness.” To grasp hold of thoughts is called “gathering in the six sense faculties”—gathering in the faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

As for “uninterrupted pure mindfulness,” ordinary people think that if they quietly recite the Buddha’s name without other thoughts arising, and only the Buddha’s name continues without interruption, this is uninterrupted pure mindfulness. But this is not so. There is still a mind that recites and a Buddha who is recited; subject and object stand in opposition, and so subject and object still remain. There is no purity; it is not pure mindfulness.

Subject and object must both vanish: the mind that recites and the Buddha who is recited must fall away together. Only when all is empty and pure is this pure mindfulness. In upholding a mantra, one must likewise uphold it until subject and object both vanish. With one thought in accord, one thought is Buddha; with every thought in accord, every thought is Buddha. That is, when this thought is released, this thought is pure and is Buddha; if every thought is thus, every thought is Buddha. This must continue without interruption.

To sustain “uninterrupted pure mindfulness” is very difficult. One may be able to do so today but be unable to release oneself tomorrow. Today one may experience an explosion in meditation, but tomorrow it does not come. Why? Because one’s practice is still raw and not yet mature.

There must be continuity: thus today, thus tomorrow, thus the day after tomorrow—thus every day. One must cultivate intensely; one does not succeed merely because of a single explosion. Continuity in stillness is not enough: being able to do this while sitting in meditation is still insufficient. There must also be continuity in activity.

In all activity and functioning, the mind must remain empty, just as in meditation—empty, pure, and non-abiding. In the morning, in the evening, whether at ease or in hardship, it must always be thus, without any difference. Only then is there true continuity. True continuity is to be equally at ease in stillness and activity. The practice of the Pure Land school is profound.

Ordinary people do not apply themselves to practice. After reciting a few phrases of Amitābha Buddha, they think everything is fine and that it does not matter.

“Amitābha Buddha vowed to guide us; at death we can attain rebirth while carrying karma. So it does not matter if I now do some bad things—Amitābha Buddha will guide me. If he does not guide me, then the Buddha has lied.”

In fact, they have misunderstood. Rebirth while carrying karma does not mean carrying this kind of karma. To know the Dharma and deliberately violate it instead increases one's offense; this karma cannot be carried away. What is carried is our habitual tendency to cling, which has not yet been completely exhausted. Even an equal enlightenment bodhisattva still has one final portion of ignorance remaining, not yet wholly emptied; this is karma. Karma is the stirring of mind: the moment a thought stirs, that is karma.

The Buddha does not run before you to guide you. The Buddha is an image manifested within your mind, like the moon's reflection appearing in water. If your mind is impure, it cannot appear; it is not that the Buddha does not come.

Our Heart-of-Heart Dharma is also the Pure Land school. When the mind that upholds the mantra and the mantra being upheld fall away together, one will naturally be reborn in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss. There is no need to start anew and practice the Pure Land school separately.

Many people believe that the Pure Land school is more reliable, but they are mistaken. They do not understand the wondrous functioning of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, which takes Chan as its essence, Esoteric Buddhism as its function, and the Pure Land as its ultimate destination. This Dharma was obtained by Patriarch Dayu through immense hardship. In Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism, this Dharma is not transmitted without twenty or thirty years of training in form-based practices. It is a profound Dharma, belonging to the final teaching of the third vehicle of Esoteric Buddhism. That you have been able to receive such a Dharma is truly a supreme blessing. You must know to cherish it and apply yourselves diligently!