

Informal Talks on the Heart Sūtra

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The Heart Sūtra is not a sūtra merely to be expounded; it is a sūtra to be investigated and practiced, one by which the mind-ground is verified during cultivation. Now, having no alternative, I shall speak of it in accordance with what I have gained from reading the sūtra and with the states realized in your practice, speaking in a way suited to your capacities and sealing mind with mind. It is therefore called Informal Talks on the Heart Sūtra.

The Heart Sūtra is a Dharma gate of perfect and sudden teaching. Its meaning is deeper than that of the Diamond Sūtra: it refutes both emptiness and existence, employing negation and affirmation together. Sentient beings have not clarified the mind-ground and do not comprehend true reality. They give rise to delusion and create karma, sink into the sea of birth and death, cling one-sidedly to existence or to emptiness, and thereby obscure the Middle Way.

After the Buddha's nirvāṇa, the earliest fault was attachment to existence. People thought that the Buddha-Dharma could be obtained like real gold, that one must surely gain something from it, and unconsciously raced outward in search of it. Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva then came to remedy this, widely propagating the school of emptiness. His meaning was that, according to conventional truth, one should speak of existence; according to ultimate truth, all is empty. Sentient beings then gave rise to views of emptiness. In truth, this was the same attachment to existence, the same failure to be empty.

Asaṅga Bodhisattva again requested Maitreya Bodhisattva to teach the Middle Way, removing both attachments to emptiness and existence in order to clarify what is neither empty nor not empty. To cure the illness according to the recipient's capacity, one provisionally speaks of existence and emptiness; but when one transcends truth and leaves wisdom behind, what emptiness or existence could there be? When neither emptiness nor existence remains, this is called the Middle

Way. Yet the Middle Way itself is not established, and true reality is also only a provisional name. The wise understand this directly and immediately. Thus, expounding the prajñā sūtras differs from expounding other sūtras: the essential point is mutual mind-sealing. Seal the sūtra with the mind, seal the mind with the sūtra, and then use the mind to seal emptiness—what is called “passing the examination of an empty mind.”

You have practiced and realized for many days already, and have gradually understood the Mind-Ground Dharma Gate. You may now proceed to discuss prajñā.

“Prajñā” is rendered in Chinese as great wisdom, but this does not fully exhaust its meaning. It should be called “the great wisdom that thoroughly penetrates worldly and supramundane dharmas and is perfectly interfused without obstruction”; only then does its meaning accord fully. Prajñā is the joint cultivation of merit and wisdom, illuminating both existence and emptiness. It removes habitual obstructions, realizes true principle, and is the wondrous virtue in which essence and function are one.

“Pāra” means the other shore. “Mitā” means to arrive; arrival means realization. It is to go from this shore of afflictions, birth, and death to the other shore of bodhi and nirvāṇa. One must possess seven supreme qualities before one may be called pāramitā.

What are these seven? First, abiding in the bodhisattva lineage; this comes after the stage of seeing the Way. Second, relying on great bodhicitta—that is, arousing the four immeasurable minds and so forth. Third, compassion for sentient beings. Fourth, fully engaging in beneficial activities. Fifth, being encompassed by non-characteristic wisdom. Sixth, dedicating all to bodhi. Seventh, not being interrupted by the two obstructions. If even one of these seven is lacking, it cannot be called the other shore. Therefore, unless one practices to the point of realizing samādhi, there is nowhere at all to begin.

“Heart” is a name for that which is firm, real, numinous, and wondrous.

“Sūtra” means to thread together; it means to accord; it is the constant path, the road. In sum, it means that this bewildered mind follows the awakening path of prajñā, leaves the karmic sea of birth and death, and transcends to the other shore. Yet this shore is one state, entering the stream is another, being midstream another, and arriving at the other shore another. To reach the other shore but not go ashore is not thoroughgoing; it is equivalent to not having crossed.

One must reach the land of the other shore before one will never again regress; hence the word “mitā.” In Sanskrit, “tā” means above. When worldly people speak of

the “Many-Hearts Sūtra,” it is truly a laughable misunderstanding. Or perhaps, because worldly people are so full of divided thoughts, they are urged to practice until they become mindless; that too has some reason to it. But they do not know that the Heart Sūtra is a sūtra to be investigated, and that it speaks of the states of bodhisattvas above the eighth bhūmi. To reach the three words “without hindrance” cannot be accomplished before the tenth bhūmi and the stage of wondrous enlightenment.

The foundation of the entire sūtra lies in the two words “at ease.” The three words “Avalokiteśvara” do not refer solely to Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva; they refer to all bodhisattvas, who never depart from this state of ease. Indeed, all sentient beings originally abide in this state as well. Yet because they are covered by ignorance and the two obstructions, they cannot bring it forth. They themselves make themselves not at ease: though they have the essence, they cannot bring its function into operation, and so suffer vainly from inversion.

Some say that ordinary beings differ from bodhisattvas: when they contemplate, they are at ease; when they do not contemplate, they are not at ease. If this were so, prajñā would become a dead thing—would that not be absurd? The “heart” of the Heart Sūtra would still be a heart not yet cultivated, a heart that still cannot use prajñā to cross to the other shore, a suffering and afflicted heart not at ease. Unable to benefit itself, how could it benefit others? It could not be called a bodhisattva.

Yet to reach the state of benefiting oneself and others and attaining great ease, one cannot but practice in reliance on prajñā; moreover, one must practice “profound” prajñā. Prajñā sweeps away emptiness and existence, but profoundly deep prajñā empties even emptiness. Prajñā is a sword: use the sword to destroy views, but in the end one must still destroy the sword. Use the sword to destroy the sword, until there is nothing left to destroy; only then is it ultimate. This is applied according to the state each person has realized; there is no fixed dharma.

As a first step, let us speak of “suffering and affliction.” How are suffering and affliction cut off? Crossing over is itself cutting off. But how does one cross over? One must first understand what “suffering and affliction” are. Obstruction in phenomena is called “suffering”; obstruction in principle is called “affliction.” When one is not at ease in principle and phenomena, that is great suffering and affliction. The entanglements of principle and phenomena do not go beyond the five aggregates.

The “five aggregates” are form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Because they are bound together in a mass that is not easily disentangled, they are called aggregates.

The six sense faculties and the six sense objects all belong to form. For example, when one sees a red flower, faculty and object confront one another and combine to produce seeing. Seeing is then stirred, and the impression is received; immediately one reflects and discriminates: What is this thing? This is called perception. Because of perception, the aggregate of formations flows on; this is called formations. Because perception and formations turn and continue, one recognizes it as a red flower; this is called consciousness.

In brief, when mind and circumstances stand in opposition, whether the matter is good or evil, right or wrong, it never goes beyond these five aggregates. Because one's clinging is firm, the aggregates too are firmly bound. The less one relaxes, the stronger become the mind's comparative calculations and attachments, and the greater become the suffering and affliction of principle and phenomena.

The fundamental cause is the lack of the power of wisdom to see thoroughly that they are originally empty. One mistakes delusion for truth, the insubstantial for the real, and what arises and ceases temporarily and cannot be relied upon for what is permanent and dependable, and so suffers these troubles in vain. Therefore, the wise clearly understand that the root of suffering and affliction does not lie in the five aggregates, but in being unable to empty the five aggregates.

The reason one cannot contemplate them as empty is that one's own power of wisdom-illumination is insufficient. It is insufficient because one's practice is not deep. Thus one uses profound prajñā for contemplation; but this does not mean that prajñā itself consists of two separate things, shallow and deep. It means that, when one's practice has become fully mature, one can see and penetrate deeply, realizing that they are ultimately all empty, and suffering and affliction are thereby crossed over of themselves. Whoever can cross over their own suffering and affliction can certainly cross over others; this is the bodhisattva of great ease.

Sentient beings are originally at ease; they merely abandon it through not awakening. Foolish people fail to understand and think that the five aggregates are poisonous things, and thus fall into annihilationism. They do not know that "seeing that the five aggregates are all empty" does not mean seeing that the five aggregates are all extinguished. Prajñā is not a dead dharma; it requires a living person to use it. Whoever can use prajñā will ultimately never die, because birth and death have been resolved.

Therefore, prajñā has five kinds: literary prajñā, contemplative prajñā, prajñā as true reality, retinue prajñā, and realm prajñā. Through written words one comes to know the features of prajñā, and thereupon activates the function of contemplative prajñā, realizing the essence of prajñā as true reality. The six perfections and myriad practices are all retinues led by prajñā; without them, prajñā's function cannot be

fully displayed. When merit and virtue together provide the support and one attains great ease, this is realm prajñā.

Worldly people are foolish and bewildered, failing to understand the two meanings of form and emptiness. The “emptiness” spoken of is not the emptiness of nothingness, the emptiness after extinction, or an emptiness that cannot be seen. It is precisely the myriad forms before our eyes: existence itself is emptiness. Because they have no inherent nature, they are empty; because they are provisionally combined through causes and conditions, they are empty; because they are ultimately unreal, they are empty.

The sun, moon, and stars; mountains, rivers, and earth; grasses, trees, and forests; palaces, houses, people, animals, and birds—their forms are of countless kinds, yet none is other than form and none is other than emptiness. The wise are not deluded by this and need no detailed explanation, for they have already realized that form itself is emptiness. Without form there is no way to reveal emptiness, and without emptiness there is no way to see form. In their mutual contrast, the two truths of ultimate and conventional reality are established.

The Vimalakīrti Sūtra says: “It is not that form is extinguished into emptiness; form is empty in its own nature.” This emptiness is neither empty nor not empty; it cannot simply be fixed as emptiness, for emptiness too is empty. It is like a mirror reflecting everything: from small to large, from near to far. First it shows my face, then the room, then the gardens and mountains beyond the room, and even the sun, moon, wind, clouds, and all worlds.

The innumerable appearances in the mirror are none other than emptiness and none other than form. The mirror itself and its reflecting have never departed from emptiness and form; all are within form itself as emptiness and emptiness itself as form.

Ordinary beings alone cling to existence, so firmly that it cannot be broken; therefore, “form is not different from emptiness” is spoken to break this attachment. Those of the four fruits cling one-sidedly to emptiness, not knowing that such one-sided emptiness falls into existence, and that emptiness too does not depart from form; therefore, “emptiness is not different from form” is spoken to break this attachment. Bodhisattvas of the provisional vehicles still establish two views concerning form and emptiness and have not integrated the Dharma gate of nonduality; therefore, “form is emptiness; emptiness is form” is spoken to break this attachment.

To say “not different” still carries the sense of a relation between two opposing terms. Here, however, the statement is direct and forceful, without the least hesitation: it plainly says that they are identical and nondual. Without extremely

powerful and profoundly deep prajñā, how could one comprehend the meaning that the dharma realm is one suchness and reveal this single unified mark? All things in the world belong to a subtle, continuous process of arising and ceasing, and some therefore cling to them as annihilated. Yet the cycle never stops: just as grasses and trees flourish each spring, wither in autumn, and flourish again after withering, year after year, others cling to them as permanent. In truth, they arise through the coming together of causes and conditions; they are neither annihilated nor permanent.

Everything in the world consists of appearances that arise through conditions and in relation to one another. Since what is relative cannot be obtained, it must ultimately return to the absolute. To explain the meaning of emptiness: the five aggregates are such that form is like a mass of foam, feeling like a bubble, perception like a mirage, formations like a plantain tree, and consciousness like an illusion. Among the three natures, this is the movement from the nature of dependence on others into the nature of pervasive discrimination and attachment. They are originally the three non-natures, and therefore empty. Even the nature of absolute reality and perfection is also called empty.

In truth, the three natures are neither empty nor not empty. To counter those attached to existence, they are collectively said to be empty. Thus, when it is said to empty the five aggregates, it means only to empty the nature of pervasive discrimination and attachment created by comparative calculation; it does not mean that the nature of dependence on others and the nature of absolute reality and perfection have nothing at all. When the Buddha says that all is empty, it is only because all things lack inherent nature.

As for “suffering and affliction,” they fundamentally arise from delusion. The unbroken continuity of the five aggregates is delusion; from delusion come karma and suffering. Beyond the eight sufferings, there are also the three kinds of suffering. First is the suffering of suffering: painful distress that is hard to bear is called the suffering of suffering. Second is the suffering of change: all worldly pleasures soon deteriorate and pass away, and because they decay, sorrow arises; this is called the suffering of change. Third is the suffering inherent in conditioned existence: all defiled dharmas naturally flow and change, pressing upon one without peace; this is called the suffering inherent in conditioned existence. The three calamities, eight difficulties, and so forth are all called suffering. But when one practices to the point that attachment to self can be forgotten, attachment to dharmas is also destroyed, wisdom-illumination is no longer deluded, and cause and effect are clearly understood, what could suffering then attach itself to?

“Śāriputra” was foremost in wisdom among the Hīnayāna disciples. His mother was named Śāri and was also eloquent in debate, so he was called Śāriputra, the son of

Śāri. To call his name in the assembly and instruct him was, in fact, to address the entire congregation.

“All dharmas” means all phenomena. “The mark of emptiness” means the meaning of emptiness; one must not cling to the character *xiang*, “mark,” in interpreting it. For emptiness, too, has a mark: an empty cup or pot, when filled with water, no longer has the mark of emptiness. Here, “empty” means that all dharmas arise only through the conjunction of causes and conditions: when mind arises, dharmas arise; when mind ceases, dharmas cease. Mind is originally not a dharma; on what, then, could dharmas be established? When mind and objects are both empty, all dharmas are likewise empty.

Since their place of arising cannot be seen and their place of cessation cannot be seen, and since “neither arising nor ceasing” is the fundamental reason, then defilement and purity, increase and decrease, coming and going, sameness and difference, right and wrong, and all such opposites cannot be established.

“Therefore, in emptiness there is no form ...” means that when a bodhisattva contemplates emptiness and thoroughly realizes that all dharmas are originally empty, form likewise cannot be established; nor can the five aggregates, the twelve sense-fields, the eighteen realms, the twelve links of dependent origination, or the dharmas of the Four Noble Truths. None of them can be established. “No” means not clinging, not grasping, and not establishing; it does not mean annihilation or nonexistence, nor does it mean stubbornly clinging to “nothingness.”

Students go astray at this point, and the harmful consequence may extend even to denying cause and effect and acting perversely and contrary to principle. This is most regrettable. The wise do not merely establish nothing at all; they do not even establish this non-establishment. This is called “exhaustion.” It is not merely that there is no ignorance; even the statement that there is no ignorance is itself absent. As said earlier, use a sword to cut off views, and then use the sword to cut off the sword; when there is nothing left to cut, this is called “exhaustion.”

Upon reaching this state, the path of words is cut off and the activity of mind comes to rest; in truth, not even the slightest dharma can be obtained. To speak of wisdom is not wisdom; to speak of obtaining is not obtaining. Thus it says, “no wisdom and also no attainment,” because ultimately there is nothing to attain. The five categories of dharmas—the five aggregates, the twelve sense-fields, the eighteen realms, the twelve links of dependent origination, and the Four Noble Truths—are practices common to the three vehicles.

Practitioners of the two vehicles have not yet relinquished attachment to dharmas; they still take these five categories to be truly existent. Now their true existence is refuted and they are said to be absent, because in their essence and meaning they

are all empty and quiescent. Yet, as skillful means, practitioners are taught to cultivate these five dharmas in order to break the two attachments to self and dharmas, gradually enabling them to enter reality. For the five aggregates, the twelve sense-fields, and the like are all conditioned dharmas, ultimately no more than dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows.

“Bodhisattva” means an awakened sentient being. In their own cultivation, bodhisattvas too must rely on the prajñā dharma gate to cross to the other shore. When they reach the state of “no hindrance,” this is “ultimate nirvāṇa”; they have already transcended to the Buddha stage. When hindrances are absent, all suffering and adversity cease.

Among the ten dharma realms, only Buddhas are not called sentient beings. The remaining nine realms, from bodhisattvas down to hell beings, are all called sentient beings, because “sentient beings” is another name for afflictions. From bodhisattvas above to hell beings below, all have hindrances; the difference lies only in their number and in whether they are coarse or subtle.

For example, hell beings are hindered by a greater portion of greed, anger, and ignorance; hungry ghosts by a greater portion of greed; animals by a greater portion of ignorance; māras by a greater portion of anger; humans by a lesser portion of greed, anger, and ignorance; devas by a lesser portion of greed; śrāvakas by the dharmas of the Four Noble Truths; pratyekabuddhas by the twelve links of dependent origination; and bodhisattvas by the six perfections and myriad practices. Even at the tenth bhūmi and equal enlightenment, there remain extremely subtle hindrances, for there are still sentient beings to liberate and a Buddhahood to attain.

Because of hindrances, there arise distinctions of self and other, gain and loss; fear naturally follows. The desire for profit, the desire for fame, and attachment to one’s own life likewise arise spontaneously. Ordinary beings have approximately five kinds of fear.

What are the five? First, fear of not being able to live, such as anxiety over maintaining one’s livelihood; second, fear of acquiring a bad reputation; third, fear of death; fourth, fear of entering the lower realms; fifth, fear of being inferior to others. This last means fearing that one’s cultivation may not equal that of others and that one may fall back. Although sages may not necessarily have these fears, subtle fears are difficult to remove. Thus, where there is fear, there are inverted views.

There are approximately six kinds of inversion: taking impermanence to be permanence, the first; taking suffering to be happiness, the second; taking impurity to be purity, the third; taking no-self to be a self to which one clings, the fourth;

taking what is false to be right, the fifth; and taking what is not so to be so, the sixth. All these are called inversions of mind. Inversion is the cause, and delusive thoughts and dreams are the result. How, then, can one attain nirvāṇa?

Ni means completeness, and pan means quiescence. Completeness means all-pervasiveness, while quiescence means profound stillness. If even the subtlest inversion remains, it cannot be called “ultimate.” Only when the mind is without hindrance can one transcend to the Buddha stage. When mind is absent, hindrances are absent; when mind is empty, all is empty. If even mind cannot be obtained, there is no need to speak of anything else. Only by obtaining this unobtainable mind does one attain realization.

One thereby realizes anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi. “Anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi” is the gate of the pure bodhicitta of the unborn. To realize this unborn mind, one must likewise rely on the prajñā dharma gate. This is what is meant by “all Buddhas”: not only have the Buddhas of the past done so, but the Buddhas of the present and future, and immeasurable hundreds of thousands of millions of Buddhas, without exception rely on this gate in the same way. How vast and lofty it is! What cannot be conceived or discussed—could it be anything but prajñā?

What has been explained above is the exoteric teaching. It can still be described in words; but at this point there is simply no name for it. Vast indeed—none can name it. For students, it may be possible to lead them along it, but not to make them know it. This knowing is one’s own realized knowing; it cannot be pointed out by another so as to make one know it.

What follows is all esoteric teaching and is therefore called a mantra. Because it cannot be spoken, it can only be praised: “This is the great spiritual mantra ...,” and so forth. These four words, “This is the,” directly point to the source of mind, without the slightest reservation or hesitation; they signify certainty without doubt. The momentum of the whole sūtra is like a hundred rivers flowing into the sea, reaching its culmination here.

Not only is the literary momentum so; the experiential realm is truly so as well. How could those who have not seen the true aspect know or fathom its profundity and wonder?

As for the meanings of “great,” “spiritual,” “bright,” and so forth: “great” means all-encompassing; “spiritual” means universally penetrating; “bright” means illuminating all without exception; “unsurpassed” means without comparison; and “unequaled” means without counterpart. They are all praises of the virtues of prajñā, summed up in the final phrase: “true and not false.” It then suddenly seems to turn toward the conditioned.

Maitreya Bodhisattva said: "It is not conditioned, nor separate from the conditioned; it is the realm of the nirvāṇa of all Tathāgatas." "The Tathāgata is one who speaks truth, speaks reality, speaks according to what is, does not deceive, and does not speak otherwise. The Dharma realized by the Tathāgata is neither real nor unreal."

The first half of the Heart Sūtra speaks of no real existence; the latter half again speaks of no unreality. People should illumine matters with living prajñā and must not cling to words in a dead interpretation. I shall point out its essential purport for you all. Though the Heart Sūtra has few words, it contains many levels and turns; throughout, it expounds the profundity and wonder of prajñā.

At the very beginning, it sets forth the bodhisattva's great freedom. The prajñā practiced is profound prajñā, capable of crossing beyond all suffering and adversity by seeing that all is empty. In this passage, the words "profound," "all," and "all" mutually correspond. Ordinary beings do not understand the five aggregates and therefore do not know how to contemplate them. Because they do not contemplate them, they are not empty, and their suffering is never crossed beyond.

Those who have attained the four fruits already know the five aggregates and contemplate them. Yet they cling one-sidedly to emptiness, abhor the five aggregates, and tend toward annihilation. Though empty, they are still not empty, and their suffering cannot ultimately be called transcended. Bodhisattvas see that the five aggregates are already empty, but they have not yet forgotten the subject and object. Although the five aggregates are empty, the act of seeing them as empty has not itself become empty. In that very instant of seeing, the five aggregates are still in flux. So long as subject and object remain, one has not reached the emptiness of emptiness and cannot call it "all empty."

Only a Buddha has neither a self that contemplates nor five aggregates that are contemplated, and there is no view in between of emptiness or nonemptiness. The three wheels are completely empty and everything is utterly purified; hence it is called "all empty." Only then does one reach the meaning that form and emptiness are nondual. One realizes, with freedom, the meaning that all dharmas do not arise, neither identical with all things nor separate from all things. Thus the five aggregates, twelve sense-fields, eighteen realms, twelve links of dependent origination, and dharmas of the Four Noble Truths are all seen as belonging to emptiness.

To empty even what has been emptied is called "exhaustion." This is all brought back to and confirmed in one statement: "because there is nothing to attain." If there is truly nothing to attain, what is there that can be hindered? And what is there to be hindered? If this is not ultimate nirvāṇa, what is it? What follows is further

wonderful: attaining this attainment of no attainment. This attainment of no attainment is precisely anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi.

Because the fundamental essence of bodhi is empty and quiescent, this is precisely when the flower of the unborn opens and one sees the Buddha of one's intrinsic nature. The sūtra repeatedly returns to the prajñā dharma gate, saying that bodhisattvas are thus. Even Buddhas are thus; how could ordinary beings cultivate and realize attainment by going beyond this dharma gate? Those in the world who vainly hope to attain realization through spiritual powers should understand this.

Moreover, this work lies entirely with oneself and has nothing to do with teachers or patrons. Seeking the Dharma without seeking oneself is truly to mislead oneself. Thus the word "know" is singled out as the crucial key. This knowing is the knowing of one's own cultivation, attainment, and realization. One knows for oneself, as one knows warmth and cold; it cannot be expressed in words and seems to have no reality. Yet when all suffering and adversity are ultimately removed, it is not unreal. The whole text turns from existence to emptiness, and from emptiness to existence, directly realizing neither emptiness nor existence. It has no name; it is called only "Avalokiteśvara." Tell me, then: which is Avalokiteśvara? Only upon understanding this may one be permitted to read the Heart Sūtra.

Here concludes Informal Remarks on the Heart Sūtra.

There is something further to say:

People of this land have a special affinity with the Heart Sūtra. For thousands of years, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist, old or young, men or women, Confucian or Buddhist, none have failed to delight in reading the Heart Sūtra. This is sufficient to show the deep prajñā capacity of the people of China. Sadly, they have never put the Heart Sūtra into practice; their reading and recitation are vain exertions, and suffering and adversity remain as before.

The Heart Sūtra is the sole dharma gate that teaches you to understand the mind-ground, open the Buddha's knowledge and vision, and eliminate the knowledge and views of sentient beings. Its destination is the cessation of suffering and the attainment of freedom. Yet to contemplate the five aggregates as originally empty requires prajñā. Since everyone possesses the fundamental essence of prajñā in full, the question is how to awaken it.

I once sought instruction from an elder and asked, "What is meant by practicing prajñā? And how does one see that all is empty?" He said, "This is the work of bodhisattvas, not the work of ordinary people like us. Since I am unfit to speak of it, you are also unfit to ask about it. You need only read more, and naturally you will awaken," and so on.

This rebuff nearly caused me to lose ten years. I reflected on how many people must have been harmed by such words, and it truly pained me. I then considered that among the immeasurable hundreds of thousands of dharma gates, there is not one through which samādhi cannot be realized and the true aspect seen; nowhere is there not the wondrous functioning of prajñā. Yet without practice, one can never realize it. You must not abandon yourselves. I shall therefore give a brief account of dharma gates for cultivating and realizing samādhi.

Ordinary beings and sages differ only in delusion and awakening. Because they do not discern the five aggregates, they cannot transform consciousness into wisdom; all this is due to being obscured by sensory objects and delusion—what is called the delusion of being separated by the aggregates. Therefore, without practice one cannot understand one's intrinsic nature, and awakening comes only afterward.

Take, for example, a person who commits the ten evil deeds. At first, it is like being shrouded in a mist, not knowing why. Once the evil karma has come to fruition and the law has been broken, one realizes that it was wrong, but repentance is already too late. This is called "awareness coming afterward." Whenever awareness comes afterward, each thought has a before and after; the mind loses its master, now suddenly east, now west, now here, now there. When external circumstances appear, one is swept along by them. This is the root of birth and death.

For sages, awareness comes first; that is, illumination comes first. In every matter, cause and effect are clearly discerned; in every thought, the mind does not lose its master. The mind is not shifted, thoughts have no before or after, and there is no interruption between them. What, then, could cause one to be swept along? Through the power of samādhi, one realizes that all is empty and becomes continuous and undivided. Thus one passes from an ordinary being into sagehood.

One must first enter the proper path of cultivation, employing prajñā to initiate contemplation. Seeing all things as empty, suffering is naturally dissolved. Yet without cultivating and realizing samādhi, there is no way to begin. The methods of cultivation and realization do not go beyond two approaches: first, the practice of holding a name; second, the practice of contemplating appearances.

These two methods have the same intent: first use the one to break through the many. The myriad dharmas return to the One; when the power of returning to the One is sufficient, this single thought is no thought, and this single appearance is no appearance. Those who contemplate appearances likewise gather the myriad thoughts into one; thus it is said that they share the same intent.

For those beginning the practice of mindfulness, they cannot sustain mindfulness without holding to it. For example, when one recites the Buddha's name and, midway through, suddenly hears a sound or sees a form, one is drawn away by it.

One must turn back and hold to the practice again. This is what is meant by being unable to sustain mindfulness without holding to it.

Therefore, one must recite the Buddha's name honestly and steadfastly. When one recites until a single thought accords with it, one is no longer shifted or led away and does not fall into preceding and succeeding thoughts. That very present thought is one-pointedness of mind without distraction. Only then is one reciting without holding to the recitation; this is called Buddha-recitation in terms of true reality. When one can recite without holding to it, one has entered the state of suchness, unmoving. The six sense faculties can function interchangeably and are not shifted by sensory objects. Unless one has directly realized samādhi, it is difficult to understand the meaning and state involved here.

If recitation becomes continuous and undivided, without falling into preceding and succeeding thoughts, then amid all direct perceptions one is not deluded by the interval obscuring rebirth. The practice of contemplating appearances is the same: when one thought encompasses all appearances, all appearances are removed, and only then can the one appearance appear before one. The one appearance is no appearance; this is called true reality.

The deluded thoughts of ordinary beings continue thought after thought; every thought is deluded, and every thought is separated. Thus they fall into birth and death. But once samādhi has been realized, turn awareness around so that it comes first, remaining constantly aware and illuminating. "Turn around and topple the city of nirvāṇa; know that birth and death are originally empty"—this is its meaning.

The difference between sages and ordinary beings lies in awareness or lack of awareness. Once there is awareness, the further issue is whether it comes before or after. When awareness comes afterward, one notices only after one has already been swept along; nevertheless, this is ten times superior to being unaware. When awareness comes first, one can transform everything, for through the power of samādhi one remains unmoved. Hence it is said: "Do not fear the arising of thoughts; fear only that awareness comes too late." To be unmoved amid movement is to realize samādhi. Samādhi is right concentration. Whether one cultivates Pure Land, Chan, or Esoteric Buddhism, without realizing samādhi it cannot be called "cultivation."

Sentient beings are originally not inverted. They are originally pure, perfect, and luminous, without habitual tendencies of greed, anger, ignorance, and the like. Originally, they neither arise nor cease and are originally unmoving. Speaking of their physical bodies, they originally live for more than eighty-four thousand years, are originally upright and adorned with fine marks, and feed on thoughts, needing neither fertile soil nor rice and grain. Speaking of their transformation bodies, they

originally possess wondrous functioning as countless as the sands of the Ganges and can give rise to all phenomena.

Originally, they are fully endowed with spiritual powers. Only because they are covered by ignorance do they fail to know the true reality of their own minds. Once they become slightly attached to fertile soil, their bodily appearance changes according to the quantity and flavor of their food, and from this arise minds that contend over right and wrong and struggle for superiority. Karma such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and false speech then arises in succession.

The various clans and surnames, local customs, and karmic habits form the various destinies of sentient beings and produce various bodies of the five aggregates. These countless complexities may be summarized as the eighty-four thousand gates of affliction, for which the eighty-four thousand pāramitās serve as remedies.

Among the six pāramitās, prajñā is the master; among the ten pāramitās, prajñā is likewise the guiding principle. Even among the eighty-four thousand dharma gates, prajñā is the principle. All this is collectively called “cultivation.” Because sentient beings do not recognize their own treasure, the Buddha guides and liberates them through skillful means.

It is like the son of a wealthy family who becomes separated in childhood, remains long apart from his parents, and becomes a beggar. Decades later, after his parents have searched and verified that he is indeed their son, they urge him to return home. But the son has completely forgotten and does not dare accept; instead, he suspects that they are luring him with evil intentions.

Having no alternative, his parents first hire him as a servant and lead him through the gate. Gradually they have him manage the household affairs, show him increasing favor, promote him to steward, and then draw him into the position of a close secretary. Only afterward do they slowly explain: “You are originally our son. You were lost in a certain year, and only now have we found you. Fearing that you would be suspicious and afraid, we had no choice but to bring you here through skillful means.”

“Now we entrust the entire family estate to you. It is originally your own treasure; you need no longer doubt.” The son then weeps bitterly and accepts it with reverence, as if awakening from a dream. This is the one great cause and condition for which the Buddha appears in the world. The one great matter in this world is realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature, opening the Buddha’s knowledge and vision. Learning the Buddha’s teachings is not difficult; what is difficult is entering through faith.

The difficult-to-believe teaching is simply that one must have faith in oneself: one is originally a Buddha-seed, originally endowed with a complete treasure, but has forgotten it because of ignorance and regards oneself as a beggar or impoverished son. Prajñā opens the path of returning to one's source. Today the first great task is to seek out the root of the illness; that root lies in delusion, karma, and suffering. First, one must drive the needle deeply into the word "delusion."

Illness has degrees of depth, and numbness likewise has degrees of depth. If, when the needle goes in, the sensation is keen, the illness is easy to treat. Among the so-called eight difficulties, the seventh is worldly intelligence and eloquence, which obstruct entry into the Way. It is like dust and grime on glass: even if accumulated several inches thick, so that no light comes through, it is still relatively easy to treat.

But if it is oily grime, although the coating is thin, it is hardest to wipe away. The more it is wiped, the dimmer it becomes. Such a person mistakenly takes it for brightness and delights in it, refusing to advance. This is the obstruction of knowledge among the five obscurations. The root of delusion has still not been removed, the root of karma has not been cut off, and the fundamental great affliction remains. Doubt is the fourth [obscurations]; it is the overall root of all afflictions arising from ignorance.

Everyone knows that the destination of practice is Buddhahood, but there are three preliminary questions: first, why should one study Buddhism? Second, with what does one study Buddhism? Third, what is a Buddha?

Now that you all understand the aim of studying Buddhism, if you do not feel suffering, you will not be willing to turn back.

But how should one practice the Dharma? It is to use the mind to discipline the mind, cultivating until one understands clearly.

What is called "Buddha" is not merely the fruition Buddha; it is in fact the causal Buddha. The fruition Buddha has no real connection with us. Yet whether fruition Buddha or causal Buddha, it is only the same awakened mind. If my mind is awakened, it is equal to that of all Buddhas.

In brief, use the mind to cultivate the mind until perfect bodhi is attained; stop at the highest good. This is collectively called anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi, translated as unsurpassed, right, and equal awakening, which is the meaning of the unborn. In comparison with bodhisattvas, a Buddha is called unsurpassed; in comparison with the two vehicles, right and equal; and in comparison with ordinary beings, right awakening.

In fact, unsurpassed, right, and equal awakening is also a provisional name. The sūtra says, “There is no wisdom and also no attainment.” Attainment without attainment is called true attainment. Anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi is the meaning of the unborn. The syllable a stands at the beginning of the Sanskrit alphabet and means that arising is unobtainable; it rightly heads all that is unobtainable.

Practitioners must necessarily have a course of practice. Ordinary beings can in principle enter directly into the ground of the Tathāgata. Although this is a sudden teaching, its meaning lies in awakening: awakening is sudden awakening, while practical matters require gradual cultivation. There are three kinds of awakening: awakening at the level of principle, awakening in practical matters, and awakening through realization.

Awakening at the level of principle means deeply believing that mind, Buddha, and sentient beings are without difference, and that in this very life one can certainly see one’s true nature and attain Buddhahood. Awakening in practical matters means practicing earnestly oneself and awakening to something genuinely attained. Awakening through realization means that, even if one has gained something oneself, without a teacher’s confirmation one’s realization is not genuine; one also lacks steadiness, may become doubtful and retreat midway, and cannot advance diligently.

Practitioners should understand the Dharma of suffering and happiness, and realize that an unclear mind-ground is the foremost suffering in the world. Awakening to the fact that it is no solution to remain submerged like this, they should urgently seek liberation. Practitioners should seek a good spiritual friend, who can reveal that their own Buddha-nature is wholly complete and flawless, and that they have fallen unjustly only because it has been covered by beginningless ignorance. Although they wish to exert themselves and accomplish something, they cannot immediately free themselves because beginningless habitual tendencies have deeply permeated them.

Therefore, the root of all illness in one life lies entirely in the mind-ground. Practitioners should understand that the destination of cultivation is learning to become a Buddha, with emphasis on seeking it within oneself—not seeking the Buddha, not seeking spiritual powers, and not seeking outside oneself. The sole dharma gate lies in investigating the mind-ground. Practitioners should recognize the insufficiency of their own strength and seek supportive conditions from a good spiritual friend, who transmits the true Dharma. They should cultivate reverently according to the Dharma until they reach the ground of freedom. Practitioners should know that, in cultivation, calmness and insight must advance together, samādhi and wisdom must support each other, awareness and illumination must be

maintained at every moment, and diligent effort must not retreat. Then perhaps they will not fail the Buddha's great compassion.

Previously, a chart was set forth comparing the identical essence but differing functions of sages and ordinary beings, for purposes of reference. Know that sages and ordinary beings are originally nondual. It is only because sentient beings cannot know their own minds as they truly are that they mistakenly grasp the four elements as the marks of their own bodies, the reflected shadows of conditions among the six sense objects as the marks of their own minds, and the five aggregates as not empty—the root of birth and death. Now, with the wisdom sword of *prajñā*, cut off the road of birth and death and ascend beyond to the shore of awakening. This depends solely on the practitioner's own resolve. How is it cut off? By seeing clearly.

Yet the Buddha Dharma is not merely for one's own liberation; it actively liberates sentient beings. Dedicate merit everywhere to sentient beings, hoping that they too will advance diligently, and recite the mantra: "Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond to the other shore; swiftly accomplish unsurpassed bodhi." This is the general meaning of the *Prajñāpāramitā* mantra. As for the eighteen realms, the twelve links of dependent origination, the Dharma of the Four Noble Truths, and the like, those seeking explanations of the words may consult the various commentaries on the Heart Sūtra.

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