Selected Gems from the Mind Altar

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Teacher Qi Zhijun



Teacher Qi Zhijun

Preface

The author of this book, Qi Zhijun, is ancestrally from Henan Province. An electronic technology engineer, he graduated from the Department of Physics at Zhengzhou University in Henan in 1977 and subsequently worked for many years in the design and development of electronic instruments and equipment. Teacher Qi is simple and unadorned by nature, without concern for outward brilliance, yet refined, perceptive, and quietly wise. Having lost his mother in childhood and experienced life's vicissitudes by middle age, he has had a genuine experience of life's suffering, emptiness, and impermanence. He feels deep compassion for sentient beings who cannot relinquish greed and anger, and his great vow to attain liberation and liberate sentient beings arose in his youth and only grew stronger with age.

In the autumn of 1989, when causes and conditions came together, Teacher Qi went to Shanghai to pay respects to Master Yuanyin and received empowerment in the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. Thereafter, he forgot himself for the sake of the Dharma, diligently practiced seated meditation, and rigorously tempered himself.

He once composed five Poems on Awakening to the Mind, presenting his understanding for examination. He received Master Yuanyin's encouragement and approval. The master personally wrote comments, confirmed his realization, and instructed him: "Neither emptiness nor provisional existence is established; within the middle, too, there is nothing. Transformed into spring mud, protect the multitude." The master also conferred upon him the qualification to bestow empowerment and entrusted him with widely propagating the Heart-of-Heart Dharma.

From that time onward, Teacher Qi spared no effort in building temples, welcoming monastics, and traveling throughout the country to expound the Dharma and confer empowerment. In letters, Master Yuanyin repeatedly expressed his admiration: "Although we are far apart, our minds are in perfect accord, without the slightest barrier between us." "You have integrated and comprehended the Buddhadharma; this is truly gratifying. In the future, who will shoulder the Tathāgata's household affairs if not my son Zhijun?!"

Since Master Yuanyin transmitted the Dharma to him, Teacher Qi has guided a great many Buddhist disciples with profound and expansive compassion, consummate wisdom, deep realization, and unfathomably skillful means, inspiring later students to return together to the Buddha Vehicle. Upholding the instructions bequeathed by three generations of patriarchs, Teacher Qi continues to emphasize that the Heart-of-Heart Dharma takes Chan as its essence, Esoteric Buddhism as its function, and the Pure Land as its ultimate destination.

He is exceedingly rigorous in discerning the mind and intrinsic nature and never makes concessions lightly. Yet whenever he encounters someone of fine ability, he

invariably strips away that person's experiential states and sweeps aside conceptual constructs, so that they must recognize it directly in that very moment. Teacher Qi's Dharma teachings are at times concise and direct, at times profound, subtle, and earnest. At times they are like thunder and lightning—before one's eyes, then suddenly behind one's back—leaving one scarcely able to take it all in; at other times they are like a leisurely breeze across the fields, relaxed and lively, benefiting both young and old alike.

In recent years, observing that some students of heart esotericism often misunderstand "the point where thought ceases and the lucid, distinctly present spiritual knowing," and that some cling rigidly to states of empty luminosity, Teacher Qi has stressed that what is called the emptying of body, mind, and world, and the manifestation of the intrinsic nature of spiritual knowing, is precisely "unobtainable."

At the very instant when this spiritual knowing stands forth vividly, students should realize that all phenomena are originally illusory and that our intrinsic nature is originally liberated. They may thereby realize the essence and activate its function, freely and without obstruction. If they cling rigidly to spiritual knowing and do not understand that all phenomena are intrinsic nature itself, they cannot respond to conditions and function accordingly. This is diametrically opposed to the fundamental intent of the Buddhadharma and the teachings of the patriarchs.

Because certain disciples of heart esotericism have also debated the principles of contemplation off the meditation cushion, Teacher Qi, after synthesizing the relevant instructions of three generations of patriarchs, creatively summarized the central points of effort in the three stages of off-cushion contemplation as "The Three Steps of Contemplation": First, neither follow thoughts nor be moved by circumstances; second, in a solemn moment of awakening, clarity appears before one.

Third, one is originally Buddha—what is there to contemplate?! In fact, all of Teacher Qi's discussions of the Dharma proceed from the realities of practice. Speaking of what is original, the intrinsic nature is inherently complete: even one step is already not so, so how could there be three steps? Yet as a skillful sequence for practice and realization, these three steps are indeed real and not false.

When addressing students of varying capacities in his daily answers to questions, Teacher Qi always emphasizes that "the focus of practice is to seek liberation." One must practice diligently for the liberation of oneself and all sentient beings. The essential key to liberation is to awaken to the fact that intrinsic nature has never been bound, afflictions have never truly arisen, and the Buddhadharma has originally been wordless.

For sentient beings unable to enter the formless, Teacher Qi resolutely instructs his disciples to “turn their minds toward the Pure Land,” holding that “the Dharma gate of Buddha-recitation is the most reliable.”

When he finds students wavering indecisively and drifting among different schools, squandering their time, Teacher Qi is deeply distressed and earnestly advises: “Please be sure to choose a Dharma gate suited to you—whether Buddha-recitation, Chan inquiry, or esoteric practice. Put it into practice until conceptual understanding falls away; persevere without slackening, and go deeply into one gate.” Only by going deeply into one gate can one possibly gain insight by analogy and experience the essence of the Buddhadharma; only then is it possible to transcend birth and death in this very life. To waste one’s energy on disputes between schools and debates over doctrine is to go against the Buddha’s teachings.

In addition, Teacher Qi’s answers to questions address such matters as scriptural interpretation, inspiration from koans, guidance in seated meditation, and various fundamental issues in Buddhist practice.

At the earnest request of colleagues from many quarters, fellow disciples of the Mind-Seal school have labored to search for and compile these materials. Teacher Qi’s answers to the many questions concerning the Buddhadharma that practitioners have raised over the years are now collected and published in this volume. Although these materials constitute only a very small portion of Teacher Qi’s many answers, and although the hurried compilation has inevitably resulted in omissions, one may know the flavor from a single drop of water. We hope that Buddhist disciples will not take them lightly merely because they are readily available. If they study them respectfully and examine themselves diligently, they will surely benefit their own practice and liberation.

May all sentient beings swiftly open wisdom and together attain right awakening.

Respectfully prefaced by Song Kejun at Nanhu Zhongyuan, Beijing

January 26, 2007

Part One: Understanding the Buddhadharma

I. Basic Knowledge of Buddhism

(I) Buddhism and Human Life

1. How should practitioners regard family, career, and money?

Answer: Family is a responsibility; a career is one's duty; money is a tool.

2. Are marital affinities truly ordained by Heaven?

Answer: Marital affinities, too, are causes and conditions. They were formed by the people themselves in previous lives. Once the conditions ripen, they cannot escape them. Calling it “ordained by Heaven” merely makes it easier to understand; in fact, they themselves have determined it. If they do not seek liberation, they will remain entangled life after life, until the conditions are exhausted. “All dharmas arise from causes and conditions; when conditions are exhausted, dharmas too cease . . .”

3. How should one practice after marriage?

Question: Although I once aspired to leave home, I now know very well that this is certainly not very likely; my parents would not agree to it. Yet I have now become somewhat fearful even of falling in love. My girlfriend keeps asking me: surely life after marriage will be different from that of ordinary people, won't it? Yes—what should one do after marriage? How should one practice? This is something I currently have no choice but to consider, and I hope Teacher Qi will kindly instruct me.

Answer: Since leaving home is not possible, why can you not live normally after marriage?

4. Can one see one's true nature without abstaining from sexual desire between husband and wife?

Answer: What does one thing have to do with the other? Kitchen utensils and toilet fixtures should not be sold together.

5. In educating children, should one use Buddhist methods or worldly methods?

Answer: Oh? Do Buddhist methods conflict with worldly methods?

6. On Fortune-Telling

Question: Some people's fortune-telling is also very accurate.

Answer: Fortune-telling is not accurate for those who truly practice. The person Yuan Liaofan encountered could be considered a master in this field, yet even he was unable to calculate accurately.

Question: Why is that?

Answer: Because practice can eliminate karma. The Diamond Sūtra says: “Furthermore, Subhūti, if good men or good women receive, uphold, read, and recite this sūtra, and are despised by others, then because they are despised by others in this life, the karmic offenses from previous lives for which they should have fallen into the evil realms will be eliminated. They will attain unsurpassed, complete, perfect awakening.”

7. On Leaving Home

Question: How does one leave home while remaining a householder?

Answer: There are four kinds of leaving home:

1. Leaving home in body but not in mind—the worms within a lion's body.

2. Leaving home in mind but not in body—outwardly appearing in the form of a lay practitioner, while inwardly carrying out the conduct of a bodhisattva.

3. Leaving home in both body and mind—pillars of the Dharma.

4. Leaving home in neither body nor mind—one must urgently arouse bodhicitta. Though this skin-bag is foul, it is not easily obtained. If this opportunity is missed in an instant, one will not be able to make use of this foul skin-bag again.

8. What is meant by “transcending birth and death”?

Answer: To transcend birth and death is to directly realize that there has never been any birth and death to transcend.

9. How can one practice until awakening and realization of the Way?

Question: How can I know that the “essence” exists?

Answer: Only through realization can it be known.

Question: How can one practice until awakening and realization of the Way?

Answer: Choose a dharma gate suited to you—whether Buddha-recitation, Chan investigation, or esoteric practice—and, once practice begins, let conceptual understanding cease; penetrate deeply into a single gate. Only then is it possible to attain right experience (experience being what is meant by “receiving”). Even if one understands the principles, at most this can be called right view. Right view and right experience are like the two wheels of a cart; neither can be lacking.

(II) Buddhism and Society

10. In practicing Buddhism, is it possible not to sever one's worldly ties?

Answer: To study Buddhism is to directly realize that, fundamentally, there are no worldly ties to be severed.

11. Does making plans amount to "seeking something" or "gaining something"?

Answer: Making arrangements and plans does not necessarily mean "seeking something" or "gaining something." For example, in running a business, one may decide what business to undertake and plan how to carry it out; this does not necessarily mean "seeking something" or "gaining something." But if one seeks financial gain by harming customers, cheating and swindling, and stopping at nothing, that is "seeking something" and "gaining something."

Question: I still do not quite understand. Harming customers is certainly "gaining something." But if one does not harm customers, and receiving fair compensation does not count as "gaining something," then what is "fair"? It becomes tangled and unclear again.

Answer: The first group of lay disciples accepted by Śākyamuni Buddha were merchants. If one does business without making money, how can one sustain oneself?

12. May Buddhist practitioners buy lottery tickets or stocks?

Answer: What is your purpose in buying them?

Question: What if it is an investment, and one does not mind losing money—is that acceptable?

Answer: Put aside for the moment whether or not you mind losing money. What is the purpose of investing?

Question: To be honest, it is still to make a profit. I simply hope not to have to work a nine-to-five job; it would be like taking on a second job.

Answer: Then do not say, "I do not mind losing money."

13. It Is Not a Matter of Treating Money Like Wastepaper

Question: Teacher, you treat money like wastepaper and are content with a life of poverty. (This comment was prompted by the fact that our late teacher once decisively refused an offering of 80,000 yuan from a friend.—Editor's note)

Answer: We should all treat greed like wastepaper; it is not that we should treat money like wastepaper.

14. Why Is It Said That It Is Difficult to Practice the Way Amid Wealth and Honor?

Answer: Is it easy for poor people to practice the Way? It seems to have little to do with poverty or wealth; the key lies in one's mind of practice.

15. How Are Wholesome and Unwholesome Thoughts Distinguished in Worldly Life?

Answer: There are three kinds of wholesome thoughts: if it benefits others even at one's own expense, and one still does it, this is called the highest good; if it benefits others without harming oneself, and only then one does it, this is called middling good; if it benefits others and oneself, and only then one does it, this is called lesser good. There are also three kinds of unwholesome thoughts: if it harms others as well as oneself, and one still does it, this is called great evil; if it harms others without harming oneself, and only then one does it, this is called middling evil; if it harms others but benefits oneself, and only then one does it, this is called lesser evil.

Question: Why is refraining from thoughts of good and evil called a pure thought?

Answer: Ah! Refraining from thoughts of good and evil is liberation. Is that not pure?

Question: Why is it said that studying Buddhism does not mean becoming unable to distinguish good from evil?

Answer: Refraining from such thoughts does not mean being unable to distinguish clearly.

Question: Knowing good and evil is discrimination; if one does not cling to them, then one ceases further discrimination. Is that right?

Answer: Clearly knowing good and evil does not necessarily constitute discrimination. "Not clinging" means not holding it in one's heart.

16. Buddhism and Christianity, Confucianism, and Other Traditions

Question: Studying Confucius or Christianity may not lead to ultimate liberation, but it is still a way to increase merit and virtue and eliminate habitual tendencies. When one's merit and virtue are sufficient, it naturally becomes easier to realize the Way. Therefore, I say that these are all methods of practice. Of course, the best course is to cultivate both merit and wisdom.

Answer: Your explanation is quite correct. Buddhism inherently includes the teachings of the five vehicles: the human vehicle, deva vehicle, śrāvaka vehicle,

pratyekabuddha vehicle, and bodhisattva vehicle. The human and deva vehicles are based on the five precepts and ten wholesome actions, and are worldly wholesome dharmas. The śrāvaka vehicle, based on the Four Noble Truths; the pratyekabuddha vehicle, based on the twelve links of dependent origination; and the bodhisattva vehicle, based on the six perfections and myriad practices—these alone are the paths of liberation that ultimately transcend good and evil.

With a devout heart, one turns toward goodness and aspires to the human and deva realms, observing the five precepts and ten wholesome actions without daring to violate even one of them. How is this not practice? When one's human qualities are complete and one's heavenly disposition perfected, only then may one attain the fruition of the human and deva realms in future lives. How easy is it to attain the fruition of the human and deva realms? Although other religions do not go so far as to teach the paths of liberation of the latter three vehicles, their worldly wholesome dharmas do not conflict with Buddhism. Therefore, the Buddha said: "All dharmas are Buddha Dharma."

(III) Buddhism and Science

17. In plain language, what is the sequence in which the four great elements of the world arise?

Answer: The Śūraṅgama Sūtra has a passage on this.

Question: Please explain this passage from the Śūraṅgama Sūtra: (The following is Teacher Qi's section-by-section explanation—editor's note.)

Sūtra: "Awareness, brightness, emptiness, and obscurity stand in opposition and thereby give rise to movement. Thus there is the wind wheel that supports and holds the world."

Answer: Let us first discuss the awareness in "awareness, brightness, emptiness, and obscurity." Buddha means awakened one; awareness refers to Buddha-nature. In contemporary terms, Buddha-nature is the source of space, time, and life. Buddha-nature possesses three major characteristics: brightness, emptiness, and obscurity. (1) Brightness—it is ultimately never annihilated. That is, the spiritually aware nature free from thought. (2) Emptiness—it is ultimately unobtainable.

That is, its essence is formless, pure, and empty and quiescent. (3) Obscurity—it ultimately contains all existents. How can containing all existents be called "obscurity"? Because all existents originate from the first thought of ignorance. What is this first thought of ignorance? It is this: "The nature of awareness is necessarily

bright, yet one mistakenly makes awareness of that brightness." Buddha-nature is originally bright, yet one gives rise to the first thought of recognizing that brightness.

Someone asked, "In 'the nature of awareness is necessarily bright, yet one mistakenly makes awareness of that brightness,' where does this 'mistakenly' come from?" It comes from this obscurity. This obscurity is one of the three major characteristics of Buddha-nature; it is simply thus by nature.

Because one mistakenly makes awareness of brightness, opposition arises. Once there is opposition, movement begins. Yao means movement. Of the four great elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, the wind element refers to movement. "Thus there is the wind wheel that supports and holds the world"—the world's first characteristic is movement, or, in other words, operation.

Sūtra: "Because of emptiness, movement arises; when firmness and brightness are established, obstruction appears. That which is called gold and treasure is awareness of brightness establishing firmness. Thus there is the gold wheel that maintains the lands."

Answer: "Because of emptiness, movement arises"—because the essential nature of Buddha-nature is empty and quiescent, as mentioned in point (2) above, it can accommodate motion; therefore, movement arises. "When firmness and brightness are established, obstruction appears"—because Buddha-nature is ultimately never annihilated, as mentioned in point (1) above, material objects possessing substantial obstruction appear in motion. This is like pressing on one's eyes and seeing flowers in empty space; this is the meaning of "awareness of brightness establishing firmness."

"That which is called gold and treasure is awareness of brightness establishing firmness"—gold and treasure refer to the earth element among the four great elements of earth, water, fire, and wind; that is, material things with physical substance. "Thus there is the gold wheel that maintains the lands"—lands are what we now call planets. The world's second characteristic is matter, which can gather together to form planets that maintain lands.

Please note: this does not mean that matter first exists and then moves. Rather, movement comes first, and matter subsequently appears. From the outset, this matter is illusory and unreal, like pressing on one's eyes and seeing flowers in empty space.

Sūtra: "When firmness and awareness become treasure, movement and brightness give rise to wind. Wind and gold rub against one another. Thus there is firelight, whose nature is transformation."

Answer: Put simply, when matter moves, friction arises, and thus temperature arises—the fire element among the four great elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. The world's third characteristic is temperature.

Sūtra: "Treasure and brightness give rise to moisture; firelight rises and steams upward. Thus there is the water wheel, containing the worlds of the ten directions."

Answer: Put even more simply, the world's fourth characteristic is transformation. (Why is the water element called "transformation"? Because without the water element, life could not evolve and arise.)

Question: Firelight rises and steams upward, and firelight has transformation as its nature; therefore, the water element must undergo transformation.

Answer: The earth element (the gold wheel) maintains form, while the water element (the water wheel) can change form; hence it is called "transformation."

18. What causes and conditions give rise to the wind element, the first of the four great elements?

Answer: The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says: "You still do not understand that within the Tathāgata-garbha, the nature of wind is true emptiness, and the nature of emptiness is true wind. It is originally pure and pervades the dharma realm, responding to sentient beings' minds in accordance with the measure of what they know. Ānanda, when one person slightly moves a garment, a slight breeze arises. If it were to sweep throughout the dharma realm, it would arise throughout all lands. It pervades the world—how could it have a fixed location? It manifests in accordance with karma. People in the world, not understanding this, mistake it for causes and conditions or for an inherent nature. All this is merely the discriminating calculation of consciousness and mind; whatever can be spoken has no real meaning."

Question: So Ānanda had already made this clear 2,500 years ago. If the wind element had not arisen, there would not be so many complications; how pure and peaceful that would be.

Answer: The wind element is not "produced."

Question: If doubts had not arisen, there would not be so many complications either; how pure and peaceful that would be.

Answer: First there are the many complications—"the nature of awareness is necessarily bright, yet one mistakenly makes awareness of that brightness"—and only afterward does the "doubt" among greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt arise.

19. What is the nature of the universe? Is it energy?

Answer: Then what is “energy”?

“Force, heat, sound, light, electricity, and so forth” arise and cease, whereas energy neither arises nor ceases. Yet apart from “force, heat, sound, light, electricity, and so forth,” where can one find “energy”? Using the analogy above, you now understand why one must realize one’s true nature, do you not?

(IV) Explanation of Terms

20. Emptiness

(1) Since everything is empty, what meaning does human life still have?

Answer: In the Buddhadharma taught by Buddhism, “emptiness” does not simply mean “nothingness,” nor does it mean meaninglessness. On the contrary, emptiness has real significance that is infinite in both time and space. Simply put, emptiness has an eternal and boundless significance. This is more than merely the meaning of human life.

(2) If things are originally empty, where does karmic force come from?

Answer: Does emptiness mean nonexistence?

Question: Must karma be exhausted before one can realize the Way, or do karmic obstacles become like dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows after one realizes the Way?

Answer: They are inherently like dreams, illusions, bubbles, and shadows. Once one realizes this, karmic obstacles are originally empty; without realization, one must repay old karmic debts.

(3) All phenomena are empty, yet cause and effect are not empty—how is this to be understood?

Answer: Because “all phenomena are cause and effect, and cause and effect are all phenomena,” emptiness is not nonemptiness, and nonemptiness is emptiness.

(4) When one creates karma and undergoes suffering, does buddha-nature undergo suffering?

Answer: Even if mountains collapse and the earth splits apart, has empty space ever been harmed?

Question: If buddha-nature does not undergo suffering, then who undergoes it?

Answer: Set aside for the moment the fact that the nature of sin is empty: even that "who" cannot be found. Listen to the transmission verse of Kāśyapa Buddha:

The nature of all sentient beings is pure; from the beginning, there has been no arising and nothing that can cease.

This body and mind are illusorily arisen; within illusion and transformation, there is neither sin nor blessing.

21. Cause and Effect

(1) Cause and Effect Extends Through the Three Times

Question: After people die, do they still have a future life? If, after death, one becomes another person, then one is no longer oneself. Would not what one experiences and feels become someone else's affair? What, then, is the point of practice?

Answer: Cause and effect through the three times: Zhang San of the Tang dynasty creates karma, and Li Si of the Song dynasty undergoes its retribution.

Question: Are Zhang San and Li Si the same person?

Answer: Cause and effect extends through the three times; it was never spoken only with reference to a single lifetime—or a single person.

(2) Worldly Cause and Effect and Supramundane Cause and Effect

Question: Please explain the principles of worldly cause and effect and supramundane cause and effect.

Answer: They are the Four Noble Truths of "suffering, origination, cessation, and the path."

"Suffering" is the worldly result;

"Origination" is the worldly cause;

"Cessation" is the supramundane result;

"The path" is the supramundane cause.

"Know suffering, abandon its origin, aspire to cessation, and cultivate the path."

(3) An Analogy of a City

Question: I deeply believe in cause and effect. One person cannot change the cause and effect of this world. Even the World-Honored One had to undergo karmic retribution. The only person he could change was himself.

Answer: Let us use a city as an analogy. The city in which everyone lives seems very real to everyone, but it is actually only an illusory realm. Broadly speaking, this illusory realm has six districts: devas, humans, asuras, ghosts, animals, and hells. There seem to be only two roads leading to these six districts—good and evil—but in fact they contain many wrong turnings.

With each step of goodness, one will surely proceed toward the devas and enjoy many pleasant rewards; with each step of evil, one will surely proceed toward hell and suffer many hardships. When good and evil are mixed, one lingers in the district of "humans," where there are both pleasant rewards and hardships. These are the unalterable rules of the game within the illusory realm, called "worldly cause and effect." Yet people do not know these rules and stumble about within it, now good and now evil, repeatedly rising and falling, surfacing and sinking, with no end in sight.

The Buddha tells everyone the rules of the game, as if giving them a map. By following the map, they can avoid many hardships. Yet this is not the Buddha's fundamental intent. The Buddha's fundamental intent is to guide everyone in breaking through this illusory realm.

Because people have eighty-four thousand different dispositions, the Buddha taught eighty-four thousand methods for breaking through the illusory realm, called the "eighty-four thousand dharma gates." So long as one is willing to follow the methods taught by the Buddha, anyone can break through the illusory realm. If one is unwilling, even the Buddha cannot break through it in one's place—just as you cannot be filled when the Buddha eats!

Once you break through the illusory realm, your view becomes the same as the Buddha's; this is called "having a view equal to that of all Buddhas." Once the illusory realm has been broken through, where could one look for rules of the game? Thus, "a Buddha has no cause and effect." This does not mean that, before breaking through the illusory realm, one may disregard its rules.

Some people, without having broken through the illusory realm, deceive themselves by saying, "There are no rules of the game; just do whatever you please" (denying worldly cause and effect). They thereby deceive themselves and others; one blind person leads many blind people, they create extensive evil karma, and even call it "liberation."

Little do they know that this is a shortcut to hell! Others deceive themselves by saying, “This is not an illusory realm. Even if it is, it cannot be broken through. The rules of the game are fixed as iron; no one can break through them, and even the Buddha cannot break through them—that is, the Buddha too remains within worldly cause and effect.”

To deny supramundane cause and effect in this way blocks the path out of illusion. One blind person leads many blind people, destroying both their own and others’ Dharma bodies and wisdom-lives. If they were not so extreme, they could still proceed toward the devas; but such extremism—even to the point of slandering the Buddha—is a shortcut among shortcuts to hell.

Ah! Where does this illusory realm come from? Do not forget the Buddha! The Buddha knows. Hurry and ask the Buddha: “If anyone wishes to understand all Buddhas of the three times, they should contemplate the nature of the dharma realm: everything is created by mind alone.” Ah, so the dharma realm is the illusory realm!

Question: Heh heh! But some people are always studying the map and forget what the map is for.

Answer: Yes, that is quite a blow of the Chan staff.

(4) Does the Chan School Deeply Believe in Cause and Effect?

Question: When the Chan school speaks of cause and effect, I fear it is still only a matter of faith. One may “see one’s nature” and attain “liberation” in the Chan school, but one may not necessarily understand cause and effect through the three times. Only by deeply believing in cause and effect through the three times can one attain true liberation of body and mind—even an awakened monk.

Answer: You are far too arbitrary; you have done the Chan school a great injustice!

What you say is like insisting that “one must memorize the Driver’s Code perfectly in order to drive ten thousand miles without an accident.” It sounds reasonable, but it does not accord with the actual situation. A veteran driver who can travel ten thousand miles without an accident has already thoroughly assimilated the Driver’s Code, though he has nearly forgotten all its wording. A driver newly graduated from driving school may be much better at memorizing the Driver’s Code than the veteran driver, but when actually driving, he is far inferior!

22. Causes and Conditions

Question: Could you explain, “A dharma does not arise in isolation; relying on conditions, it arises. When conditions cease, the dharma ceases; yet cessation upon

cessation is not cessation”?

Answer: Take heart esotericism as an example. Heart esotericism did not arise in isolation; that is, it did not arise merely because it considered itself good. Heart esotericism arose in reliance on causes and conditions. What causes and conditions? The conditions for liberation of sentient beings with an affinity for heart esotericism had matured, and thus heart esotericism responded by appearing in the world. When those who should be liberated have been liberated, the conditions have ceased.

Once the conditions have ceased, no one will practice heart esotericism any longer; this is provisionally called “the cessation of the dharma.” Yet dharmas are originally neither arising nor ceasing, and when have the methods of heart esotericism ever ceased? Hence it is said, “cessation upon cessation is not cessation.” Therefore, so long as we practice heart esotericism, it will not cease. If no one practices it, then even if the empty framework called “heart esotericism” remains, its conditions have in fact ceased and the dharma has ceased.

Question: Of the five houses and seven schools of Chan, the Caodong school, which was meant for ordinary people, should have spread more widely. Why was the opposite the case?

Answer: Once those suited to the teaching have been liberated, the particular school no longer serves much purpose.

Question: The lack of publicity nowadays is also a reason, is it not?

Answer: A dharma does not arise in isolation; it arises in reliance on causes and conditions.

Question: Illness is karmic retribution, so can one still use mudrās to heal others?

Answer: Karmic retribution does not lie apart from cause and effect, nor apart from dharmas arising from causes and conditions. Illness arises from causes and conditions; does recovery from illness not also arise from causes and conditions? There is no contradiction.

23. Spiritual Benefit

Question: I have always felt that shouyong simply means enjoyment!

Answer: Right view and right experience are like the two legs that walk the path of practice. Inner emptiness and purity are called right experience—felt experience or spiritual benefit. The blessings of the five desires—forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations—are called enjoyment.

24. Mahāyāna

Question: Recently I read a book, Essentials of the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which explains the dharma gate of the four foundations of mindfulness in a well-ordered sequence. I feel that an ordinary person such as myself cannot speak of Mahāyāna; I am still far from even the Hīnayāna. Would it not be better to begin with the Hīnayāna? What do you think?

Answer: The dharma gate of the four foundations of mindfulness is very good. The principal difference between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna lies in the aspiration one arouses; the four foundations of mindfulness do not necessarily belong only to the Hīnayāna.

Question: Then if someone practices a Hīnayāna method with a Mahāyāna aspiration, is that person also a Mahāyāna practitioner?

Answer: A method practiced by a Mahāyāna practitioner is no longer a Hīnayāna method.

25. Great Compassion

Question: I still have a doubt that has remained unresolved for a long time. Whenever I see the phrase, “Dreamlike illusions and flowers in empty space—why labor to grasp at them?” I feel unable to arouse great compassion. The people in a dream do not truly exist, so there is fundamentally no one to liberate. But why, after awakening, do Buddhas and bodhisattvas still “liberate dreamlike sentient beings where there originally are no sentient beings”?

Answer: You may be mistaking lesser compassion for great compassion. Compassion conditioned by sentient beings is lesser compassion; compassion conditioned by dharmas is intermediate compassion; compassion without conditions is great compassion.

26. Spiritual Powers, Karmic Force, and Vow Power

(1) Spiritual powers cannot overcome karmic force, and karmic force cannot overcome vow power

Question: I often cannot clearly distinguish between karmic force and vow power.

Answer: Karmic force manifests as worldly dharmas, while vow power manifests as supramundane dharmas.

Question: Truly, fate makes fools of people...

Answer: Karmic force is inconceivable, and vow power is even more inconceivable. Vow power, karmic force, and the power of spiritual abilities are all powers of mind. Spiritual powers cannot overcome karmic force, and karmic force cannot overcome vow power.

Question: Since they are all powers of mind, where does the difference lie?

Answer: Since they are all powers of mind, the difference lies in the differing aspirations with which they are aroused.

Question: What is the difference between the wish to become wealthy and the wish to become a Buddha?

Answer: In becoming wealthy, there is a self; in becoming a Buddha, there is no self. That identifies the difference.

Question: Is there also a difference in vow power? For example, is there a difference between making a vow with a deluded mind and making the same vow with a pure mind?

Answer: Vow power is an unconditioned dharma. “All worthy ones and sages differ through unconditioned dharmas.” Since it says “all,” there are not merely these two possibilities, but countless distinctions.

(2) What was being shown by the passing of Venerable Maudgalyāyana, who was “foremost in spiritual powers”?

Answer: It was, of course, complete freedom and unobstructed ease.

If a peaceful passing became a rigid standard, and one worried every day while alive about the moment of death, would that not be precisely attachment? Venerable Maudgalyāyana, renowned as “foremost in spiritual powers,” manifested his passing in this way in order to show that spiritual powers cannot overcome karmic force, and to warn people not to regard spiritual powers as ultimate. The Venerable One could certainly have passed away peacefully, but he could equally well have passed away as he manifested it. The crucial point is how one uses it: whatever is useful should be done accordingly.

(3) Are the “spiritual powers” spoken of in Buddhism the same thing as paranormal abilities?

Answer: They are not the same thing. It is simply that far too many people misunderstand them as being the same and therefore treat them as such. Shen is the essence; tong is its wondrous functioning.

Question: They really are different. Buddhist spiritual powers are one's own penetration, natural penetration, and constant penetration; they are a minor matter on the side of sagehood. Paranormal abilities are by-products of meditative concentration; many involve possession by ghosts or spirits. They are not natural penetration or constant penetration, but are peripheral affairs of sagehood for such beings.

Answer: “A minor matter on the side of sagehood” is an expedient expression spoken in accordance with sentient beings’ minds and according to the measure of what they know.

Because sentient beings always regard paranormal abilities as spiritual powers, one speaks, in accordance with the measure of what they know, of what they take to be “spiritual powers” as “a minor matter on the side of sagehood.” “Non-abiding” is called shen; “giving rise to the mind” is called tong. This is no longer merely “a minor matter on the side of sagehood,” is it?

27. What Are Deluded Thoughts?

Answer: Deluded thoughts refer to greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, and wrong views. Wrong views refer to the view of the body, extreme views, attachment to views, attachment to precepts and prohibitions, and erroneous views.

Question: How should one counteract worldly cleverness and eloquence?

Answer: If one can leave behind deluded thoughts and attachments, worldly cleverness and eloquence are themselves wondrous functioning. Why counteract them? What must be counteracted are deluded thoughts and attachments.

Question: Will mind, intellect, and consciousness gradually fade away?

Answer: It is deluded thoughts and attachments that gradually fade away.

28. Put an End to the Thieving Mind

Question: There are too many “synonyms” in the Buddhadharma—for example, Buddha-nature and one’s own original face. Once I understand terms of this kind, I will organize them all.

Answer: Ha ha! Then organize the Tripiṭaka and the twelve divisions of the teachings. Or organize the eighty-four thousand kinds of minds of sentient beings.

Question: Your warning has awakened me: I nearly went to the sea to sift sand. In the future, I may still be confused by similar “synonyms,” but my fundamental

course will never waver. Besides, with someone at the helm to support me, I need only do my best to row.

Answer: You must take the helm yourself.

Question: I am attached to you for this lifetime; you will not be able to shake me off.

Answer: That would work only if eating you could fill me up.

Question: I only ask that you keep an eye on me as I eat from time to time. Just do not let me eat the wrong thing or eat too slowly.

Answer: The more pressing the time, the less one should hurry to eat. Otherwise, in hunger one will eat anything; even if it is not poison, choking on it can still cause trouble.

Question: I will keep that in mind. At present, however, I am only capable of laxness and have not yet reached the degree of diligence you speak of.

Answer: Then first put an end to the thieving mind.

29. What If One Is Well Learned but Does Not Practice?

Answer: Has not Venerable Ānanda already given a living demonstration in the Śūraṅgama Sūtra?

(V) Other Issues

30. With limited space at home, how should one enshrine a Buddha image in a bedroom?

Answer: Put up a curtain around the Buddha shrine. Simply draw it aside when paying homage to the Buddha.

31. Why do bodhisattvas appear in different forms—compassionate or wrathful?

Answer: A compassionate appearance is like a mother soothing a child, while the wrathful vajra appearance is much like a father disciplining his son.

Question: Why does a mother soothe a child? Why does a father discipline his son?

Answer: Soothing the child benefits his healthy growth; disciplining him is intended to remove factors harmful to his growth.

32. What are śarīra relics?

Answer: Without cultivation, śarīra relics cannot appear. Yet those who have realized the Way do not necessarily all manifest śarīra relics in the same manner.

33. Is it true that practicing the “Wealth Deity Mantra” first brings misfortune?

Answer: I have never practiced this mantra, so I have no such experience. However, when greed suddenly arises and one resorts to any means whatsoever, misfortune will surely follow.

34. Does reciting Amitābha Buddha’s name count as looking for something to do?

Answer: It uses your deeply ingrained habit of wanting to find something to do, and gives you something greatly beneficial to do.

Question: Amitābha Buddha!

35. What is the relationship between Śākyamuni Buddha and Amitābha Buddha, and how should they address one another?

Question: My father has begun to arouse the resolve to study Buddhism. He just asked me a question that stumped me: What is the relationship between our Fundamental Teacher, Śākyamuni Buddha, and Amitābha Buddha, and how should they address one another?

Answer: Ha ha! Just say that we are like students: Śākyamuni Buddha is like the principal of our school here, while Amitābha Buddha is like the principal of a prestigious university elsewhere. The principal of our school says that anyone who wishes to transfer may do so by reciting “Namo Amitābha Buddha,” and then go there to study.

36. Reverence for the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha

Question: What should one do if someone insults Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva?!

Answer: Alas! Such a person is truly pitiable.

Question: I have asked the bodhisattva, and the bodhisattva does not mind.

Answer: Of course the bodhisattva does not mind, but cause and effect will not spare him.

37. Why is studying Buddhism so complicated?

Answer: Actually, studying Buddhism is not complicated; the human mind is complicated.

II. Studying Buddhist Sūtras

(I) Heart Sūtra

38. Form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form. Form is emptiness; emptiness is form.

Question: Earlier, the Heart Sūtra says: “Form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form. Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness are also thus.” Why, then, does it later say that in emptiness there is “no” form?

Answer: For example, there is a bronze bowl: the bowl is not different from bronze, and bronze is not different from the bowl; the bowl is bronze, and bronze is the bowl. Therefore, within bronze there is no bowl. (One cannot say, “The bowl is inside the bronze,” can one?)

Question: Hello, Teacher. “Form is emptiness” can still be understood, but why does it also say, “Emptiness is form”?

Answer: How do you understand “form is emptiness”?

Question: Form has already dissolved into emptiness, so why does it also say, “Emptiness is form”?

Answer: Has form dissolved?

Question: If all thoughts have fallen away, then why does it say, “Emptiness is form”?

Answer: Is it thoughts that have fallen away, or form?

Question: Form is impermanent and therefore empty. Why, then, does it also say, “Emptiness is form”?

Answer: Form is impermanent and therefore empty?! Does the emptiness you speak of mean simply “nothing”?

Question: “Form is emptiness; emptiness is form.” Emptiness and form certainly are not the same thing.

Answer: You need only change the latter part: emptiness and form certainly are the same thing.

B. Form is emptiness—where there is a Buddha, pass quickly by; emptiness is form—where there is no Buddha, do not linger. Do not abide in form or emptiness; correctly understand form and emptiness.

Answer: ^o^

(II) Diamond Sūtra

39. “How should one abide, and how should one subdue one’s mind?” Why is this asked twice?

Answer: Ah! This should be understood in connection with the preceding and following context; then one sees that the depth is different.

Question: The question “How should one abide, and how should one subdue one’s mind?” is asked twice. Does the first instance refute the absence of a self in persons, and the second refute the absence of a self in dharmas?

Answer: One may also say that the first is not identifying with any single dharma, while the second is not departing from any single dharma.

Question: Because there is neither reality nor unreality, there is “neither identification nor departure.” Could it be changed to: “With regard to the unsurpassed, complete, perfect enlightenment attained by the Tathāgata, therein there is reality and unreality”?

Answer: Neither reality nor unreality means not falling into either extreme. Does “reality and unreality” not fall into both extremes?

Question: Has it been subdued, or has it not been subdued?

Answer: To say that it has been subdued is to touch upon it; to say that it has not been subdued is to turn away from it. Please say a word that neither touches nor turns away.

Question: That is the second phrase!

Answer: ^_^

40. The Four Marks

[Renjue] asked: “If the mark of self has not been shattered, one still wishes to become a Buddha; if the mark of person has not been shattered, one still seeks to liberate sentient beings. How can the four marks in the mind be shattered? I respectfully ask the teacher to provide the illuminating insight.”

Answer: “If the mark of person is shattered, there is originally no Buddha; if the mark of self is shattered, there are no sentient beings. Since the four marks are originally nonexistent, why need they be shattered? If there is no dragon, why dot its eyes?” Is Brother [Renjue] here?

41. The Non-Abiding Mind

Question: Is the non-abiding mind spoken of in the Diamond Sūtra the wondrous, luminous true mind?

Answer: If one does not cling to the concept of the “wondrous, luminous true mind,” that is the non-abiding mind.

If one clings to the concept of the “wondrous, luminous true mind,” that is an abiding mind.

Whether you are attached or unattached, the wondrous, luminous true mind has never wavered, never arisen or ceased, never been defiled or purified, and never increased or decreased.

Question: How should one understand the Diamond Sūtra’s statement, “One should give rise to a mind that abides nowhere; if the mind abides anywhere, that is not abiding”?

Answer: “One should give rise to a mind that abides nowhere” means that one should not give rise to a mind abiding in forms, nor should one give rise to a mind abiding in sounds, smells, tastes, touchables, or dharmas.

“If the mind abides anywhere, that is not abiding” means that a bodhisattva’s mind should not abide in forms when giving. A bodhisattva should give in this way for the benefit of all sentient beings. Likewise, one should uphold the precepts, practice forbearance, diligence, meditative stability, and wisdom in this way. One should not abide in sounds, smells, tastes, touchables, or dharmas either.

Giving—the three wheels are empty.

Upholding the precepts—“The very arising of a thought is already a violation of the precepts.”

Forbearance—there is no insult to endure: if you spit in my face, I let it dry by itself. I save my effort, and you have no affliction.

Diligence—giving rise to the thought of wishing to be diligent is delusion, not diligence. If the mind is free of delusion, diligence has no limit.

Meditative stability—the great samādhi in which there is neither entering nor emerging.

Wisdom—no wisdom and no attainment.

(III) Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment

42. The Four Statements

A: “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.” Please explain.

Answer: The four statements entail four prohibitions. Each is linked to the next, with the latter remedying the former:

Where one does not give rise to deluded thoughts, one must avoid seeking to extinguish them; one must not remain sitting behind a dark mountain.

Where one does not seek to extinguish them, one must avoid further knowing; the knowing that seeks to understand is unacceptable.

Where one does not superimpose further knowing, one must avoid taking things as real; one must not fall into the deep pit of liberation.

Where one does not discern what is the ultimate reality, one must avoid deluded thoughts; one must not allow deluded thoughts to arise in continuous succession.

(IV) The Platform Sūtra

43. The Central Teaching of the Platform Sūtra

Question: At the very beginning of the Platform Sūtra, it says: “Good friends, the self-nature of bodhi is originally pure. Simply use this mind, and directly realize Buddhahood.” There should be no serious problem with taking this statement as the central teaching of the Platform Sūtra, should there?

Answer: Yes. This is the central teaching of the Platform Sūtra.

(V) Śūraṅgama Sūtra

44. Why is the Śūraṅgama Sūtra said to be the first Buddhist scripture to perish?

Answer: The Śūraṅgama is originally beyond arising and ceasing. When those who are to be liberated have been liberated, and the conditions for liberation in this period have come to an end, this is called “perishing.”

45. Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva is not one of the bodhisattvas who “consult to resolve doubts,” is he?

Answer: In fact, including Venerable Ānanda, they are all here to “consult and resolve doubts” for us.

Question: So Ānanda and the others were actors all along! I had thought there really was such a fortunate layperson.

46. The Seven Searches for the Mind and the Ten Revelations of Seeing

Question: Earlier in this sūtra, the seven searches and examinations directly point to the mind; later, the twenty-five paths to bodhi broadly gather in the gradual approaches. The Buddha’s gate is indeed vast!

Answer: The seven searches for the mind—when one seeks the mind, it cannot be found—one cannot grasp it. The ten revelations of seeing—the true mind is everywhere—one cannot cast it aside.

To truly recognize that which cannot be grasped or cast aside is called “seeing one’s true nature.”

Question: If there is explosion, fragmentation, clarity, or spiritual knowing—that is grasping; if there is utter emptiness and nothing at all—that is casting aside.

Answer: I suggest changing the word “there is” above to “grasping.” If one grasps at explosion, fragmentation, clarity, or spiritual knowing, that is grasping; if one rejects explosion, fragmentation, clarity, or spiritual knowing, that is casting aside.

47. Originally pure and fundamentally so: how do mountains, rivers, and the great earth suddenly arise?

Answer: Originally pure and fundamentally so—how do mountains, rivers, and the great earth suddenly arise!

Anyone who has greatly awakened through the foregoing questions and answers must certainly possess right samādhi. Consider the following passage of yours:

[Second Moon]: The reason “I” become deluded is that I take these appearances, which are originally relative, unreal, and without before or after, to be absolute, real, and to have before and after. Such concepts lead to misjudgments about phenomena; misjudgments lead to still more deluded comparisons. Thus, link after

link becomes entangled, circumstance after circumstance becomes mutually conditioned, as though there were no end.

—You speak of “relative, unreal, with before and after,” but in their very presence they are “absolute, real, without before or after”! You see mountains, rivers, and the great earth; I see original purity.

48. “In accordance with the minds of sentient beings, responding to the measure of what they know”

Question: Please use posting messages as an example to explain “in accordance with the minds of sentient beings, responding to the measure of what they know.”

Answer: Oh! When replying to your post, one should accord with your mind and respond to the measure of what you know. To accord with your mind means not departing from your question.

To respond to the measure of what you know means not saying what you already know, nor saying what you cannot possibly accept.

Question: So that is what “respond” means. It seems that, when posting messages, one must aim for the horse’s mouth.

Answer: Otherwise, it is the sickness of “contrivance”—creating something of one’s own. Put more pleasantly, it is the “establishing words” in “establishing merit, establishing virtue, and establishing words.” The Buddhadharma establishes no words—whenever there are words, they are not the ultimate meaning.

The Buddha-Heart Sūtra, Also Corresponding to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī

49. Should the title be recited as “Buddha-Heart Sūtra” or “Buddha-Heart Sūtra Chapter”?

Question: Regarding The Buddha-Heart Sūtra, Also Corresponding to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī, after searching and checking, I found that collections generally call it the Buddha-Heart Sūtra, whereas at our Mind-Seal Vihara we commonly use Buddha-Heart Sūtra Chapter. This leads to differing understandings as to whether it is a sūtra in its own right or a chapter within one.

Answer: The Buddha-Heart Sūtra and the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī Sūtra should be two separate scriptures. In the title The Buddha-Heart Sūtra, Also Corresponding to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī, the phrase “chapters also corresponding” should mean that certain chapters of the Buddha-Heart Sūtra correspond to certain

chapters of the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī Sūtra. It is evident that the upper volume can independently constitute a sūtra.

In the winter of 1989, when I went to Shanghai to seek the Dharma from the Elder, he gave me a copy of The Buddha-Heart Sūtra, Also Corresponding to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī Sūtra. At the beginning of the lower volume were printed the two characters fa bie, “distinct dharma.” Clearly, this two-volume Buddha-Heart Sūtra edition in the Buddhist canon had been compiled by earlier generations.

Question: Teacher, what do the two characters “distinct dharma” mean?

Answer: They mean a dharma distinct from the six mudrās and one mantra.

Question: I respectfully kneel and request that Teacher Qi expound The Buddha-Heart Sūtra, Also Corresponding to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī.

Answer: I cannot expound it well; please forgive me. But we can discuss it. Before the discussion, let us first divide it into sections. Post replies according to the chapters.

Let us discuss several questions:

I. Regarding the character pin, “chapter,” in the title. In The Buddha-Heart Sūtra, Also Corresponding to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī, the phrase “chapters also corresponding” should mean that certain chapters of the Buddha-Heart Sūtra correspond to certain chapters of the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī Sūtra. Which chapters correspond? At the very least, the chapter you have listed, “Wish-Fulfilling Freedom,” corresponds to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī Sūtra. If you find the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī Sūtra and post it here, we may discover further correspondences.

II. Concerning the use of “section” or “chapter.” I think “chapter” should still be used, for two reasons: 1. As stated above, the title says “chapters also corresponding,” not “sections also corresponding.” 2. The traditional threefold division for explaining sūtras—introduction, main exposition, and circulation—uses the word “section.” I had intended to make a separate post mentioning the “threefold division,” but since it can be discussed in connection with this topic, I will not make a separate post about it.

III. The traditional threefold division for explaining sūtras: The introductory section is the “preface of six forms of verification,” also called the “six accomplishments”—the accomplishment of faith, hearing, time, place, the principal teacher, and the assembly. The first chapter of this sūtra, “The Ten Directions as Fire,” is the introductory section.

The main-exposition section: Apart from the preceding introductory section and the final circulation section, the principal content in between is the main-exposition section. Here, “main exposition” simply means “the principal content.” The circulation section: The circulation section of this sūtra consists of these final words: “At that time, when the great assembly heard what the Buddha had taught, each joined their palms and upheld the Buddha-Heart-of-Heart. When the Tathāgata saw this, he extended his golden arm and placed it upon their crowns as an empowerment seal, bestowing predictions of Buddhahood upon the bodhisattvas. Then the great assembly received the Buddha’s predictions, joyfully practiced them, bowed to the Buddha, and departed.”

IV. Regarding the chapters of this sūtra. The final words cited above are listed as the final chapter, “Upholding in Accordance with the Dharma.” Thus, the first chapter is the introductory section, the final chapter is the circulation section, and all the chapters in between are the main-exposition section.

The upper and lower volumes each have eight chapters, making sixteen chapters in the entire sūtra.

Upper Volume

Chapter One: The Ten Directions as Fire

Chapter Two: Samādhi of Loving-Kindness

Chapter Three: The Excellence of Heart Esotericism

Chapter Four: The Ten Upholdings of the Ground of Awakening

Chapter Five: One Mantra and Six Mudrās

Chapter Six: Samādhi Seals and Empowerment

Chapter Seven: The Splendor of the Maṇḍala

Chapter Eight: The Youth of Light

Lower Volume

Chapter Nine: The Wondrous Luminosity of the Dharmakāya

Chapter Ten: The Tathāgata’s Sphere of Measure

Chapter Eleven: Sudden Transcendence to the Ground of Awakening

Chapter Twelve: The Non-Attachment of Mind and Phenomena

Chapter Thirteen: The Features of the Buddha-Heart

Chapter Fourteen: Wish-Fulfilling Freedom

Chapter Fifteen: The Inexhaustible Functioning of Spiritual Powers

Chapter Sixteen: Upholding in Accordance with the Dharma

(Teacher Qi once explained the first half of this sūtra on the forum; the latter half was discussed by fellow practitioners.—Editor's note)

50. Patriarch Dayu's Lead-Type and Woodblock Edition

Question: Teacher Qi, is the Buddha-Heart Sūtra we have in hand a complete text?

Answer: What makes you ask that?

Question: A website says that it was excerpted by our lineage patriarch, Great Master Dayu.

Answer: The copy the Elder gave me in those days was the original text from the Taishō Canon.

Question: The "Acharya Dayu lead-type and woodblock edition" that we now see differs somewhat from the original in the Taishō Canon. The "Acharya Dayu lead-type and woodblock edition" has comparatively more omissions. For example, it omits the mudrās, and its translation is not entirely the same either.

Answer: I do not know who produced the original version of the Acharya Dayu lead-type and woodblock edition now in circulation. It is unlikely that the lead-type and woodblock edition was provided by the Elder, because the copy he gave me was the original text from the Taishō Canon.

Question: What is your view of Patriarch Dayu's lead-type and woodblock edition of the Buddha-Heart Sūtra?

Answer: In my view, qian refers to lead-type printing, while qian refers to woodblock printing. Taken together, the two characters mean "edition." It is not uncommon for a Buddhist scripture to have multiple translations. This may have been another translation of the Buddha-Heart Sūtra obtained by the grandmaster of our lineage.

Question: I once saw a lead-type and woodblock edition in a friend's possession. It was an old thread-bound book with very yellowed pages, probably a publication from the Republican era.

Answer: Oh! It seems that the lead-type and woodblock edition has existed for a long time.

51. The Ten Upholdings

Question: What is the essence of the ten great vows of the Buddha Dharma's Heart-of-Heart practice?

Answer: In the winter of 1989, when the Elder conferred empowerment upon me, he gave me a copy of the Buddha-Heart Sūtra. Next to "The Ten Upholdings," he wrote this marginal note: "For realizing and actualizing the Buddha-ground, the Ten Upholdings are most important. Without these Ten Upholdings, one can absolutely never become a Buddha! Those who cultivate the Heart-of-Heart Dharma must first arouse these ten great vows!"

Question: Teacher Qi, out of compassion for us, please explain the "Ten Upholdings" briefly in plain language.

Answer: The Buddha-Heart Sūtra explains the naming causes and conditions of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. It speaks of eighteen "reasons" in relation to worldly dharmas and six "reasons" in relation to supramundane dharmas. Then, at the assembly's request, the World-Honored One proclaimed the teaching. Before proclaiming the six mudrās and one mantra, he first proclaimed these Ten Upholdings for realizing and actualizing the Buddha-ground: (Teacher Qi's section-by-section explanation of the sūtra follows.—Editor's note)

Sūtra text: "At that time, the Tathāgata addressed the bodhisattvas: 'Good sons, I shall now proclaim the ten upholdings by which one realizes and actualizes the Buddha-ground and certainly attains accomplishment. What are these ten?'"

The meaning of this passage is easy to understand and needs no explanation. The Venerable Master Yuanyin wrote this marginal note: "The Ten Upholdings for realizing and actualizing the Buddha-ground are most important. Without these Ten Upholdings, one can absolutely never become a Buddha! Those who cultivate the Heart-of-Heart Dharma must first arouse these ten great vows."

Sūtra text: "The first upholding is upholding the mind: unobstructed with regard to dharmas, giving rise to faith in the Buddha, being impartial in mind, being compassionate toward sentient beings, and being unattached to forms."

Being unobstructed with regard to dharmas accords with the great perfect mirror wisdom, transformed from the eighth consciousness. Being impartial in mind accords with the wisdom of equality, transformed from the seventh consciousness. Being unattached to forms accords with the wondrous observing wisdom, transformed from the sixth consciousness. Giving rise to faith in the Buddha and

being compassionate toward sentient beings accord with the wisdom of accomplishing what is to be done, transformed from the first five consciousnesses. The first upholding already accords with transforming the eight consciousnesses into the four wisdoms; further gathering the four wisdoms into the three kāyas, one thereby attains accomplishment.

Sūtra text: “The second is to uphold the precepts without deficiency, to remain constantly gathered in samādhi, to practice not speaking falsely, to delight in giving to sentient beings, and to eliminate arrogance and pride.”

Upholding the precepts without deficiency is precepts; remaining constantly gathered in samādhi is samādhi; practicing not speaking falsely is wisdom. Delighting in giving to sentient beings overcomes greed; eliminating arrogance overcomes anger; practicing not speaking falsely overcomes ignorance. The Venerable Master Yuanyin taught: “Greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt are the five afflictions of thought. They are very difficult to eliminate, and therefore one must remain constantly gathered in samādhi to eliminate them. Practicing not speaking falsely can also encompass cutting off ignorance and opening wisdom. Because of ignorance, one does not recognize that all things arise through conditions and are without inherent nature, but clings to them as truly existent. Thus one speaks falsely, deceives oneself and others, creates karma, and undergoes karmic retribution.”

Sūtra text: “Third, do not commit evil. Cultivate the precept against killing; do not eat evil food; be careful not to praise yourself; do not see the faults of others.”

The precept against killing and not eating evil food should be read together: eating meat can give rise to killing, so evil food should refer to meat. “Be careful not to praise yourself” eliminates arrogance, and “do not see the faults of others” eliminates pride; this accords with the second upholding’s “eliminating arrogance and pride.” The Venerable Master Yuanyin taught: “Evil food does not refer only to meat; spoiled and poisonous food is included as well. In addition, eating at improper times is also evil food.”

Sūtra text: “Fourth, do not give rise to ridicule or disdain toward any who seek the Dharma; with regard to all Buddhist teachings, shield and protect against faults and evils; among teachers and monastics, regard them as one’s parents.”

“With regard to all Buddhist teachings, shield and protect against faults and evils” is taking refuge in the Buddha with utmost sincerity. “Do not give rise to ridicule or disdain toward any who seek the Dharma” is taking refuge in the Dharma with utmost sincerity. “Among teachers and monastics, regard them as one’s parents” is taking refuge in the teacher and taking refuge in the saṅgha with utmost sincerity. This fourth upholding encompasses the four refuges: taking refuge in the Vajra

Master, taking refuge in the Buddha, taking refuge in the Dharma, and taking refuge in the Saṅgha.

Scripture passage: “Fifth, if you put the teachings and vows into practice, take care never to lose them. Regard rich and poor alike with an impartial mind. You must uphold conventional truth and accord with all people.”

“If you put the teachings and vows into practice, take care never to lose them” means: “Let thought after thought continue without interruption; let the karma of body, speech, and mind know no weariness.” “Regard rich and poor alike with an impartial mind” means: “Without asking whether they are pure or impure, whether they are noble kṣatriyas or caṇḍālas, practice equal compassion toward them all. Do not discriminate against the humble or lowly; arouse the resolve to perfect the immeasurable merit and virtue of all sentient beings.” “You must uphold conventional truth and accord with all people” means: “Buddhadharma is in the world and does not depart from awakening within the world. To seek bodhi apart from the world is like looking for a rabbit’s horn.”

Let us try another approach: first explain your understanding, and then I will discuss it in a follow-up post. How does that sound?

Question: My conjectures are as follows; please correct me! (What follows is the questioner’s attempted explanation of the scripture passage.)

Scripture passage: “Sixth, always remain alert to the Buddha’s verses. You must fully uphold all the dharmas you cultivate. When anything is requested, give it in accordance with your mind. Take care not to discriminate among superior, middling, and lesser capacities.”

Questioner’s explanation: Take refuge in the Buddha: just as one tests a blade by blowing a hair upon it, one must grind it sharply and diligently. Take refuge in the Dharma: cultivate and uphold it completely and without slackening. “The unsurpassed Buddha Way, I vow to accomplish; the boundless Dharma gates, I vow to study; the innumerable sentient beings, I vow to liberate.” Benefit sentient beings and save them equally!

Scripture passage: “Seventh, in maintaining the mudrās, do not act impurely; do not form them at improper times; and do not use them for fame, renown, or material gain. In whatever dharma practice you undertake, do not abandon any sentient being.”

Questioner’s explanation: Revere the Dharma and value the Dharma. Take right view as the cause for cultivating the Dharma, and take an impartial, unobstructed mind as the standard for practicing the Dharma.

Scripture passage: “Eighth, do not give rise to theft with regard to anything whatsoever. Cut off irrational evils, and do not practice flattery or deceit. Protect the essentials of Buddhadharma as you would your own life. Whether people are noble or lowly, do not harbor a divided mind toward them.”

Questioner’s explanation: Do not give rise to discrimination regarding any dharma. Know that all dharmas bear the mark of emptiness and that in truth nothing can be obtained. Let the straightforward mind be the place of practice, and practice all dharmas.

Scripture passage: “Ninth, when relieving all forms of suffering, do not truly retreat in mind even if others are not sincere. Do not belittle the Dharma, nor let others belittle it. You must put an end to your own slander and not allow others to slander it. You must be upright and sincere, always speaking gently. Encourage others to remain on the wholesome path and arouse great compassion.”

Questioner’s explanation: Revere the Dharma and value the Dharma, protecting it as one would one’s own eyes. Practice the six perfections and embrace beings through the four means of attraction. Liberate all sentient beings, while in truth knowing that not a single sentient being is liberated.

Scripture passage: “Tenth, eliminate deviant conduct, and do not harm empty space. Let your resolve and faith be firm, and do not shrink from weariness or hardship. Constantly exhort others not to abandon [the path], and seek out good spiritual friends. Or, in pure places among forests and springs, make vast vows to propagate [the Dharma] widely. Take care not to be timid or weak. In every thought, maintain and gather in [the mind]. Do not let deviant views arise; always abide in the Mahāyāna. When there are good spiritual friends, welcome them respectfully and bow in homage.”

Questioner’s explanation: Maintain right view, strengthen faith, make vast vows, diligently protect and uphold [the Dharma], and draw near to wholesome conditions; the Way lies therein! “Those able to eliminate these ten matters are said to uphold the Dharma as realization; they will certainly proceed directly to unsurpassed bodhi and never again regress.”

Answer: Not bad.

III. Buddhist Schools

(I) Chan School

52. Why Are There So Many Buddhist Schools?

Question: What puzzles me is this: why are Buddhist schools not divided one by one according to the eighteen realms? It seems that schools are currently divided not by their methods of practice but by doctrinal teachings. If this continues, there will eventually be 108,000 schools. Wouldn't beginners be utterly bewildered?

Answer: Not bewildered—rather, it becomes more convenient.

(I) The Chan School

53. An Introduction to the Chan School

(1) Characteristics of the Chan School

Question: Could you summarize several characteristics of the Chan school?

Answer: Directness and spontaneity.

Direct, yet without any appearance of directness—so direct that people mistakenly think something mysterious is concealed within it.

Spontaneity is not ignorance; it is so spontaneous that those clever in schemes and stratagems cannot fathom its subtlety.

(2) What Is Tathāgata Chan? What Is Patriarch Chan?

Question: May I ask: what is Patriarch Chan? Could you explain it in greater detail?

Answer: The gateway of the patriarchs:

After Chan Master Xiangyan Zhixian realized the Way upon hearing bamboo strike, he composed this verse:

At one strike, all that I knew was forgotten; no further cultivation is needed.

In every movement, cast off the old road; do not fall into the device of silent stillness.

Nowhere is there any trace; its deportment lies beyond sound and form.

Those who have realized the Way everywhere all call it the supreme capacity.

When Weishan learned of this, he said to Yangshan Huiji, “This fellow has penetrated it completely.”

Yangshan said, “This comes from mental contrivance and consciousness; it can be composed in writing. Let me examine him myself.”

When Yangshan met Xiangyan, he said, “The Master has praised you, younger brother, for realizing the great matter. Try speaking of it.”

Xiangyan recited the preceding verse.

Yangshan said, “This is the result of former habits, retained in memory and thus composed. If you have genuine awakening, say something else.”

Xiangyan then composed another verse:

Last year I was poor, yet that was not true poverty;

This year I am poor—only now is it true poverty.

Last year I was poor, yet there was still ground enough to stand an awl;

This year, even an awl is gone.

Yangshan said, “I acknowledge that you understand Tathāgata Chan. But Patriarch Chan—you have not even dreamed of it.”

Chan Master Xiangyan composed yet another verse:

I have one device: I blink my eyes and look at him.

If someone does not understand, do not call him a novice monk.

After hearing this, Yangshan returned and reported to Weishan: “Fortunately, Brother Xian now understands Patriarch Chan.”

…

From this koan, we can see:

At one strike, all that I knew was forgotten; no further cultivation is needed.

In every movement, cast off the old road; do not fall into the device of silent stillness.

Nowhere is there any trace; its deportment lies beyond sound and form.

Those who have realized the Way everywhere all call it the supreme capacity.

This verse does not even qualify as Tathāgata Chan, much less Patriarch Chan.

The meaning of this verse is: upon hearing the sound of bamboo being struck, subject and object were suddenly both forgotten. Ah! It turns out that realization of the Way is not attained through cultivation.

In the line “In every movement, cast off the old road,” “every movement” refers to raising the eyebrows and blinking the eyes—of course, to raising the eyebrows and blinking the eyes after awakening. “Cast off” means to reject, discard, and let go.

“The old road” refers to former ways, in two senses: first, one's former ways of raising the eyebrows, blinking the eyes, speaking, and acting, which have not left behind deluded attachment; second, the ways in which the ancients realized the Way—another's eating cannot satisfy my hunger. When raising one's eyebrows, blinking one's eyes, speaking, or acting, both of these must be cast off.

“Do not fall into the device of silent stillness” means not taking “silent stillness” as ultimate.

When speaking of deportment, it is ordinarily a matter of sound and form. Yet this “deportment” lies beyond sound and form, because “nowhere is there any trace”: it is without marks. Those who are thoroughly accomplished and have realized the Way everywhere all call it the “supreme capacity.”

Last year I was poor, yet that was not true poverty;

This year I am poor—only now is it true poverty.

Last year I was poor, yet there was still ground enough to stand an awl;

This year, even an awl is gone.

This verse does not understand Patriarch Chan, but it does qualify as understanding Tathāgata Chan.

Poverty means having nothing at all; it is a metaphor for sweeping away deluded attachments.

The awl refers to the “supreme capacity” in the preceding verse. So long as this still remains, not only has one not understood Patriarch Chan, one has not even understood Tathāgata Chan.

I have one device: I blink my eyes and look at him.

If someone does not understand, do not call him a novice monk.

At this point, the path of words is cut off, yet there is no hindrance to speaking of east and west; the sphere of mental activity is extinguished, yet there is no obstacle

to stirring up wind and rain. I can say no more. I can only explain what the words in the verse refer to: “novice monk” refers to Yangshan. “If someone does not understand, do not call him a novice monk” means: if you still do not comprehend, then do not call yourself “Novice Huiji.”

Finally, someone asked: how far apart are the “one device” here and the earlier “supreme capacity”?

Answer: Parrot Islet before Yellow Crane Tower.

Question: What does that mean?

Answer: For one who understands, they do not differ by a hair's breadth; for one who does not understand, they are as far apart as heaven and earth.

Question: What is the gateway of the Tathāgata? Please compassionately enlighten this beginner!

Answer: In the ten directions there are no walls; all around there are no gates.

(3) Sense of Doubt

Question: The ancients said, “At the top of a hundred-foot pole, take one more step, and your whole body appears throughout the worlds of the ten directions.” Does this refer to directly realizing that the true nature of one's own mind is without self or person, and truly experiencing the quiescent and extinct intrinsic nature as pervading empty space? Or does it mean that all the various appearances of the ten-direction worlds are nothing but seeing, manifested by the seeing nature of one's own mind?

Answer: You are now arousing a sense of doubt and investigating it. If I were to chatter on and explain principles, would I not block the gate of your awakening? If you cease investigating it, then I may chatter a few more words.

Question: This student has not yet reached the top of the hundred-foot pole and therefore should not be investigating this.

Answer: If you can truly arouse a sense of doubt here, then this too may be investigated.

Question: But now it is like a thorn stuck in my throat: I can neither spit it out nor swallow it down.

Answer: If it truly is so, that is the sense of doubt.

Question: What should someone practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma do when a great sense of doubt arises? Should they investigate it with all their strength, or should they treat it as an ordinary deluded thought, say “Peh!” and be done with it?

Answer: What can be dismissed with a “Peh!” is only a deluded thought. If it is truly a great sense of doubt, it cannot be dismissed by a single “Peh!” If it can be dismissed, it is still a deluded thought, not a genuine sense of doubt.

(4) The Three Barriers of the Chan School

Question: Teacher, for no apparent reason I feel unsettled.

Answer: This is due to subtle residual view-delusions; you have not yet cut off view-delusions completely.

Question: If so, does that mean one cannot be said to have broken through the first barrier?

Answer: For one who has broken through the first barrier, no trace of a “barrier” remains lodged in the mind. Yet this is not the end, hence the talk of the subsequent “double barrier” and “firm barrier.” If one uses the discriminating, calculating mind to study the three barriers, then no matter how systematically one speaks of them, at most it is merely a kind of worldly learning—Chan studies—not the Chan school itself.

Question: May I ask a foolish question: what is the sign of having completely cut off view-delusions?

Answer: It is like drinking water: one knows for oneself whether it is cold or warm. When two people meet face-to-face and present it directly to each other, they can know it mutually.

Question: Without a teacher nearby, how can one know the three barriers for oneself?

Answer: Do not keep the “three barriers” stuck in your mind. Practice steadily. After a long time, when encountering an occasion and meeting conditions, you may shatter the mass of doubt in an instant. Not only the “first barrier,” but even the “three barriers” will leave no trace at all; seek for a barrier and it cannot be found. This is called “breaking through the first barrier.”

There are two wrong paths here:

(1) One feels that the road ahead is vast and bleak, and gives rise to a discouraged and timid mind. Although one believes oneself not to have the capacity for sudden

awakening, one is still unwilling to accept this and thinks that others are even less capable. Though one first declares before others that one is incapable, one's words always convey the implication, “But you are even less capable.” Taken to an extreme, this leads one consciously or unconsciously to deny the unsurpassed vehicle of Buddhadharma. If such a person has favorable karmic fortune and can compel everyone to follow what they say, the most precious core of Buddhadharma—the path of liberation—will disappear.

(2) One believes oneself already to have realized bodhi and gives rise to arrogance. This is not necessarily all for deceiving others; more often, it is for deceiving oneself. Although such a person speaks forcefully before others, when alone they still feel unsteady beneath their feet. Yet without speaking forcefully before others, they would feel even more unsteady beneath their feet. When they meet others of the same kind, they flatter one another, eventually giving rise to “wild Chan.” If such a person lacks favorable karmic fortune, this “wild Chan” is not Chan at all but merely madness, and it cannot harm others. If they do have favorable karmic fortune, they are liable to enter the demonic path.

Do not take either of these two wrong paths. Nor does “endure it for a while” mean that there is no need to practice. This is precisely when practice is needed! After the Elder told me, “Endure it for a while,” he later set aside additional time to explain “contemplation” to me in detail. When I occasionally speak on the forum of the “three steps of contemplation,” “do not heed it,” and so on, none of this goes beyond what the Elder taught. Later, when I reread the Elder’s books, I found that all of this was already there!

Question: In “Penetrating the Barrier of Confinement” in Chan Master Laiguo’s Autobiographical Record, it says, “The barrier of confinement lies beyond empty space. To go beyond empty space is to pass beyond the barrier of confinement.” How should “empty space” be understood here?

Answer: This empty space is not apart from “all Buddhas and sentient beings.” Just as all Buddhas and sentient beings have not stepped even one pace beyond empty space, the barrier of confinement lies beyond empty space. To go beyond empty space is to pass beyond the barrier of confinement; thus, empty space itself may serve as the barrier. Who can pass beyond this barrier? Only Chan practitioners can do so, without taking a single step—there is no doubt that they can pass beyond it.

Question: Teacher, how can one “without taking a single step, pass beyond this barrier”?

Answer: It has always been so; it is complete right here and now. Naturally, there is no need to take a single step.

Question: Even if one could go beyond empty space and pass beyond the barrier of confinement, one still could not escape from the palm of his hand.

Answer: At this point, the crucial barrier set by the patriarchs can no longer hold you back.

Question: Ha-ha, Teacher, please do not add frost to snow.

Answer: As expected, I cannot hide it from you.

Question: If, even when clouds arise, one does not doubt the clear sky, then one understands completely. Dark clouds do not exist apart from the clear sky; thus, dark clouds are transformed into wondrous functioning. Only then may one speak of "afflictions themselves being bodhi," and only then may one speak of "no practice, no attainment, and no realization." At this point, has one broken through the second barrier or passed beyond the barrier of confinement? Does this belong to what lies beyond the dharmakāya?

Answer: It is still as I said: if the concept of the three barriers remains, then one has not even broken through the first barrier.

The three barriers are guidelines for actual practice, not material for theoretical discussion. Unless one has reached the state of breaking through the second barrier, how can one even speak of the first barrier? Unless one has reached the state of passing beyond the barrier of confinement, how can one speak of the first and second barriers? Unless one has reached the state of "no practice, no attainment, and no realization," how can one speak of the three barriers?

(5) Do Chan patriarchs not rely on the sūtras or on the Buddha's teachings?

Question: The patriarchs of the Chan school's so-called refusal to rely on the sūtras or on the Buddha's teachings is a form of instruction uttered in response to the occasion.

Answer: Oh? Chan patriarchs do not rely on the sūtras or on the Buddha's teachings? In fact, Chan patriarchs put the meaning of the sūtras into practice and enact the Buddha's teachings!

Question: Yes, yes! Chan patriarchs are precisely those who truly put the meaning of the sūtras into practice and enact the Buddha's teachings!

Answer: Perhaps certain sayings have obscured your vision—for example, "Beat him to death and feed him to the dogs!" This means to strike dead the questioner's deluded thoughts, so that in an instant those thoughts abruptly cease. It does not

mean killing the questioner and feeding him to dogs, much less killing the World-Honored One and feeding him to dogs.

Question: Reading your words puts my mind somewhat more at ease.

Answer: “To rely on the words in interpreting the meaning is to wrong the Buddhas of the three times!” The fault does not lie in the sūtras, but in people. Fundamentally, the Chan school and the doctrinal schools are in accord.

(6) Why can the true reality of Chan not be seen?

Answer: If you cannot see it, then honestly go sit in meditation. If you do not clear up this “tangled appearance,” you will see the “appearance of Chan” even less. When the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month arrives, one who is not flustered is truly capable.

54. Understanding Koans

(1) Chan koans are numerous

Question: Chan koans are numerous, and inevitably there is a mixture of genuine and spurious. Some therefore say that Chan is fraudulent. How should this be regarded?

Answer: How are “numerous koans” and “a mixture of genuine and spurious” connected? Is the person who says this perhaps a fraud?

(2) Should one wait until after awakening before reading the recorded sayings of Chan patriarchs?

Answer: Before awakening, one reads them in order to open oneself up; after awakening, one reads them to remove habitual tendencies—what is called safeguarding realization.

(3) Once one has just recognized the Original Face, should one then understand these Chan koans thoroughly?

Answer: Not necessarily. It is like being able to read long novels as soon as one enters school. This also depends on one’s habitual tendencies from past lives. Those with the faculties of Chan are quicker to understand.

(4) Why did ancient Chan masters always speak in such roundabout ways?

Answer: They were not being roundabout. Let me give an example: suppose a distant guest comes to your home, and your mother-in-law asks, “Who is this?” You

would give her a detailed explanation—this is like the language of the doctrinal schools.

But if your mother-in-law points to your spouse and asks, “Who is this?” you would probably not introduce that person in such detail. Negative explanation: “I do not recognize [him or her]!” Affirmative explanation: “It is your spouse!” A gentler response: “Ha-ha! If you do not know, who else would?”

(5) When rendered in modern language, the ancient meaning is easily lost

A: Please translate koans into modern language; that suits me! Medicine suited to the illness is good medicine!

Answer: Ha-ha! Medicine whose flavor has changed may make you ill.

B: When rendered in modern language, some of the ancient meaning is easily lost.

Answer: Right! When rendered in modern language, the ancient meaning is indeed easily lost. I have seen some so-called “translations” that were neither one thing nor the other. In his comments in The Blue Cliff Record, Chan Master Yuanwu referred to himself as “Jia Shan,” yet someone actually translated this as Chan Master Jia Shan Shanhui.

C: “The Honored One of Two Feet” was translated into English by some people as “a noble person with two feet.”

Answer: The Buddhadharma is not as superficial as they make it out to be. If one person translates it as “two legs” and another comes forth to argue for “two feet,” it becomes even more laughable. Yet such arguments are everywhere on the internet…

55. Related Expressions Commonly Used in Koans

(1) What does “a mustard seed contains Mount Sumeru” mean?

Answer: The utterly small is identical with the great, and distinctions of scale are forgotten. The utterly great is identical with the small, and no boundaries or outward forms are seen.

Question: How can Mount Sumeru be contained within a mustard seed?

Answer: Is not this little forum as small as a mustard seed? (Not to mention other places—Lequyuan alone has more than ten thousand forums.)

The Compendium of the Five Lamps contains a koan on “a mustard seed containing Mount Sumeru.” Governor Li Bo of Jiangzhou asked, “The teachings say that Mount

Sumeru contains a mustard seed; of this I have no doubt. But can a mustard seed contain Mount Sumeru? Is that not absurd talk?" The master, Chan Master Zhichang of Guizong, said, "People say that Your Excellency has read ten thousand scrolls of books. Is that so?" Li said, "Yes." The master said, "From the crown of your head to your heels, you are no bigger than a coconut. Where do you put ten thousand scrolls of books?" Li merely bowed his head.

(2) "Seeing mountains as mountains and seeing water as water"

Question: (1) Seeing mountains as mountains and seeing water as water. (2) Seeing mountains not as mountains and seeing water not as water. (3) Seeing mountains still as mountains and seeing water still as water. These three are stages in practice. What is the difference between the first and third?

Answer: (1) When seeing a mountain, one grasps at the mountain; when seeing water, one grasps at the water. Grasping at the mountain excludes water; grasping at water excludes the mountain. (This is what the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra calls "assertion and negation.")

(3) When seeing a mountain, it is precisely a mountain; when seeing water, it is precisely water. Seeing a mountain does not obstruct water, and seeing water does not obstruct the mountain. (A bodhisattva departs from the two extremes—assertion and negation. This is called a bodhisattva's entering the Ground of Joy.)

Question: Is it possible to arrive directly at the third stage without passing through the second?

Answer: Yes! Although I have not seen it in the present day, there were such cases in ancient times. For example, the butcher Guang'e—the one in "Lay down the butcher's knife and become a Buddha on the spot."

(3) How should one understand "Though the bright moon hangs in the sky, one is still a man beneath the steps"?

Answer: Only when even "the bright moon hanging in the sky" cannot be grasped is one said to have entered the hall and the inner chamber.

(4) "At the tip of the pole, let the line be handled as you please; without disturbing the clear waves, its meaning is naturally distinct"

Question: [Chan Master Chuanzhi said,] "At the tip of the pole, let the line be handled as you please; without disturbing the clear waves, its meaning is naturally distinct."

Answer: Do whatever you need to do; so long as you do not engage in deluded thoughts and attachment, your state of mind will naturally be different.

Question: What do the “clear waves” refer to?

Answer: They refer to eating all day long and dressing all day long.

Question: What counts as “not disturbing” them?

Answer: Not biting onto a single grain of rice and not catching on a single thread of silk—only then does it count as not disturbing them.

Question: And then what?

Answer: Once there is no disturbance, do not speak of “afterward”; there is not even a “beforehand.”

56. Analyzing Koans

(1) Damei, Return My Pit

Question: Please explain this koan: Layman Pang asked the master, “I have long heard of Damei, but I do not know whether its plums are ripe yet.” The master said, “Where would you take your first bite?” Pang said, “Then they would be smashed into a hundred pieces.” The master said, “Return my pit to me.”

Answer: First bring me the pit, and then I will explain.

Question: Please compassionately explain it.

Answer: Let us follow the format of The Blue Cliff Record:

Instruction: In general, to uphold the essential principles of a school, one must be a person of keen spirit: touch it and turn at once; raise it and act at once. If one begins to deliberate and calculate, it is already a complete failure. When meeting a swordsman on the road, one must show one’s sword; before it is even drawn from its sheath, victory has already been decided. Whose stratagem is this? Let us cite a case and see:

Case:

Layman Pang asked Chan Master Fachang of Damei, “I have long heard of Damei. I wonder whether the plums are ripe yet?” [He cannot get beyond this routine! Probing with a pole, stirring up grass.]

The Master said, “Where would you take a bite?” [Do not say that having something to do is good! Beware of falling into a trap.]

The layman said, “Then there would be a hundred kinds of fragments.” [I knew you would say that. Do not play the lute this way with everyone you meet; when you encounter a drummer, your strings will break.]

The Master said, “Give me back the pit.” [Fortunately, there is this move! Yet it too is merely grass.]

Layman Pang Yun visited the two great elders Shitou and Mazu extensively. When he visited Shitou, he asked, “Who is the one who does not take the myriad dharmas as companions?” Shitou covered Pang’s mouth with his hand, and Pang suddenly had an awakening. One day, Shitou asked, “Since you first saw this old monk, what have you been doing in your daily activities?” Pang said, “If you ask about my daily activities, there is no place to open my mouth.”

He then presented this verse: “There is nothing special in daily activities; I simply accord with myself. At every point there is neither grasping nor rejecting; everywhere there is no contrivance. Who gives names such as vermilion and purple? On the northern mountain, not a speck of dust remains. Spiritual powers and wondrous functioning are nothing other than carrying water and hauling firewood.” Shitou approved of this and said, “Will you wear black or white?” Pang replied, “I wish to follow what I admire.” Thus he neither shaved his head nor dyed his clothing.

Later, he visited Mazu and asked, “Who is the one who does not take the myriad dharmas as companions?” Mazu said, “When you swallow all the water of the West River in a single gulp, I will tell you.” At these words, Pang suddenly grasped the profound meaning. He then remained there, attending upon Mazu for two years. He composed a verse: “A man does not marry; a woman does not wed. The whole family sits together, speaking of the unborn.” From then on, his responses were swift and incisive, and people from all directions turned to him.

Chan Master Fachang of Mount Damei in Mingzhou was from Xiangyang and bore the family name Zheng. In his youth, he followed a teacher at Yuquan Monastery in Jingzhou. When he first visited Mazu, he asked, “What is Buddha?” Mazu said, “Mind itself is Buddha.” The Master immediately attained great awakening and went to the former secluded dwelling of Mei Zizhen at Siming, where he built a thatched hut and lived.

When Mazu heard that the Master was living in the mountains, he sent a monk to ask, “What did the Venerable obtain from Master Mazu that you now live on this mountain?” The Master replied, “The Master told me, ‘Mind itself is Buddha,’ so I came to live here.” The monk said, “The Master’s Buddhadharma has recently

changed." The Master asked, "How so?" The monk replied, "He now also says, 'Neither mind nor Buddha.'" The Master said, "That old fellow will never cease confusing people! Let him say 'neither mind nor Buddha'; I simply maintain that mind itself is Buddha!" When the monk returned and reported this to Mazu, Mazu said, "The plums are ripe!"

Verse:

Accustomed to fishing for giant turtles in the vast blue sea, [Even one accustomed to sailing the great blue sea must beware of gullies and pitfalls.]

Mind itself is Buddha—at ease and unrestrained. [Even your teacher could do nothing to you, much less your friend!]

Who would have thought that, when reeled in, it would make a whole load? [Who would have thought the fishing rod would break?]

If one has the strength, what harm in carrying it on one end of a pole? [Do not say that having nothing to do is good. Having something to do is also having nothing to do.]

"Accustomed to fishing for giant turtles in the vast blue sea" praises Layman Pang's question to the Master: "I have long heard of Damei. I wonder whether the plums are ripe yet?" Mazu had long ago said, "The plums are ripe," yet Pang still went and asked this. Was that not superfluous? Actually, it was not. What Mazu said does not mean that Damei himself said it. Layman Pang was testing Damei, to see what he himself would say.

"Mind itself is Buddha—at ease and unrestrained" praises the Master's words, "Where would you take a bite?" If Damei had answered, "Ripe," he would have been like a giant turtle, just right for Layman Pang to hook. If he had answered, "Not ripe," then he would have left his teacher too soon and would not have been fit to live in the mountains. With the single sentence, "Where would you take a bite?" he slipped free lightly. Where would you take a bite of ripe? And where would you take a bite of unripe?

"Who would have thought that, when reeled in, it would make a whole load?" Layman Pang saw him answer, "Where would you take a bite?" If he had fallen upon "mind itself is Buddha," clinging to it without letting go and considering himself to have attained realization, he too could have answered in this way. That is to say, "Where would you take a bite?" might mean, "The plums are ripe! Where would you take a bite?" If so, that would indeed be "a hundred kinds of fragments"—fabricated Chan practitioners, as numerous as hemp and millet!

“If one has the strength, what harm in carrying it on one end of a pole?” praises the Master’s words, “Give me back the pit.” Do you think that, because I answered “ripe,” I must necessarily have attained something? Here, ripe is ripe, and unripe is also ripe; “mind itself is Buddha” is “mind itself is Buddha,” and “neither mind nor Buddha” is also “mind itself is Buddha.” Say “ripe,” or say “mind itself is Buddha”—there is nothing you can do to me!

Let us set aside Layman Pang for the moment. All of you, tell me: what is that “pit”? (After a long pause, he said: Do not strain your eyes!)

Question: I have been thinking wildly: when you, Layman Pang, said “a hundred kinds of fragments,” you were precisely taking a bite where there was no place to take a bite. (“The plums are ripe! Where would you take a bite?” You, Layman Pang, had fallen upon “ripe.” Because you fell upon “ripe,” there arose the hundred kinds of fragments of ripeness and unripeness. But for me, there is no such duality.) Therefore, the plum had long since been eaten, and this pit is the evidence of realization.

Answer: Ha ha! “Three cups of Qingyuan Baijiu wine—after drinking them, you say your lips were never wetted.”

Question: Does the “smell of wine” on my body also remain as evidence, like the “pit,” though I do not know it? Or are you saying that one has long experienced the taste of buddha-nature but cannot recognize it? Please point directly, Teacher.

Answer: In fact, the old teacher has already pointed directly countless times. Then let us point directly:

What is called the “pit” is precisely the intrinsically knowing nature that is clear and distinct when not a single thought arises. What is called the “smell of wine” is precisely the six fundamental afflictions: greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, and wrong views.

Yet whenever the old teacher speaks of “the intrinsically knowing nature that is clear and distinct when not a single thought arises,” he always subsequently sweeps it away, telling you that even intrinsic knowing is unobtainable. Do you know why?

Question: Oh, so the “pit” is the intrinsically knowing nature of “when the skin has entirely fallen away, only the one true permanence is revealed.” Because “there is no wisdom and no attainment,” whatever is attained is not ultimate reality. Ultimate reality does not establish a single dharma and is unstained by a single speck of dust. Thus this intrinsic knowing too is unobtainable. Is that correct?

Answer: The “pit” is not only something that cannot be grasped; it also cannot be discarded. Formless and without appearance, it contains all appearances; neither

arising nor ceasing, it encompasses all arising and ceasing. It is not produced by contrivance; it is inherently just so.

(2) Qinshan's One Arrow Piercing Three Barriers

Question: The Blue Cliff Record cites this case: Chan traveler Liang asked Qinshan, "What is it like when one arrow pierces three barriers?" Qinshan said, "Let the master within the barriers come forth and be seen." Liang said, "Then, if one knows one's fault, one must surely correct it?" Qinshan said, "Why wait any longer?" Liang said, "A good arrow has not struck its target." He then left. Qinshan said, "Come here, Venerable!" Liang turned his head. Qinshan seized him and said, "Let us set aside one arrow piercing three barriers. Now try shooting an arrow at Qinshan." Liang began to deliberate. Qinshan struck him seven times with his staff and said, "Let this fellow remain in doubt for thirty years!"

Turning one's head was not necessarily wrong. Where, then, was the error here?

Answer: The error lies in your very question. Originally, the seas were calm and the rivers clear, and all under heaven was at peace. With this question of yours, an affair has arisen.

Question: This koan cannot be judged so casually.

Answer: Indeed! Indeed!

Question: What if one encounters injustice on the road?

Answer: Do not let the sword draw you out.

(3) Baiyun: "You Fear Being Laughed At"

[Case:] Chan Master Baiyun Duan possessed an untrammeled spirit and traveled in Hunan in his youth. At that time, Chan Master Hui had newly arrived from Yangqi and was residing at Yungai. Upon seeing Duan, Hui recognized his exceptional character, and whenever they spoke, they would often continue until the end of the night. Hui suddenly asked, "Who was your tonsure master?" Duan replied, "Venerable Yu of Chaling." Hui said, "I have heard that he attained awakening while crossing a stream and composed a most remarkable verse."

"Can you remember it?" Duan immediately recited: "I have one precious pearl, long shut away by the bonds of worldly toil. Today the dust is gone and its light shines forth, illuminating the myriad forms of mountains and rivers." Hui burst into laughter and departed. Duan was astonished; he looked around on every side and did not sleep throughout the night. The next day, he sought a private interview and asked about the matter. It was just the beginning of the year. Hui said, "Did you see

the wild fox yesterday?" Duan replied, "I did." Hui said, "You do not equal him in the least." Duan was again greatly startled and asked, "What do you mean?" Hui said, "He likes others to laugh at him; you fear that others will laugh at you." At these words, Duan attained great awakening.

What does "He likes others to laugh at him; you fear that others will laugh at you" mean?

Answer: The old teacher directly points to intrinsic knowing free from thoughts. Have you truly recognized it? It is not that you doubt only when others laugh at you; in fact, you doubt yourself.

(What follows is Teacher Qi's section-by-section explanation:)

Chan Master Baiyun Duan possessed an untrammeled spirit and traveled in Hunan in his youth. At that time, Chan Master Hui had newly arrived from Yangqi and was residing at Yungai. Upon seeing Duan, Hui recognized his exceptional character, and whenever they spoke, they would often continue until the end of the night.

Chan Master Fanghui of Yangqi was the founding great patriarch of the Yangqi branch of the Linji school. Having just arrived at Yungai from Yangqi—both Yangqi and Yungai are place names—he met Chan Master Shouduan of Baiyun, who later inherited Yangqi's Dharma robe and became the second patriarch of the Yangqi branch. At their first meeting, teacher and disciple were deeply congenial, often conversing through the whole night.

Hui suddenly asked, "Who was your tonsure master?" Duan replied, "Venerable Yu of Chaling." Hui said, "I have heard that he attained awakening while crossing a stream and composed a most remarkable verse. Can you remember it?" Duan immediately recited: "I have one precious pearl, long shut away by the bonds of worldly toil. Today the dust is gone and its light shines forth, illuminating the myriad forms of mountains and rivers."

It appears that Chan Master Baiyun Duan had then recognized "the one precious pearl," that is, intrinsic knowing free from thoughts. But had he truly recognized it? Perhaps not. He himself may not even have noticed this "perhaps not"; he still believed that he had truly recognized it.

He would laugh loudly and leave.

Ha ha! I denied it to you for a moment, to test you and see whether you had truly recognized it.

Duan was stunned and looked about him in bewilderment. He did not sleep all night. The next day, he sought a private interview and asked about the matter.

Sure enough, you could not withstand the test.

It was New Year's Day. Hui said, “Did you see that wild-fox fellow yesterday?” Duan replied, “I did.” Hui said, “You are not a match for him.” Duan was greatly startled again and asked, “What do you mean?” Hui said, “He likes people to laugh at him; you are afraid that people will laugh at you.”

“At yesterday’s Dharma gathering, did you see what those wild-fox Chan practitioners were like?”

“I did.”

“In one respect, you are still inferior to them.”

“How so?”

“They court popular favor and like people to laugh. But you fear that I will laugh at you. When I laughed at you, you gave rise to doubts on your own. You could not sleep the whole night, and as soon as daylight came, you came to ask me about it, didn’t you?”

Thereupon, Duan had a great awakening at these words.

At this point, Chan Master Baiyun Duan completely cut off the root of his doubts; hence it is said that he “had a great awakening at these words.”

Fellow practitioners of the Mind-Seal, how many among us do not know of the spiritually aware knowing free of thoughts? And how many do not harbor doubts about this spiritually aware knowing free of thoughts? When those wild foxes on the internet began yelping some time ago, did your minds truly remain unmoved?!

(4) The Great Tiger Knocks Him Down with One Step

Question: The Blue Cliff Record says that Master Zhaoxian of Luyuan in Changsha, a Dharma heir of Nanquan and a contemporary of Zhaozhou and Zihu, had swift and incisive responses. If someone asked about teachings, he expounded the teachings; if someone wanted a verse, he gave a verse. If you wished to meet him as a master, he met you as a master. Yangshan’s usual incisive responses were unsurpassed.

One day, while he and Changsha were enjoying the moon, Yangshan pointed to the moon and said, “Everyone has this, but cannot use it.” Changsha said, “Exactly so. Then I ask you to use it.” Yangshan said, “Try using it yourself.” Changsha knocked him down with a single step. Yangshan got up and said, “My uncle in the Dharma is just like a great tiger.” Later generations called him “Cen the Great Tiger.”

Does “Changsha knocked him down with a single step” mean that by penetrating one’s own deluded thoughts of body and mind, one can attain the dharma-realm body? As it is said, “When you have killed off your thoughts, you may be granted the dharma-realm body.”

Answer: You, too, ought to be knocked down with one step.

(5) Yunmen: What Is the Dharmakāya?

Question: The Blue Cliff Record relates: A monk asked Yunmen, “What is the dharmakāya?” Yunmen said, “The six do not take it in.”

May I ask: What is the nirmāṇakāya?

Answer: It does not take in the six.

Question: The Blue Cliff Record says, “When Yunmen said, ‘The six do not take it in,’ it was truly difficult to grasp. If you grasp it when the first stirrings have not yet differentiated, that is already the second level.” How does one arrive at the first level?

Answer: When the first stirrings have not yet differentiated.

Question: This matter can be seen, heard, and felt, but cannot be discussed, recognized, or further sought.

Answer: Without words, it can be discussed; without mind, it can be recognized; without desire, it can be sought.

Question: Teacher, do you also wish to make this little monk laugh when he hears it?

Answer: Then you may laugh as well.

(6) The Senior Monk Overturns the Tea Kettle

Question: The Blue Cliff Record relates: Grand Tutor Wang entered Zhaoqing Monastery, where tea was being prepared. At that time, Senior Monk Lang and Mingzhao were handling the kettle. Lang overturned the tea kettle. When the grand tutor saw this, he asked the senior monk, “What is beneath the tea stove?” Lang said, “The Stove-Bearing Spirit.” The grand tutor said, “Since it is the Stove-Bearing Spirit, why did it overturn the tea kettle?”

Since it is the Stove-Bearing Spirit, why did it overturn the tea kettle?

Answer: Bearing the stove is not as good as bearing a person.

Question: Amitābha Buddha—wonderful! May I ask, Teacher, how does one bear a person?

Answer: Bear them like this: recite “Amitābha Buddha” once and call out “Wonderful!” once.

Tongzi Bingding (the questioner’s forum username) asks, “What is beneath the tea stove?” Please add one line. You must not overturn the tea stove.

Answer: Tongzi Bingding!

(7) Nanquan Cuts the Cat to End the Dispute

Question: In the Blue Cliff Record case “Nanquan Cuts the Cat to End the Dispute,” if someone were to meow, Nanquan would say, “Who told you to meow at random? Cut!” and sever it with one stroke of the sword. But if one said, “The cat is in this old monk’s hand; life and death are already clear,” what would Nanquan say?

Answer: Ha ha! People today are bolder than the people of old.

Question: The courage of people today, the courage of people of old. I bow forward once and carry the cat away.

Answer: Had you been there, you would indeed have saved the cat.

Question: I bow in reverence. (Turns to look back.)

Answer: Do not look back! (Watch the blade!)

Question: Hey! (Do not let the blade cut the wrong person.)

Answer: Meow!

(8) Deshan’s Final Word Is No Word

Question: I respectfully invite the Teacher to expound the Deshan Carrying His Bowl koan as well.

Answer: Let us instead look at the final words spoken by the Buddha. This is a chapter from the Sutra in Forty-Two Sections; please look at its final sentence:

Feeding a hundred billion Buddhas of the three periods of time is not as good as feeding one who is without thought, non-abiding, without cultivation, and without realization.

Question: Everyone, all is equal, all is unobstructed; follow the mind without hindrance, and it is thus right here and now. This is awakening; this is the

accomplishment of the dharmakāya. This is the “final word,” the “Patriarchs’ Chan.”

Answer: The final word has none of this idle furniture: “All is equal, all is unobstructed; follow the mind without hindrance, and it is thus right here and now. This is awakening; this is the accomplishment of the dharmakāya.”

Question: The final word means that the work of being liberated from birth and death has been brought to completion. Therefore, he says that at the end there is no word; the final word is the work—the work of being liberated from birth and death!

Answer: Do you know the koan, “Sitting upright to die or dying while standing is not absent, but the late master’s meaning has not even been dreamed of”?

Question: There is a tale that Chan Master Yantou, an eminent monk of Tang China, was beheaded by bandits. During his lifetime, Yantou often told his disciples, “When I die, there will be only one cry of anguish.”

Sure enough, when the bandits were about to cut off Chan Master Yantou’s head, he gave a great shout, said to have been heard several miles away.

Answer: This shows that the “final word” does not refer to dying while seated or standing.

Question: When I consider “Deshan Carrying His Bowl,” it is still like a fly trying to bite an egg: there is nowhere to begin.

Answer: Speaking of “Deshan Carrying His Bowl,” I have a question: Could it be that the master is inferior to the disciple? And further: What is the “final word”?

Question: Why is everyone asking this question? I cannot raise any doubt about it.

Answer: Then leave it alone.

Question: Ultimate reality is without characteristics and yet without no characteristics. This is the final word.

Answer: It is still not the final word. At the end, there is no word.

Where Yantou deceived people, though there is no word, there is precisely a word.

Originally there is neither beginning nor end, yet he says that this alone is it.

Question: What is the “final word”? I crave the “final word.”

Answer: Let me tell you plainly: words that enable the questioner to open to the original nature on the spot are the “final word,” even if not a word has been spoken. If they cannot do so, then even if one speaks so splendidly that heavenly flowers rain down and golden lotuses spring from the earth, one has still “lost half.”

(9) Zhaozhou: Go Drink Tea

Question: Teacher, you have established an online Dharma center and are making a great display of virtual Buddhist services! Ha ha!

Answer: Ha ha! I did not establish the online Dharma center, and everyone is conducting the virtual Buddhist services. I have brought tea for everyone. “Please have some tea.” ^o^

He: The altar is the altar within the mind; is the tea Zhaozhou’s tea? With the mind’s eye one sees the mind-altar—who drinks Zhaozhou’s tea?

Answer: Brother He! Go drink tea.

57. Chan Terminology

(1) Caoshan’s “Verse of Four Prohibitions”

Question: I once asked a Dharma brother, “I hear that you have seen your true nature?” His reaction was as though he had been scolded! Ha ha!

Answer: Chan Master Caoshan’s “Verse of Four Prohibitions”: “Do not travel the road where mind operates; do not wear the garment of the original. Why speak of just suchness? Most taboo is the time before birth.”

The ancients knew that this was a “present-day taboo” (“present day” refers to the emperor, and “taboo” means a forbidden personal name; violating the emperor’s personal name could bring beheading. It is a metaphor for how violating it cuts off one’s Dharma body and wisdom-life), so they used other language to describe awakening and seeing one’s true nature:

1. The ever-abiding true mind. This is the “road where mind operates.”

2. Opening to the original. This is the “garment of the original.”

3. What about just suchness at this very moment?

4. The Original Face before one’s parents were born.

Yet, when these four ways of speaking are used too often, they also come to imply “attaining sagehood.” Thus Chan Master Caoshan composed a “Verse of Four

Prohibitions."

Why avoid the taboo? Why impose prohibitions? Because whenever there are ordinary beings and sages, higher and lower, one cannot be equally such; this plainly shows the mischief of the discriminating mind, which has nothing to do with awakening and seeing one's true nature.

Question: "Most taboo is the time before birth"? Contemplation is precisely the "time before birth"; what is taboo about it? Does it mean, "What contemplation is there to contemplate?"

Answer: Why only "before birth"? The mind, place, path, original robe, and just-thisness—are these not all seeing one's true nature? Does a srotāpanna entertain the thought, "I have attained the fruition of srotāpanna"?

Question: It would be simpler just to rename it the "One-Prohibition Verse."

Answer: ^o^

(2) Dongshan's "Three Leaks"

Question: Teacher, it seems there are "three kinds of leaks." Practitioners should know what these "three leaks" are. One seems to be a leak in speech, but I cannot remember the others. Teacher, you have read many Chan books; please explain them.

Answer: The three kinds of leaks spoken of by Chan Master Dongshan are:

Chan Master Dongshan Liangjie, founding patriarch of the Caodong school, summarized the pitfalls into which practitioners easily fall as three kinds: "In the Dharma-ending age, many people possess only dry wisdom. If one wishes to distinguish the genuine from the false, there are three kinds of leaks."

(1) Leak in views: this means that views of self and dharmas still remain; one clings to the objects of knowing and does not see reality. In other words, the practitioner's views of self and dharmas have not yet been emptied, and thus the practitioner cannot thoroughly see the true reality of all dharmas. As it is said, "The function does not depart from its position and falls into the sea of poison."

(2) Leak in feelings: this means that discriminating consciousness and emotional attachment still remain. One takes this and rejects that, thereby retaining a mode of thought based on opposition between this and that. As it is said, "One remains stuck in turning toward and away, and one's view becomes one-sided and withered."

(3) Leak in speech: one is obstructed by words and sentences, not knowing that writing is merely a tool for realizing truth, and vainly applies one's mind to explicating written language and speech. It refers to being stuck and deluded by views based on words and phrases. As it is said, "Investigating subtlety, one loses the source; the function is obscured as to beginning and end."

Question: "Leak in views: the function does not depart from its position and falls into the sea of poison." What position does it fail to leave? What does the "sea of poison" refer to? Does it mean generating views arbitrarily and becoming bound by one side or the other?

Answer: For example: "When you have swallowed all the water of the Western River in one gulp, I will tell you." If one replies, "Where then would the fish, dragons, shrimp, and crabs settle?" this is the function not departing from its position. It does not mean arbitrarily generating views or being bound by one side or the other; rather, one cannot leave the verbal context of "the water of the Western River." This is what it means for the function not to depart from its position. Because one's understanding is not genuine and one's vision is unclear, one cannot discern the true meaning of the words and phrases, and so this happens. It is therefore called a leak in views.

Question: "Leak in feelings: wisdom is always turned toward or away, and one's view becomes one-sided and withered." May I hear an explanation of "turning toward and away"? What kind of error does "one-sided and withered" indicate?

Answer: For example, upon hearing, "When one is true, everything is true," one indulges one's greed and advances arguments in pursuit of gain; this is called "turning toward." Upon hearing, "When one is false, everything is false," one strives to cut off thoughts and rejects everything; this is called "turning away." Everyone knows, "All appearances are illusory," but do they know, "Illusory are all appearances"? How can one see the illusory? These very appearances are it! If one understands in this way, one will not be one-sided and withered. Why does one become one-sided and withered? Simply because emotional views have not been exhausted. It is therefore called a leak in feelings.

Question: "Leak in speech: the subtle essence loses its source, and the function is obscured as to beginning and end." Why is "the essence …" called a leak in speech rather than a leak in views?

Answer: For example, in the ancient "Chan of mind and nature," people discoursed on mind and spoke of nature, designating it as the subtle essence. They spoke of it this way and that, horizontally and vertically, clearly establishing a single dharma, yet could not say, "Who has seen me open my mouth?" The "essence" of which they speak is not in fact essence, but merely a reflection or a concept. Since they have not

seen the essence, it is not called a leak in views. They insist on establishing words, and so it is called a leak in speech.

(What follows consists of Teacher Qi's answers, given section by section.—Editor's note)

Question: Is my understanding mistaken? Why is it called a "leak"? Is this an assessment by super-experts of experts?

Answer: Better to say: it is an assessment by those who have transcended high and low of "experts."

Question: Leak in views: climbing a tree to seek fish; leaving the net only to enter a cage.

Answer: As numerous as hemp fibers and millet grains.

Question: Leak in feelings: cutting existence and cutting emptiness—who cuts the scissors?

Answer: You may throw away the scissors.

Question: Leak in speech: precisely emptiness, precisely existence—this too is mere idle speculation.

Answer: Why is it idle speculation? Simply because it establishes an argument.

(3) Yunmen's "One Tune, Three Phrases"

Question: [Case] A monk asked, "What is Yunmen's one tune?" The master said, "The twenty-fifth day of the twelfth lunar month." The monk further asked, "What of the singer?" The master said, "Take it slowly." Why did Yunmen say, "The twenty-fifth day of the twelfth lunar month"?

Answer: Someone asked me about this several years ago, and this was my answer. Please correct me if it is wrong:

Question: Yunmen answered the monk's question, "What is Yunmen's one tune?" with "The twenty-fifth day of the twelfth lunar month." When the monk then asked, "What of the singer?" he replied, "Take it slowly." What does this mean? Does "take it slowly" indicate that several days still remain before the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month, and thus suggest his state of mind—at leisure and unencumbered in the face of birth and death?

Answer: These are two questions. Let us first discuss the second. In the Chan school, "the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month" has indeed been used as a metaphor

for death being at hand. If “the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth lunar month” here were spoken in relation to “death being at hand,” then “take it slowly” would mean waiting for death. Why is one who is liberated at leisure and unencumbered? Because that person has directly realized that there is originally no birth and death.

If one has not directly realized that there is originally no birth and death, then in the face of birth and death one should give rise to the urgent sense that “birth and death are a great matter; impermanence is swift.” This is a basic quality that a practitioner should possess. For a practitioner, “facing birth and death” and being “at leisure and unencumbered” cannot coexist. Only after one day breaks through the black lacquer tube and directly realizes that “birth and death and nirvāṇa are equally like empty flowers” can one truly be “at leisure and unencumbered.”

Thus we know that Yunmen’s “the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth lunar month” was not said in relation to “the thirtieth day of the twelfth lunar month.” Had he answered “the twenty-third day of the first lunar month,” it would still not have departed from Yunmen’s intent.

The monk’s question, “What is Yunmen’s one tune?” was a question testing the host: he wished to test Yunmen’s level of realization and probe the style of Yunmen’s school. Yunmen’s one phrase contains three phrases—an all-encompassing phrase, a phrase that cuts off the myriad streams, and a phrase that follows the waves and currents. This is the style of Yunmen’s school. To encompass heaven and earth means that buddha-nature embraces all dharmas.

To cut off the myriad streams means to sever all deluded thoughts and attachments. In other words, cutting off the myriad streams is a great death, while encompassing heaven and earth is a great life.

After attaining life within death, what then? “Neither emptiness nor provisional existence is established, and even the middle is absent; transformed into spring mud, it protects the multitude of blossoms”—one follows the waves and currents! One responds to all conditions and liberates all sentient beings, yet there is not a single sentient being to liberate; one speaks all dharmas to every capacity, yet there is not a single dharma to speak. How could this be explained by language or measured by thought? To answer him with a meaningless phrase, cutting off his thinking in the hope that he may encompass heaven and earth and follow the waves and currents—this is the painstaking intent behind Yunmen’s answering a question about a “tune” with a “date.”

This monk was not ignorant of Yunmen’s intent. In “What of the singer?” the word “one” means “this”: Would it be all right if I sang such a tune? That is: I let go of all discrimination and preference and no longer give rise to any deluded thought. Yunmen feared that he might fall into an annihilationist view; then he would be

unable to encompass heaven and earth, much less follow the waves and currents. Hence he said, “Take it slowly.” Its meaning is quite similar to, “To take up such a matter, one must be exceedingly careful.”

One must enter through this koan and realize Yunmen’s three phrases.

Question: Then could one say that the thirty-first day of the twelfth lunar month is the phrase encompassing heaven and earth, the thirtieth day is the phrase cutting off the myriad streams, and the twenty-fifth day is the phrase following the waves and currents?

Answer: Excellent!

Question: A pure tune should belong in heaven; who in this world can hear it? Take it slowly—do not startle those behind the curtain; Yunmen’s threefold refrain is at just the right time. Please correct me!

Answer: This tune should not belong in heaven; only in the human world can it be heard. Yunmen’s three phrases are sung according to each person’s capacity, solely to awaken those behind the curtain.

(4) Yunmen’s “Speaking in Accord with the One” and “Speaking in Reverse of the One”

Question: To what kinds of capacities do Yunmen’s “speaking in accord with the One” and “speaking in reverse of the One” respectively respond?

Answer: Both respond to capacities that ask “how.” One is the whole body of teachings delivered by the Buddha during his lifetime—doctrinal teaching; the other is “not a matter before one’s eyes, nor a capacity before one’s eyes”—Chan.

Question: I see them both as killing swords. Is the killing sword the living sword?

Answer: The killing sword cuts off all worldly emotional views. The living sword gives rise, in response to capacities, to boundless wondrous functioning.

58. Online Sayings

(1) Question: Teacher, where is not the pure dharmakāya?

Answer: The pure dharmakāya.

(2) Do insentient things have mind?

Answer: If you do not have it, then they do.

(3) If you call it the sound of rain, you are blind! If you do not call it the sound of rain, you make contact. What sound do you call it?

Answer: If you do not call it the sound of rain, you are blind as well!

B: Teacher, how is one not blind?

Answer: “Casually cast a fishing line. Do not worry about deafness—what are you asking for?”

(4) Which came first, saṃsāra or ignorance?

Question: Which came first, saṃsāra or ignorance? This is as difficult a problem as whether the chicken came first or the egg.

Answer: Someone once asked Master Yuanyin, “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” The old master glared at him and said loudly, “You came first!”

(5) One Person Leaves Home, and Nine Clans Are Elevated

Question: A certain Dharma teacher recently gave me a huatou to investigate. Teacher Qi, please instruct me: since “when one person leaves home, nine clans are elevated,” why did the Venerable Maudgalyāyana still have to save his mother?

Answer: Is this not precisely “when one person leaves home, nine clans are elevated”?

(6) Where one finds a place to hide, leave no trace; where there is no trace, do not hide oneself.

Question: May I ask, Teacher: “Where one finds a place to hide, leave no trace; where there is no trace, do not hide oneself”?

Answer: Are you not already without a place to hide?

(7) How should “the physical body does not decay” be understood?

Question: How should “the physical body does not decay” be understood? Does it mean being forever healthy and long-lived, or does it mean leaving behind an incorruptible physical body after death, like Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch?

Answer: Is not the head appearing and disappearing precisely the physical body’s not decaying?

(8) What is it like when a naked blade is at one’s head?

Answer: ?!

Question: Whose head falls to the ground?

Answer: It falls!

(9) What was the Patriarch's intention in coming from the West?

Answer: What was the Patriarch's intention in coming from the West?

Question: I do not see!

Answer: What was the Patriarch's intention in coming from the West?

Question: Making trouble out of nothing.

Answer: If so, it is no wonder you say, "I do not see."

(10) The myriad dharmas return to the One; where does the One return?

A: The myriad dharmas return to the One; where does the One return? Could one answer: It returns to where your mind is?

Answer: No!

B: It returns nowhere, yet there is nowhere to which it does not return?

Answer: No!

B: Not right?

Answer: Is "discussion and slander" right as well?

(11) Not seeing the fish's head, yet seeing its tail

Xinming (screen name) asked: "The three threes before and the three threes after; other people's tops spin, while ours turns. A mosquito swallows an iron ox; stones bloom and fertile fields are sown. Are there still fish?"

Answer: Ha ha! Not seeing the fish's head, yet seeing its tail.

Xinming: What a fisherman!

Answer: You see only the fisherman; can you see the fish?

Xinming: If the fish could be seen, I would cast the fisherman into the net along with it.

Answer: Save me! Save me!

Xinseng (another person's screen name) asked: Leaving aside saving you, what net has trapped you?

Answer: Many thanks for saving me.

Xinseng: Still dragging half a foot through mud.

(12) To know delusion is originally not delusion; to recognize the true, the true is not true

Question: To know delusion is originally not delusion; to recognize the true, the true is not true. A long whistle stirs heaven and earth; a light song gladdens my heart.

Answer: A fine verse!

To know delusion is originally not delusion—do you still delight in hearing the word "know"?

To recognize the true, the true is not true—you still carry "recognition" with you.

A long whistle stirs heaven and earth—the sound resounds for thirty li.

A light song gladdens my heart—this is still here?!

(13) What is not a shadowy event of dharma-dust?

Question: "To inwardly guard secluded tranquility is still a discriminative shadowy event of dharma-dust." When contemplation is lucid and clear, is that too a shadowy event of dharma-dust?

Answer: Ha ha! What is not a shadowy event of dharma-dust?

(14) If there is no Chan to ask about, then what?

Answer: Ha ha! This very body is already in Hanyuan Hall; why ask where Chang'an is?

(15) A synonym for "beginningless" is "the present moment"

Question: I understand the antonym of "beginningless" to be "the present moment."

Answer: Ha ha! Its synonym is also "the present moment."

(16) Remove the "nest": where does the "bird" return?

[Bird's Nest]: What sort of thing is realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature? It is still one hundred and eight thousand li away.

Answer: Remove the “nest”: where does the “bird” return?

Question: A cloudless sky stretches for ten thousand li.

Answer: A wild storm is coming!

Question: One may say there is no clear sky, yet there is clear sky—hee hee.

Answer: Why not say: “The tips of the feathers have never gotten wet!”

(17) Understanding is a mind-demon; not understanding is a dead demon. Tell me, how can one not be a demon?

Question: How should we understand the ancients’ saying: “When thoughts arise, it is the celestial demon; when thoughts do not arise, it is the demon of the aggregates; when one speaks of arising and not arising, it is the demon of afflictions”?

Answer: Ha ha! Understanding is a mind-demon; not understanding is a dead demon. Tell me, how can one not be a demon?

Question: Teacher, yesterday I fell into the mind-demon, and today I have fallen into the dead demon. What should I do?

Answer: Ha ha! Then let it be this way: When thoughts arise, it is the Buddha of wondrous functioning; when thoughts do not arise, it is the Buddha of nirvāṇa; when one speaks of arising and not arising, it is the inconceivable Buddha.

(II) Esoteric Buddhism

59. Empowerment

Question: Is empowerment intended to control the transmission of certain Dharma gates?

Answer: No! There is no need for control; seeking empowerment is not difficult.

Question: I think that, for example, some practices can be undertaken only after one has reached a certain level.

Answer: That is a different matter. To use an analogy: when a child is learning to walk, empowerment is like the support provided by an adult.

Question: Does empowerment help ensure the correct transmission of orthodox Buddhist teachings—for example, the sounds of mantras?

Answer: Ha ha! What Buddhist teaching is unorthodox?

Question: Is empowerment a “license” for practicing a Dharma?

Answer: If the empowerment that transmits a Dharma is called a “license” for practicing it, the wording may not be wholly apt, but the meaning is indeed comparable.

60. Mantras

(1) Why are mantras different?

Answer: Because sentient beings' minds differ.

(2) Is reciting the Kṣitigarbha mantra the same as reciting the Kṣitigarbha Sūtra?

Answer: To say they are the same would obscure the meaning of the sūtra; to say they are different would disparage the mantra.

(3) Does mantra recitation and Buddha-recitation mean seeking me through sound?

Question: The Diamond Sūtra says: “If one sees me through form, or seeks me through sound, that person follows a deviant path and cannot see the Tathāgata.” Does mantra recitation and Buddha-recitation mean seeking me through sound? Please point out an entryway for me, Teacher.

Answer: Mantra recitation is called the great dhāraṇī—embracing all dharmas and sustaining immeasurable meanings. How could it be encompassed by sound? The nian of Buddha-recitation means “the present mind”—the one mind of this very moment. How could it be no more than sound? If the mouth recites while the mind does not practice, then, as the saying goes, “Though the mouth recites Amitābha, if the mind is scattered, shouting until one's throat breaks is still futile.” Would it not be quite accurate to call this following a deviant path?

Question: How should this be understood? The Diamond Sūtra says: “All appearances are illusory.” Yet the Buddha's name and mantras are true reality (as stated in teachings scattered through the writings of such eminent Pure Land teachers as Elder Master Nianzu and Elder Xu Hengzhi). I vaguely feel that these two statements do not contradict each other, but are two aspects of one reality. Yet I cannot quite think it through. Please, Teacher Qi, answer this.

Answer: You are right: these two statements do not contradict each other, but are two aspects of one reality.

61. Channels and Winds

Question: “Those who are awakened will certainly have unobstructed channels and winds; but unobstructed channels and winds do not necessarily mean awakening.” Is this correct?

Answer: The key lies in what is meant by “channels and winds.” Among the channels and winds, there is what is called the central channel; within the central channel, there is what is called the ultimate-meaning central channel. When the ultimate-meaning central channel is open, that is the same as awakening. That is, if the ultimate-meaning central channel is open, one is certainly awakened. The ultimate-meaning central channel is not separate from mind-nature. Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism does not have only one system of practice; some call this the “subtle wind-mind.” The perspectives differ, and so do the ways of explaining it.

There is a misunderstanding: some Chinese possess much wisdom but little meditative stability. Having read a few records of Chan patriarchs' sayings, they form their own understanding of awakening and think that awakening is nothing more than this. Not only do they dismiss talk of channels and winds with contempt, but they also negate and reject every kind of teaching.

They casually make grand pronouncements, seeming to swallow up everything, but when circumstances arise, they still cannot see through them. Dahui Gao compared them to medicinal mercury: when it encounters fire, it immediately flies away—fine to look at, but useless. Can this be called awakening? Still less should such awakening be linked with channels and winds. Because it lacks solidity, it is not even as grounded as those who practice channels and winds; it may be called “having one's heels off the ground.”

There is another misunderstanding. As mentioned earlier, the practice of channels, winds, and vital essences has an extremely strong power of blessing. This is not one-sided, but is connected with an extremely powerful force of faith and sincerity. If it goes too far, however, it becomes a form of attachment, and one can easily cling to some viewpoint, expression, or experience without letting go. If it is not handled well, it can obstruct final great liberation. Therefore, teachers with clear insight are of the utmost importance.

62. Rainbow Body

Question: Once one has thoroughly awakened, why must one still cultivate the rainbow body?

Answer: Once one has thoroughly awakened, why reject the rainbow body?

Question: Once one has thoroughly awakened, one should be in great rest. Would cultivating the rainbow body not be making trouble for oneself?

Answer: It too is great rest.

Question: Elder Master Huang Nianzu said that one of his senior Dharma brothers ordinarily did not speak, but attained the rainbow body after death.

Answer: Those who undergo rainbow transformation may not have had time during life to transmit the Dharma.

Question: Generally, one becomes famous only after attaining the rainbow body.

Answer: The rainbow body is also a way of propagating the Dharma.

Question: Yes—teaching by example.

Answer: Yes! Though teaching by words is also indispensable.

Question: Can the Chan school also attain the rainbow body?

Answer: There are such cases in the Chan school, but Chan does not place importance on this, so very few have been recorded.

Question: Patriarch Bodhidharma and Chan Master Puhua both underwent rainbow transformation, did they not?

Answer: Yes. These are the cases that have been recorded.

Question: Ha ha, Teacher, Patriarch Bodhidharma and Chan Master Puhua underwent a very thorough rainbow transformation!

Answer: Those that were not thorough were even less likely to be recorded, because this was not considered important.

Question: The matter of rainbow transformation is just as was said on the forum at home: “To die seated or standing is not necessarily the final word.”

Answer: The Śūraṅgama Sūtra has revealed the secret in a single phrase: “In accordance with the minds of sentient beings, [the Buddhas] respond according to what they are capable of knowing.”

Yantou said: “Xuefeng and I were born from the same branch, but we shall not die from the same branch. If you wish to recognize the final word, it is only this.”

63. The Madhyamaka “Absence of Intrinsic Nature”

Question: What is the difference between the “absence of intrinsic nature in all dharmas” taught by Madhyamaka and the “seeing one's intrinsic nature” spoken of in the Chan school? Please explain this carefully for later students.

Answer: What I say may not necessarily be correct. Let it serve as a brick cast out to attract jade:

The Madhyamaka teaching that "all dharmas lack intrinsic nature" aims to emphasize that “dharmas arising from causes and conditions, I say, are emptiness.” This is what is meant by “not arising from itself, not arising from another, not arising from both, and not arising without a cause.” It is intended that people first understand this theoretically and then realize it directly.

The “intrinsic nature” in the Chan teaching of “seeing one's intrinsic nature” is direct realization of the principle-substance of suchness. Unafraid of becoming covered from head to toe in weeds, it forcibly speaks at the point where “the way of words is cut off and the path of mental activity is extinguished.” But if, after reading a few Chan books, one seeks it among appearances, then even clarified butter becomes poison!

64. Is Tögal the Upward Path in the Chan School?

Answer: The Chan school has its own methods of going further upward, but they are not necessarily Tögal. Nor is this true only of the Chan school; every school has its own methods of going further upward.

Question: What does it mean to go beyond the dharmakāya?

Answer: Ha ha! Before speaking of going beyond it, what do you think the dharmakāya is?

Question: The dharmakāya cannot be spoken of; it is present in every raising of the hand and movement of the foot, in dressing and eating.

Answer: Ha ha! If the dharmakāya cannot be spoken of, can going beyond it be spoken of?

Question: This disciple also knows that “the path beyond is not transmitted by a thousand sages.”

Answer: What is not transmitted by a thousand sages is precisely that from which the thousand sages have never departed, and from which generation after generation has never departed.

(III) Pure Land School

65. Buddha-Recitation Is the Most Reliable Dharma Gate

Question: Teacher, could you tell us about the story you mentioned last time of a relative who passed away peacefully and was reborn?

Answer: He was my paternal uncle, almost like my adoptive father, since I lost my mother when I was three. He had no sons, so in his later years he lived with me. I did not urge him to meditate or recite mantras; I simply urged him to recite the Buddha's name sincerely and faithfully. For several years, he constantly held a string of prayer beads and softly recited the Buddha's name.

He was in very good health and had no illness. This spring, he was reborn in the Western Pure Land; he passed away standing. That day, he even went up and down the stairs by himself to see whether the car that was to take him back to his hometown in the countryside had arrived. It had been arranged in advance for Dianchen, the son of my elder sister—his eldest daughter—to drive him back to his hometown for a stay.

When the car arrived, he would not accept assistance and got into it by himself. Around noon, the family in his hometown called to report that he had gotten out of the car without assistance and walked to his room by himself. That evening, the family called to say that he had passed away. I packed that night and hurried back to his hometown the next day.

Only then did I learn what had happened. After dinner, he watched television and then went to the toilet, which in the countryside was outside the house. On his way back, Dianchen said, "Grandfather, you left your cane by the entrance to the toilet." He went and retrieved it himself. After entering his room, he took out a bundle of money and wanted to count it out for Dianchen.

Dianchen found this strange. In the past, Dianchen had always supported him filialy; why was he giving Dianchen money today? Before he had finished counting several hundred yuan, he entered parinirvāṇa. Dianchen supported him and laid him on the bed. Within less than five minutes, he had ceased breathing. When I arrived home around noon the next day, his whole body was cold, but the crown of his head was still warm. Of course, I had brought vajra sand and a dhāraṇī blanket, and recited the Great Light Mantra and prayers for liberation in the intermediate state; that goes without saying.

The funeral was conducted according to local rural custom. The coffin was kept for five days and then buried. A small Buddha-recitation player was placed at the head of the coffin, set at a very low volume. Its sound could not be heard at the gate of the courtyard, yet at the entrance to an alley one hundred meters away it could be heard loudly, as though heavenly music were resounding in the sky. Many people found this remarkable.

On the third day, someone who was not a Buddhist asked me, “Last night at midnight, I saw quite a few of your friends come. They were all monks, striking wooden fish and chanting sūtras before the coffin. How do you have so many monk friends? Why don’t I see them today? Did they return overnight?” In fact, I could not find any monastics nearby. Having rushed about and worked continuously, I was exhausted and slept very deeply. I did not see the vision that he saw. But I knew that it was an auspicious sign—holy monastics had come to welcome him.

When the coffin was buried, a Buddha-recitation player was placed inside. To conserve the batteries and prolong the recitation, its volume was set extremely low; it could be heard only when held to the ear. Yet after the burial, when we had gone far away from the gravesite, we could still hear the Buddha-recitation player sounding, as though it were resounding in the sky—again, everyone found it remarkable.

After this happened, many people in his hometown asked me for Buddhist books, and there were many more fellow practitioners of Buddha-recitation.

66. How Does Amitābha Buddha Guide Sentient Beings?

Answer: He takes you home.

Question: But where is home? Looking in all directions with sword in hand, this mind is utterly at a loss . . .

Answer: Do not be at a loss. Śākyamuni, the World-Honored One, has already told us: through Buddha-recitation, one may be reborn in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss. In that land there is a Buddha named Amitābha, who is now present there teaching the Dharma.

Question: Teacher, what is the most basic condition for rebirth in the West?

Answer: Just as the most basic condition for entering a school is that you are willing to attend it, the most basic condition for rebirth in the West is that you make the vow to be reborn there.

Question: So if one does not make the vow, one certainly cannot be reborn in the West. But merely wanting to go to school does not necessarily mean that one can enroll, does it?

Answer: If you truly wish to go, then reciting the Buddha’s name will do.

Question: The Dharma is non-contrivance: in accordance with conditions, one removes habitual tendencies and does not recite the Buddha’s name. Would that be acceptable?

Answer: “The Dharma is non-contrivance; in accordance with conditions, one removes habitual tendencies”—that is truly reciting the Buddha’s name. Besides, do you think that reciting the Buddha’s name is conditioned activity?

Question: The Buddha says in the Infinite Life Sūtra: “If, when I attain Buddhahood, the multitudes of bodhisattvas in the lands of other directions hear my name and do not immediately reach the stage of non-retrogression, may I not attain perfect enlightenment.” Does this mean that as soon as one hears Amitābha Buddha’s name, one can attain non-retrogression? Is that correct?

Answer: For example, if you establish a university in Beijing that enrolls students from across the country, then high school students everywhere in the country, upon hearing this news, will continue advancing in their studies; they will not regress to an elementary-school level of education.

Question: Oh, I see. That means one must still study for oneself and pass the examinations, right?

Answer: Studying is my proper duty—the provisions of faith. Merely wanting to attend school—the provisions of vows. Studying diligently and making progress every day—the provisions of practice.

Question: Are these three provisions all indispensable?

Answer: Did you not say, “The Dharma is non-contrivance”? In fact, one is three, and three are one.

67. What Sound Should One Listen to During Buddha-Recitation?

Question: When I recite the Buddha’s name, I like to use recordings as support for the recitation. One teacher says that one should listen to the combined sound, because the response is stronger that way. Yet I feel that sometimes I am mainly listening to the recorded Buddha-recitation, sometimes mainly to the sound of my own recitation, and sometimes to the combined sound. If I force myself to listen to the combined sound at every moment, I feel rigid, and the result is worse. What should I do?

Answer: Seeing how much you are calculating over sound makes me think of the Diamond Sūtra: “If one sees me by form or seeks me through sound, that person follows a mistaken path and cannot see the Tathāgata.” If you recite wholeheartedly, then whether or not you use recordings, you are not seeking through sound.

Question: Your teaching was deafeningly illuminating. The attachment that had bound my mind for several days was shattered without a trace by your single

phrase, like a blow to the head with a staff. In great laughter, I feel relaxed and liberated! I find myself so amusing! Thank you!!!

68. Of Several Methods of Buddha-Recitation, Which Is Best?

Question: After consideration, I have decided to practice Buddha-recitation. This humble student knows several methods, as follows: (1) reciting while using prayer beads to keep count; (2) forming the Amitābha samādhi mudrā, reciting mentally and listening with the ears, while timing the recitation; and (3) forming the samādhi mudrā and counting from one to ten with clear awareness, continuing in the same way even to the tens of millions. This humble student has tried all three methods before, but only for a short time. Which method does the teacher think I should use?

Answer: Best is to take steadiness, constancy, and sincerity as your seal, and your breathing as your prayer beads.

69. How Can I Know Whether My Grandfather Has Already Been Reborn?

Answer: Drawing lots before the Buddha is not a bad method.

Question: What does drawing lots mean? Please excuse this disciple’s ignorance.

Answer: Write two lots: “Already reborn” and “Not yet reborn.” Place them as offerings before the Buddha, bow with sincere reverence, and ask the Buddha for instruction. Then draw one lot and see what it says. Bow in homage and withdraw.

Question: If one encounters something difficult to decide in everyday life, may one also do this?

Answer: Yes, one may.

Question: When using this method to make a decision in the face of difficulties in life, how can one know whether it is a true response?

Answer: Ah, that also varies from person to person. If you still have doubts, why draw lots at all?

(IV) Consciousness-Only School

70. The Sixth Consciousness: Consciousness

Question: How do we know that there is a Buddha? Where does the Buddha come from?

Answer: How do you know that there is no Buddha? Where does “no Buddha” come from?

Question: What I mean to ask is: at this moment, which of the eight consciousnesses does this knowing belong to?

Answer: Oh! You mean the thinking mind. The thinking mind is the sixth consciousness.

71. The Seventh Consciousness: Attachment to Self

(1) Does a newborn infant have attachment to self?

Answer: Attachment to self is a function of the seventh consciousness, and the seventh consciousness arises from the eighth consciousness. Sentient beings’ attachment to self is innate; of course, newborn infants have attachment to self.

(2) What does the seventh consciousness do?

Answer: This porter works very hard. It busily carries the deluded thoughts and fabrications of the sixth consciousness into the eighth consciousness, where they become seeds—that is, it plants causes. It is also busy carrying out the seeds in the eighth consciousness that have matured upon encountering conditions, causing them to manifest falsely—that is, it undergoes the results.

(3) I believe that innate attachment to self can be cut off, but I do not know how to cut it off.

Answer: Choose a dharma gate suited to you, go deeply into a single practice, and persevere without letup, until the fruit ripens and the conditions are complete. When that time comes, looking back at our present posts, you will find them utterly laughable: they are all mere idle speculation!

72. The Eighth Consciousness: Mind King

(1) Where is the eighth consciousness when one is asleep?

Answer: Whether asleep or awake, the eighth consciousness is located in the region of the heart. Even upon entering the cessation of feeling and perception, when the first seven consciousnesses no longer manifest, the eighth consciousness remains in the region of the heart. Once the eighth consciousness leaves the body, the person dies.

(2) What is the difference between a person’s eighth consciousness and an ant’s eighth consciousness?

Answer: The eighth consciousnesses of a colony of ants are broadly the same (collective karma), yet each is also different (individual karma). The eighth consciousness stores the seeds of karmic force and is therefore also called the storehouse consciousness.

(3) Is the eighth consciousness one or many?

Answer: Is a “person” one or many?

Question: Is the true body (one spirit) one for each person, or is there one that everyone shares?

Answer: Are the many waves of the great ocean one water or several waters?

(4) The Mind-Born Body and the Intermediate-State Body

Question: What is the relationship among the mind-born body, the intermediate-state body, and the eighth consciousness?

Answer: The mind-born body manifests through the wisdom of equality (into which the seventh consciousness is transformed). The intermediate-state body is a temporary transitional body that manifests after a person dies and the eighth consciousness leaves the body, then takes in extremely rarefied matter.

(5) When the preceding thought has ceased and the subsequent thought has not yet arisen, which of the eight consciousnesses does this belong to?

Question: When the preceding thought has ceased and the subsequent thought has not yet arisen, which of the eight consciousnesses does this belong to? Or is it unrelated to the eight consciousnesses?

Answer: Since it has “ceased” and has “not yet arisen,” how could there still be any trace of consciousness?

(V) Tiantai School

73. The Tiantai Three Contemplations

Question: In the Tiantai Three Contemplations, does one contemplation contain all three contemplations?

Answer: The three contemplations in one mind and three thousand realms in a single thought are both important teachings of the Tiantai school.

Question: [The Three Contemplations—the Tiantai Three Contemplations]

1. Contemplation of emptiness—when the three aspects are all swept away, this is ultimate emptiness; this is called the contemplation of emptiness.

2. Contemplation of provisional existence—when the three dharmas are all established, this is wondrous provisional existence; this is called the contemplation of provisional existence.

3. Contemplation of the middle—when all three are free of relativity, this is the perfect middle; this is called the contemplation of the middle.

(1) From the explanation above, does one contemplation contain all three contemplations?

Answer: The three contemplations in one mind.

Question: (2) If explained separately: the contemplation of emptiness destroys delusion; the contemplation of provisional existence reveals truth; and the contemplation of the middle does not cling to the perfect—this accords perfectly with the Śūraṅgama Sūtra. Is this not a forced interpretation?

Answer: It is not a forced interpretation. ^o^

74. The Concurrent Practice of Calming and Contemplation

Question: Teacher, how is the concurrent practice of calming and contemplation manifested during contemplation? I do not grasp this point well. Sometimes I simply do not know how, and I become rather confused.

Answer: “Stop!” Try it now.

75. “The Six Identities with Buddhahood”

Question: At present, I merely recognize delusion and do not seek truth.

Answer: To seek truth is to have delusion; to recognize delusion is truth.

Question: That connects with what you have just said, Teacher. Let me borrow a verse by Master Tanxu: “Contemplate thoughts, and each thought immediately comes to rest; recognize delusion, and every delusion is true.”

Answer: In the Tiantai school’s “Six Identities with Buddhahood,” the “ultimate identity with Buddhahood” says: “What has always been true is delusion, yet now all delusions are true. Simply return to the nature as it originally was; not a single dharma is new.”

(VI) Vinaya School

76. Lay Practitioners Should Not Read Monastic Precepts

Question: The Buddha said that lay practitioners, or those who have not left home, are not permitted to read the Vinaya. Do you know why, senior brother? I have never been able to find a satisfactory answer.

Answer: “Lay practitioners, or those who have not left home, are not permitted to read the Vinaya” means that they are not permitted to read the precepts for monastic teachers. My understanding is far from complete and is offered for reference only:

1. The living environment of monastic teachers is entirely different from that of laypeople. Without personal experience, it is not easy to understand. If misunderstandings arise, nectar may instead become poison.

2. The several hundred precepts received by monastic teachers involve subtle particulars. Moreover, the observance, violation, allowances, and prohibitions within them are extremely specific. If you look at them only superficially, there will surely seem to be many people violating the precepts in your eyes, whereas in fact they may not be violations, or may be permissible exceptions. If you think that someone has violated them, this is “slandering the saṅgha in thought”; if you say it aloud, this is “slandering the saṅgha in speech.” To prevent you from slandering the saṅgha, it is better not to read them.

3. The precepts are for one’s own observance. If you have not left home and have not received those precepts, what benefit is there in reading them besides using them to scrutinize others?

77. Do Not Misunderstand Nanquan’s Killing of the Cat

Question: There are many cockroaches and ants in my home, and quite a few caterpillars in the garden as well. What should I do? Thank you, Teacher!

Answer: Maintaining good hygiene indoors and outdoors and beautifying the environment are ordinary daily matters. Why must they be connected with “killing living beings”?

Question: Teacher, do you mean that we should not be attached to killing or not killing, but simply do whatever needs to be done?

Answer: If you understand it that way, you have already connected it with “killing.”

When the Buddha was alive, some disciples opened their heavenly eye and were able to see microorganisms in water—“eighty-four thousand insects.” The Buddha therefore prohibited his disciples from using the heavenly eye to examine drinking

water. We are always speaking of “Nanquan’s killing of the cat.” Yet for Nanquan, no cat was ever killed. If one cannot free oneself from the habit of clinging to appearances, one will not only misunderstand “Nanquan’s killing of the cat,” but will also misunderstand “Nanquan never killed a cat.”

Question: Teacher, what is meant by “Nanquan’s killing of the cat”? Is it a koan?

Answer: Oh? Have you never heard of Nanquan’s killing of the cat?

Question: No! Could you explain it, Teacher?

Answer: That makes things easier; then there is no need to concern yourself with it.

(VII) Huayan School

78. All Is Created by Mind

Question: If humans too were created by mind, whose mind created them? If even primordial ignorance never departed from mind, how could ignorance arise from the mind’s original purity, clarity, and perfect brightness, and then give rise to mountains, rivers, the great earth, and all kinds of phenomena? These questions have long perplexed me and have also made it difficult for me to develop deep faith in the Buddhadharma. I respectfully ask the teacher for a compassionate answer. I would be most grateful.

Answer: Oh! It turns out that you understand “mind” to mean the thinking mind.

At the fourth assembly of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra, immeasurable bodhisattvas gathered in the Heaven of Yāma Palace and spoke verses in praise of the Buddha. At that time, Bodhisattva Juelin, empowered by the Buddha, surveyed the ten directions and spoke these verses:

It is like a skilled painter, who lays out the various colors. Deludedly grasping distinct appearances, though the great elements are without distinction.

Within the great elements there are no colors, and within colors there are no great elements. Yet apart from the great elements, no colors can be found.

Within mind there are no painted colors, and within painted colors there is no mind. Yet apart from mind, painted colors can be found.

That mind never abides; it is immeasurable and inconceivable. It manifests all colors, yet each is unaware of the others.

Like a skilled painter, it cannot know its own mind. Yet because of mind it paints; the nature of all dharmas is likewise.

Mind is like a skilled painter, able to paint all the worlds. The five aggregates all arise from it; there is no dharma that it does not create.

As with mind, so too with Buddha; as with Buddha, so too with sentient beings. You should know that Buddha and mind are both inexhaustible in their essential nature.

If one knows how mind functions, universally creating all worlds, that person sees the Buddha and realizes the Buddha's true reality.

Mind does not abide in the body, nor does the body abide in mind. Yet it can perform the Buddha's work, with a freedom never before known.

If one wishes to understand all Buddhas of the three times, one should contemplate the nature of the dharma realm: all is created by mind.

Look! Is this "mind" the thinking mind?

Middle Section: Buddhist Practice

I. Faith: Right Faith

79. Attachment Becomes an Obstruction

Question: The purpose of Buddhist practice is liberation—that is, to remove the "obstructions" that hinder liberation. But where are these obstructions? How do they become obstructions?

Answer: Obstructions are in the mind, because of attachment.

80. Mind Is the Pure Land, and the Pure Land Is Mind: How Is This to Be Understood?

Answer: Of the four—faith, understanding, practice, and realization—if faith is lacking at the outset, understanding can only be misunderstanding. If practice and realization are lacking later on, then even if one does not misunderstand, what use is it?

II. Vows: Arousing Mahāyāna Vows

81. Why Cultivate the Mahāyāna?

Answer: A comparable question may be asked: Since trains already exist, why are airplanes needed? Can one not reach one's destination without taking an airplane?

Question: Everyone knows that the Mahāyāna is good, so why has not everyone aroused the Mahāyāna resolve? It is truly difficult to arouse such a great resolve!

Answer: If one seeks liberation only to free oneself from suffering, then Mahāyāna bodhisattvas would lose their motivation to seek liberation. Mahāyāna bodhisattvas understand that only after they themselves have been freed from suffering can they enable sentient beings to be freed from suffering. For this reason, they diligently cultivate the path of liberation. Bodhisattvas seek liberation in order to liberate sentient beings, not merely to free themselves from suffering. Thus it may be said: "At the very first arousing of the resolve, one immediately attains perfect enlightenment."

Now, contemplate once more Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva's great vow: "Until the hells are empty, I vow not to become a Buddha!" Does it feel the same as before?

III. Practice: Diligently Cultivating the Six Pāramitās

(I) Giving

82. Should We Give Money to Street Beggars?

Question: There are increasingly more street beggars these days, and they beg in many different ways. In the past, whenever I encountered one, I would almost always give something—sometimes 10 or 5 yuan if I had no small change. But now I sometimes wonder: am I helping them, or harming them? I ask everyone: when encountering such a situation, how should one apply one's mind? Should one give or not?

Answer: Venerable Jinghui always kept some small change in his pocket. Whenever he encountered beggars, he would give them alms. Someone asked him, "Some of those beggars are frauds. Do you still give to them?" The Venerable replied, "Whether they are genuine or not, they are pitiable. To beg is to relinquish one's dignity. Is a person who has relinquished their dignity not pitiable?" He also said, "Moreover, they at least give us an opportunity to practice generosity."

(II) Upholding the Precepts

83. Meat and Vegetarian Food

Question: Does rice wine violate the precepts?

Answer: Only those who use alcohol as medicine do not violate the precept.

Question: Fruit wine and beer should fall under the Five Precepts, shouldn't they?

Answer: They fall under the precept against drinking alcohol.

Question: Then what about drinking at social engagements? I often go out with my superiors.

B: Ask Teacher Qi to attend those social engagements in your place—heh heh.

Answer: Ha ha! I have a congenital alcohol allergy. If it flares up, it could cost me my life.

Do you know who said this? "Scallions and garlic have always been pungent; fish and meat are rank; vegetables and beans are greens; to accord with conditions is vegetarian."

Question: What does Teacher Qi think of the "Drunkard" brand of peanuts I mentioned? Though thirsty, Confucius did not drink the water of Robber Spring.

Answer: Since you have already called it "the water of Robber Spring," all I can do is praise you. I have heard of a precept called "not watching military formations." My name contains the character for "military"; if that too counts as "the water of Robber Spring," then you cannot associate with me.

Question: How should we deal with mosquitoes, flies, and cockroaches? Mosquitoes are truly annoying. May we exterminate them?

Answer: Do not think of them as annoying, nor think of exterminating them; simply keep things clean. If you cannot be master of your mind in this matter, you may feel compassion for them and liberate them.

84. Refraining from Harsh Speech

Question: On online forums, one sometimes sees people attacking well-known Dharma masters. How should this be handled?

Answer: The main thing is to see who the attacker is: are they hurling abuse, or are they reasoning? Set aside those who hurl abuse; as for those who reason, disciples attacking one another is still understandable, but Dharma masters attacking

Dharma masters demean their own status. As leaders of the same Dharma lineage, if A attacks B and B does not attack A, the right and wrong are clear of themselves.

(III) Forbearance

85. Teacher, she says that she always wants to let go, but can never do so. May I ask you a question concerning our work? When we encounter unjust treatment or unfair circumstances at work, should we endure them or strive for what is right? We work diligently, yet are treated with contempt.

Answer: If there is attachment, neither enduring nor striving is good; if there is no attachment, there is nothing wrong with either enduring or striving.

Question: At the Teacher's words, she smiled happily for the first time today. Thank you, Teacher.

Answer: "Because people in this present life treat one with contempt, the karmic offenses of former lives are thereby extinguished, and one will attain anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi."

(IV) Diligence

86. What method can relieve my mother's karmic obstacles? By what means can I advance without slackening or doubt?

Question: I recently learned that my mother's longstanding illness has recurred (bleeding hemorrhoids), and that she must undergo surgery. Thinking of her everyday kindness toward me, while I am now far away and have not yet attained the fruit of the Way, I am deeply afflicted. I respectfully ask Teacher Qi: What method can relieve my mother's karmic obstacles? And by what means can I know the extent of my own strength, so that I may advance without slackening or doubt?

Answer: When one person realizes the Way, nine generations of ancestors ascend to heaven.

The Linji school, which remains flourishing to this day, was founded by Chan Master Linji. Chan Master Linji's teacher was Chan Master Huangbo. Huangbo left home to become a monastic in his youth; his mother herself sent him to do so. Later, after she became blind in both eyes, she vowed to wash the feet of passing monks at a station specially established to receive itinerant monastics. Because Chan Master Huangbo had a fleshy growth on his foot, the old mother, yearning deeply for her son—such is the compassion of parents the world over!

One day, the young Chan Master Huangbo was traveling on pilgrimage and passed through that place. Someone told him, “Your mother has vowed to wash the feet of passing monastics here.” Chan Master Huangbo immediately understood what this meant. He therefore did not stay, but continued on his journey. That person then told Huangbo’s mother about this. The old woman at once felt her way after him. As she was wading across a river, she happened to encounter a flash flood, and so…

Chan Master Huangbo witnessed all this. He wailed aloud in grief, yet was unable to rescue her. His resolve for the Way did not waver in the least. He cried out to the Buddhas in heaven: “When one person realizes the Way, nine generations of ancestors ascend to heaven! Buddhas of the ten directions, do not deceive me!”

Japan today has the Ōbaku school. It is said that during its daily hall recitation, it includes this line: “When one person realizes the Way, nine generations of ancestors ascend to heaven! Buddhas of the ten directions, do not deceive me!”

87. Whether or not one is making progress, proceed straight ahead with unwavering resolve

Question: “Cling firmly to the green mountains and never let go, regardless of winds from east, west, south, or north.” Whether or not I am making progress, I will proceed straight ahead with unwavering resolve. Please rest assured, Teacher.

Answer: Good.

Question: Proceed steadfastly with unwavering resolve!

Answer: In this way, you will naturally receive the Buddha’s blessings. If the frenzied mind does not cease, even the Buddha cannot apply his strength.

88. To carry the single phrase “Namo Amitābha Buddha” through to the end is true diligence.

Question: I have a terminal illness and ordinarily practice the Great Compassion Mantra. Teacher Qi, please instruct me: For someone like me, how should I cultivate the Buddhadharma so as to be more diligent?

Answer: A terminal illness concerns only the physical body; the dharmakāya is inherently free of illness. Have genuine faith in the Pure Land and earnestly make vows to seek rebirth there. To carry the single phrase “Namo Amitābha Buddha” through to the end is true diligence.

(V) Dhyāna

89. The Relationship Between Meditative Absorption and Awakening

Question: Do those who have awakened possess the meditative stability of the first dhyāna through the fourth dhyāna?

Answer: They are unrelated! One can only say this: possessing the meditative stability of the first through the fourth dhyānas, the eight absorptions, or even the nine successive absorptions does not necessarily mean one has awakened.

(VI) Prajñā

90. Genuine Faith Is Without Faith; Genuine Vows Are Without Vows; Genuine Practice Is Without Practice

Question: Please tell us, teacher: what counts as genuinely having faith in the Buddha?

Answer: I once discussed the matter of genuine faith with a Dharma friend, because he was boasting. He said, “Of the three provisions of faith, vows, and practice, I would not dare boast about the latter two, but I possess the provision of faith one hundred percent.” In fact, if he truly possessed the provision of faith one hundred percent, vows and practice would already be contained within it. Though he had not yet left the Sahā world, he would already be united with the lotus-pool assembly.

I said, “I would not presume to comment on the latter two, but I can see that your provision of faith is not yet complete. You still need honestly to recite the Buddha’s name and accumulate it.”

He said, “I have genuine faith.”

I said, “Genuine faith is without faith!”

He said, “Faith is faith, and disbelief is disbelief!”

I said, “I did not say that you do not have faith; I said that it is ‘not complete.’” I lifted my teacup, took a sip of water, and asked him, “Water relieves thirst. Do you believe this or not?”

He said, “There is something wrong with the way you speak! Water relieves thirst—does that require belief?”

I said, “Exactly! It is laid out in full and immediately present; there is simply no need for such superfluous words as ‘belief’ or ‘disbelief.’ That is genuine faith.”

Having finished with “genuine faith,” I will not say much more about “the true Buddha.” Look—this is the very question everyone is discussing.

Question: Please also explain genuine vows and genuine practice.

Answer: Consider two questions: When you are hungry, are you willing to eat? When you are paid, do you go and collect your wages? When you eat because you are hungry, is there still a matter of being willing or unwilling? When you collect your wages, is there still a matter of practicing or not practicing?

Therefore, genuine vows are without vows, and genuine practice is without practice. Genuine practice without practice is true practice without cultivation.

Question: Without vows and practice, yet not apart from vows and practice.

Answer: Correct! It is not that there are no vows or no practice, but that they are genuine vows and genuine practice.

91. If It Is Everywhere, Why Is Practice Still Necessary?

Answer: Although it is everywhere, there are obstructions everywhere! Therefore, one must still sit in meditation and practice. Practice is the removal of obstructions.

Question: Where do these obstructions come from?

Answer: Even Sister Wang from East Village knows: dark clouds arise from the bright, clear sky.

Question: So one must still sit in meditation and practice. Does sitting in meditation and practicing mean actively gathering in the mind?

Answer: When you suddenly discover, “There was never any mind to gather in!” the purpose of sitting in meditation and practicing has been attained.

Question: What is the principle by which sitting meditation—regardless of the method—removes these obstructions?

Answer: First, use soap to wash away mud; afterward, pull out the nails and remove the wedges.

Question: Practice is the removal of obstructions. According to Buddhist theory, obstructions are originally empty; even without removing them, they will depart by themselves. What obstruction, then, does my practice remove?

Answer: “Obstructions are originally empty; even without removing them, they will depart by themselves”—the cycle of rebirth in the six realms!—Karmic force is inconceivable!

“What obstruction, then, does my practice remove?”—Do not go along with it!—The power of vows is even more inconceivable!

92. The Equality of Buddhadharma

(1) Is the Chan school the highest Buddhadharma?

Answer: The Chan school is the most direct Dharma; it does not beat around the bush. “All dharmas are equal; there is neither high nor low.” The Dharma suited to a particular person is the best and highest Dharma.

(2) Why are all dharmas equal, with no Dharma higher or lower than another?

Answer: Among the eighty-four thousand dharma gates, are there higher and lower ones? If there are, by what standard could they be measured?

(3) Was Shenxiu better, or was the Sixth Patriarch better?

Answer: Both were good.

Question: Judging by the Sixth Patriarch’s realization, what stage would he have attained?

Answer: Although we cannot assess the Sixth Patriarch’s realization, one point is certain: the Sixth Patriarch’s realization had long transcended any question of stages or no stages.

(4) Just as many Buddhist sūtras say, “This sūtra is the most supreme.”

Question: I know that the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is the summit of Esoteric Buddhism. How can someone who has never practiced learn such an esoteric teaching?

Answer: It is just as many Buddhist sūtras say: “This sūtra is the most supreme.” Many methods of practice likewise emphasize their own excellence. Their purpose is to encourage students to settle their minds and work diligently on the Way. Let me give an analogy:

When an elementary-school teacher comes to an important lesson, the teacher repeatedly emphasizes how very important it is. Even if someone with a doctorate heard this way of teaching, they would not criticize that elementary-school teacher who had not even attended university. For the doctoral graduate knows that it is not wrong to teach elementary-school students this way. Those students simply could not go on to postdoctoral study at that time.

What is important in practice is that it suit the practitioner, that one be grounded and practical, and that one go deeply into a single method. Then attainment is certain.

Question: One teacher says, “The Heart-of-Heart Esoteric Dharma is unsurpassed esoteric practice.” Another teacher says, “All methods other than Dzogchen are incomplete teachings. One cannot attain the ultimate fruit of Buddhahood by relying on incomplete methods.” I have faith in both of these teachers, but why do these two statements seem contradictory to me?

Answer: All dharmas are equal, with neither high nor low; what matters is whether a method suits the practitioner. For a particular practitioner, the Dharma most suited to them is the highest and best Dharma. For example, if someone is suited to Pure Land practice, then the Dharma gate of Buddha-recitation is the highest and best Dharma for that person. “Discernment of dharmas,” among the seven factors of awakening, means choosing the Dharma most suited to oneself and then going deeply into that single method.

There is now an unhealthy tendency: everyone says that their own Dharma is the highest and that others’ Dharma is no good. In my view, there is nothing wrong with considering one’s own Dharma the highest and best, because it suits oneself. But to say that others’ Dharma is no good is mistaken. The World-Honored One foretold that, in the final age of Buddhadharma, contention would become entrenched. Here we can see an example of this. I think that Dharma gates should respect one another; after all, we are all disciples of Śākyamuni Buddha.

(5) What method should one practice in order to awaken most quickly?

Answer: The method suited to you is the quickest.

(6) At the End of Practice, All Is Equally Such

Question: Once one has practiced to a certain point—realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature—do all Dharma gates become the same, and are they no longer needed? Is that correct?

Answer: At the end of practice, all is equally such; originally there is neither high nor low. No practice is true practice. No Dharma is true Dharma. Great Mahāmudrā has no mudrā to form. The unsurpassed great esoteric mantra does not contain a single syllable.

93. Practice

(1) Is the Dharma Not Something to Be Cultivated?

Question: The Dharma does not belong to cultivation. If one says it can be cultivated and attained, then what is cultivated and accomplished will also decay.

Answer: Nor does it belong to non-cultivation, for not cultivating is no different from being an ordinary being.

(2) What Is the Purpose of Practice, and What Is to Be Attained?

Answer: The purpose of practice is to enable all sentient beings to attain liberation. Ultimately, one can "liberate immeasurable and boundless sentient beings where there originally are no sentient beings." This is called "attaining Buddhahood."

(3) What Are the General Stages of Practice?

Answer: The first step is to realize the mind and see one's true nature, directly realizing the dharmakāya. Then diligently eliminate habitual tendencies and fully realize "immovability"; this is called "the proper stage of the dharmakāya." Finally, one goes "beyond the dharmakāya": where there originally are no sentient beings, one liberates immeasurable and boundless sentient beings, thereby perfecting the fruit of Buddhahood.

(4) Do Not Take the Wrong Medicine

Question: The Chinese language is indeed quite meaningful: nian ( ) consists of "now" ( ) and "mind" ( ), while xiang ( ) is a mental appearance. Can we say that nian is the present moment, whereas xiang is the continuation of mental appearances arising from nian? If a thought arises and one does not follow it, it is not deluded thought; once one follows it, it becomes deluded thought. Conversely, knowing deluded thoughts without following them is also the mind of the present moment.

Answer: Deluded thoughts refer to greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, and wrong views. Wrong views refer to the view of the body, extreme views, attachment to views, attachment to rules and prohibitions, and erroneous views.

Question: It seems that I am beyond cure. Within me are six kinds of deadly poison.

Answer: You can be cured. Just do not take the wrong medicine. Pay attention to the proper correspondences:

Greed — precepts

Anger — samādhi

Ignorance — wisdom

Pride — humility

Doubt — faith

Wrong views — right view

For example, if one takes the medicine of “faith” for the illness of wrong views, one becomes a follower of a non-Buddhist path; if one takes the medicine of “humility” for the illness of doubt, one willingly demeans oneself; if one takes the medicine of “wisdom” for the illness of pride, one plants seeds for hell; if one takes the medicine of “samādhi” for the illness of ignorance, one sits behind a dark mountain . . . All the medicines are good medicines, but taking the wrong one will destroy the wisdom-life of the dharmakāya. This is what is meant by “even ghee can turn into poison”!

Question: Master, please prescribe a remedy for me.

Answer: The prescription is: if you are not ill, do not take medicine indiscriminately!

Question: I have already taken it.

(5) Why Did Śākyamuni Buddha Not Manifest the Process of Eliminating Habitual Tendencies After Awakening?

Answer: This is not the only such question; there are similar questions as well:

As for the Chan school, why did he not manifest the process of investigating a huatou, breaking through the critical phrase, and herding the ox?

From the perspective of Esoteric Buddhism, why did he not manifest the process of entering retreat for exclusive practice, attaining the rainbow body, and transforming into a rainbow body?

From the perspective of the Pure Land school, why did he not manifest the process of single-minded, exclusive Buddha-recitation and rebirth in the Western Pure Land?

In fact, he manifested all of these. The Buddha has never left us. Listen to this Buddha-name: “Homage to Śākyamuni Buddha, who manifests countless transformation bodies!”

(6) Are awakening and practice contradictory?

Answer: Ha ha! Practice and awakening are not contradictory; yet awakening and practice are contradictory.

Question: What “awakening” is there, then? One merely awakens to the fact that practice is itself non-practice.

Answer: Ha ha! There is also non-practice that is itself practice.

Question: In other words, if it is Right Faith, you cannot be allowed to believe, nor can you be allowed not to believe. Everything is plainly there, is it not?

Answer: This is important: everything is plainly there.

Question: Hee hee! I originally wanted not to believe in gravity. I jumped upward with all my strength, yet I still fell back down!

Answer: This, too, is plainly evident: dharmas are thus of themselves.

94. Buddha

(1) Does a Buddha have a lifespan?

Question: A friend asked me to pose this question to Teacher Qi on his behalf: Does a Buddha have a lifespan? This friend says that the Kṣitigarbha Sūtra states that a Buddha's lifespan extends for so many kalpas ... Yet buddha-nature is neither arising nor ceasing, is it not?

Answer: If sentient beings have it, Buddhas have it; if sentient beings do not have it, Buddhas do not have it. That which is neither arising nor ceasing is without duality or distinction, neither one nor different. It does not increase in Buddhas or diminish in sentient beings.

(2) The Buddha's manifestations

Question: Why did Śākyamuni Buddha undergo the retribution of the golden spear and horse fodder?

Answer: Because sentient beings are ill, the World-Honored One is ill as well.

(3) After attaining Buddhahood, does one remain forever in samādhi, or does one perish?

Answer: At this point, the best thing to speak of is the four virtues of the dharmakāya: "eternity, bliss, self, and purity."

Question: Teacher, where did Amitābha Buddha go after stepping down?

Answer: Eternity, bliss, self, and purity.

(4) Are all Buddhas entirely the same? Do they all abide in the great ocean of perfect enlightenment? Do they all possess immeasurable transformation bodies?

Answer: It is like all people being equal: all abide in the human dharma realm and equally face the sun, moon, stars, and even flowers, birds, fish, and insects.

(5) If one is originally a Buddha, how can one be liberated?

Answer: To enable a person to realize for themselves that they are originally a Buddha—this is called “liberating.”

95. Is a female body an obstacle to attaining Buddhahood?

Question: The statement that one cannot attain Buddhahood in a “female body”—does “female body” here refer to the habitual tendencies of a female body?

Answer: Confucius also said, “Only petty men and women are difficult to deal with.” Difficult to deal with is now called difficult to get along with. Why are they difficult to get along with? Confucius said, “Keep them at a distance and they resent it; draw near to them and they become disrespectful”—if you keep them at a distance, they resent you; if you draw near to them, they become coarse. Confucius spoke of “resentment” and “disrespect”; he may not have been referring to women in general.

If a woman is broad-minded and far-sighted, she is called a heroine among women. Where, then, is even the slightest trace of “resentment” or “disrespect”? Whenever the World-Honored One taught the Dharma, he always addressed “good men and good women”; he did not exclude women.

96. Will an awakened person say that they have already awakened?

Answer: How about putting it another way: Must a person who has truly awakened necessarily say either that they have awakened or that they have not awakened?

Question: It is just as it is said: “Just as one who drinks water knows for oneself whether it is cold or warm.” One knows by conduct and understanding. Is that correct?

Answer: The question is: Why does he say that he has awakened? Or why does he say that he has not awakened?

97. Dreams

(1) When one sleeps without dreaming, where is the awareness-nature?

Question: Since our awareness-nature is neither arising nor ceasing, when someone is asleep and not dreaming, where has that awareness-nature gone at that very moment?

Answer: Sleeping without dreaming does not belong to knowing. A pat will wake you, so it does not belong to not knowing.

(2) After waking from a dream, does the dream realm still exist?

Answer: One cannot say that it exists, nor can one say that it does not exist. The dream realm is simply devoid of significance; to grasp at or reject it is utterly laughable.

98. Miscellaneous

(1) Must one follow ritual procedures when reading sūtras?

Answer: Do not let the sūtra read you; that is the proper procedure.

Question: How does one avoid being read by the sūtra?

Answer: Rely on the meaning, not the words; rely on the definitive meaning, not the provisional meaning.

(2) What should someone who has just gained clarity do if they still break the precepts and feel uneasy?

Answer: Bring me your mind, and I will set it at rest for you.

(3) Why does Devadatta not suffer the pains of hell?

Question A: Why does Devadatta not suffer the pains of hell? Devadatta manifested as an evil person, so he should also have manifested undergoing the suffering of karmic cause and effect. Yet he enjoys the bliss of the dhyāna heavens while in hell. Can an evil person also cultivate to the point where the mind is empty and does not undergo suffering, thereby transcending cause and effect?

Answer: Only because you are doubting this matter.

(What follows is Teacher Qi's response, divided into sections—Editor's note.)

Question: Devadatta manifested as an evil person, so he should also have manifested undergoing the suffering of karmic cause and effect.

Answer: Has he not already fallen alive into hell?

Question: Yet he enjoys the bliss of the dhyāna heavens while in hell.

Answer: Why should he not enjoy it in the dhyāna heavens?

Question: Can an evil person also cultivate to the point where the mind is empty and does not undergo suffering?

Answer: If he did not undergo it, would he have fallen alive into hell?

Question: Can he also transcend cause and effect?

Answer: Did you not say that it was a manifestation? Precisely so, cause and effect is not obscured.

Question: I still have a doubt: Can a person of great evil cultivate to the lofty state of undergoing yet not undergoing?

Answer: The World-Honored One did not conclude that he could not repent and reform; he even bestowed upon him a prediction of Buddhahood.

B: The big tiger is playing taiji pushing-hands with a child, circling around and around while refusing to reveal what lies within.

Answer: To spell it out is to fall into it!

Question: Perhaps it is an adult's private matter, and he fears that children may learn bad habits.

Answer: In fact, it has already been fully revealed.

C: Has he fallen into it?

Answer: Then simply fall out of the three realms.

C: The old monk's heels have not yet touched the ground.

Answer: Great King, may you enjoy ten thousand blessings!

D: Fortunately, there is this very move.

Part Two: Practicing Heart Esotericism

I. Understanding the Mind-Seal School: The Heart-of-Heart Esoteric Dharma

99. How can one gain a deeper understanding of heart esotericism?

Question: Teacher Qi, could one say that heart esotericism is not really Esoteric Buddhism, since from the standpoint of Esoteric Buddhism it is overly simple and easy?

Answer: It is called esoteric because it has one mantra and six mudrās. The Mind-Seal school of Chinese Buddhism is abbreviated as heart esotericism.

Question: I would like to write an article, “Is Heart Esotericism Esoteric Buddhism?” However, the origin of the expression “heart esotericism” still needs to be investigated.

Answer: There is no need to investigate its origin; it is already plainly there: heart—prajñā as its principle; esoteric—dhāraṇī as its method.

Question: Is it distinct from Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism?

Answer: No one now considers them to be the same esoteric Buddhist school.

Question: Teacher Chen has provided an article, “An Introduction to the Heart-of-Heart Dharma.” Please determine whether you wrote it.

Answer: I did not write this article.

Question: What materials and avenues are needed for an in-depth understanding of heart esotericism?

Answer: There is a link to the “Heart Esotericism Collection” on the forum. Look for it yourself.

100. Are there now any organizations that transmit the heart-esoteric Dharma?

Answer: No. Heart esotericism has no particular organizational structure and does not conduct organized activities; rather, one cultivates oneself and one's own mind. This was also how it was when the master was alive.

101. Which bodhisattva is the yidam of heart esotericism?

Answer: Great Wish-Fulfilling Bodhisattva is the yidam of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. I heard this from other Dharma brothers only after I had begun transmitting the Dharma.

After hearing this, I asked the Elder: “Is Great Wish-Fulfilling Bodhisattva the yidam of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma?”

The Elder said: “Yes!”

I was very surprised and asked: “Why did you not tell me before?”

The Elder said: “You are troublesome enough as it is. If I had told you, would you not have become even more troublesome?”

102. Will having little knowledge of Buddhadharma affect one's study of heart esotericism?

Answer: That is precisely a good foundation—there is little extraneous furniture.

103. What kind of person is qualified to receive empowerment?

Answer: This is not a question of “qualification.” One must genuinely arouse the resolve in order to be receptive.

104. Must one first learn the full lotus position before studying the Heart-of-Heart Dharma?

Answer: Heart esotericism cultivates the mind, not the legs; it has no requirement concerning cross-legged sitting.

105. Taking refuge and receiving the precepts

(1) Can one study heart esotericism without having taken refuge?

Answer: If one's mind has not taken refuge, would one be willing to study Chan, Esoteric Buddhism, or Pure Land?

Question: Do you mean that even without formally taking refuge, one may study heart esotericism so long as one takes refuge in one's heart?

Answer: If your heart has truly taken refuge, why would you not take refuge formally?

Question: Is not “leaving home in one's heart” taking refuge?

Answer: If it is “leaving home in one's heart,” why reject taking refuge?

Questioner: I will take refuge. I am looking for a place to do so.

Answer: ^o^

(2) Receiving the precepts

Question: When studying heart esotericism, must one go to a temple for a precept-receiving ceremony?

Answer: It is not only heart esotericism. Do not the Chan school, Pure Land school, and all the other schools likewise go to temples for precept-receiving ceremonies?

Question: Oh, I had thought that, since ours is formless esoteric practice, it would be enough for us to keep the precepts ourselves according to the Vinaya. We need not care too much about whether to go to a temple for a precept-receiving ceremony, lest we become attached to appearances. Moreover, the precept we uphold is the mind-precept: “Do not turn with thoughts; do not move with circumstances.”

Answer: Although Chinese Buddhism has many schools, its precepts are uniform.

It is not that each school has its own precepts. Have you ever heard expressions such as “the precepts of the Chan school” or “the precepts of the Pure Land school”?

There is also the matter of taking refuge. Taking refuge is likewise uniform. One takes refuge in Buddhism, not in a particular school.

(3) Does a person who has taken refuge with an Esoteric Buddhist master violate precepts by subsequently studying heart esotericism?

Answer: Whether this violates esoteric precepts should be asked of the master who transmitted those precepts to you. In practicing the Dharma, it is best to enter deeply through one gate. Practicing two methods at once does not necessarily benefit one from both sides; most likely, one will miss both.

Question: When one receives the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, are precepts transmitted? If so, are they the “fourteen vajra downfalls”?

Answer: In those years, I specifically asked the Elder to confer upon me the Vajra samaya precepts. The Elder said: “You seek to receive precepts? Very well. Listen carefully: there is only one—whenever a thought arises or the mind stirs, you violate the precept!”

Question: Teacher, is it really that simple? But if no thought arises and the mind does not stir, would one not be dead?

Answer: It means not drifting along with deluded thoughts.

Question: I had intended to remain unmarried all my life, but I am my parents' only son and cannot disobey their wishes. I have been married for more than a year, and now they are pressing me to have a child. I have never really wanted children. How should I deal with this?

Answer: If things were as you say, the patriarchs of heart esotericism would not have transmitted the Heart-of-Heart Dharma to young lay practitioners.

106. Is it difficult to receive the heart-esoteric Dharma?

Question: Did Master Yuanyin ever speak of not establishing a fourth patriarch? How will the lineage of teachers be transmitted after the Heart-of-Heart Dharma?

Answer: In his later years, the Elder repeatedly emphasized that no fourth patriarch would be established! Have you not already seen the subsequent transmission? Is it not all being transmitted? I have yet to hear of anyone seeking this Dharma who could not obtain it.

Question: Practicing the Heart-of-Heart esoteric Dharma is not difficult; what is difficult is having the affinity to encounter and study this Dharma.

Answer: It is not difficult to encounter; people are simply unwilling. Worse still: "Upon hearing of the Tathāgata's sudden-teaching gate, they resent not being able to destroy it and smash it into tiles!"

107. Do Not Slander Heart Esotericism

(1) Repentance

Question: Repentance! I once doubted whether heart esotericism was the true Dharma. This later student, burdened by deep karmic obstacles, ceased practicing heart esotericism after one year because of my own obstructions. Yet, arrogant and conceited, I became greatly afflicted when the teacher rebuked me. Rather than reflecting on my own poor faculties, I instead doubted the teacher and, further, doubted whether heart esotericism was the true Dharma. I then became unable to continue practicing heart esotericism.

Later, this humble student changed to the Gelug teachings and studied under widely recognized spiritual friends. Only afterward did I realize that my doubts about heart esotericism were indeed a grave offense. Today, I specially use this precious forum to post this letter of repentance. I further vow to recite the Kṣitigarbha Sūtra seven times and perform prostrations to the Thirty-Five Buddhas for one hundred days, in repentance for my karmic offenses.

This sinner kneels and implores the patriarchs and great worthies of heart esotericism throughout the generations to accept this disciple's repentant heart. I vow that, even at the cost of my life, I will never again commit this fault. I further wish that I may continue studying heart esotericism in the future, widely propagate the true Dharma, and ultimately realize bodhi. All the evil karma I have created in the past arises from beginningless greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt, produced through body, speech, and mind; of all these, I now repent completely!

Answer: With utmost sincerity, I pay homage to and praise a genuine Gelug practitioner.

Homage to all the Gelug patriarchs!

(2) Alas for the Dharma-ending age, this evil time

Question: He merely cited Candrakīrti Bodhisattva's words, "There is no fault in refuting other schools" (referring to what a self-proclaimed lama said in attacking heart esotericism), but this involves many theoretical issues in Esoteric Buddhism. It is worth consideration by the great worthies of the Heart-of-Heart tradition.

Answer: I know little about Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. When I first studied the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, I did not examine it through Tibetan esoteric theories, nor did the Elder tell me that it was Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. I know only that the name "Heart-of-Heart" comes from the root tantra of heart esotericism, The Buddha-Heart Sutra. I learned only after studying heart esotericism that this name duplicates that of the "Great Perfection Heart-of-Heart" in Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism.

Just as the Chinese Buddhist canon is vast as an ocean, so too are the scriptures of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. Just as the Chinese character kong, "emptiness," has many meanings, does "Heart-of-Heart" in Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism represent only one method? This question can be known only through a comprehensive study of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism.

Because my learning is shallow, because I do not understand Tibetan, and because the Elder never instructed me to examine Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism through the theories of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, I do not know whether, apart from the Heart-of-Heart of six mudrās and one mantra and the Great Perfection Heart-of-Heart, there are other Heart-of-Heart methods.

He cites Candrakīrti Bodhisattva's words: "Discriminating the meanings of the scriptures is not for the sake of personal purity; it is to reveal the truth for liberation. If one explains the true meaning, there is no fault in refuting other schools." I too cite a verse from Chan Master Yongjia's Song of Enlightenment: "Alas for the Dharma-ending age, this evil time: sentient beings' blessings are meager, and they are hard to tame. Far removed from the sages, their erroneous views are deep; māras are strong, the Dharma weak, and resentments and harm are many.

"Upon hearing of the Tathāgata's sudden-teaching gate, they resent not being able to destroy it and smash it into tiles." Whether his purpose in citing Candrakīrti Bodhisattva's verse was directed at anyone or not, my purpose in citing Chan Master Yongjia's verse was certainly not directed at him. Rather, it is meant to explain that

identical outward appearances do not necessarily indicate identical essences. Both speak of “refuting other schools”; both speak of “resenting not being able to destroy it and smash it into tiles.” Yet one is for the sake of explaining the true meaning, while the other arises from “deep erroneous views.” Their substance is utterly different!

I have not thought that his views—referring only to his views attacking other schools—would be accepted by the great worthies of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. Nor have I thought that he could represent Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. I merely wish to hear him explain the true meaning. For only when the true meaning is explained is “refuting other schools” without fault. If one does not explain the true meaning and merely refutes other schools, that is probably not Candrakīrti Bodhisattva’s original intent.

(3) The Eye for Discerning the Dharma

Question: Regarding a post containing a handwritten note (photograph), someone has signed it as having been written by Master Yuanyin. Could you please see whether it is really the Master's handwriting?

Answer: How could this possibly resemble the Master's handwriting?

Even granting that someone had imitated his handwriting so closely as to pass off the false as genuine, the meaning of the Dharma is not judged by handwriting. There are now many of the Master's writings available; one need only compare them, and would it not then be obvious?

Question: I merely did not dare dismiss it rashly after seeing the image. I would like to post a pinned clarification.

Answer: If one does not make a fuss over the strange, its strangeness will collapse of itself. If everyone lacked an eye for discerning the Dharma, would heart esotericism not have disappeared long ago?

Question: Yes. Apart from the compassionate protection of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, the flourishing of heart esotericism owes, first, to the realization and virtue of the patriarchs;

Answer: Indeed. Even among the disciples of the World-Honored One there was Devadatta—how much more so in this latter age!

Question: Second, it owes to the Heart-of-Heart Dharma's style of actual practice and actual realization;

Answer: Apart from actual practice and actual realization, heart esotericism has no other advantage.

Question: Third, it owes to the students' correct views.

Answer: Indeed. Things of a kind gather together, and people sort themselves into groups.

Question: This is why you repeatedly emphasize that when practice arises, conceptual understanding ceases.

Answer: Look again at those for whom conceptual understanding arises while practice ceases—they are both laughable and lamentable!

Question: Ha-ha, there really is such a thing as conceptual understanding arising while practice ceases, and it is everywhere. Heh-heh! This, too, is due to the causes and conditions of having planted wholesome roots together before countless Buddhas!

Answer: “Heh-heh! This, too, is due to the causes and conditions of having planted wholesome roots together before countless Buddhas!” Yes, indeed! Thus liberation is not difficult; it is only that people are unwilling. The Buddhadharma is originally a path of liberation, but nowadays one more often sees a path of contention—“the firm persistence of contention,” indeed!

Question: In the Sahā world, what is hard to endure must nevertheless be endured.

Answer: This is precisely the Buddhadharma of Śākyamuni, the World-Honored One—lotuses growing amid fire.

Question: Exactly. That is why it is so precious.

Answer: Lotuses growing in a lotus pond—an easy path of practice. Lotuses growing amid fire—a swift path of practice.

Question: Yet some people insist on following the path to Avīci—slandering the Buddha and slandering the Dharma.

Answer: Even if you exhort them, they will not listen. The Buddha entrusted sentient beings to Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva precisely for the sake of beings of this kind. The Buddha also entrusted sentient beings to Maitreya Bodhisattva, precisely for the sake of those who genuinely practice.

Question: Such people are not worth exhorting, much less pitying.

Answer: In fact, they are the ones most deserving of pity.

Question: One should make the vow that, when the opportunity arises in the future, they will be the first to be liberated.

Answer: That is precisely Kṣitigarbha's vow. Homage to Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva, King of Great Vows!

108. Mind-Seal: Chan as Its Essence, Esoteric Buddhism as Its Function, and Pure Land as Its Ultimate Destination

Question: Does the Heart-of-Heart Dharma use the ritual procedure of practice to attain one-pointedness of mind without distraction?

Answer: Put simply: the aim of practicing heart esotericism is realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature; its method is six mudrās and one mantra; and its ultimate destination is rebirth in the Pure Land. This is "prajñā as its principle, dhāraṇī as its method, and the Pure Land as its ultimate destination."

(1) Chan as Its Essence

Question: Is there any difference between the Chan school and heart esotericism?

Answer: There is no difference in their aim—both seek to open up the original nature and realize the mind and see one's true nature. Their methods differ—the Chan school mainly investigates the huatou; heart esotericism employs contemplation in accordance with the Dharma and seated meditation.

Question: Why is it easier to awaken through the Heart-of-Heart Dharma than through investigating the huatou?

Answer: In fact, one awakens easily through a dharma gate suited to one's capacity. When someone says that the Heart-of-Heart Dharma makes awakening easier than other dharma gates, it is because this Dharma is suited to that person's capacity.

Question: Can the Heart-of-Heart Dharma of Dharma Master Dayu enable one to attain Buddhahood in this very life?

Answer: Even to speak of "attaining Buddhahood in this very body" is already an expedient means. Better simply to say, "Originally, one is a Buddha."

What is it like when the seventeen hundred koans are threaded through in a single string?

A Brief Biography of Master Yuanyin, Third Patriarch of the Mind-Seal School: "My grandteacher, Acharya Dayu, often posed difficult questions to test us fellow disciples, in order to urge us toward ever-higher advancement. For example, he would ask: 'What is it like when the seventeen hundred koans are threaded through

in a single string?' One fellow disciple answered, 'Suffering!' My grandteacher pressed him: 'Who suffers?' The disciple could not answer. I covered my ears and walked away from the side. My grandteacher said, 'Someone has rescued you.'"

(What follows is Teacher Qi's response, given in sections.—Editor's note)

Question: Master Dayu asked, "What is it like when the seventeen hundred koans are threaded through in a single string?" What does "threaded through in a single string" mean?

Answer: It means "thoroughly penetrated."

Question: That sounds very troublesome.

Answer: Ha-ha! If it is troublesome, then they have not yet been threaded through.

Question: Someone answered, "Suffering!"

Answer: Ha-ha! Here comes someone daring enough to scratch a tiger's head.

Question: Master Dayu pressed him: "Who suffers?"

Answer: Master Dayu was no ordinary fellow; he already knew the measure of the one who had come.

Question: Seeing that he could not answer, the master "covered his ears and walked away"—was it because even asking "Who suffers?" was considered superfluous, so he simply covered his ears and left? (Is there another interpretation?)

Answer: Ha-ha! The interpretation you have just given is already another interpretation.

Question: Does covering his ears indicate not being moved by adventitious defilements, while walking away signifies natural and unimpeded functioning?

Answer: See? That is plainly another interpretation.

Question: Then please give the correct interpretation. In any case, I do not know it.

Answer: Suffering!

Question: Master Dayu said, "Someone has rescued you."

Answer: Why not say to Master Dayu, "Thank you, sir, for rescuing me!"

Question: I had intended to answer, "You, too, have been rescued," but then realized that this would trap me as well.

Answer: Ha-ha! So it turns out that you do not dare to throw yourself across the tiger's jaws.

Question: Of course I do not dare. Otherwise—if I chipped the tiger's teeth, would you compensate me?

Answer: Ha-ha! This is not Chan, but entanglement.

(2) Esoteric Buddhism as Its Function

Question: One often sees the term "Chan and Esoteric Buddhism," but in what ways do Chan and Esoteric Buddhism differ?

Answer: The Chan school directly points to the mind; seeing one's true nature, one attains Buddhahood. It is inherently the swiftest method of practice and is called the orthodox tradition of Buddhism. Yet after the Song dynasty, people's capacities gradually declined, and those who saw their true nature upon hearing a word became few indeed. Therefore, Dahui Zonggao advocated investigating the huatou: concentrating the mind on one point and pressing oneself to the point of seeing one's true nature.

By recent times, most people could not even arouse a sense of doubt through investigating the huatou. This gave rise to what is called "Chan and Esoteric Buddhism."

Acharya Dayu, the founding patriarch of the Mind-Seal school of Buddhism—that is, the Heart-of-Heart Dharma—wrote in a verse: "How is the flower held up transmitted? Why not both Esoteric and Chan…" He thus clearly set forth the purpose of realizing "flower-holding" through Esoteric Buddhism—that is, Chan awakening as the purpose.

Acharya Renzhi, our grandteacher (Master Wang Xianglu), further proposed "prajñā as its principle, dhāraṇī as its method, and the Pure Land as its ultimate destination," thereby clearly establishing the purpose of Chan as its essence, Esoteric Buddhism as its function, and Pure Land as its ultimate destination. Of Esoteric Buddhism, the Chinese Tang Esoteric tradition had nearly died out by the beginning of the Ming dynasty. The two branches now having the greatest influence are Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism and Japanese Esoteric Buddhism. They begin with form-based practice and then proceed to the formless. Upon reaching the formless—the highest class—they converge with the Chan school.

The principal difference between Chan and Esoteric Buddhism lies in this: Chan has no stages and directly realizes the original nature; Esoteric Buddhism has stages and gradually enters the original nature.

Heart esotericism (the Buddhist Heart-of-Heart Dharma) uses the empowering force of six mudrās and one mantra to directly realize the original nature. It has characteristics of both Chan and Esoteric Buddhism, and so some call it “Chan and Esoteric Buddhism.” But because the qigong world has a practice called “Chan-Esoteric Qigong,” it is better not to use the term “Chan and Esoteric Buddhism,” lest the two be confused.

Question: Six mudrās and one mantra includes the method of forming the mudrās. Is it appropriate to post that here?

Answer: There is no need to post it here. If other websites make it public, there is nothing we can do to prevent them.

(3) Pure Land as Its Ultimate Destination

Question: May disciples of heart esotericism recite the Buddha’s name?

Answer: Heart esotericism has its own method of Buddha-recitation for rebirth in the Pure Land. (See the Maitreya Mantra and the Extensive Rebirth Mantra.—Editor's note)

Question: Why did Master Wang Xianglu consider the Pure Land dharma gate actually very difficult?

Answer: Oh? Do you consider it very easy?

Question: I think it is quite difficult. Entering it is very convenient, but going deeply into it is not easy.

Answer: The method of Buddha-recitation is very easy, but persisting in Buddha-recitation is very difficult.

Question: If one used the Heart-of-Heart Dharma’s ritual procedure to practice Buddha-recitation for three years, the results should be quite considerable. And one should strive upward, directly toward the highest grade.

Answer: Ha-ha! Heart esotericism itself takes the Pure Land as its ultimate destination.

Question: Since perfect penetration through the ear faculty is best suited to our world, why is the Buddha-recitation dharma gate nevertheless supreme in this world? Have we gotten something wrong?

Answer: The Buddha-recitation dharma gate is itself perfect penetration through the ear faculty.

Question: In July 1994, at the Master's residence in Shanghai, a fellow practitioner asked about a certain practice and also about rebirth. The Master laughed heartily, then sighed and said: "Ah! The Heart-of-Heart Dharma is the unsurpassed great Dharma. It directly realizes true reality, enabling you to accomplish the great Way in this very life and be liberated from birth and death."

"You do not understand. You have squandered the Heart-of-Heart Dharma—it is like holding a golden rice bowl while begging for food. Is that not a pity?! If you do not realize the mind and see your true nature, you will still have to cultivate after rebirth. Some people do not practice the Dharma wholeheartedly. When they sit in meditation, they neither keep the mind on the mantra nor listen with the ears, but indulge in deluded thoughts. After they leave the seat, they do not contemplate either. When they encounter circumstances, they cannot see through them; their afflictions continue without cease. Then they turn around and doubt the Dharma, saying things they ought not to say. Therefore, I often advise them: recite the Buddha's name well, and in the future be reborn in the Western Pure Land."

Answer: These words of the Elder have the same subtle purport as Elder Xia's verse:

"When they encounter circumstances, they cannot see through them; their afflictions continue without cease. Then they turn around and doubt the Dharma, saying things they ought not to say."

—Call back Practitioner Lu; pull back old Bodhidharma.

"Therefore, I often advise them: recite the Buddha's name well, and in the future be reborn in the Western Pure Land."

—Join palms with them and recite Amitābha together.

Question: Should one vow to be reborn in the Inner Court of Tuṣita or in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss?

Answer: The sūtras say that after being born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, one may see Maitreya Bodhisattva. Maitreya Bodhisattva says, "Whoever is born in my Inner Court and wishes to go to the West, I will send them there." You wish to be born in a Pure Land, yet cannot decide which Pure Land to choose. Then why not draw lots before the Buddha?

109. Resolving Doubts in The Collected Works of Heart Esotericism

(1) "Quiescence Illuminates; Illumination Returns to Quiescence"

Question: What does "quiescence illuminates; illumination returns to quiescence" mean?

Answer: Quiescence is the essence; illumination is wondrous functioning. “Quiescence illuminates” means “One should abide nowhere and give rise to that mind.” “Illumination returns to quiescence” means “One should give rise to a mind that abides nowhere.”

Question: Could you make that clearer?

Answer: Saying more will not make it “clearer”; I fear it would distort it beyond recognition.

Question: Patriarch Dayu’s words, “Quiescence illuminates; illumination returns to quiescence. Above all, avoid exertion. To become a Buddha or a patriarch, there is no other secret,” are truly essential words for cultivation and study. Please explain them in detail, Teacher.

Answer: Since you know that they are essential words for cultivation and study, simply follow them in practice. If you turn receiving, upholding, and practicing them into theoretical study, you will have failed the Great Patriarch.

Question: “Both illumination and awareness are called obstacles; therefore bodhisattvas constantly awaken without abiding.” Does this refer to a different stage from “Quiescence illuminates; illumination returns to quiescence. Above all, avoid exertion. To become a Buddha or a patriarch, there is no other secret”?

Answer: Is not “constantly awaken without abiding” precisely “quiescence illuminates; illumination returns to quiescence—above all, avoid exertion”?

Question: Then I have misunderstood “quiescence illuminates; illumination returns to quiescence.” I understood it literally as meaning that the latter still contains an “illumination.”

Answer: Ha ha! If the sūtra passage were translated as, “Both illumination and awareness are called obstacles; therefore bodhisattvas constantly illuminate without abiding,” would you have the same misunderstanding about “awareness”?

(2) The Complete Works of Lay Practitioner Wang Xianglu

Question: Could you send me a copy of One Hundred Examples of Applying Realization?

Answer: Practitioners of heart esotericism may read the essay One Hundred Examples only after completing more than one hundred meditation sessions.

Question: In one of Master Wang Xianglu’s works, there is a description of contemplation: emptiness of objects, emptiness of mind, emptiness of dharmas,

and emptiness of emptiness. What does this “emptiness of dharmas” mean?

Answer: Do not think about such things just now! That is precisely what it means.

(3) Essential Instructions for Buddhist Practice and Realization

[A Brief Discussion of Realizing the Mind and Seeing One’s True Nature]

Question: I am from the younger generation and would like to understand Master Yuanyin’s teachings. Which book contains their essence?

Answer: A Brief Discussion of Realizing the Mind and Seeing One’s True Nature.

[A Simple Explanation of Mahāmudrā]

Question: Could a fellow practitioner explain when and by whom the original work on which Venerable Master Yuanyin’s teaching on Ganges Mahāmudrā was based was transmitted?

Answer: If what I say is incomplete or mistaken, I ask the fellow practitioners to supplement or correct it.

The highest practice of the White School of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism is Ganges Mahāmudrā. At this point it converges with the Chan school, directly pointing to seeing the fundamental principle—that is, seeing one’s true nature in the Chan school—and there are no further mudrās to form. The root tantras of Ganges Mahāmudrā are not limited to one text; among them is The Three Essential Points of the Mallet Strike. A mallet is a club, and striking produces sound; “mallet strike” carries the sense of blows and shouts. The three essential points are view, meditative stability, and conduct.

Master Gongga gave a penetrating exposition of The Three Essential Points of the Mallet Strike. This teaching was collected into a book entitled An Excellent Explanation of the Supreme Dharma of The Three Essential Points of the Mallet Strike. It expounds the essential meaning of Ganges Mahāmudrā to the fullest, and some have called it “the ultimate expression of Ganges Mahāmudrā.”

Later, someone compiled the essential passages from this exposition into a booklet entitled Essential Instructions for Settling the Mind. Venerable Master Yuanyin explained this booklet, Essential Instructions for Settling the Mind, in detail; this is the book now named Ganges Mahāmudrā by his disciples. Although this title is not exact, it is not without reason, for the book already encompasses the essentials of Ganges Mahāmudrā. If the book is reprinted, it is suggested that its title be changed to A Simple Explanation of Mahāmudrā, since that title appears in some of the Master’s other books.

Question: I have read Master Yuanyin's commentary on Ganges Mahāmudrā and find it exceptionally wonderful. What is the origin of this book, Ganges Mahāmudrā?

Answer: Master Gongga wrote An Excellent Explanation of the Three Essential Points of the Mallet Strike. Someone condensed its essentials into Essential Instructions for Settling the Mind, and the Elder's A Simple Explanation of Mahāmudrā is an exposition of Essential Instructions for Settling the Mind.

[Essential Instructions for Buddhist Practice and Realization]

Question: Is the capacity that can hear and listen the essence, while hearing and listening are wondrous functioning?

Answer: If one speaks of the original essence, it is the capacity and object, and freedom from both capacity and object.

Question: Master Yuanyin once compared the eighth consciousness to the electrical energy of the human body. On this basis, and in conjunction with physical phenomena and the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon, I have developed some speculations—for example, that certain forms of light energy may be absorbed and bound by matter. Is this understanding correct?

Answer: I, too, frequently had such speculations in those days. The Elder never evaluated whether they were right or wrong; he always swept them away at their root.

110. Patriarchs of Heart Esotericism

(1) Brief Biographies of the Three Generations of Patriarchs of Heart Esotericism

(From the editor's preface to Secrets of the Heart Sūtra)

With reverence, we say:

On the ground of ultimate reality, there are no names such as Buddha or sentient being; only within the gate of cultivation are there distinctions between ordinary beings and sages. The nature of mind is originally pure, yet because of grasping, afflictions and delusions arise in profusion. Deluded appearances are originally empty, yet through awakening and illumination, true constancy is free from all relativity. Unchanging while according with conditions, the rise and fall of the ten realms differ vastly; according with conditions while remaining unchanged, the essence and function of the one mind are not different. Although this mind and this principle are inherently possessed by all living beings, thorough awakening and direct realization belong only to the awakened. The multitude of sentient beings

remain unenlightened through attachment and delusion, and thus wander through the six realms for kalpa after kalpa, suffering beyond endurance.

Śākyamuni, the World-Honored One, Tamer of Beings in the Central Land, had already attained perfect awakening kalpas ago, as numerous as motes of dust. Having dissolved the three divisions of time, he abides in the Land of Eternal Quiescent Light and constantly enjoys the four virtues. Out of compassion for the nine realms, he manifested birth and repeatedly displayed the eight phases. In accordance with the one hundred and eight kinds of mental dispositions in the nine realms, he expounded the wondrous Dharma of the three piṭakas and twelve divisions of the canon.

For those of great capacity, he directly revealed the One True Dharma Realm, enabling them to give rise to the mind without abiding and ultimately to cut off delusions and realize truth. For those of lesser faculties, he explained in detail the cause and effect of the three times, leading them to seek good fortune and avoid misfortune, thereby providing expedient means for entering the Way. The sages of the Lesser Vehicle have eliminated their former karma, established pure conduct, completed what was to be done, and abide in the city of nirvāṇa without undergoing further existence. Mahāyāna bodhisattvas have deep, unwavering faith, earnest vows that do not retreat, and unceasing diligent practice; they cross the ocean of birth and death in order to liberate sentient beings extensively.

When the blessings and causes in the Eastern Land had matured and its conditions for liberation were ripe, the great teaching gradually spread eastward and the patriarchs came from the west. The fifth fascicle of Stopping and Contemplation says: “In primordial antiquity, when chaos still prevailed, it was not yet suitable for the Buddha to appear in the world. The capacities of those in the border regions could not evoke the Buddha’s advent. I sent three sages to transform that land of Zhendan. First, rites and righteousness were established; only afterward could the sūtras of the Great and Lesser Vehicles be trusted. Since this was so in Zhendan, it was so also in the ten directions.”

The Sūtra of Pure Dharma Practice says: “Moonlight Bodhisattva was called Yan Hui there; Bright-Purity Bodhisattva was called Zhongni there; Kāśyapa Bodhisattva was called Laozi there.” Zhongni cherished the ideal of fulfilling one’s human relationships and duties, while Laozi attacked worldly cleverness. The bodhisattvas vow to liberate all sentient beings, while the Tathāgata purifies their minds. First, moral and cultural foundations were cultivated, opening up the spirit of the Mahāyāna; afterward, beings were gathered into the ocean of great perfect enlightenment, so that all might suddenly realize the unborn. The World-Honored One taught all under heaven through immeasurable skillful means, with utmost

mastery; again, through immeasurable skillful means, he transmitted and entrusted the teaching, bringing accomplishment to the multitudes of beings in the latter age.

Great Patriarch Acharya Dayu manifested in the Li family of Wuhan during the late Qing dynasty. His mind-ground was endowed with deep, innate wisdom. He once read widely in the works of sages and worthies, and, rich in talent, had formerly inquired into political affairs. But when he witnessed the inhumanity of the warlords and the resulting devastation of living beings, he was deeply pained and indignantly left home to become a monastic.

At Donglin on Mount Lu, he cultivated the Pure Land Dharma gate and rigorously practiced the pratyutpanna samādhi, risking his life to break through the illusory realm of delusion within illusion. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva appeared to him in samādhi, transmitted six mudrās and one mantra, and conferred empowerment for the esoteric Heart-of-Heart practice. Following the Bodhisattva's instructions, he searched the Buddhist canon and indeed found the root tantra of heart esotericism. He practiced the esoteric Dharma rigorously, directly realized it after seven years, and founded the Mind-Seal Dharma gate.

To gather in sentient beings suited to the teaching, he briefly displayed spiritual powers; yet, by pointing directly to the nature of suchness, he thoroughly swept away all mysterious marvels. His heart was vast: the great void drank in the light and dissolved all estrangement. His Dharma gate was profound: echoes in a secluded valley spoke amid the evening haze. Later he left behind a poem and withdrew into seclusion; to this day, no one knows where he ended.

My master's teacher, Acharya Renzhi, surnamed Wang, was named Zaiji and styled Xianglu. He was born into a scholarly family in Haiyan and was deeply benevolent at heart. He ranged widely through the sea of moral philosophy and literature and devoutly believed in the Buddhist vehicle. At first, he broadly sought the essential teachings of the various schools, practiced Buddha-recitation and investigated Chan, yet did not dare claim that he had found the essential handle. Later, he followed Patriarch Dayu, cultivated the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, and suddenly opened up, realizing the mind.

He received the patriarch's marrow of mind and deeply accorded with the unsurpassed esoteric intent. He founded Mind-Seal Vihara, guiding receptive sentient beings. He fused Chan, Pure Land, and Esoteric Buddhism into one furnace, sweeping away the narrow and inferior views that divide them into separate schools; he united the traditions, teachings, and precepts into a single whole, revealing the tathāgata-garbha mind inherently possessed by sentient beings. He established the Mind-Seal school's guiding principles: prajñā as its principle, dhāraṇī as its method, and the Pure Land as its ultimate destination. When the conditions

for his teaching activity in this life were complete, the eyes of humans and devas were extinguished, and the boat of prajñā sank: he entered parinirvāṇa in the 1950s.

My revered teacher, Acharya Yuanyin, was named Zhongding. He was born into the Li family of Hefei, Anhui, at the beginning of this century. As a child, he studied the legacy teachings of Confucius and Mencius, yet when investigating birth and death, he felt at a loss. In his youth, he attended a modern school; when he read prajñā teachings, they seemed strangely familiar. On hearing the sound of a bell struck at Jiayou Chan Monastery, the clamor of the world suddenly vanished; upon receiving a blow on a wooden fish from an awakened eminent monk, arising and ceasing disappeared with it.

Having aroused the resolve to study Buddhism, he did not marry. Because he had to support his aged mother, he was unable to leave home. He paid homage to Venerable Xingci and studied Tiantai, continuously maintaining the sacred name of Amitābha Buddha; he followed lay practitioner Gu Nong in studying Consciousness-Only, conducting an in-depth study of the Tiantai teachings and their essential principles.

He drew near to the virtuous elder Yingci, studying the Avataṃsaka Sūtra and investigating Chan. Suddenly, he felt that his human body had vanished and that luminosity shone brilliantly. He followed Master Renzhi in practicing seated meditation in the Heart-of-Heart Dharma and suddenly realized that empty space had shattered and the great earth had sunk level. Receiving the protective mindfulness of all Buddhas and bodhisattvas, he repeatedly experienced auspicious signs. He investigated Patriarch Dayu's questions and answers, whose marvelous sayings flowed in an unbroken stream. He received empowerment from a Vajra Acharya and was honored with a place among the teachers; at the earnest requests of students from many regions, he expounded the Buddhist vehicle.

Even in his nineties, the revered teacher vigorously advocated realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature. His footsteps reached every part of the country: Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning in the east; Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan in the west; Hunan, Guangdong, and Fujian in the south; and Shaanxi, Gansu, and Qinghai in the north. Many overseas students from the United States, Germany, France, Japan, Canada, and elsewhere also came to him in admiration.

Untiringly, he proclaimed and transformed on the Buddha's behalf, forgetting himself in propagating the Dharma. How could he shrink from criticism and suspicion? Forgetting his own body for the sake of the Dharma, he wrote works equal to his height. When A Brief Discussion of Realizing the Mind and Seeing One's True Nature appeared, it awakened the Buddhist world to the fact that awakening and realization are fundamental, startling the deaf and enlightening the blind. When

Essential Teachings for the Practice and Realization of Buddhadharma was published, it showed students the great path of genuine cultivation, leaving an indelible impression.

Prajñā is the eye of cultivation; all twelve divisions of the Buddhist canon are contained within it. The Heart Sūtra is the essence of prajñā; an entire treasury of six hundred scrolls is fully encompassed within it. Bodhisattvas throughout the ten directions use it to unfold and propagate the fundamental great teaching; all Buddhas of the three times use it to expound the unsurpassed Dharma wheel. The Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra is the core of the Buddhist scriptures; hence it is called the “Heart Sūtra.”

At earnest request, the revered teacher expounded the meaning of the sūtra. Some listeners aroused the resolve and recorded it on tape; students listened to the recordings and transcribed them, after which the revered teacher reviewed them and they were compiled into a book. This is how the present book, Uncovering the Hidden Meaning of the Heart Sūtra, came to be.

Respectfully written after washing his hands by the later student-disciple Qi Zhijun, in the year 1997, the Dingchou year of the sexagenary cycle

(2) Acharya Dayu

Question: I became confused after seeing on an online forum Master Taixu’s evaluation of Dharma Master Dayu!

Answer: Please read Master Taixu’s statement:

Dayu is pure in faith, expansive in vows, vigorous in resolve, outstanding in capacity, clear in principle and phenomena, and diligent in precepts and samādhi; these are qualities I have long known in him. At first, he specialized in cultivating the Buddha-recitation samādhi, awaiting the practices and vows of Samantabhadra. Of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma that he now transmits, it is said that in the winter fifteen years ago, he sensed Samantabhadra transmitting it to him; he nevertheless continued to rely on the sacred teachings preserved in the canon. Upon examination, it has quite well grasped the essentials of Esoteric Buddhism, Pure Land, and Chan. That he transmits it to those with affinity is in itself beyond reproach.

However, outside accounts place excessive emphasis on his predictions of current events, his discussions of people’s past destinies, and astonishing others through spiritual powers. I have therefore repeatedly written to caution him, so that wandering diviners and magicians may not exploit this to delude people.

I do not know who, out of misplaced zeal, took these letters and disseminated them in the newspapers. Thereupon certain persons known as “Juexian” and “Xiangwen” actually used them as a pretext for self-promotion and brazen persuasion. As for Xiangwen, he merely maintains the Cundī Mantra; among those in our country who constantly recite it, how could there be fewer than thousands among monastics and laity? There are also monks who have traveled in India, Southeast Asia, Kham, and Tibet; such people are found everywhere. Why make a sensation on that basis? Yet common people fail to examine the matter and are actually deceived by them. This is truly lamentable.

I therefore make this statement especially to put an end to falsehood and deception.

—See Master Taixu’s notice in Hai magazine, vol. 10, no. 9, p. 1121—

Question: Teacher Qi, the elder said that Patriarch Dayu was in the Zhongnan Mountains. Does anyone know of a teacher who has seen him?

Answer: I went into the mountains to look for him, but did not see him.

(3) Acharya Wang Xianglu

A letter:

Dear younger brother Hairong,

1. I have received the letter forwarded by Wu Zhong, which greatly relieved my lingering concern. Knowing that, because of your circumstances, you often lack interest, I have again been unable to put you out of my mind. You should understand that everything in your circumstances serves only to refine you; everywhere are causes and conditions that aid the Way. Whether hostile or friendly, all are our good spiritual friends. To receive instruction from them is rare and precious; you should think of repaying their kindness. This is how the mind of great compassion arises.

2. For us as we live in the world, everything lies simply in making the mind-ground settled. To live in the world, one must engage with it, but even while engaging with it, one must not oppose it. Whatever displeases the eye is opposition; greedily clinging to pleasure is also opposition; numb indifference is also opposition. One should clearly know these things without being moved by them. One must realize the twofold emptiness of self and phenomena; in emptiness, the mind naturally becomes settled. If the power of emptiness is insufficient, all kinds of discriminations and afflictions arise.

You must know that the Sahā world is called the five turbidities and is also called an evil world. If one enters a latrine and seeks fragrance, whose fault is that?

Bodhisattvas clearly know this, yet do not spare themselves hardship in order to liberate others. Do as much as one can, one part at a time; do not calculate success or failure, gain or loss. On the one hand, give one's whole heart; on the other, train the mind. Even when utterly unbearable matters press before one's eyes, having already reckoned that this is simply how things are, why should one be hurt?

3. Speaking now of saving the world, there is no need to exert too much effort at the level of results; it is arduous and wins no appreciation. One need only work much harder at the level of causes and become one who knows and awakens before others. At present, it is not yet the time for people such as us to act freely and fully; everything awaits the proper causes, conditions, and time. We should simply enrich and equip ourselves more fully.

4. With your talent and fine qualities, you will surely be of great use in the future. At present, this is an excellent time to train your vital energy. Such circumstances are blessings, not suffering; everything depends on them to refine you. In your recent practice, you should concentrate on the two words "without obstruction." Examine everything: is there, in the end, any obstruction? Obstruction and nonobstruction are both fabricated by our illusory minds. Thinking there is obstruction, we give rise to distorted views on our own; this is self-binding, not samādhi. You should open your mind and regard everything as it fundamentally is. Though the sun and moon pass, I do not pass away. Is my work confined to this one lifetime?

5. When the wise live in the world, they see every place as a place of practice, understanding that everything in the world is illusory and impermanent. At first one thinks there is hope, but when one hears the outcome, disappointment is not absent. You must know that this is simply how things are; it is precisely because of our hopes that such disappointment arises. You have fully tasted hardship and received no small amount of instruction. Do not fail this environment. With one turn, it is bodhi—is this not a joyful thing? Living away from home, you should take good care of your health. Let the body labor, but do not let the mind labor; let the mind labor, but do not let the spirit labor. This body and mind have much great work yet to do. I earnestly urge and hope this of you.

A hasty reply. I offer my respectful wishes for

your continued well-being.

Xianglu, with palms joined

(4) Acharya Yuanyin

[The Elder's Lineage]

Question: Was Master Yuanyin's Mahāmudrā of the Ganges transmitted through Master Gongga?

Answer: As for the elder's own lineage, while he was alive he said that he had studied Dharma with many masters, virtuous elders, and good spiritual friends from various traditions. In the end, he still decided to inherit the Heart-of-Heart Dharma.

(Master Yuanyin's Questions and Answers records: "I myself took refuge with several masters. My first master was the old Dharma Master Xingci of the Tiantai school. Later, I took refuge with a Chan master. There was also the old Dharma Master Yingci, patriarch of the Avataṃsaka school. After studying Esoteric Buddhism, I took Mr. Wang Xianglu, Master Gongga, and lay practitioner Fan Gunong of the Dharma Characteristics School as my masters."—Editor's note)

Question: Did Master Yuanyin not also practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma only after having had Vajrayāna masters?

Answer: No. According to what the master said, he studied other esoteric practices only after receiving permission from Master Wang Xianglu.

[The Elder's Books]

Question: If Master Yuanyin's writings could be openly distributed in bookstores throughout the country, that would truly be a great blessing for sentient beings!

Answer: Today, I saw a set of the elder's writings, Essential Teachings for the Practice and Realization of Buddhadharma. Published and distributed by: Religious Culture Press

Book number: ISBN 7-80123-619-X/B.22

List price: 88.00 yuan (five volumes)

Question: Religious Culture Press? It has been openly distributed?!

Answer: Yes, it has been openly distributed. The set I saw today was placed on the shelves of Xinhua Bookstore; it was not for internal circulation. The publisher invited eminent members of the national Buddhist association to examine it; this time, five were invited.

[Remembering the Elder]

Question: When I first went to Weinan Road to see the elder in 1994, the master spoke to us about practice. The general meaning was that Wang Yangming was always able to practice: even when riding a horse, his gaze did not extend beyond

one zhang. When I heard this, my wild mind suddenly came to rest. You should know that I went there burdened with so many questions.

Answer: The elder was utterly ordinary; one could not tell that he possessed any attainment, yet his power of blessing was extremely strong. “My wild mind suddenly came to rest when I heard this”—that was precisely due to the power of blessing.

[When Emotion Arises, Wisdom Is Obscured]

Question: May I ask what your deepest impression of the elder is?

Answer: A very ordinary, very ordinary old man. Just as the saying goes: “Ordinary mind is the Way.”

Question: Teacher, did you ever wish to spend more time close to the Elder?

Answer: The Elder said, “When feelings arise, wisdom is obstructed.”

Question: Teacher, whether by telephone or online, staying in touch is still different from meeting in person.

Answer: Feelings arise, indeed!

Question: Ha ha! Teacher, I have always felt that being at your side and receiving your subtle influence would be more direct than keeping in touch online.

Answer: Once, a lay practitioner from Shandong saw the Elder off and wept. The Elder said, “Look! Look! Feelings as deep as the sea!”

Question: Is Master Yuanyin an emanation of Maitreya?

Answer: Maitreya Buddha has countless emanation bodies. If your body, speech, and mind are all in accord with Maitreya Buddha, then you too may be called an emanation of Maitreya Buddha.

Question: Teacher, was Master Yuanyin reborn in Tuṣita Heaven?

Answer: The Elder is in our hearts.

Question: I am grateful for your guidance. I wish you—though it does not seem quite fitting to wish you anything—so let me pray that you remain in this world for a long time. Amitābha Buddha!

Answer: While my guru was alive, I vowed to go with him, and he gave me a sound scolding. ^o^

[In Gratitude to the Elder]

Question: I am not saying that we must look for faults in Master Yuanyin; I am saying that we should not revere him to such an extent that it becomes superstition!

Answer: Would this statement count as superstition? “I would rather have this body ground into fine dust than fail to repay even one ten-thousandth of the profound kindness of my revered teacher, Master Yuanyin!”

Question: Is it because the Elder told you, “Originally there are no afflictions”?

Answer: It is not because the Elder told me so, but because of the results of putting into practice the method he taught. Let me give an analogy: your ability to write articles was not actually given to you by your teacher; rather, it came from your own practice and exploration in accordance with your teacher’s instruction. If simply being told by him meant that you knew it—if it were such a simple matter—that would amount merely to hearing the teaching, and it might not necessarily inspire such gratitude.

111. Dharma-Transmission Teacher

[Empowerment and Dharma Transmission]

Question: Should I address you as Teacher or Master?

Answer: Before I confer empowerment on anyone here, I first invoke the Elder, Master Yuanyin, and explain that it is the Elder who is conferring the empowerment upon you. I also explain that our root guru is Master Yuanyin and that we are Dharma brothers and sisters.

Moreover, I can understand how you feel, but you may not understand how I feel—if you did, you would not raise these questions. There is another way that would suit both sides: I am not the only Dharma-transmission teacher of the Mind-Seal school. Other teachers may not be like this. You may certainly ask clearly whether a teacher accepts disciples personally, and then receive empowerment from that teacher.

But why do I not accept disciples myself? Let me explain the reason clearly. While the Elder was alive, he explicitly said, “I will take responsibility for you all to the very end.” That is to say, so long as one has faith in the Elder, relying on him ensures liberation. Can relying on me ensure liberation? I should know that better than anyone.

I too have practiced for many years; at the very least, I cannot deceive people with false speech. To tell you the truth, I know that I do not yet have the foundation to make such a claim. Moreover, after the Elder passed away, his blessing power became even stronger. Therefore, whenever people come to me for empowerment, we all rely on the Elder, truly for the sake of ensuring the liberation of students.

Some people are not quite able to accept this way of speaking, so I explain to them that it has nothing to do with my being modest or hypocritical. The main reason is that, after the Elder passed away, his blessing power became even stronger. This is not empty theory or a pretext; once you enter actual practice, you will be able to experience it directly.

[Mind-Seal Forum Administration]

Person A: Regarding the criticism of **that scoundrel. lvm, however, without distinguishing right from wrong, says, “There is no way to verify it online; what use is there in arguing? The more one argues, the more trouble there will be …” You neither distinguish right from wrong nor discern it properly. With views such as these, how are you any different from that scoundrel in the Buddhist community?

Answer: Since you cannot stop arguing, say whatever you like.

Question: Whatever you do, do not become a teacher; and of all kinds of teachers, do not become a Dharma-transmission teacher of the Mind-Seal school. Sailing a boat across the desert—how difficult it is!

Answer: Since I have taken it on, I do not think of anything else.

Question: When poor, cultivate oneself alone; when successful, benefit the world as well.

Answer: When there is affinity, propagate the Dharma; when there is no affinity, attend to one’s own liberation.

Question: Sometimes you speak bluntly, and some people cannot bear it and say that you are cold. If I were you, I would have withdrawn into seclusion long ago. These people do not even understand how to serve a teacher; what right do they have to speak?

Answer: Since a straightforward mind is the place of practice, there is no need to concern oneself with being called warm or cold.

Question: Teacher, please take good care of yourself. If it truly becomes impossible, you might as well follow the example of the First Patriarch. This is what is truly in my heart; never mind propagating the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings.

Answer: When there is affinity, propagate the Dharma; when there is no affinity, attend to one’s own liberation.

Propagating the Dharma is not an affair—Buddha-work is dreamlike, and the place of practice is like the moon reflected in water.

Attending to one's own liberation is not being without affairs—plant grain, cotton, and oil crops, and have no worries about food and daily necessities.

Question: Having known you for a long time, I have no doubt at all about your plain and honest character. You certainly did not delete my post at that time. It must have been some well-intentioned Dharma brothers and sisters. To this day, you have never deleted my posts or blocked my IP address. That would be impossible on any other forum. In the eyes of some Dharma brothers and sisters, your forbearance has allowed me to push my luck. But I think it is precisely your forbearance that enables Mind-Seal practitioners to receive the formative influence of the Buddha's teachings, rather than amusing themselves with mere verbal repartee or even misleading beginners.

Answer: Oh! The principles for deleting posts are these: violating the ten rules or insulting the patriarchs.

Question: Other people's posts receive replies. Why is this question not answered? Does it not need an answer?

Answer: Oh! This is how it is:

There are many good spiritual friends online, and my own views are not necessarily all correct. If someone else answers, I too can compare and learn. Therefore, unless a question is specifically addressed to me, I generally do not interject. Like the person asking the question, I am also waiting for someone to answer, so that I may learn and improve.

112. Mind-Seal Disciples

Question: Are those who practice the Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra called Mind-Seal disciples?

Answer: Only those who have received Mind-Seal empowerment are Mind-Seal disciples.

Question: What are the characteristics of a Mind-Seal disciple?

Answer: Once one becomes a Mind-Seal disciple, one should begin by learning formlessness.

A: The Mind-Seal family is growing day by day. How joyful and worthy of celebration!

Answer: Samantabhadra Bodhisattva told Acharya Dayu that this Dharma is suited to the present recipients.

Question: On the Mind-Seal forum, people always like to say, “Are you a Mind-Seal disciple? Are you a disciple of Master Yuanyin?” Was not every Dharma gate taught by the World-Honored One in accordance with the capacities of beings? Teacher, is it necessary to say such things?

Answer: Mind-Seal disciples are disciples of the Buddha. Mind-Seal disciples should become examples for the broad community of Buddhist disciples.

Question: Do not make anything of [Destroyer of the Mind-Seal School] (the username of an internet user—editor’s note)! Who is he, to destroy the Mind-Seal school? The only people capable of destroying the Mind-Seal school are Mind-Seal practitioners. They cannot slander the Mind-Seal school; it is Mind-Seal practitioners’ failure to practice in accordance with the Dharma that truly slanders the Mind-Seal school!

Answer: A maxim! A maxim! The only people capable of destroying the Mind-Seal school are Mind-Seal practitioners.

II. Beginning the Practice of the Six-Syllable Mantra in Heart Esotericism

113. What is the relationship between practicing the Mind-Seal Six-Syllable Mantra and the Heart-of-Heart Dharma?

Question: If one is unable to sit for two hours but wishes to practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, what should one do?

Answer: First practice the Six-Syllable Mantra. When you can sit for a full two hours, you may then practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma.

Question: Teacher, how long must one practice the Great Six-Syllable Mantra before one may practice the Heart-of-Heart Esoteric Dharma?

Answer: Oh! It simply means that one may first practice the Six-Syllable Mantra before receiving empowerment. There is no rule prescribing how much of the Six-Syllable Mantra one must practice before practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma. Therefore, the Six-Syllable Mantra is not a preliminary practice of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma; the Heart-of-Heart Dharma has no preliminary practices.

114. Can the Mind-Seal Six-Syllable Mantra be practiced without empowerment?

Question: Is the Great Six-Syllable Mantra practice on the “Buddhadharma Heart-of-Heart” website a generally transmitted practice? May one practice it independently

without receiving empowerment or transmission? May such a generally transmitted practice also be taught to others?

Answer: Originally, one could practice the Six-Syllable Mantra only after receiving empowerment. In those days, our grandmaster, Master Wang Xianglu, took pity on those for whom it was difficult to seek the Dharma in person. He once established an altar and conferred empowerment upon all future sentient beings with affinity. Although he did not use the term “generally transmitted practice,” the Six-Syllable Mantra may be passed on from person to person. When I asked Master Yuanyin for the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, the Master instructed me first to practice the Six-Syllable Mantra. The mantra and mudrā were mailed to me in a letter. Only after practicing for half a year did I go to Shanghai to receive empowerment.

115. Ritual Procedure for Seated Practice of the Mind-Seal Great Six-Syllable Mantra

Ritual Procedure for Seated Practice of the Mind-Seal Great Six-Syllable Mantra:

I. Take your seat, join your palms, and recite the Four Refuges Mantra 3–7 times:

“Namo Gurubhya, Namo Buddhāya, Namo Dharmāya, Namo Saṅghāya.”

II. Recite three times:

“Homage to the root master, Acharya Yuanyin; homage to all Buddhas, bodhisattvas, vajras, and Dharma protectors throughout the ten directions and three times.”

III. Recite once:

“I pray that the root master, Acharya Yuanyin, and all Buddhas, bodhisattvas, vajras, and Dharma protectors throughout the ten directions and three times may, through their compassionate power, bless and protect me; eliminate my karmic obstacles; enable me to settle my mind and enter the Buddha; cultivate this wondrous Dharma devoutly; swiftly attain accomplishment; and liberate sentient beings.”

IV. Form the Great Lotus Mudrā (cover the hands with a yellow cloth):

Bring together three points—the bases of the palms, the thumbs, and the little fingers—while allowing the remaining six fingers to separate naturally. Hold the mudrā before the chest. That is, after joining the palms, naturally separate the six fingers.

Recite the Great Six-Syllable Mantra (recite mentally and listen with the ears):

“Oṃ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ (ong ma ni bei mei hong)” (approximately 40–50 recitations per minute).

Sit every day for at least half an hour; two hours is better. Let ease and naturalness be the standard.

V. Raise the mudrā to the crown of the head and recite the Great Six-Syllable Mantra fifteen times. Then recite the aspiration prayer once:

“May I swiftly open wisdom and attain Buddhahood in this life, liberate sentient beings, and seek no other fruition.”

VI. Release the mudrā above the crown of the head and leave the seat.

Question: Is it acceptable not to cover the Heart-of-Heart Six Mudrās and the Great Lotus Mudrā with a yellow cloth?

Answer: If they are not covered, the practice is not in accordance with the Dharma.

B: The Six Mudrās and the Great Lotus Mudrā must be covered with a yellow cloth; otherwise, passing spirits and deities will bow to them. Therefore, one should cherish one’s blessings.

Answer: Correct! Covering the hands is for cherishing one’s blessings.

116. While Sitting, the Essential Point Is Cultivating the Mind, Not the Legs

Question: I now practice the Great Six-Syllable Mantra every day, but my legs hurt in the full-lotus posture. There are two views: one says to persist through it, while the other says not to force oneself. I do not know which approach is more suitable.

Answer: If the person who advocates “the two views” is someone who has persisted through it, then not only does he have his reasons, but he also has his experience. If your capacities are similar to his, he can guide you through this hurdle.

If he has no such experience, you need not pay him too much heed. If he has not passed this hurdle himself, how can attending to him help you pass it? Moreover, from the outset it has been said: cultivate the mind, not the legs. If you cannot sit in full lotus, sit in half lotus; if you cannot sit in half lotus, sit cross-legged; if even that is impossible, simply cross your legs beneath your seat on the ground. This is not to say that lotus sitting is not good; it means that cultivating the mind is more important than the legs. If you focus your mind only on the legs, you waste precious time. It is not worthwhile!

Question: When my legs hurt and I cannot remain seated, I want to sway my body. Is this a sign that the channels and vital energy have not opened?

Answer: Legs, channels, and vital energy are all not apart from mind; apart from mind, there is no pain.

Question: When I sit, if I do not attend to it and simply persist in sitting, will my legs naturally become compliant as time passes and my practice deepens?

Answer: In truth, it is a matter of “subduing one’s mind.”

Question: During the latter half hour, I cannot sit very well. I do not know why.

Answer: It is your mind that moves, good sir.

117. While Sitting, Attend Only to the Mantra; Do Not Concern Yourself with Anything Else.

Question: While sitting, I sometimes visualize my body as empty space, or visualize that the Buddha and I are one. This makes my mind quieter and can improve the effect. I now use visualization only occasionally as a temporary expedient, not continuously. Is it acceptable to use it sometimes?

Answer: While sitting, attend only to the mantra; do not concern yourself with anything else.

Question: I am only borrowing it temporarily, using it for the moment. I will not become trapped in a fixed pattern.

Answer: Of course you will not become trapped in a pattern, because you are already trapped in one.

Question: You are formidable. Today I followed your instruction to attend only to the mantra and not concern myself with anything else, and it was much better. I used to think that my thoughts were extremely stubborn, and that I needed to use many tentacles, like an octopus—various methods—to seize hold of them. Today I let go, let go of everything, and simply held the mantra. It felt much easier. It was the feeling of what I had sought so hard coming without effort.

Answer: I have long said, “Let ease and naturalness be the standard.”

Question: One must wear out iron shoes before one can truly believe it.

Answer: Ha ha! Then make a few more pairs of iron shoes.

118. Vajra Recitation: Mental Recitation and Listening with the Ears

(1) In Vajra Recitation, Listening Is Essential

Question: How does one recite mentally and listen with the ears?

Answer: Mental recitation and listening with the ears is “vajra recitation”; listening is essential.

“Mental recitation and listening with the ears” does not mean thinking about the mantra, but hearing it with complete clarity. To help one hear it, the lips may move slightly, though others cannot hear it. Its purpose is to use the ear faculty to gather in the mind faculty.

As it is said, “The true substance of this land’s teaching lies in purity through hearing sounds.” If this is truly done, the speed will not slow as deluded thoughts diminish.

Question: I would like to ask: How should one recite the mantra so that it flows from the mind?

Answer: It is simply to be relaxed and natural. Do not be contrived or overly deliberate; be relaxed and clear, natural and flowing.

Question: In mental recitation and listening with the ears, the lips move slightly. Does the tongue move as well?

Answer: Do not produce sound; listening is essential. Do not be overly rigid about the lips and tongue. They are all merely aids to listening.

Question: What is the difference between the “mental recitation” in “mental recitation and listening with the ears” and silent recitation?

Answer: In “mental recitation and listening with the ears,” listening is essential; it is not recitation. It is called “mental recitation” to distinguish it from recitation aloud. Silent recitation, however, is reciting silently.

(2) Hearing the Mantra Is Unrelated to Breathing

Question: When reciting mentally and listening with the ears, how should one coordinate it with the breath?

Answer: Do not attend to the breath; let it take its natural course. Hearing the mantra is unrelated to breathing.

Question: This disciple practices the Great Six-Syllable Mantra. After regulating the breath and quieting the mind upon taking the seat, I begin to hold the mantra. Occasionally, as soon as I begin holding the mantra, I feel discomfort in the chest. When I do not hold it but instead quiet the mind, it is actually clear and peaceful. I do not know why. Please give instruction, Master.

Answer: There may be two different causes:

1. You are unable to forget the breath.

In Mind-Seal sitting, one does not regulate the breath. One recites mentally and listens with the ears; it is unrelated to breathing. If you cannot forget the breath, the mantra is extremely rapid, while the breath cannot possibly keep pace with it. Since you are unable to forget the breath, you hold your breath and consequently feel discomfort in the chest.

2. You have misunderstood the “mind” in “mental recitation and listening with the ears.”

You mistakenly take this “mind” to refer to the location of the physical heart and continually direct your attention there. Without realizing it, you are concentrating on the middle dantian. If a person without meditative training concentrates on the middle dantian, chest discomfort will result. The corrective method is to hear the mantra as issuing from the lower dantian, relaxed and natural, like pearls rolling across a tray. (Note: This method is only a remedy for the situation described above and must not be generalized.) Once the body can dissolve into emptiness, there is no need to concern yourself with the lower dantian or not.

Question: Teacher, how should one recite in order to recite mentally and listen with the ears?

Answer: Someone once asked the Master this question. The Master said, “Let us do it this way: recite one mantra.”

He recited one syllable: “Oṃ...”

The Master asked, “Did you hear it yourself?”

He replied, “I heard it.”

The Master said, “That is mental recitation and listening with the ears!”

Question: How should one recite in order for it to be vajra recitation?

Answer: As long as it is relaxed and natural, any way is fine; if it involves contrivance, none is acceptable. This is the practical meaning of vajra recitation.

If the lips move slightly and you can hear it, then it is there; you may even recite with a faint sound. But if, after hearing this, you start fussing over how the tongue should be, how the mouth should be, how the teeth should be, whether the tongue should touch the palate, whether it will harm your vital energy, and so on—then throw all that away. That is not genuine vajra recitation.

Other forms of practice are the same: be relaxed and natural; do not be contrived, do not force anything, and do not cling to names and forms. Take Buddha-recitation, for example. Its purpose is to gather in your mind. If, in worrying about how to recite, you not only fail to gather in the mind but instead give rise to even more deluded thoughts, then you might as well not recite at all.

Again, someone had read quite a few articles on contemplation and came to ask me, "How exactly should one contemplate?" I said, "Let me tell you: what is there to contemplate? Not contemplating is contemplation." Because he was attached to that thing, attached to names and forms, it was already no longer contemplation. All Buddhadharma is medicine prescribed according to the illness, meant to counteract that frenzied mind of yours. The moment you force it, you become attached to appearances. So do not force it; simply go about your affairs in this way.

119. For those beginning the Six-Syllable Mantra practice, how can they know whether they have made progress?

Answer: See whether your deluded thoughts and attachments have weakened, and whether your afflictions and suffering have lessened.

120. If I have no particular experiences or responses, does that mean I am rather dull?

A: A Dharma brother of mine has just begun practicing the Lotus Mudrā. During last night's meditation session, he felt as though a small hole had been pricked in the crown of his head, after which water continuously poured into his body. . . . Teacher, may I ask what condition this is?

Answer: And what happened afterward? Go on.

B: Is it normal that I have no particular experiences or responses—does it vary from person to person, or am I simply rather dull?!

Answer: Put aside this comparative mind!

121. Off the Meditation Cushion: Contemplation

Question: When I am not meditating, I recite the mantra rather quickly.

Answer: Mantra recitation off the meditation cushion is only a provisional measure at the beginning. Contemplation off the cushion is the proper practice.

Question: I am currently practicing the Six-Syllable Mantra. Teacher, when off the meditation cushion, may I recite Amitābha Buddha's name to protect the true mind, instead of contemplating thoughts?

Answer: How could you say that you may not? Moreover, contemplation is not watching thoughts. If you misunderstand contemplation, it would be better to practice Buddha-recitation.

III. Cultivating the Heart-of-Heart Dharma

(I) Empowerment

(I) Empowerment

122. Why must one receive empowerment before practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma?

Question: The Buddha-Heart Sūtra, Also Corresponding to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī can be found in the Taishō Tripiṭaka. If it is made public, people will find a practice manual and learn it on their own!

Answer: Originally, the six mudrās and one mantra were not to be transmitted widely. Even if one studies the Buddhist canon, one may not be able to determine the mantra and mudrās correctly. We simply do not transmit them widely. If it were feasible to learn from a practice manual on one's own, the patriarchs of earlier generations would not have concerned themselves with empowerment.

Question: In the first volume of The Buddha-Heart Sūtra, Also Corresponding to the Great Wish-Fulfilling Dhāraṇī, in the passage describing the Snow Mountain Youth, the Buddha does not seem to blame the youth. He even says: "You should know that even stealing the Dharma entails such great power; how much more so when it is properly transmitted?" Does this mean that the Heart-of-Heart Dharma may be practiced without empowerment?

Answer: What is emphasized is "properly transmitted." How could that lead to the conclusion that empowerment is unnecessary?

Question: Why must one receive empowerment before practicing heart esotericism?

Answer: This is the method transmitted by the patriarchs; we must not go beyond it.

Question: What are the drawbacks of practicing without empowerment?

Answer: At the very least, one will not receive the power of blessings from the guru, Buddhas, and bodhisattvas. There are many other drawbacks as well; they cannot all

be explained in a few words.

123. How long does an empowerment in heart esotericism take?

Answer: It takes less than half an hour. If one also needs to learn how to form the mudrās, it takes a little longer.

124. When requesting the Dharma and receiving empowerment, should one make an offering of money or goods to the teacher who transmits the Dharma?

Answer: Nothing with form is the finest gift to offer a guru. The finest offering to a guru is to practice in accordance with the teaching and attain realization through cultivation. When I went to Shanghai to request the Dharma from Master Yuanyin, this did not occur to me. Only after I returned did I think of it, so I mailed some money to Shanghai. To my surprise, the guru immediately mailed it back. This was even worse: it made the guru pay the postage, and how could I bear that? So I mailed it again. This time I received a temple receipt bearing my name—the guru had made an offering to the Three Jewels on my behalf.

The guru wrote in his letter: “If you wish to make an offering, that is fine. To realize your original nature is the finest offering.”

Question: Why is it said that “a Dharma offering is the finest gift to offer a guru”?

Answer: Among all offerings, a Dharma offering is supreme. “All that has form is illusory.” The Buddhadharma is without marks and is therefore called the true mark. Only this is most real.

(II) Supportive Practice: Meditation

(II) Auxiliary Practice: Meditation Sitting

125. One Hundred Sessions: Focus on Cultivating the Mind, Not the Legs

(1) Bodily Pain

A: I can sit in meditation for only half an hour at most. What experience can you share? Amitābha Buddha! A friend of mine can sit for eight hours, but at first she too could sit for only five minutes. She says that the empowering force of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is indeed very strong! B: Keep the mantra going, grit your teeth, and endure.

Even if you die, die on the cushion! Answer: If you applied the three poisons here, what difficulty would there be in attaining accomplishment in this very life? C: Everyone, look—an ascetic non-Buddhist! An ascetic non-Buddhist! Buddhadharma

is the study of wisdom; do not get it wrong. Śākyamuni practiced austerities for six years, and in the end did he not abandon them? Hmph! Answer: It is not that one suffers like this forever. After a few days, it will pass.

The teacher gave this instruction regarding pain in the hands: “Pain eliminates obscurations; when obscurations are eliminated, wisdom opens.” C: There is a problem with the teacher’s instruction. If that were so, all ascetic non-Buddhists could attain accomplishment.

Answer: The World-Honored One also underwent six years of ascetic practice.... It is true that “ascetic practice is not the Way,” but that was said to those attached to ascetic practice. Yet you should not recoil in alarm at the mere mention of ascetic practice! The World-Honored One’s manifestation of six years of ascetic practice carries profound meaning.

Without distinguishing right from wrong, you criticize ascetic practice whenever you see it. Do you not find yourself crude and sweeping in your judgments? C: Ha ha, that is hilarious. The World-Honored One also manifested as a prince. Does that mean that everyone who studies Buddhism must first find a way to become a prince before studying Buddhism? What a bunch of muddleheaded people.

Answer: Venerable Milarepa was never a prince. If I were to cite him as an example, what would you say then? Let us not argue pointlessly like this, shall we? Let us return to the subject: if one had the capacity to awaken immediately upon hearing a word, why investigate a huatou or practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma at all? Before one has truly opened up the Original Face, is there not a process to go through? ... You may feel that this is “too much trouble.” I can understand that.

Although I too now feel that it is “too much trouble,” I also understand this: if I had not made this effort, I would certainly still be as frivolous as I was at first. Therefore Chan Master Xuedou said: “What a pity! It is worth recounting.” After “what a pity,” there is also “it is worth recounting.” C: Sitting yourself to death like this will not bring accomplishment; it is completely useless.

Answer: It is not that one will sit like this forever. The term is one thousand sessions; you will not sit yourself to death. If it were useless, I would not foolishly persist. C: Foolishly persist—you admit it yourself. Answer: By the time you know that it is foolish persistence, the purpose has already been achieved.

Before that, persistence is not foolish. (2) Pain in the Mudrā Question: Many Dharma brothers and sisters say that their fingers hurt, but even after many sessions mine have not hurt much, and I have felt little qi sensation. Does this mean that I am practicing incorrectly? Answer: People are not all the same.

Whether or not your hands hurt, and whether or not you experience qi sensations, does not necessarily mean that your practice is incorrect. Yet the doubt that has now arisen in your mind is itself not in accordance with the practice. Question: After enduring the second and third mudrās, although the pain in my hands remains, I no longer experience it as pain.

Answer: It should be explained that one must not exert force when forming a mudrā; it should be relaxed and natural. If the mudrā feels very tight, this is because the movement of qi has been activated, not because you are intentionally exerting force. Do not attend to the movement of qi; listen single-mindedly to the mantra. That is correct.

After a long time, deluded thoughts disappear and the mantra can no longer be recited; then one lets go of the mantra and peacefully enters samādhi. (3) Drowsiness at the Beginning of Samādhi Question: The mudrā has not come apart, but at times it is difficult to tell whether I have toppled over. Generally I have not, but there have been occasions when the yellow cloth slipped down; should that count as the mudrā toppling over?

Answer: If you make the yellow cloth into a tube or bag, it will not slip down so easily. This does not count as the mudrā toppling over. If your sitting posture is not relaxed, you may also topple over when entering samādhi. This does not matter either; you may place something soft beneath your hands.

Question: For example, this morning, fearing that I might fall into a drowsy sleep, I got up an hour later than usual, at 5:30. I was fully alert while washing my face, brushing my teeth, lighting incense, and offering water, but after sitting for a while I became drowsy. It took great effort to bring up the mantra, and I became too lazy to do so. When I startled awake, my head was still hanging down.

As I understand it, a drooping head generally indicates drowsiness. This happened intermittently for about an hour and was rather severe. Answer: When entering samādhi, the head may also droop.

Question: Apart from the mudrā, are there any other characteristics that distinguish drowsiness from entering samādhi? Answer: Given your situation, it is unlikely that you are falling asleep while sitting. If you truly became drowsy and fell asleep, it would not merely be that the mudrā came apart; you would probably be unable to remain seated and would fall over.

(4) Whether Additional Sessions May Be Added Question: During the first two rounds of Heart-of-Heart Dharma practice, one mudrā is normally practiced for eight days. May I do two sessions a day and complete it in four days? Answer: In principle, this is possible.

However, among those I have seen who are impatient and eager to rush ahead, those who force themselves to do so end up interrupting their practice. Question: May additional sessions be added within the first hundred sessions? Is it beneficial to add sessions, or is it better not to? Answer: People differ. Do not greedily force yourself to add more sessions in order to progress faster, but if it is easy and comfortable, you may add them.

(5) If Practice Is Interrupted, Begin Again from the Start; Re-empowerment Is Unnecessary Question: For some reason, I stopped practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma for a period of time. Do I need to receive empowerment again before resuming? Must I repeat what I practiced before? Answer: If your practice has been interrupted, you must begin again from the start; there is no need to receive empowerment again.

Question: After receiving the Dharma transmission and empowerment from you, this disciple practiced in accordance with the method. During practice, whenever a thought arose, I became aware of it, clearly and distinctly. After seven days of practice, there were already signs of entering samādhi.

But one day my practice was interrupted because of work. After that, great changes arose in my mind and behavior. It seems as though a very strong force arises from within and prevents me from practicing. I indulge in play and deluded thoughts; not to mention sitting in meditation, even at home I... Answer: There are two paths, and you may choose either one: Do not interrupt your practice under any circumstances.

Stop practicing.

Question: Is there any method, such as mantra recitation or sūtra reading, that could help this disciple avoid interrupting practice? Answer: Methods “such as mantra recitation and sūtra reading” can themselves also be interrupted. What help, then, should one seek? (6) Other Matters

Question: Can I sit on the bed with my legs stretched straight out, form the mudrā, and recite the mantra for two hours? Answer: You may not stretch your legs straight out.

Question: When practicing the six mudrās, apart from making prostrations to the Buddha, how many sticks of incense should be lit? Is there any difference between one and three sticks? Answer: When practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, do not burn incense with an overly strong fragrance. This is especially so in winter, when rooms are closed up; an overly strong fragrance can interfere with entering samādhi. There is no difference between one and three sticks. A single stick of incense offered from the heart is also very good.

Question: In some later sessions, I did not have enough time. Do those sessions count? Answer: If the time is insufficient, they do not count. Question: Since one should not watch the clock while sitting in meditation, how can one ensure the time? Answer: You may use an alarm clock.

In earlier times, when there were no clocks, incense that could burn for two hours was used to measure the time. Who says that you cannot look at a clock? It is only that if you look at it repeatedly, would you say that is good? Question: In the third and fourth mudrās, should the nails of the two middle fingers touch? Answer: Trim your nails; the fingertips should touch.

Question: During meditation, I often feel that the mudrā has become distorted, and this gives rise to many distracting deluded thoughts. Teacher, what should I do? Answer: When you notice that the mudrā has become distorted, simply form it correctly again. There is no need to generate any further deluded thoughts.

Question: Which is better: three two-hour sessions a day, each separated by three hours, or one four-hour session a day? Answer: The one who does not compare which is better is better.

Question: Teacher, when I recite the Heart of the Śūraṅgama Mantra and form the mudrā, may I omit covering it with the yellow cloth? Answer: Only the six mudrās of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma and the Great Lotus Mudrā need to be covered with the yellow cloth.

Question: When using the second mudrā to treat a family member's illness, how long should one recite the mantra? Should the mudrā be covered, and should the mantra be recited aloud? Answer: The second mudrā is for treating one's own illness; the third mudrā is for treating another person's illness. Recite the mantra for at least two hours, cover the hands with the yellow cloth, and recite the mantra softly aloud.

Question: While sitting in meditation, changes in the mudrā often occur. At times it changes into palms joined together, and at other times into other mudrās. Yet I can notice this and correct it, and it does not interfere with mantra recitation. Still, I worry whether this is normal.

Answer: Although this phenomenon is not widespread, it is not uncommon either. Once discovered, simply correct it. The subsequent worry is deluded thinking; that deluded thinking is what should be corrected.

Question: This time, while practicing the third mudrā, I suddenly felt deeply sorrowful and began to cry. I continued reciting the mantra, yet the tears would not stop. Why was this?

Answer: Although this is a response and communion, do not cling to appearances and refuse to let them go.

126. A Thousand Sessions: Do Not Be Lazy or Impatient

(1) Although sitting more is good, do not force yourself.

Question: After one hundred sessions, must one add additional sessions? What should one pay attention to?

Answer: Adding sessions is not absolutely necessary.

First, do not drift along; do not be lazy. Second, do not force yourself; do not be impatient.

Question: The more impatient one is, the farther away one gets; the more impatient one is, the slower one becomes. Is that right?

Answer: Impatience itself is an obstacle. How could one not become slow?

Question: I sit three sessions a day in the single-lotus posture. At first things went very well, but now I cannot muster the energy.

Answer: Although sitting more is good, do not force yourself. If you force yourself, you will instead easily practice intensely for a while and then abandon it. I know of more than one person who, for this reason, was unable to complete a continuous thousand sessions.

(2) Interrupting the Thousand Sessions

Question: If one misses a session during the thousand sessions, must one start over from the beginning?

Answer: Of course. Not practicing is also your freedom. But if you wish to practice, there can be no interruption within the thousand sessions.

Question: I will immediately start over from the beginning. But what if illness or special circumstances prevent one from sitting during the thousand sessions?

Answer: A continuous thousand sessions does not admit of special circumstances. Of course, not meditating is also your freedom.

A: This summer, I would like first to focus on Buddha-recitation and mantra recitation, rather than seated practice, and resume sitting when the weather becomes cooler in autumn. Would that be all right?

Answer: In a continuous thousand sessions, one will inevitably encounter summer. What can be done?

B: Such things are all excuses one seeks for one's own laziness.

Answer: Even those who have already begun the practice often ask trivial questions such as whether this place hurts or that place itches. I can only advise them to stop practicing.

Consider this: if one shrinks back at the sight of every small hill and ditch, how could one press forward without turning back, crossing mountains and seas? Realizing the Way is not so easy. A treasured sword's edge is sharpened by grinding; the plum blossom's fragrance comes from bitter cold.

(3) Entering Samādhi Is the Best Mantra Recitation

Question: Before completing a thousand sessions, if during a sitting one cannot bring up the mantra, may one simply follow that state and enter samādhi? But if one has not recited the mantra a thousand times that day, should one make up the count after emerging from samādhi?

Answer: By “cannot bring it up,” you mean that you cannot bring up the mantra, correct?

There are two situations in which one cannot bring up the mantra: first, one has followed deluded thoughts; second, one is about to enter samādhi, at which time there are no deluded thoughts. In the second case, one should set aside the mantra and peacefully enter samādhi. It seems that you think entering samādhi means being without mantra. Then what would it mean to have mantra? The unsurpassed great esoteric mantra does not contain a single word. Sitting meditation cultivates samādhi; entering samādhi is the best mantra recitation.

(4) Do Not Entertain Deluded Thoughts

Question: I have begun specializing in the second and fourth mudrās. Because my demonic obstacles are serious, I can spare only two hours each day, and I have not yet had any sense of entering samādhi.

If I add sessions of other mudrās, must I then sit for four hours?

Answer: If you cannot attain samādhi, additionally practice the third mudrā; if you have many demonic obstacles, additionally practice the fifth mudrā. However, never become neurotic and see demonic obstacles in everything. For someone able to practice only one session a day, these may be used as substitutes. Yet adding the third or fifth mudrā is not compulsory.

Suggestion: Just sit in meditation. Do not entertain deluded thoughts about such things as “samādhi” or “demonic obstacles.”

Question: During sitting, when I encounter a state in which the body is empty—my body is gone, but consciousness remains—what should I do if I encounter this state again?

Answer: The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says, “If one does not take it to be a sacred realization, it is called a good state.”

If one interprets it as a sacred realization, one will immediately fall prey to the host of heterodox influences.

127. After Completing a Thousand Sessions, Should One Stop?

Question: Should one continue meditating indefinitely, or stop after completing a thousand sessions?

Answer: It actually varies from person to person. The purpose of practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is to see one's true nature and awaken.

Some people awaken upon hearing a single statement; they need not meditate, much less complete a thousand sessions. But such people are now extremely rare. The vast majority must exert themselves diligently. Without enduring bone-chilling cold, how can one obtain the plum blossom's fragrance? In practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, contemplation is the primary practice, and sitting meditation is an auxiliary practice.

If one contemplates well, three to five hundred sessions may be enough to uncover one's original nature. If one lets the wild horse run free off the cushion and does not contemplate, even a thousand sessions may yield no result. Even if one gains some realization after three to five hundred sessions, the habitual defilements of many lives and kalpas are deep-rooted, and one still cannot remain master of oneself when encountering circumstances. In addition to urgently contemplating and safeguarding one's realization, one must continue sitting meditation to develop samādhi power.

Continue until the great samādhi beyond coming in and going out manifests. After a thousand sessions, if one's state of mind on and off the cushion is the same, there is no need to remain attached to either sitting meditation or not sitting. Any further attachment would be attachment to dharmas.

If, off the cushion, one still lets the wild horse run free and can become quiet only while sitting, then contemplation lacks strength. One must urgently take up contemplation and emphasize the primary practice, while continuing to use sitting meditation as an aid for at least two hours each day, without interruption.

Question: After how many sessions did you yourself cease sitting?

Answer: More than a thousand sessions. If one's state of mind on and off the cushion is the same, one need no longer remain attached to sitting meditation. This does not mean one absolutely never sits. I have personally seen my master meditate; he sat whenever it was appropriate.

Question: After practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma until one uncovers one's original nature, is there no further need to sit in meditation, and should one simply safeguard realization in daily life?

Answer: If one's samādhi power is insufficient, that is also unfavorable for safeguarding realization. In that case, one must continue sitting meditation.

128. Simply Keep Sharpening the Knife

Question: I keep sharpening the knife, but it never gets used.

Answer: Then simply keep sharpening it.

Question: Why sharpen it if it is not going to be used?

Answer: Sharpening it, sharpening it . . . then suddenly you discover that the knife was not dull in the first place and did not need sharpening at all. At that point, the knife has been sharpened.

129. Points to Note for a Seven-Day Retreat

(1) Scheduling

Question: What are the special features of a Heart-of-Heart seven-day retreat?

Answer: Let me mention the main points: maintain silence. It must not exceed four seven-day retreats, or twenty-eight days at most.

It may be conducted only in winter.

(2) Points to Note

Question: I can rest at home from the twenty-third of this month until New Year's Day, so I would like to undertake a seven-day retreat at home. Although I have already completed one thousand Heart-of-Heart sessions, I still feel that my mind is very restless.

Could you please give some guidance on the points to note for a seven-day retreat?

Answer: First, forget in one sweep all such concepts as “seeing one's true nature” and “awakening.”

Second, prepare some cooling drinks or fruit.

Third, keep things relaxed and natural; avoid exerting force at all costs.

Fourth, maintain silence.

Fifth, simply sit in meditation and disregard everything else.

Sixth, from 12:00 a.m. to 4:00 a.m. and from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m., practice the fourth mudrā. From 12:00 noon to 4:00 p.m., practice the second mudrā; during this period, you may switch to the fourth mudrā, though it is also fine not to switch.

On the final day, from 12:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m., 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m., practice only the fourth mudrā.

After completing one seven-day retreat, do not meditate on the following day; this does not count as an interruption.

Question: There are only two hours of rest in between. What foods should one eat during that time?

Answer: Do not eat foods that easily cause internal heat.

Question: If drowsiness arises in between, how should one handle it?

Answer: Oh! You may sleep only after 4:00 p.m.

Question: Does one need to be in exceptionally robust physical health in order to persist?

Answer: What is needed is psychological endurance.

Question: Teacher, if one is supporting someone in retreat, what should one pay attention to?

Answer: Take good care of the person's food and daily needs, and ensure that a doctor can be reached at any time.

Question: What should the retreatant's diet avoid?

Answer: Do not eat foods that easily cause internal heat, such as chili peppers.

(3) Seven-Day Retreat Practice Center
Question: If there is an opportunity for everyone to organize a Heart Esotericism seven-day retreat, would that not be better?
Answer: A Heart Esotericism seven-day retreat can be held only in winter. At most, four consecutive retreats may be held (a maximum of twenty-eight days). The main issue is that of a legally recognized practice center.

If there is a legally recognized Heart Esotericism practice center, then when winter comes:
Living amid illusory and deluded states, by what can one unlock the lock of consciousness?
Relying on the power of the Heart-of-Heart Esoteric practice, one here passes through the mysterious gate!
Question: [Crying]
Answer: Are you crying because there is no practice center? The practice center is in your mind.

Have you not heard, “Ordinary mind is the Way; a straightforward mind is the practice center”?
Question: The key for me is to strengthen my power of awareness through everyday training. Then I shall bring this seven-day-retreat mind into my daily life.
Answer: Exactly. Sporadic effort is of no use.

130. Points to Note for a Flexible Seven-Day Retreat
Question: I would like to undertake a flexible seven-day retreat. Please explain the procedure.

Answer: In a flexible seven-day retreat, one need sit only four sessions each day—the first three using the fourth mudrā and the final one using the second mudrā. The times may be arranged freely; for example, from midnight to 6:00 a.m. using the fourth mudrā, then at any convenient time, two hours using the second mudrā.

Question: Does a seven-day retreat require the support of someone experienced?
Answer: Since it is called a flexible seven-day retreat, you may support yourself.
Question: May each session last four hours? How can one avoid the monastery's lunchtime?

Answer: Since it is called flexible, that arrangement is also acceptable. For a flexible seven-day retreat, simply move the session earlier to avoid the mealtime.
Question: During a retreat, may one observe the practice of not eating after noon?
Answer: Of course one may do so during a retreat, but it is not required.

Question: After sitting for more than three hours, I become increasingly relaxed. By the fourth hour, Dharma joy is gradually arising, and I do not wish to leave my seat. May I sit for five hours?
Answer: Follow your original arrangement and sit for four hours. You may extend the time as you wish.

Question: Should I arrange two sessions or three? The final session must use the second mudrā, correct?
Answer: The first three sessions use the fourth mudrā, and the final session uses the second mudrā. Since it is called flexible, the specific starting and ending times may be adjusted.

For example, begin sitting at midnight and form the fourth mudrā. If you rise between 4:00 and 6:00, it counts as two sessions. Then, at noon, sit again and form the second mudrā. At 2:00 p.m., you may switch to the fourth mudrā—though it is also fine not to switch, or to switch later. You may rise at any time after 4:00 p.m.

Another example: begin sitting at midnight and form the fourth mudrā. If you rise after 6:00 a.m., it counts as three sessions. You need only do one further session using the second mudrā that day.
This is not a formal seven-day retreat. In a formal seven-day retreat, there are six sessions each day, at fixed times, and they cannot be arranged freely.

131. Points to Note for a Nine-Session Retreat
Question: Why must a nine-session retreat be held on the fifteenth day of a full month? May someone who has not undertaken a seven-day retreat go directly to a nine-session retreat?
Answer: Someone who has not undertaken a seven-day retreat may go directly to a nine-session retreat.

The Buddha-Heart Sutra, in "The Fourth Tathāgata-Mother Mudrā," states: "If one holds this mudrā, one should call to mind the Buddhas of the ten directions seven times and then form the mudrā. If one maintains it ten thousand times on the fifteenth day of a full month, one attains great freedom. The Buddhas abide in

quiescent samādhi, and I too abide in quiescent samādhi; the Buddhas abide in samādhi, and I too abide in samādhi; the Buddhas teach the Dharma, and I too teach the Dharma; the Buddhas liberate beings, and I too liberate beings; the Buddhas are unobstructed, and I too am unobstructed."

"Even all the various deeds and activities of the Buddhas, I too can do and accomplish. Why? Because this Dharma contains the eight mothers and the eight freedoms. I arise from the eight freedoms; there is no other Dharma."
Question: It seems that one can undertake a nine-session retreat whenever one has time.

For example, on a weekend?
Answer: The fifteenth day of a full month is only recommended; other times are not prohibited.

Question: Does a full month mean an odd-numbered month, such as the first, third, fifth, seventh, ninth, or eleventh month? Is the fifteenth day according to the lunar calendar?
Answer: It does not mean an odd-numbered month. It refers to a full month in the traditional calendar—that is, a month with thirty days. The full and short months of the traditional calendar are not fixed to particular months: a full month has thirty days, and a short month has twenty-nine days. On the fifteenth day of every month, the moon is full.

IV. Main Practice of Heart Esotericism: Contemplation Off the Meditation Cushion

(I) Contemplative Awareness Off the Cushion Is the Main Practice

132. In Heart Esotericism, seated meditation is a supporting practice; contemplative awareness off the cushion is the main practice.

Question: Teacher, how should I practice off the cushion? By reading sūtras and reciting mantras?

Answer: In Heart Esotericism, seated meditation is a supporting practice; contemplative awareness off the cushion is the main practice.

(II) Methods of Contemplative Awareness

133. How does one awaken to awareness at the beginning?

Answer: Although the term “awareness” is the same, the various schools place their emphasis differently in practice. What matters in cultivation is to penetrate deeply into a single method. Whatever Dharma you practice, the safest course is to consult a knowledgeable teacher of that tradition. If you mix in practices from other schools, sometimes “clarified butter turns into poison.”

For example, “uphold the name exclusively, without mixing in other practices” and “recite the Buddha’s name once, then carry three loads of water” cannot be practiced together. If the mind is distracted by other pursuits, one may not be able to penetrate deeply into a single method. Yet when patriarchs observe the capacities and conditions of sentient beings, they do far more than merely combine methods. Therefore, if you have just set out on the path, you should urgently penetrate deeply into one method; if you can already discern capacities and teach accordingly, then integrating methods presents no problem.

134. You May First Recite a Mantra

Question: It seems that the Elder said that reciting mantras after leaving meditation is also acceptable, but he did not elaborate further.

Answer: Oh! Contemplative awareness off the cushion is the main practice. If you are not yet able to maintain awareness, then of course you may first recite a mantra.

Question: Only after meditating did I gradually realize how important contemplative awareness truly is.

Answer: Therefore, the main practice off the cushion is not mantra recitation!

Question: Mantra recitation can transform deluded thoughts. Is it especially effective for foolish people?

Answer: Deluded thoughts are themselves bodhi. Why transform them?

Question: Yes. Not attending to them is bodhi.

Answer: If you are not harmed by them, they will surely serve your use.

Question: Yes, I understand the principle.

Answer: Cast aside this principle—what is there?

Question: This!

Answer: Then, in a solemn instant of awakening, will “this” appear before you?

Question: Perfectly bright and lucid awareness!

Answer: Since you already know what contemplative awareness is, do not continue reciting mantras off the cushion.

135. Do Not Attend to It

A: How does one maintain contemplative awareness?

Answer: Do not attend to it!

B: This later student wishes to ask: If one does not attend to it, does that mean letting it run wild like an untamed horse?

Answer: “Do not attend to it” was said in response to his particular condition at that time. He was continually thinking about the label “contemplative awareness.” “Do not attend to it!” immediately cut off his unbroken succession of thoughts.

Question: During meditation, many thoughts arise. What should I do?

Answer: Do not attend to them! Pay no attention to any thoughts; simply attend to the mantra.

Question: If one is not settled on a single point, might that…?

Answer: I told you simply to attend to the mantra precisely in order to counteract your fixation on settling the mind on a thought.

136. Do Not Attend to It, Observe Where Thoughts Arise, Be Aware the Moment a Thought Arises, Cut, Bah!, Stop…

Question: May I ask Teacher Qi about the relationship between “be aware the moment a thought arises” and “Inwardly, do not turn with thoughts; outwardly, do not move with circumstances”?

Answer: They are one matter expressed in two ways. If you simply put them into practice, you will know that they are indeed the very same thing. If you do not put them into practice, counting grains of sand after entering the sea is of no benefit.

Question: Regarding immediate no-mind and not attending to things: immediate no-mind belongs to unconditioned dharma, while not attending to things belongs to conditioned dharma.

Answer: To those who know that there is no dharma outside mind, yet do not understand that “mind, too, is unobtainable,” one says: “Immediately no-mind!” To those who run after deluded thoughts without even knowing it, or who even use

Buddhist technical terms to measure things by their own ideas, one says: “Stop attending to these things!”

If one is not addressing these two kinds of people, it is better simply to forget these two expressions.

Question: Greetings, Teacher. Are “bah!” and “not attending to it” really the same, without any difference in levels?

Answer: Not only these two—even “where a thought arises” is the same. All are for the sake of not running after deluded thoughts. Different mental dispositions call for different verbal teachings.

Question: The Blue Cliff Record recounts: A monk asked Zhaozhou, “‘The supreme Way is not difficult; it only avoids picking and choosing.’ The moment there are words, there is picking and choosing. How then does the Master guide people?” Zhaozhou said, “Why do you not quote the whole saying?” The monk said, “This humble monk can only recite it up to this point.” Zhaozhou said, “Only this: ‘The supreme Way is not difficult; it only avoids picking and choosing.’” When I read this, I suddenly thought of something the teacher once said: “Stop! This is contemplative awareness.” Ha ha!

Answer: In fact, nothing had ever stopped; it is simply that, in that very moment, false conceptualization stops. For example, an actor may become so immersed in rehearsing a television drama that he forgets himself in the role. Suddenly, the director shouts, “Stop!” What will happen to the actor?

(III) Do Not Misunderstand Contemplative Awareness

137. Contemplative Awareness Means Removing Deluded Thinking and Attachment

Question: Hello, Teacher. Recently, worldly affairs have been troubling me. I feel somewhat vexed and my mind is in turmoil.

Answer: White clouds drift across green mountains, yet the green mountains remain. Green mountains are simply green mountains—how could they be obstructed by white clouds?

Question: Whether I make progress in practice or not, I shall no longer concern myself with it; from now on, I shall simply follow the steps. Previously, I took stillness as the criterion of progress.

Answer: In fact, there is only one criterion: remove deluded thinking and attachment.

Question: In everyday contemplative awareness, when a deluded thought comes, a lucid instant of awakening transforms it into emptiness.

Answer: Exactly so.

Question: But when this single “knowing awareness” alone remains, this “awakening” is at times aware of what is seen, at times aware of what is heard, and at times aware of what is felt. How should this “awakening” be placed? That is, when a deluded thought comes, this “awakening” can be aware of it and transform it into emptiness; but after the deluded thought has gone, how should this “awakening” be left?

Answer: Why add a superfluous tail?

138. It Is Not Suppressing Thoughts

Question: Could you illustrate the difference between cutting off thoughts and suppressing thoughts?

Answer: Let us compare deluded attachments and deluded thoughts to wild grass. In order to keep it from growing, some people place a stone over it to press it down —this illustrates suppressing thoughts—while others uproot the grass completely— this illustrates cutting off thoughts.

Those who press grass down with a stone seek not to see any grass—they think that the absence of arising thoughts is no-thought. Even if they succeed in their practice, it is useless. Look at the vast Gobi Desert: not a blade of grass is visible, yet it still belongs to “dharmas arising from causes and conditions.” It is only that, at present, when the conditions are exhausted, the dharma ceases; above all, the external condition of water is lacking. Once abundant rain falls from the sky, the grass will grow on its own without your planting it—when conditions are met, it arises. Even without encountering conditions, no grass and no shoots means a barren dead stillness, incapable of giving rise to boundless wondrous functioning.

Those who cut off the roots of grass recognize the roots as soon as they see the grass. After cutting off the roots, they lay the grass out to dry. They do not fear seeing grass—having thoughts is itself no-thought. Once it has dried, it may even be used as firewood, precisely serving a useful purpose—deluded thoughts are themselves bodhi. Since there is no stone, grain seedlings can be planted, and wondrous functioning can arise!

139. It Is Not the Absence of Thoughts

Question: For example, when one is using the internet, one must give rise to thoughts in order to do things. How should one cut them off at such a time?

Answer: If you suppress thoughts so that none arise, then you will not be able to use the internet.

Question: I often have times when not a single thought arises. How should I apply myself then?

Answer: Ha ha! I would not ask you to prolong the time during which “not a single thought arises.” Having thoughts is itself no-thought; that is true no-thought.

140. What Is Cut Off Is Deluded Thought

Question: When affairs are pressing, I use the word “cut”; when I am at leisure at home, I recite mantras. Oddly enough, I find that I often forget things until I have nothing at all to do, and I frequently make mistakes at work.

Answer: “Cut” means cutting off the deluded thoughts that belong to greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, and wrong views. It does not mean cutting off your work. It is not that you cut when affairs are pressing; rather, you cut when deluded thoughts are flying about.

Question: My work involves making decisions. I do not know whether thinking about work also counts as “deluded thought.”

Answer: Thinking about work does not belong to greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, or wrong views, so of course it is not deluded thought.

Question: Will practitioners’ usual safeguarding of the true mind affect their work?

Answer: No. If it affects your work, then you have misunderstood this “safeguarding” of the true mind. Not running after deluded thoughts is safeguarding the true mind. If you can avoid running after deluded thoughts, it will even improve your efficiency at work.

Question: How should one deal with the relationship between being conscientious in one’s work and nonattachment?

Answer: Being conscientious in one’s work is not attachment. What we do not cling to are greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, and wrong views. Work is not greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, or wrong views.

Question: If deluded thoughts become solidified, do they become the material world?

Answer: Ha ha! You are truly good at thinking.

Question: Oh, then should I not think? Is that still wrong?

Answer: Oh! It is not that you should not think; it is that you should not cling to your thinking.

141. It Is Not Watching Thoughts

A: Teacher, in my contemplation I use right mindfulness: I watch my thoughts. When a thought arises, I ignore it and hold to this unmoving state.

Answer: Who told you to “watch your thoughts”?

B: Teacher, please answer my question.

Master Yuanyin says in A Brief Discussion of Realizing the Mind and Seeing One’s True Nature: “When practicing no-thought, progress does not mean gradually extending the interval of true emptiness between the cessation of the preceding thought and the arising of the next thought. For example, it does not mean that today one remains without thought for only one minute, then gradually extends this to five minutes, ten minutes, or even one hour or twenty-four hours, and calls that success.

You should know that no-thought is alive and dynamic; it is not stiff and inert like a block of wood or stone. A monastic asked Zhaozhou, ‘What is no-thought?’ Zhaozhou said, ‘Playing ball atop rushing water!’ A later commentator said, ‘Thought after thought does not remain!’ So-called no-thought does not mean that not a single thought arises; rather, thoughts arise and cease as they arise, without the slightest trace of abiding in appearances.”

Does the “true emptiness between the cessation of the preceding thought and the arising of the next thought” here refer to “the point where thought arises”? It says here that “no-thought is alive and dynamic.” How can contemplation that “watches the point where thought arises” be alive and dynamic?

Answer: Let us begin, then, with this talk of “watching thoughts”:

The expression “watching thoughts” may derive from Tiantai’s “three thousand realms in a single thought.” When a thought arises in meditative stability, one contemplates that this thought fully contains the three thousand dharmas; this is the practice of the Great Calming and Contemplation. Nowadays, even the Tiantai school itself can no longer practice the Great Calming and Contemplation. Its doctrine follows Tiantai, but its practice lies with Amitābha; it has turned instead to Buddha-recitation.

People today have exuberant discursive thinking. If they force an association with “watching thoughts,” first, they are not in meditative stability; second, they lack the wisdom to discern the three thousand dharmas as fully present. Thus, watching

thoughts becomes merely a succession of deluded thoughts, wholly unrelated to Tiantai's Great Calming and Contemplation.

The expression "watching thoughts" may also derive from the Chan school's "watching the huatou." To watch the huatou, one must arouse a sense of doubt and focus one's whole body and mind on a single huatou—a phrase without ordinary meaning. After a long, long time, it suddenly falls away, and an originally present expanse of true light appears brilliantly before one; this is called "breaking through the investigation." Nowadays, few in the Chan school persist unwaveringly in investigating the huatou. Most of what Chan teachers speak about is doctrine, and even more of it is introductory instruction.

People today cannot arouse a sense of doubt. If they turn "watching the huatou" into "watching thoughts," they do grave injustice to Dahui and falsely implicate the Chan school!

Yet there are quite a few people who never tire of "watching thoughts" and call daydreaming practice. When such people ask Master Yuanyin, he follows their disposition and instructs them to "watch the point where thoughts arise." His purpose is to free them from the continuous succession of deluded thoughts. This has the same intent as "ignore them."

For those whose succession of deluded thoughts is somewhat looser, Master Yuanyin directly says, "Ignore them." For those for whom the succession of deluded thoughts has become habitual, he tells them to look at the point where they arise, thereby shifting their fixed way of thinking. This is simply teaching according to the individual and prescribing medicine according to the illness. Why should later people raise disputes over it for no reason?

142. Do Not Seek Sensations

Question: Now, even when I rest, I never have that former feeling of clear, distinct awareness; it is only a vague semblance. What should I do?

Answer: Resting is bodhi. Feeling belongs to the aggregate of feeling. Weishan said to Yangshan (Huiji), "Ji, do not enter the realm of the aggregates!"

Question: When there is nothing to do, can one let the mind become pure, without giving rise to a single thought, and remain in that state for a while, feeling it out?

Answer: Ha ha! The moment you seek a feeling, it is no longer right.

Question: After cutting off my deluded thoughts, during this relatively blank interval I experience my own existence. That which can experience and feel is myself.

Answer: How is this “after cutting off deluded thoughts”? Look: “I experience my own existence; that which can experience and feel is myself.” Have you cut off deluded thoughts? In fact, you have merely changed their content.

143. Do Not Exert Force in Contemplation

Question: In daily life, how can I bring forth contemplation? Why does it always feel so strenuous? Because it seems troublesome, when I become lazy I neither contemplate nor observe. Is there any skillful means?

Answer: Do not run after deluded thoughts. It requires no effort.

Question: I feel that when a deluded thought comes, awareness itself is enough; if I exert force, it is no longer awareness. This is not something that can be done by force, is it?

Answer: Exactly! “In stillness, illuminate; in illumination, be still. Never exert force.”

Question: Greetings, Teacher. While watching a video disc of Master Yuanyin’s Dharma talks, I heard this passage: “Master Hanshan said that when we practice Buddha-recitation or uphold a mantra, we should be like pushing a heavily laden cart up a mountain.” Earlier, I also saw Patriarch Dayu’s essential instructions for practice: “In stillness, illuminate; in illumination, be still. Never exert force.” The two seem contradictory concerning whether and how to exert effort. What exactly do these two passages mean?

Answer: Master Hanshan was speaking of Buddha-recitation, while Acharya Dayu was speaking of contemplation. And these are far from the only two methods: skillful means have many gateways, even eighty-four thousand dharma gates. How could they all be forced into a single pattern? For example, how could one insist that the Pure Land school’s “diligent Buddha-recitation” and the Chan school’s saying, “Recite the Buddha’s name once, carry three loads of water,” must conform to one another? Sentient beings’ afflictions, like illnesses—the eighty-four thousand afflictions—are each different; the Buddhadharma, like medicine—the eighty-four thousand dharma gates—is likewise different in each case.

Question: In actual mantra recitation, forming mudrās, and contemplation, what should one do for the practice to accord with the Dharma?

Answer: If you follow Master Hanshan in Buddha-recitation, press forward with effort. If you practice contemplation in heart esotericism, never exert force.

144. If You Follow It, That Is Saṃsāra; If It Follows You, That Is Wondrous Functioning

Question: If you had not stopped my consciousness from getting entangled in the chat room—what one Dharma brother calls “entangling Chan”—I would have continued traveling at night. To correct my past faults, I have made a resolution: “Do not indulge in deluded thoughts!” I will not make it a motto, but a life-and-death inscription, posted on my forehead every day.

Answer: There is nothing wrong with thinking in that way, but you must not let it lead you around.

If it is not the master and you are the master, then it will become your sharpest weapon. If your thinking surpasses that of others, your weapon will be sharper than theirs. But if it leads you around, it will harm your dharma body and wisdom-life. The saying “a sharp blade injures the hand” is a metaphor for this. One may skillfully distinguish the characteristics of all dharmas while remaining unmoved in the ultimate truth.

Question: If I do not recognize it as a deluded thought, should I still not follow it?

Answer: If you follow it, that is saṃsāra; if it follows you, that is wondrous functioning. If it follows you, it is not a deluded thought.

Question: Can this be understood to mean that if I am in charge of whether to follow it or not, then it is not a deluded thought?

Answer: If you can truly be the master, and it serves your use, is that not wondrous functioning?

Question: Teacher Qi, I would like to ask: whether in applying realization after awakening, or in continuous and seamless contemplation while dealing with people and circumstances off the meditation cushion, one still uses thoughts to conduct affairs. What is the difference between freely applying them and drifting along in attachment to deluded thoughts?

Answer: Have you not already stated the difference yourself?

Question: What is the dividing line between thoughts that cling and those that do not?

Answer: Is this “dividing line” itself clinging, or not clinging?

Question: How can one discern this for oneself?

Answer: Now you understand what it means to be carried along by thoughts, do you not?

Question: When a thought arises and I act in accordance with it, how can I know whether it is an appropriate thought or a falsely arising thought?

Answer: Have you ever heard the saying, “All day long one eats, yet never bites down on a single grain of rice”? When has a thought ever arisen? And when has one ever done anything?

Question: My work is news editing. When I am editing text or doing other work that requires highly concentrated thought, how should I contemplate?

Answer: Gross deluded thoughts are greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt. Work that involves thinking does not belong to deluded thought.

Question: When I am doing work that uses my mind, how should I use my mind?

Answer: Focus wholeheartedly on writing official documents, with no distractions, and you have not departed from contemplating the mind. Rather, if your mind is distracted while writing documents and you then give rise to another thought of “contemplating the mind,” that is not called contemplating the mind.

Question: While working, may one recite a mantra? Would using the mind for two things at once be counterproductive?

Answer: If you use the mind for two things at once, it is not good. If the mind is free of distractions, that itself is the unsurpassed great esoteric mantra.

Question: When doing things, such as reading or watching television, how should one contemplate?

Answer: When doing something, the thing is an object; when reading, the book is an object; when watching television, the television is an object. Contemplation means not being carried along by thoughts and not being moved by circumstances. “Not being moved by circumstances” does not mean not doing things, not reading, or not watching television. It simply means not allowing these things to lead you around by the nose.

Question: When I am reading with complete concentration, am I being carried along by thoughts?

Answer: No. Failing to concentrate completely is what it means to be carried along by thoughts.

145. If the Mind Is Free of Delusion, Diligence Has No Limit

Question: I have practiced this Dharma for over a year, nearly two years, and I still do not sit meditation very well.

Answer: After more than a year, nearly two years, this should have been an excellent opportunity to uncover what is original. But unfortunately, you have substituted mantra recitation and attending to sound for contemplation. The main practice has been lost, and relying solely on seated meditation as an auxiliary practice does not have this power.

Question: After reading your post, I broke out in a sweat all over. I have traveled such a misguided path for so long! These past two days, I have had fewer demands while sitting, and in daily life my awareness has become more relaxed as well.

Answer: “If the mind is free of delusion, diligence has no end.”

(IV) The Three Steps of Contemplation in Heart Esotericism

146. The Three Steps

Question: I have practiced the Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra for some time, focusing exclusively on this one practice. Whenever deluded thoughts arise in daily life, I immediately turn to the mantra.

Answer: When deluded thoughts arise, do not heed them. This is called contemplation and is known as the principal practice.

Question: But sometimes it feels as though the more I turn to it, the more confused I become.

Answer: Deluded thoughts are confused to begin with. If you turn toward them again, will that not make them even more confused?

Question: What should I do, then?

Answer: Then let me spin out a few more words—the three steps of contemplation:

First: Do not turn with thoughts; do not be moved by circumstances.

In practicing Heart Esotericism, contemplation is the principal practice, while the six mudrās and one mantra are auxiliary practices. “Do not turn with thoughts; do not be moved by circumstances” is contemplation. This does not mean using the true mind to watch deluded thoughts; there is neither one who contemplates nor that which is contemplated. Contemplation without contemplation is true contemplation.

To be truly able not to turn with thoughts and not to be moved by circumstances is already the realm of fruition. We cannot do this now, but learn to do it; hence it is called “practicing from the fruition ground.” We are accustomed to deluded thinking and attachment, so they are familiar. Not turning with thoughts and not being moved by circumstances are not yet familiar, so they are unfamiliar. If one continues

in this way for a long time, what is familiar becomes unfamiliar, and what is unfamiliar becomes familiar. There will surely come a moment when everything falls away; then, like beans bursting from cold ashes, it will shine forth clearly before one!

Middle: In a solemn awakening, it shines forth clearly before one.

After things have fallen away, the habitual tendencies of deluded attachment may still remain. When they surge back, they are like dark clouds obscuring the sun; one urgently needs “a solemn awakening, in which it shines forth clearly before one.” What is it that shines forth? It is the knowing free from thought that everyone on this forum discusses in such varied ways. However you may explain it, horizontally or vertically, you cannot describe it. It is free from thought: it does not fall within language and does not transgress into conceptual thinking.

It is numinously lucid, unlike wood or stone. It is neither light and shadow nor a concept. Where the path of words is cut off and the course of mental activity comes to an end, only realization can know it. Having no name for it, we reluctantly call it knowing free from thought. When knowing free from thought shines forth, one naturally does not turn with thoughts or become moved by circumstances.

Last: One is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?

This alone is true contemplation. The first and middle stages are both learning contemplation. After this, even knowing free from thought cannot be obtained, and awakening to see one’s true nature becomes mere leftover words. If you say that such a person has seen his true nature, he may say, “Seeing is itself nature; what further nature is there to see?” If you say that these words establish a “seeing,” he will not argue with you.

He spoke that sentence only in response to your words; he spoke it for your sake. For himself, there is not even “seeing.” At most, he may reply with something like, “This old monk has lost half.” Those who can pierce the ear are rarely encountered; those who mark a boat to seek a sword are plentiful. How could one avoid “losing half”?

147. The three steps were explained in response to a question; they must not be established in words.

Question: Teacher, how should one apply oneself before and after seeing one’s true nature?

Answer: If one has truly experienced the nature of knowing free from thought, then upon noticing a thought arise and looking at its point of arising, it immediately shines forth clearly before one.

This is called “a solemn awakening, in which it shines forth clearly before one.” “A solemn awakening” and “looking at the point of arising” are actually the same thing. When one first learns contemplation, it is simply “not turning with thoughts and not being moved by circumstances.” Of course, one must be able to notice when one is turning with thoughts. If one cannot even notice that one is running after thoughts, then one must first recite the mantra off the meditation cushion. None of the foregoing is true contemplation. True contemplation is: “One is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?”

Question: Does the point from which a thought arises itself have a location? The bright moon shines high.

Answer: If so, then contemplation is this: whenever distraction occurs, awaken solemnly and let it shine forth clearly before you.

Question: Let us meet when the moon sets...

Answer: Then contemplation is: “One is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?”

Question: This saying, “One is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?” is the speech of one who has arrived home. To one who has arrived home, it seems like nonsense; but one who has not arrived home can easily be poisoned by it.

Answer: Since you have not yet arrived home, simply learn not to turn with thoughts and not to be moved by circumstances.

The questions are as follows: (The passages below are Teacher Qi’s answers, given section by section—editor’s note.)

Question: In your earlier post concerning the three steps of contemplation, there is no need to change “do not turn with thoughts; do not be moved by circumstances” to “do not follow thoughts; do not be moved by circumstances,” is there?

Answer: It would be best to forget all these words and put them into practice.

Question: “Not turning with thoughts” is a general method, is it not? More specifically, there are many ways to begin—for example, Mahāmudrā’s “pei!”, Chan’s “investigating the huatou,” Buddha-recitation, and what we call “not heeding them.” These are all expedient methods of entry, are they not?

Answer: Yes! These are all methods of not turning with thoughts.

Question: “In a solemn awakening, it shines forth clearly before one”—is this method the same Dharma gate as the “method of disengagement” and “looking at the point

from which a thought arises," merely expressed differently? This level should only be adopted after seeing one's true nature, should it not? Without seeing one's true nature, one naturally would not know what it is for it to shine forth clearly before one.

Answer: Yes! They are different expressions for the same thing. Instead of saying, "Without seeing one's true nature, one naturally would not know what it is for it to shine forth clearly before one," it would be better to say, "If it truly shines forth clearly before one, this is called seeing one's true nature."

Question: Can the three steps of contemplation be compared to "Avalokiteśvara," "contemplation," and contemplation without contemplation? Are the second and third steps respectively quiescence illuminating and illumination quiescent?

Answer: Idle names indeed fill the five lakes.

Question: The three steps are not a process that everyone must necessarily undergo at present, like stages in the practice of a Dharma method. Is that right?

Answer: The three steps were explained in response to a question. Use them if they are useful, but do not establish them in words.

Question: As for my impression, it should not be called carrying excrement in; it should only be called carrying excrement out.

Answer: Ha ha! It is precisely carrying excrement in.

148. How Does One Cross Between the Three Steps?

Question: How does one cross from the second step to the third step of the Heart Esotericism three steps?

Answer: There is no crossing over. If there were crossing over, one could not reach the third step.

Question: Is it simply a matter of continuing with this awakening and disregarding everything else?

Answer: It is all right to put it that way.

Question: Teacher, there should be no boundary, should there?

Answer: If you say there is one, the third step is not thorough. If you say there is none, then why speak of a second and third?

Question: Is it like the three barriers?

Answer: Oh, stop clinging to these theories.

Question: It seems that the first and second steps occur simultaneously.

Answer: All three occur simultaneously.

Question: Three? What is the other one?

Answer: The other is, “One is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?”

Question: If they occur simultaneously, why did you divide them into separate stages?

Answer: When there is “a solemn awakening, in which it shines forth clearly before one,” one naturally does not turn with thoughts or become moved by circumstances.

149. Not Turning with Thoughts, Not Being Moved by Circumstances

(1) A Correct Understanding of “Not Turning with Thoughts, Not Being Moved by Circumstances”

Question: Teacher Qi once said something to this effect: using the Heart-of-Heart Dharma to realize the mind and see one’s true nature is like using an ox-cleaver to kill a chicken. I know that the Heart-of-Heart Dharma possesses great power through the blessing of the three mysteries and indeed makes it comparatively easy to open up to one’s original nature. But after realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature, the main practice is contemplation off the meditation cushion. How, then, is the special power of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma manifested? Please instruct us clearly, Teacher Qi.

Answer: Rather than calling it “special power,” it would be better to call it “directness.”

Directness means directly measuring oneself against those who have realized fruition. Before one has completely severed delusion and karma, one directly learns from those who have severed them completely, just as a child learns to do the things adults do.

Leaving aside “a solemn awakening, in which it shines forth clearly before one” and “one is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?”, even “not turning with thoughts and not being moved by circumstances” is already a realm of fruition.

Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi said: “All sentient beings without exception possess awakened nature—numinously lucid and empty-quiescent, no different from the Buddha. Yet, since beginningless kalpas, they have never awakened to it. Deludedly clinging to the body as a mark of self, they give rise to such feelings as love and

aversion. Following these feelings, they create karma; following karma, they undergo retribution. Thus they cycle through birth, old age, sickness, and death for long kalpas.

“Yet the awakened nature within the body has never undergone birth and death. It is like being driven and ordered in a dream while the body itself remains at ease; it is like water becoming ice while its wet nature remains unchanged. If one can awaken to this nature, it is the dharmakāya, originally unborn—what could it depend upon? It is vividly undimmed, clear, ever-present knowing, coming from nowhere and going nowhere. Yet through many lives of deluded attachment, habit has become second nature; joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure flow on in a subtle continuous stream.

“Although the truth may be suddenly comprehended, these feelings are difficult to eliminate all at once. One must constantly be aware of them, diminishing them again and again, like wind that suddenly stops while the waves gradually subside. How could the practice of a single lifetime immediately equal the powers and functions of all Buddhas? One need only take empty quiescence as one’s own essence and not identify with the physical body; take numinous knowing as one’s own mind and not identify with deluded thoughts. Whenever deluded thoughts arise, do not follow them at all. Then, even at the time of death, karma will naturally be unable to bind one.

“Though there is an intermediate state, one will be free in whatever direction one goes, taking rebirth at will in heaven or the human realm. If thoughts of love and aversion have already vanished, one will not receive a body of segmented birth and death, and can naturally transform the short into the long and the coarse into the subtle. If the subtle continuous stream is entirely stilled, leaving only the great wisdom of perfect enlightenment shining forth alone, then, in accordance with circumstances, one manifests countless transformation bodies to liberate sentient beings with whom one has affinities. This is called a Buddha.”

The Chan master spoke of three stages after awakening: If deluded thoughts arise, do not follow any of them. Even at the time of death, karma will naturally be unable to bind one. Though there is an intermediate state, one is free to go wherever one wishes, taking refuge at will in heaven or among humans. If thoughts of love and aversion have already vanished, one will no longer receive a segmented body and can naturally transform the short into the long and the coarse into the sublime. If the subtle continuous stream has utterly ceased and only the great wisdom of perfect enlightenment remains, luminous and alone, then one can manifest countless transformation bodies in response to circumstances, liberating sentient beings with whom one has affinities. This is called Buddhahood.

The latter two stages are above the eighth bhūmi. Let us not discuss them for now, but speak only of the first. If one can truly "take empty quiescence as one's essential nature and not identify with the physical body; take luminous knowing as one's own mind and not identify with deluded thoughts. If deluded thoughts arise, do not follow any of them," then one has already reached the point where "karma cannot bind." When karma cannot bind, one has broken through the strange cycle of rebirth in the six realms and escaped saṃsāra. Is this not realizing the Way?

Therefore, when we say, "Do not turn with thoughts; do not be moved by circumstances," we are not asking you to accomplish it immediately. Rather, you should learn to do it; it is the direction of your effort, called proper practice. Once you can do it, you will have realized the Way. See—is this not very direct? There is no need to be drawn along by the hook of desire; go directly toward the fruition stage. Should not a great person be like this?

(2) The Skill Lies in "Not Heeding It"

Question: I feel that my previous contemplation was inaccurate. It does not mean observing the point in the brain where a thought arises—that would be putting a head on top of one's head. Rather, whenever a thought comes, regardless of where it comes from, see it and say once, "Do not heed it." It breaks off at once. Immediately let go throughout the whole body; be clearly aware, with the mind lucid and distinct. After a while, another thought comes, and again give a shout: "Do not heed it." This is contemplation, is it not? Please correct me, Teacher.

Answer: Observing where a thought arises is not putting a head on top of one's head. But what you originally described was not its point of arising: "Off the cushion, I observe thoughts in the brain." A thought is not the same as its point of arising.

Question: Teacher, what I mean is that when I formerly observed thoughts, I focused on my head, watched a particular point, took it to be their point of arising, and became aware when thoughts arose.

Answer: That is even more irrelevant. That is why I said: replace "Observe!" with "Do not heed it!"

Question: I hope that from now on there will no longer be any afflictive or deluded talk on this forum unrelated to Dharma practice.

Answer: As for afflictive and deluded talk unrelated to Dharma practice, the best method is: do not heed them—do not reply to their posts.

Question: What should one do when white waves surge to the sky?

Answer: Cast them into the land of the unborn!

Question: What must one do in order to hold fast?

Answer: Do not do anything in order to hold fast.

Question: Only when sitting in meditation do I discover how turbulent and surging they are, like raging waves.

Answer: Though the wind has stopped, the waves still surge! Do not heed them! Do not run after them!

Question: What is the difference between mere verbal Chan, wild Chan, and genuine Chan?

Answer: Ha ha! When you cast “mere verbal Chan, wild Chan, genuine Chan . . .” all into the Eastern Ocean, you will understand.

150. A Stern Awakening; Luminous Presence before You

Question: A stern awakening is easy enough to practice, but I do not experience luminous presence before me. Does luminous presence arise only after an explosive breakthrough?

Answer: If that is how it is, then even after an explosive breakthrough, there will be no luminous presence before you.

Question: As for “luminous,” I feel that it gives rise to further complications. This expression can easily mislead practitioners into thinking that there is some light. In fact, I think it is simply this: not a single thought arises, yet there is clear, ever-present knowing.

Answer: Ha ha! You do not say “luminous,” yet you have brought in “clear, ever-present knowing.”

Question: I only say it with my mouth; at such a time, it is not in my mind. I now understand what you mean by “luminous.”

Answer: “Originally one is a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?” This is true luminosity.

Question: “A stern awakening; luminous presence before you.” I have two understandings of this, and I have accordingly adopted two methods. In daily life, I simply go about what I am doing, awaken sharply, and then let go after awakening; after a while, I awaken again.

In this way, I repeatedly train the number of sharp awakenings. This method emphasizes frequency rather than sustained duration. Another method is to remain

in luminous presence and then strive to sustain this state, unstained by a single thing. This trains sustained duration. At present, I think that only by continuing with the latter method can one become continuous and undivided. Thus I maintain a high degree of alertness and have recently been training in this way.

Answer: For you, both methods are very good, but the second is better. Yet not everyone should practice this way. Let me ask you something: does practicing in this way affect your work?

Question: I usually use the first method when doing work that requires thought, and the second when walking, sitting idly, or during leisure when I do not need to think. The second method in particular has somewhat greater force. I also try my best to practice this way while sitting, and off the cushion I can occasionally do so even while working. It feels as though the work is not being done by me; things seem hazy. But most of the time I cannot do it, for it affects my work, which shows that my strength is still insufficient. Since this is correct, I will persist in practicing this way from now on.

Answer: It should be that it not only does not affect your work, but invisibly improves your efficiency, because you have fewer deluded thoughts while working. “When the mind is focused on one point, nothing cannot be accomplished.”

151. Originally One Is a Buddha—What Is There to Contemplate?

A: What is the key to contemplation? How can one see deluded thoughts as they arise?

B: There are two steps. As the elder said, do not let the mind turn with circumstances, because all appearances of circumstances are unreal; one must detach from appearances and circumstances. Then break through the one who thinks and the one who contemplates. When a thought arises, do not abide in it; the thought itself is empty. There is no self in circumstances; the circumstances themselves are empty.

Answer: There is also a third step—sweep away the traces of the first two steps.

B: The third step is to genuinely arouse the compassionate bodhicitta.

Answer: The second step still includes this: “When a thought arises, do not abide in it; the thought itself is empty. There is no self in circumstances; the circumstances themselves are empty.”

Only at the third step can it possibly be like this:

Such pedantic talk! The nostrils of a patch-robed monk have their great heads pointing downward. If you do not believe it, ask Sister Wang of East Village! (This belongs to the Chan school.)

“Feeding a hundred billion Buddhas of the three periods of time is not as good as feeding one who is without thought, non-abiding, cultivation, or realization.” (This belongs to the doctrinal school.)

Question: Regarding “Originally one is a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?”, a certain fellow practitioner has been criticizing this issue for a long time. Unless he directly realizes it, he will remain forever trapped in his own conceptual understanding. This fellow practitioner received Heart-of-Heart Dharma empowerment in the 1990s, but has still not completed one thousand meditation sessions. If he can be persuaded, I hope he will stay away from the internet, let go of everything, practice in accordance with the Dharma, and directly realize the original reality at an early date.

Answer: Among the “four reliances” is: “Rely on definitive meaning, not on provisional meaning.” What the elder said—“Originally one is a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?”—is definitive meaning.

Provisional meaning must also be taught: “Give medicine according to the illness,” and “In accord with the minds of sentient beings, respond according to their capacity to understand.” An ancient worthy said, “Sit amid the grass on the summit of a solitary peak.” The summit of a solitary peak is definitive meaning; sitting amid the grass is provisional meaning. If Deshan had not “sat amid the grass,” how could he have elicited Yantou’s statement, “He does not understand the final phrase”?

Yet Deshan was, after all, a person “on the summit of a solitary peak,” and he could also prompt Yantou to say, “How fortunate that the old man at the head of the hall understands the final phrase after all.” Yantou had no other trick to play. In his desperation, he appended the tail end, “He has only three years left to live,” thereby provoking much noisy chatter from later generations of those attached to spiritual powers, such as prediction. But in predictive ability, who can surpass the devas? Yet have the devas attained liberation? Are they no longer within the cycle of rebirth in the six realms?

Another example: the elder both said, “the nature of luminous knowing in which not a single thought arises, yet there is clear, ever-present knowing,” and said, “What luminous knowing or non-luminous knowing is there?” The latter statement is definitive meaning.

Question: Teacher, please instruct me concerning “Originally one is a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?” 1. Does this step mean abandoning contemplation, having

already gone beyond contemplation—even beyond quiescent illumination and illuminating quiescence? 2. To reach this stage, must one first become thoroughly proficient at constant contemplation before entering this higher step? If one is still unskilled in contemplation, is it impossible to leap directly beyond it and reach this stage? 3. Is this step the stage of an eighth-bhūmi bodhisattva?

Answer: Yuanwu said: “Unless one has reached the nonobstruction among phenomena, one has no qualification to speak of Chan at all.”

(What follows is Teacher Qi’s response, given point by point.—Editor’s note)

Question 1: Does this step mean abandoning contemplation, having already gone beyond contemplation—even beyond quiescent illumination and illuminating quiescence?

Answer: In fact, this is not a “step”; there is not even abandoning or transcending.

Question 2: To reach this stage, must one first become thoroughly proficient at constant contemplation before entering this higher step? If one is still unskilled in contemplation, is it impossible to leap directly beyond it and reach this stage?

Answer: Here there are no stages, nor is there any reaching.

Question 3: Is this step the stage of an eighth-bhūmi bodhisattva?

Answer: What bhūmi or no bhūmi is there?

Have you not seen it: “A carefree person of the Way, beyond learning and contrivance, does not eliminate deluded thoughts or seek the true . . .”

(I) Off-the-Cushion Contemplation Is Right Practice

132. In heart esotericism practice, seated meditation is an auxiliary practice; contemplation off the cushion is the primary practice.

Question: Teacher, how should I practice off the cushion? By reading sūtras and reciting mantras?

Answer: In heart esotericism practice, seated meditation is an auxiliary practice; contemplation off the cushion is the primary practice.

(II) Methods of Contemplation

133. How should one engage in awareness at the beginning?

Answer: Although the term “awareness” is the same, the emphases of practice differ among the various traditions. What matters in cultivation is to penetrate deeply through a single gate. Whatever practice you follow, the safest course is to consult a good spiritual friend within that tradition. If you mix in practices from other traditions, even “ghee may instead become poison.”

For example, “hold to the Buddha’s name exclusively, without mixing in other practices” and “with each recitation of the Buddha’s name, carry three loads of water” cannot be practiced together indiscriminately. If the mind is distracted by other pursuits, one may be unable to penetrate deeply through a single gate. Yet when the patriarchs considered the capacities and conditions of sentient beings, they did far more than merely combine methods. Therefore, when one has only just set out, it is urgently necessary to penetrate deeply through a single gate; once one is able to assess capacities and teach accordingly, integration naturally presents no problem.

134. One may first recite a mantra

Question: It seems that the Elder said that one may also recite a mantra after getting off the cushion, but he did not explain further.

Answer: Oh! Awareness after getting off the cushion is the main practice. If you are not yet able to maintain awareness, then of course you may first recite a mantra.

Question: Only after meditating did I gradually come to understand how truly important awareness is.

Answer: Therefore, the main practice off the cushion is not mantra recitation.

Question: Mantra recitation can dispel deluded thoughts. Is it especially effective for those of dull wits?

Answer: Deluded thoughts are themselves bodhi. Why try to transform them?

Question: Yes. Not paying attention to them is bodhi.

Answer: If you are not harmed by them, they will surely serve your use.

Question: Yes, I understand the principle.

Answer: Set aside this principle—what is it?

Question: This!

Answer: Then, with a stern awakening, will “this” appear before you?

Question: Perfectly clear and luminously illuminating!

Answer: Since you already know what awareness is, do not continue reciting mantras after getting off the cushion.

135. Do Not Pay Attention to It

A: How does one engage in awareness?

Answer: Do not pay attention to it!

B: This junior student wishes to ask: If one does not pay attention to it, does that mean letting it run wild like an unbridled horse?

Answer: “Do not concern yourself with it” was said in response to his particular situation at that time. He was continuously thinking about the label “awareness,” thought after thought. “Do not concern yourself with it!” cut off that unbroken succession of thoughts at once.

Question: During meditation, there are many thoughts. What should I do?

Answer: Ignore them! Pay no attention to any thoughts; attend only to the mantra.

Question: If the mind is not settled on one point, might it not…?

Answer: I tell you to attend only to the mantra precisely in order to counteract your fixation on settling the mind upon a thought.

136. Ignoring Them, Watching Where Thoughts Arise, Becoming Aware as Thoughts Arise, Cutting Them Off, “Peh!,” “Stop!” …

Question: Teacher Qi, may I ask about the relationship between “becoming aware as thoughts arise” and “inwardly, do not turn with thoughts; outwardly, do not move with circumstances”?

Answer: They are one matter expressed in two ways. As long as you put them into practice, you will realize that they are indeed the very same thing. If you do not put them into practice, counting sand grains after entering the sea is of no benefit.

Question: Regarding immediate no-mind and ignoring things: immediate no-mind belongs to unconditioned dharma, whereas ignoring things belongs to conditioned dharma.

Answer: To those who know that there is no dharma outside mind, yet do not understand that “mind, too, is unobtainable,” one says: “Immediately, no-mind!” To those who run after deluded thoughts without even knowing it, and who even use

Buddhist technical terms to interpret matters according to their own ideas, one says: “Stop paying attention to these things!”

If one is not addressing either of these two kinds of people, it is better to forget these two expressions altogether.

Question: Greetings, Teacher. May I ask whether “Peh!” and “ignoring it” are truly the same, with no difference in level?

Answer: Not only those two—even “where thoughts arise” is the same. All are meant to keep one from running after deluded thoughts. Different states of mind in asking call forth different verbal teachings.

Question: The Blue Cliff Record cites this exchange: A monk asked Zhaozhou, “The supreme Way is not difficult; it only rejects choosing and discriminating. As soon as there are words, there is choosing and discriminating. How, then, does the Venerable teach people?” Zhaozhou said, “Why not quote the saying in full?” The monk said, “I have recited only this much.” Zhaozhou said, “It is only this: ‘The supreme Way is not difficult; it only rejects choosing and discriminating.’” Upon reading this, I suddenly thought of something the teacher once said: “Stop! This is awareness.” Ha ha!

Answer: In fact, nothing ever stopped; what ceases at that very moment is merely false ideation about appearances. For example, an actor becomes absorbed in a television drama during rehearsal, entering the role so completely as to forget himself. Suddenly, the director gives a great shout: “Stop!” What will happen to the actor?

(III) Do Not Misunderstand Contemplation

137. Contemplative Awareness: Removing Deluded Thoughts and Attachments

Question: Hello, Teacher. Recently, worldly affairs have been troubling me. I feel somewhat vexed and my mind is unsettled.

Answer: White clouds drift over green mountains, yet the green mountains remain as they are. Green mountains are simply green mountains—how could white clouds hinder them?

Question: As for practice, whether or not I make progress is no concern of mine. From now on, I will simply follow the steps. Previously, I took stillness as the standard of progress.

Answer: In fact, there is only one standard: removing deluded thoughts and attachments.

Question: In daily life, when a deluded thought arises, I contemplate it, and with a clear awakening I dissolve it into emptiness.

Answer: Exactly.

Question: But when this single “awakening-awareness” alone remains, this “awakening” sometimes awakens to what is seen, sometimes to what is heard, and sometimes to what is felt. How should this “awakening” be settled? That is, when deluded thoughts arise, this “awakening” can be aware of them and dissolve them into emptiness; but after the deluded thoughts have gone, how should this “awakening” be put down?

Answer: Why add something superfluous?

138. It Is Not Suppressing Thoughts

Question: Could you use an analogy to explain the difference between cutting off thoughts and suppressing thoughts?

Answer: Let us compare deluded attachments and deluded thoughts to weeds. To keep them from growing, some people place a stone over them to hold them down —this is like suppressing thoughts—while others uproot the weeds completely—this is like cutting off thoughts.

Those who place stones over weeds seek not to see the weeds. They think that the absence of thoughts is no-thought. Even if they succeed in cultivating this state, it is useless. Look at the vast Gobi Desert: not a blade of grass is visible. Yet it still belongs to the realm of conditioned dharmas; for the moment, when conditions are exhausted, the dharma also ceases. The main reason is the lack of supporting conditions—namely, water. Once rain falls from the sky, the grass will grow by itself without your planting it: when conditions are met, it arises. Even if no conditions are met, the absence of grass and sprouts leaves only lifeless stillness; it cannot give rise to boundless wondrous functioning.

Those who cut off the roots of the weeds see the weeds and immediately recognize their roots. After cutting off the roots, they leave the weeds there to dry. They do not fear seeing weeds: having thoughts is itself no-thought. Once dried, the weeds can still be used as firewood, just when they are needed: deluded thoughts are themselves bodhi. Since there are no stones, crops can be planted, and wondrous functioning can arise!

139. It Is Not the Absence of Thoughts

Question: For example, when I am online, I need to form thoughts in order to do things. How should I cut them off at such a time?

Answer: If you suppressed thoughts so that none arose, you would not even be able to go online.

Question: I often have times when not a single thought arises. How should I apply myself then?

Answer: Ha ha! I would not ask you to prolong the duration of this “not a single thought arises.” Having thoughts is itself no-thought; that is true no-thought.

140. What Is Cut Off Are Deluded Thoughts

Question: When work is busy, I use the word “cut off”; when I am at home with leisure, I recite mantras. Yet I have unexpectedly found that I often forget things and end up with nothing to do, and that I frequently make mistakes at work.

Answer: “Cutting off” means cutting off the deluded thoughts that belong to greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, and wrong views. It does not mean cutting off your work. It is not that you cut off thoughts when affairs are busy; rather, you cut them off when deluded thoughts are flying about.

Question: My work involves making decisions. I do not know whether thinking about my work also counts as “deluded thought.”

Answer: Thinking about your work does not belong to greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, or wrong views. Of course it is not deluded thought.

Question: In daily life, will a practitioner’s safeguarding of the true mind affect work?

Answer: No. If it affects your work, then you have misunderstood this “safeguarding” of the true mind. Not following after deluded thoughts is safeguarding the true mind. If you can refrain from following after deluded thoughts, it will even improve your efficiency at work.

Question: How should one handle the relationship between being conscientious at work and non-attachment?

Answer: Being conscientious at work is not attachment. What we do not attach to are greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, and wrong views. Work is not greed, anger, ignorance, pride, doubt, or wrong views.

Question: Does deluded thinking become the material world once it has solidified?

Answer: Ha ha! You are truly good at reflection.

Question: Oh, then should I not reflect? Is that also wrong?

Answer: Oh! It is not that you should not reflect; it is that you should not cling to reflection.

141. It Is Not Watching Thoughts

A: Teacher, in my contemplative awareness I use right mindfulness to watch my thoughts. When thoughts arise, I ignore them and keep watch over what does not move.

Answer: Who told you to “watch your thoughts”?

B: Teacher, please answer my question.

In A Brief Discussion of Realizing the Mind and Seeing One’s True Nature, the Elder said: “In practicing no-thought, progress does not mean gradually extending the period of true emptiness and no-thought between the cessation of the previous thought and the arising of the next. For example, having no thoughts for only one minute today, then gradually extending it to five minutes, ten minutes, or even one hour or twenty-four hours, and regarding that as success.”

“You must know that no-thought is lively and dynamic; it is not rigid and inert like a piece of wood or stone. A monastic asked Zhaozhou, ‘What is no-thought?’ Zhaozhou said, ‘Hitting a ball upon rushing water!’ A later commentator said, ‘Thought after thought does not abide!’ So-called no-thought does not mean that not a single thought arises. Rather, thoughts arise and cease as they arise, without the slightest trace of abiding in appearances.”

Does the “true emptiness between the cessation of the previous thought and the arising of the next” mentioned here refer to “the point at which a thought arises”? It says here that “no-thought is lively and dynamic.” How can contemplative awareness that “watches the point at which thoughts arise” be lively and dynamic?

Answer: Then let us begin with the notion of “watching thoughts.”

The expression “watching thoughts” may derive from the Tiantai school’s “three thousand realms in a single thought.” When a thought arises in meditative absorption, one contemplates that this thought contains the three thousand dharmas in their entirety. This is the practice of The Great Calming and Contemplation. Today, even the Tiantai school itself can no longer practice The Great Calming and Contemplation. Instead, it follows the principle, “Its doctrine is Tiantai, but its practice is Amitābha,” and has turned to Buddha-recitation.

People today are overwhelmed by discursive thought. If they force an association with “watching thoughts,” first, they are not in meditative absorption; second, they lack the wisdom to contemplate the three thousand dharmas contained in a single thought. Thus, watching thoughts becomes an uninterrupted succession of deluded thoughts and has nothing whatsoever to do with the Tiantai school’s The Great Calming and Contemplation.

The expression “watching thoughts” may also derive from the Chan school’s “investigating the huatou.” To investigate a huatou, one must arouse a sense of doubt and focus one’s whole body and mind on a meaningless critical phrase. After a long, long time, there is suddenly a falling away, and one’s original, radiant true light clearly appears before one. This is called “breaking through the investigation.” Nowadays, few in the Chan school persist unremittingly in investigating huatou. Most of what Chan teachers teach is doctrinal exposition, or, more often, introductory instruction.

People today cannot arouse a sense of doubt. If they reinterpret “investigating the huatou” as “watching thoughts,” they wrong Dahui grievously and falsely accuse the Chan school!

Yet there are quite a few who tirelessly enjoy “watching thoughts” and call daydreaming practice. When such people asked the Elder, he would guide them according to their dispositions to “watch the point at which thoughts arise.” His purpose was to free them from their unbroken succession of deluded thoughts. It serves the same purpose as “ignoring them.”

To those whose continuous succession of deluded thoughts had loosened somewhat, the Elder directly said, “Ignore them.” To those for whom this succession of deluded thoughts had become habitual, he told them to watch the point at which thoughts arise, thereby redirecting their fixed course of thinking. This was simply teaching according to the individual and prescribing medicine according to the illness. Why should later people stir up disputes over it for no reason?

142. It Is Not Seeking Sensations

Question: Now, even when I rest, it is never quite like that former feeling of clear, distinct awareness; it is only an approximation. What should I do?

Answer: Resting is itself bodhi. Feeling belongs to the aggregate of sensation. Guishan said to Yangshan Huiji, “Huiji, do not enter the realm of the aggregates!”

Question: When there is nothing to do, may I let the mind become pure so that not a single thought arises, remain “blankly” in that state for a while, and experience it?

Answer: Ha ha! The very act of experiencing it means you have missed it.

Question: After I cut off deluded thoughts, during this relative blank interval I experience my own existence. What experiences the capacity to feel is myself.

Answer: How is that “after cutting off deluded thoughts”? Look: “I experience my own existence; what experiences the capacity to feel is myself.” Have you cut off deluded thoughts? In fact, you have merely changed the content of your deluded thoughts.

143. Do Not Strain in Contemplative Awareness

Question: In daily life, how can I bring forth contemplative awareness? Why do I always feel that it takes so much effort? Because it seems troublesome, once I become lazy I no longer contemplate or remain aware. Is there any skillful means?

Answer: Do not follow after deluded thoughts. That takes no effort.

Question: I feel that when deluded thoughts arise, a single awakening is enough. If I exert effort, it is no longer awakening. This is not something in which effort can be used, is it?

Answer: That is right! “In quiescence, illuminate; in illumination, be quiescent—by all means avoid exerting effort.”

Question: Hello, Teacher. While watching a recording of Master Yuanyin’s teachings, I heard this passage: “Master Hanshan said that when we recite the Buddha’s name or uphold a mantra, we should be like someone pushing a heavily laden cart up a mountain.” Earlier, I also read Patriarch Dayu’s essential instructions for practice: “In quiescence, illuminate; in illumination, be quiescent—by all means avoid exerting effort.” The two seem contradictory regarding whether, or how, to exert effort. What exactly do these two passages mean?

Answer: Master Hanshan spoke of Buddha-recitation, while Acharya Dayu spoke of contemplation. Nor are these the only two methods: expedient means have many gates, extending even to the eighty-four thousand dharma gates. How could they all be made identical? For example, how could one force the Pure Land school's “diligent Buddha-recitation” and the Chan school's “With one recitation of the Buddha’s name, carry three loads of water” to conform to a single pattern? Sentient beings’ afflictions, like illnesses—the eighty-four thousand afflictions—are each different; the Buddha Dharma, like medicine—the eighty-four thousand dharma gates—is likewise different in each case.

Question: In actual mantra recitation, forming mudrās, and contemplation, what exactly should one do for the practice to accord with the Dharma?

Answer: If you are learning Master Hanshan’s Buddha-recitation, then exert yourself vigorously and press forward. If it is the contemplation of heart esotericism, then

you must absolutely avoid exerting yourself.

144. If you follow it, that is saṃsāra; if it follows you, that is wondrous functioning.

Question: In the chat room, had the teacher not stopped my conscious entanglements—what one fellow practitioner called “entangling Chan”—I would have continued on through the night. To correct my past shortcomings, I have made this resolution: “Do not indulge in deluded thoughts!” I will not make it a motto, but a life-and-death placard, posted before my eyes every day.

Answer: There is nothing wrong with thinking in that way, but you must not let it lead you by the nose.

If it is not the master, while you are the master, then it will become your sharpest weapon. If your thinking is superior to that of others, your weapon will be sharper than theirs. But if it leads you along, it will harm your dharmakāya and wisdom-life. This is what is meant by “the blade wounds the hand that wields it.” One may skillfully distinguish the characteristics of all dharmas while remaining unmoved in the highest truth.

Question: If one does not recognize it as a deluded thought, should one still refrain from following it?

Answer: If you follow it, that is saṃsāra; if it follows you, that is wondrous functioning. When it follows you, it is not a deluded thought.

Question: May this be understood to mean that, if one is master of whether to follow or not follow one’s own thoughts, they are not deluded thoughts?

Answer: If you truly can be master, then it is at your disposal. Is that not wondrous functioning?

Question: I would like to ask Teacher Qi: after awakening, when one applies it, or when one continuously and seamlessly contemplates while off the meditation cushion and interacting with others in daily life, one still uses these thoughts to carry out one’s affairs. What is the difference between freely applying them and wandering along with deluded thoughts in attachment?

Answer: Have you not already stated the difference yourself?

Question: What is the boundary between thoughts to which one is attached and those to which one is not attached?

Answer: Is “boundary” attachment, or nonattachment?

Question: How should one observe this for oneself?

Answer: Now you know what it means to be carried along by thoughts, don't you?

Question: When a thought arises and one acts accordingly, how can I know whether it is a thought that should arise or a deluded thought that has arisen?

Answer: Have you not heard the saying, "All day long one eats, yet has not bitten a single grain of rice"? When has any thought ever arisen? And when has one ever done anything?

Question: My work is news editing. When I am writing and doing other work that requires highly concentrated thought, how should I contemplate?

Answer: Coarse deluded thoughts are greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt. Thinking required for work does not belong to deluded thought.

Question: When I am doing mental work, how should I apply my mind?

Answer: Concentrate wholly on writing your documents, with the mind free of distractions, and you have not departed from contemplating the mind. But if, while writing, the mind is distracted and you then give rise to another thought of "contemplating the mind," that is not called contemplating the mind.

Question: While working, may one recite mantras? Does trying to use the mind in two ways become counterproductive?

Answer: If the mind is used in two ways, it is not good. If the mind is free of distractions, that itself is the unsurpassed great esoteric mantra.

Question: When doing things, such as reading or watching television, how should one contemplate?

Answer: When doing things, the thing is an object; when reading, the book is an object; when watching television, the television is an object. Contemplation means neither turning with thoughts nor being moved by circumstances. "Not being moved by circumstances" does not mean not doing things, not reading, or not watching television. It simply means not letting these things lead you by the nose.

Question: When I am reading with complete concentration, am I being carried along by thoughts?

Answer: No. Failing to concentrate completely is what it means to be carried along by thoughts.

145. If the mind is free of deluded thoughts, diligence has no limit.

Question: I have practiced for more than a year, nearly two years, yet I still have not learned to sit meditation properly.

Answer: After more than a year, nearly two years, this should have been an excellent time to open to your original nature. Unfortunately, you have replaced contemplation with mantra recitation and attention to sound. The primary practice has been lost; relying only on seated meditation as an auxiliary practice does not provide such strength.

Question: After reading your post, I broke out in a sweat all over. I have taken such a needless detour. During the past two days, I have not made so many demands of myself while sitting, and my usual alert awareness has also become more relaxed.

Answer: “If the mind is free of deluded thoughts, diligence has no limit.”

(IV) Three Steps of Contemplation in Heart Esotericism

146. The Three-Step Tune

Question: I have practiced the Great Six-Syllable Mantra for some time, going deeply into this single practice. Whenever deluded thoughts arise in daily life, I immediately turn to the mantra.

Answer: When deluded thoughts arise, do not heed them. This is called contemplation and is known as the principal practice.

Question: But sometimes I feel that the more I turn to it, the more chaotic things become.

Answer: Deluded thoughts are chaotic to begin with. If you turn them over again, will they not become even more chaotic?

Question: What should I do, then?

Answer: Then let me spin out a few more entanglements—the three-step tune of contemplation:

First: Do not turn with thoughts; do not be moved by circumstances.

In heart esotericism, contemplation is the principal practice, while the six mudrās and one mantra are supporting practices. “Do not turn with thoughts; do not be moved by circumstances” is contemplation. This does not mean using the true mind

to observe deluded thoughts; there is neither an observer nor an object observed. Observation without observing is true contemplation.

To be truly able not to turn with thoughts or be moved by circumstances is the realm of fruition. We cannot yet do so, but learn to do so; therefore, it is called “cultivating from the stage of fruition.” We are accustomed to deluded thoughts and attachments—they are familiar. Not turning with thoughts and not being moved by circumstances are not yet familiar—they are unfamiliar. Continue in this way for a long time: what is familiar becomes unfamiliar, and what is unfamiliar becomes familiar. There will surely come a moment when everything falls away; then, like beans bursting in cold ashes, it will appear brightly before you.

Middle: A sudden, awe-inspiring awakening; it appears brightly before you.

After things have fallen away, the habitual tendencies of deluded attachment may still remain. When those tendencies surge back, they are like dark clouds obscuring the sun. One urgently needs “a sudden, awe-inspiring awakening; it appears brightly before you.” What is it that appears before you? It is the thought-free numinous knowing about which everyone on this forum has expressed so many differing views. However you speak of it, horizontally or vertically, your words cannot reach it. It is free from thought, does not fall into language, and does not intrude into conceptual thinking.

It is numinously luminous, unlike wood or stone. It is neither light nor shadow, neither a concept; the path of words is cut off and the course of mental activity comes to an end. Only through realization can it be known. Unable to name it, we provisionally call it thought-free numinous knowing. When thought-free numinous knowing is present, one naturally does not turn with thoughts or become moved by circumstances.

Last: One is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?

This alone is true contemplation. The first and middle stages are both learning contemplation. After this, even thought-free numinous knowing cannot be obtained, and awakening and seeing one’s true nature become superfluous words. If you say that such a person has seen their true nature, they may reply, “Seeing is itself the nature—what further nature is there to see?” If you say that these words establish a “seeing,” they will not argue with you.

For they spoke that one sentence in response to your words; they spoke it for your sake. For themselves, there is not even “seeing.” At most, they may answer with something like, “This old monk has lost half of it today.” Those who truly understand are rarely encountered; those who cling to the letter are many. How could one avoid “losing half of it”?

147. The Three-Step Tune Was Explained Only in Response to a Question; It Must Not Be Turned into a Fixed Formulation

Question: Teacher, how should one apply oneself before and after seeing one's true nature?

Answer: If you have truly experienced the nature of thought-free numinous knowing, then whenever you notice a thought arising, look at the place from which it arises, and it will immediately appear brightly before you.

This is called "a sudden, awe-inspiring awakening; it appears brightly before you." "A sudden, awe-inspiring awakening" and "looking at the place from which it arises" are actually the same thing. When first learning contemplation, it is simply "do not turn with thoughts; do not be moved by circumstances." Of course, one must first be able to notice that one is turning with thoughts. If one follows thoughts as they run and does not even notice it, then one must first recite the mantra off the meditation cushion. None of the foregoing is true contemplation. True contemplation is: "One is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?"

Question: Does the place from which a thought arises still have a location? The bright moon shines high.

Answer: If so, contemplation is this: when you have gone astray, awaken sharply, causing it to appear brightly before you.

Question: Let us meet when the moon has set …

Answer: Then contemplation is: "One is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?"

Question: This saying, "One is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?" is the language of one who has arrived home. To one who has arrived home, it seems like empty talk; but one who has not arrived home can easily be poisoned by it.

Answer: Since you have not yet arrived home, simply continue learning not to turn with thoughts and not to be moved by circumstances.

The questions are as follows: (The answers below were given in sections by Teacher Qi—Editor's note.)

Question: In your earlier post on the three-step tune of contemplation, regarding "not turning with thoughts and not being moved by circumstances," there is no need to change it to "do not turn with thoughts; do not be moved by circumstances," is there?

Answer: It would be best to forget all these words and put them into practice.

Question: “Not turning with thoughts” is a general method, is it not? More specifically, there are many ways to begin—for example, Mahāmudrā’s “pei!”, Chan’s investigation of huatou, Buddha-recitation, and what we call “not heeding them.” These are all expedient methods for entering the gate, are they not?

Answer: Yes! These are all methods of not turning with thoughts.

Question: “A sudden, awe-inspiring awakening; it appears brightly before you”—is this method the same Dharma gate as the “method of disengaging” and “looking at the place from which a thought arises,” merely expressed differently? This level should be adopted only after seeing one’s true nature, should it not? Without seeing one’s true nature, one naturally would not know what it is for it to appear brightly before one.

Answer: Yes! They are different expressions of the same thing. Rather than saying, “Without seeing one’s true nature, one naturally would not know what it is for it to appear brightly before one,” it would be better to say, “If it truly appears brightly before one, that is called seeing one’s true nature.”

Question: Can the three-step tune of contemplation be compared to “Avalokiteśvara,” “contemplation,” and contemplation without observing? Are the second and third steps then quiescence illuminating and illumination quiescent?

Answer: Idle names indeed fill the Five Lakes.

Question: The three-step tune is not necessarily a process that everyone now goes through, like stages in the practice of a Dharma method. Is that right?

Answer: The three-step tune was explained only in response to a question. Use it if it is useful; do not turn it into a fixed formulation.

Question: As for my reflection, it is not called carrying dung in, but only carrying dung out.

Answer: Ha ha! It is precisely carrying dung in.

148. How Does One Cross from One Step of the Three-Step Tune to Another?

Question: How does one cross from the second step to the third step of the heart-esotericism three-step tune?

Answer: There is no crossing. If there were a crossing, one could not reach the third step.

Question: Is it simply a matter of continuing with this one awakening and not concerning oneself with anything else?

Answer: You may put it that way.

Question: Teacher, there should be no boundaries, should there?

Answer: If you say there are boundaries, the third step is not thorough either. If you say there are none, then why speak of a second and third?

Question: Is it like the Three Barriers?

Answer: Oh dear! Do not cling to these theories.

Question: It seems that the first and second steps occur simultaneously.

Answer: All three occur simultaneously.

Question: Three? What is the other one?

Answer: The other is: “One is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?”

Question: If they occur simultaneously, why did you divide them into separate stages?

Answer: When there is “a sudden, awe-inspiring awakening; it appears brightly before you,” one naturally does not turn with thoughts or become moved by circumstances.

149. Not Turning with Thoughts, Not Being Moved by Circumstances

(1) A Correct Understanding of “Not Turning with Thoughts, Not Being Moved by Circumstances”

Question: Teacher Qi once said, in effect, that using the Heart-of-Heart Dharma to realize the mind and see one’s true nature is like using a butcher’s knife to kill a chicken. I know that the Heart-of-Heart Dharma has the great empowering force of the three mysteries and can indeed rather easily open up one’s original nature. But after realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature, the main practice is contemplation off the meditation cushion. How, then, does the special power of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma manifest? Please explain clearly, Teacher Qi.

Answer: Rather than calling it “special power,” it would be better to call it “directness.”

Directness means directly measuring oneself against those who have realized fruition. Though one has not yet completely cut off delusion and karma, one directly learns from those who have done so, just as a child learns to do what adults do.

Leaving aside “a sudden, awe-inspiring awakening; it appears brightly before you” and “one is originally a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?”, this very “not turning with thoughts and not being moved by circumstances” is already a realm of fruition.

Chan Master Guifeng Zongmi said: “All sentient beings without exception possess the nature of awakening, numinously luminous and empty yet quiescent, no different from the Buddha. But since beginningless kalpas, they have never realized it. Deludedly clinging to the body as a self, they give rise to feelings such as love and aversion. Following these feelings, they create karma; following karma, they undergo retribution. Thus they undergo birth, old age, sickness, and death, revolving through long kalpas.”

“Yet the nature of awakening within the body has never undergone birth or death. It is like being driven about in a dream while one’s body is originally at ease; or like water becoming ice while its wet nature does not change. If one can awaken to this nature, it is the dharmakāya, originally unborn—what could it depend upon? Numinous and never obscured, clearly and ever-presently knowing, it comes from nowhere and goes nowhere. Yet through many lives of deluded attachment, habits have become second nature: joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure flow on in subtle continuous streams.”

“Though the truth may be reached suddenly, these feelings are difficult to remove all at once. One must constantly awaken to them and diminish them again and again. Then, as when the wind suddenly ceases, the waves gradually subside. How could the cultivation of a single lifetime immediately equal the powers and functions of all Buddhas? One should simply take empty quiescence as one’s own essence and not identify with the physical body; take numinous knowing as one’s own mind and not identify with deluded thoughts. Whenever deluded thoughts arise, do not follow them at all. Then, even at the time of death, karma will naturally be unable to bind one.”

“Though there is an intermediate state, one may go freely wherever one wishes, taking up residence at will in heaven or among human beings. If thoughts of love and aversion have already ceased, one will no longer receive a body of segmented birth and death, and will naturally be able to transform the short into the long and the coarse into the subtle and wondrous. If the subtle continuous streams are all extinguished, and only the great wisdom of perfect enlightenment remains brightly and alone, then one can manifest countless transformation bodies in response to

circumstances, liberating sentient beings with whom one has affinities. This is called Buddhahood."

The Chan master spoke of three stages after awakening: (1) Whenever deluded thoughts arise, one does not follow them. Even at the time of death, karma cannot bind one naturally. Though there is an intermediate state, one is free to go wherever one wishes, taking rebirth in heaven or among humans as one pleases. (2) Once thoughts of love and aversion have ceased, one no longer undergoes a body of segmented birth and death, and can naturally transform the short into the long and the coarse into the subtle. (3) Once the subtle continuous stream has entirely fallen silent, and only the great wisdom of perfect enlightenment remains luminously present, one can manifest countless transformation bodies in response to circumstances, liberate sentient beings with whom one has affinities, and is called a Buddha.

The latter two stages are above the eighth bhūmi. Let us not speak of them for now, but only of the first. If one can truly "take empty quiescence as one's own essence and not identify with the physical body; take numinous knowing as one's own mind and not identify with deluded thoughts. Whenever deluded thoughts arise, do not follow them," then one has already reached the point where "karma cannot bind one." When karma cannot bind one, one has broken through the vicious cycle of rebirth in the six realms and escaped saṃsāra. Is this not realizing the Way?

Therefore, when we speak of "not turning with thoughts and not being moved by circumstances," we are not asking you to accomplish it immediately. Rather, you should learn to do it; it is the direction of your efforts and is called the right practice. Once you can do it, you will realize the Way. Look—is this not very direct? There is no need to be drawn along by the hook of desire; go directly toward the fruition. Should not a great person be like this?

(2) The Skill Lies in "Not Heeding It"

Question: I feel that my previous contemplation was inaccurate. One should not contemplate the arising of a thought at some particular point in the brain; that would be putting a head on top of one's head. Rather, when a thought comes—no matter where it comes from—one sees it and says, "Do not heed it," and it is immediately cut off. At once, the whole body relaxes; everything is clear and distinct, and the mind is lucid and fully aware. After a while, another thought comes, and again one sharply says, "Do not heed it." This is contemplation, is it not? Please correct me, Teacher.

Answer: Contemplating where a thought arises is not putting a head on top of one's head. But what you originally described was not its point of arising: "Off the cushion,

I simply contemplate the thoughts in my brain." Thoughts are not the same as their point of arising.

Question: Teacher, what I mean is that when I formerly contemplated thoughts, I focused my attention within my head, watched a particular point, took it to be the point from which they arose, and became aware when a thought arose.

Answer: That is even less relevant. That is why I said: replace "Contemplate!" with "Do not heed it!"

Question: I hope that from now on there will be no more afflictive and deluded words on this forum that are unrelated to practice.

Answer: Regarding afflictive and deluded words unrelated to practice, the best approach is this: do not heed them—do not reply to their posts.

Question: What should one do when white waves surge to the heavens?

Answer: Throw them into the land of the unborn!

Question: What must one do in order to hold fast?

Answer: Do not do anything in order to hold fast.

Question: Only when sitting in meditation do I discover that they surge and billow like raging waves.

Answer: Though the wind has stopped, the waves still surge! Do not heed them! Do not run after them!

Question: What is the difference between mere verbal Chan, wild Chan, and genuine Chan?

Answer: Ha ha! When you have thrown "mere verbal Chan, wild Chan, genuine Chan . . ." all into the Eastern Ocean, you will understand.

150. A Stern Awakening, Luminous Presence

Question: A stern awakening is easy enough to practice, but I do not experience luminous presence. Does luminous presence come only after an explosion?

Answer: If that is so, then even after an explosion there will be no luminous presence.

Question: As for "luminous," I feel that this creates another complication. The term can easily mislead practitioners into thinking that there is some light. In fact, I think

it is simply this: not a single thought arises, yet there is clear, ever-present knowing.

Answer: Ha ha! You do not say “luminous,” yet you bring in “clear, ever-present knowing.”

Question: I can say it with my mouth, but at that time it is not in my mind. I now understand your “luminous presence” as well.

Answer: “Originally, one is a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?” This is true luminous presence.

Question: Regarding “a stern awakening, luminous presence,” I have two understandings and have practiced them in two different ways. In daily life, I simply go about what I am doing, awaken sharply, and let go after awakening; then, after a while, awaken again.

In this way, I repeatedly train the frequency of sharp awakenings. This method emphasizes frequency rather than continuity over time. There is another method: luminous presence arises, and then one strives to sustain this state without being tainted by a single thing. This is a method for training continuity over time. At present, I think that only by continuing with the latter method can one become continuous and undivided. It maintains a high degree of alertness, so recently I have been training in this way.

Answer: For you, both methods are very good; the second is better. But not everyone is the same. Let me ask you something: does practicing this way affect your work?

Question: I usually use the first method when doing work that requires thought. I usually use the second when walking, sitting idly, or during leisure when no thought is required. The second is especially more powerful. I also do my utmost to practice this way while sitting in meditation, and off the cushion I can occasionally do so while working. It feels as though the work is not being done by me; things seem hazy. Yet most of the time I cannot do it, because it affects my work, which shows that my strength is still insufficient. Since it is correct, I will persist in practicing this way.

Answer: It should be that this not only does not affect your work, but also imperceptibly improves your efficiency, because there are fewer deluded thoughts while you work. “When the mind is concentrated in one place, nothing cannot be accomplished.”

151. Originally, One Is a Buddha—What Is There to Contemplate?

A: What is the key to contemplation? How can one see deluded thoughts arising?

B: There are two steps. As the old master said, do not let the mind turn with circumstances, because all appearances of circumstances are unreal; one must leave appearances and circumstances behind. Then break through the one who thinks and the one who contemplates. When a thought arises, do not abide in it; that thought too is empty. There is no self in circumstances; those circumstances too are empty.

Answer: There is also a third step—sweep away the traces of the first two steps.

B: The third step is to truly arouse the compassionate bodhicitta.

Answer: This still belongs to the second step: “When a thought arises, do not abide in it; that thought too is empty. There is no self in circumstances; those circumstances too are empty.”

Only at the third step can it be like this:

“Zhihu zheye!” A monk’s nostrils have their broad ends facing downward; if you do not believe it, ask Elder Sister Wang of East Village! (This is from the Chan school.)

“Feeding all the Buddhas of the three times, countless as a thousand million, is not as good as feeding one who is without thought, without abiding, without cultivation, and without realization.” (This is from the doctrinal school.)

Question: Regarding “Originally, one is a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?” a certain Dharma brother has been criticizing this issue for a long time. Unless he directly realizes it, he will remain forever trapped in his own conceptual understanding. This Dharma brother received Heart-of-Heart Dharma empowerment in the 1990s, yet he has still not completed one thousand meditation sessions. If you can persuade him, I sincerely hope that he will stay away from the internet, let everything go, practice in accordance with the Dharma, and directly realize his original nature soon.

Answer: Among the “four reliances” is “rely on the definitive meaning, not on the provisional meaning.” What the old master said—“Originally, one is a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?”—is definitive meaning.

Yet provisional meaning must also be taught: “prescribe medicine according to the illness,” and “in accordance with the minds of sentient beings, respond according to their capacity to understand.” An ancient worthy said, “On the summit of a solitary peak, sit amid the grass.” The summit of a solitary peak is definitive meaning; sitting amid the grass is provisional meaning. If Deshan had not “sat amid the grass,” how could he have prompted Yantou’s remark, “You do not understand the final word”?

Yet Deshan was, after all, a person “on the summit of a solitary peak,” and he could also lead Yantou to say, “How delightful—the old man at the head of the hall understands the final word now.” Yantou had nothing else to play with, so in his urgency he added the tag, “You have only three years left to live.” This then provoked much clamor among later generations of those attached to spiritual powers, such as prediction. But in predictive ability, who can surpass the devas? Yet have devas attained liberation? Are devas outside the cycle of rebirth in the six realms?

Another example: the old master both spoke of “the nature of numinous knowing, in which not a single thought arises and yet there is clear, ever-present knowing,” and said, “What numinous knowing or not-knowing is there?” The latter statement alone is definitive meaning.

Question: Teacher, may I ask about “Originally, one is a Buddha—what is there to contemplate?” 1. Does this step mean abandoning contemplation and already transcending it, even going beyond quiescence illuminating and illumination quiescing? 2. To reach this stage, must one first become thoroughly skilled at continuous contemplation? If one is still unskilled at contemplation, is it impossible to leap directly beyond it and arrive at this stage? 3. Is this step the stage of an eighth-bhūmi bodhisattva?

Answer: Yuanwu said: “Unless one reaches the nonobstruction among phenomena, one is fundamentally unqualified to speak of Chan.”

(What follows is Teacher Qi’s answer, divided into sections—Editor’s note.)

Question 1: Does this step mean abandoning contemplation and already transcending it, even going beyond quiescence illuminating and illumination quiescing?

Answer: In fact, this is not a “step”; there is not even abandoning or transcending.

Question 2: To reach this stage, must one first become thoroughly skilled at continuous contemplation? If one is still unskilled at contemplation, is it impossible to leap directly beyond it and arrive at this stage?

Answer: Here there are no stages, nor is there any arriving.

Question 3: Is this step the stage of an eighth-bhūmi bodhisattva?

Answer: What bhūmi or no bhūmi is there?

Have you not seen: “A carefree person of the Way, beyond learning and contrivance, does not eliminate deluded thoughts or seek the true . . .”

V. Realizing the Mind and Seeing One's True Nature

(I) Originally Complete—What Nature Is There to See?

152. Direct Pointing

Question: How can I eliminate the bad habit of clinging to appearances and achieve "having no clinging mind in affairs while responding to conditions and engaging with things"? I have practiced the Heart-of-Heart Dharma for nearly two hundred sessions, yet have had no particular sensations or experiences. Is this in accord with the Dharma? The only progress I can feel is that my mind-capacity has grown somewhat, and my concern with gain and loss has lessened; but sexual desire remains as before. How should I apply myself???

Answer: In this very instant, cast aside all this speculation and see what it is!

Question: I beg the teacher, out of compassion, to strike down the three minds and shout ignorance away completely.

Answer: The three minds are unobtainable—how can I wield the stick? "The true nature of ignorance is itself Buddha-nature"; how, then, could it be shouted away completely?

Question: When one has reached the end of the road, is there still a place where dark willows give way to bright flowers?

Answer: You are still asking about a place where dark willows give way to bright flowers. Where are you now?

153. Explosion

(1) Explosion

Question: I may have seen my true nature: originally, nothing is anything at all. Early yesterday morning, when I sat in meditation, unlike my usual experience of thoughts arising one after another, I was unexpectedly able to sit for an hour with no stray thoughts. Throughout the entire day yesterday, the Śūraṅgama Heart Mantra kept surging and reciting itself over and over within me, and my mind was empty, without stray thoughts.

Last night I had a dream: my master came to my home and asked about my practice. He pressed me with the question three times in succession, and I became so anxious that I could not answer. Suddenly there was a flash of insight, and my body immediately exploded. I slowly fell down; body, mind, and world all dissolved together. In an instant there was no self. I saw only a cool, clear world, distinctly evident.

I immediately recognized with certainty: this is the nature! So this is how it is—nothing is anything at all. I do not know how long passed before I recovered and awoke from the dream. In bed, I carefully recited the Heart Sūtra once and discovered that it was indeed precisely that state.

Moreover, the entire process just now was "empty space shattering and the great earth sinking away." I found these eight characters truly exact; I do not know who coined them, but that was indeed how it was. At that moment, mountains, rivers, the great earth—everything—ceased to exist. I was everything, and everything was me. There was no distinction between hell and heaven; everything was one body, and throughout heaven and earth I alone was honored.

I put on my clothes, went down to the study, and looked at the time: it was 3:00 a.m. Then I recalled a huatou from ancient Chan practice: "Who was I before my parents gave birth to me?" In truth, the lucid knowing of a single thought is unborn and undying, enduring eternally through all ages and as long-lived as heaven and earth. Please give me a few words of instruction!

Answer: If you again stir a thought and make a holy interpretation, you abandon the ocean and take a floating bubble for it.

Question: At that time, both the universe and I had completely disappeared. It lasted only an instant. Suddenly I became afraid—very afraid—and then I returned.

Answer: What are you afraid of?

Question: I do not know what I was afraid of. It seemed to be a natural reaction: as soon as fear arose, I returned to ordinary reality. I do not know whether this disciple is on the right path or the wrong one.

Answer: When meeting on a narrow path, it is not a matter of right or wrong.

(2) Awakening Does Not Necessarily Require an "Explosion"

Question: I have never personally experienced an "explosion." Is there a dharma gate that does not require an "explosion"?

Answer: Who said that an "explosion" is absolutely necessary?

Question: Ha-ha, that is wonderful! I want to study heart esotericism with you!

Answer: Seeing one's true nature is not limited to a single path. The fastest is "awakening immediately upon hearing the Dharma." The eighty-four thousand dharma gates thus comprise eighty-four thousand paths.

Question: In practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, must one become empty or explode before it counts as seeing one's true nature?

Answer: Only when you understand that there was originally nothing that could be emptied, and forget about explosions, does it count as seeing your true nature.

Question: By becoming empty, I mean the body becoming empty.

Answer: When the body becomes empty, you must understand that there was originally no body.

Question: Becoming empty and exploding are both initial seeing of one's true nature. They are the same, are they not?

Answer: The "becoming empty" spoken of here means using the power of wisdom to illuminate and break through the original nature; "explosion" means breaking through a meditative state so that the original nature suddenly stands forth. The "original nature" is the same—there are not two paths in returning to the source; the approaches differ—there are many expedient doors.

Question: How can I awaken as quickly as possible?

Answer: If you fixate on the words "awakening," it will instead become difficult to awaken.

Question: Hello, Teacher Qi. In 1998, Master Yuanyin gave me empowerment, and I began meditating. At that time, however, I knew only that I should meditate daily; I did not know that meditation was merely an auxiliary practice. Later, I heard that many Dharma brothers and sisters had directly realized their original nature, whereas I myself felt that nothing much had happened, and I was somewhat perplexed.

Later, I read the Master's books, which said that having no experiences is best. So I no longer felt anxious and simply kept sitting, little by little. My family did not really approve of my meditation, and I told them that in three years I would give them an answer.

Three years later, I still had no particular feelings, and I began to panic somewhat. I wondered: when my original nature opened, did I simply overlook it, or was there no

hope at all? Could my mudrā have been incorrect? For these past years, I have worked away from home, practicing blindly and gloomily by myself. Now I have meditated for five years. I have endured pain and I have endured hardship. Not to mention practicing such a supreme Dharma—even if I had been practicing qigong, I should have shown some signs by now.

I see many people around me who wish to draw near to the Buddha and study Buddhism, yet I do not dare guide them. I truly am rather anxious. Teacher Qi, could you help assess what is happening with me? Have I made any progress at all? What specifically should I do from now on?

Answer: First, I need to know what you mean by "signs." That is, what do you think must happen before it counts as "opening the original nature"?

Question: What I have read in books is "the great earth sinking away," "the bottom falling out of the bucket," and "suddenly bursting open." In short, there should at least be a feeling of sudden, complete clarity, should there not? Over these five years, I cannot say that I have had no insights at all, but they always seem to contain an element of conjecture.

Answer: Oh! Then let us continue our discussion: what do you consider to have form, and what do you consider to be formless?

Question: In principle, both the formed and the formless are it. The formless is the essence, and the formed is the function.

Answer: Excellent! Let us not discuss the formless for now. What precisely do you mean by "formed"? You must give specific examples.

Question: The objects of the senses—roughly, the "objects" encountered by the faculties. For example, what the eye faculty sees, what the ears hear, what the nose smells, what the tongue tastes, what the body touches, and what the mind thinks.

Answer: Then are the feelings of "the great earth sinking away," "the bottom falling out of the bucket," "suddenly bursting open," and "sudden, complete clarity" formed or formless?

Question: In principle, the formless cannot be spoken of. Language in consciousness always contains relative elements—what the Master called the "discriminating mind." Yet if one must try to express in language that formless experience, expressions such as "the great earth sinking away" and "the bottom falling out of the bucket" arise. But once they are spoken, they have form. There can be no doubt about that. Teacher Qi, are you saying that I have mistaken the finger for the moon?

Answer: Ah! We must avoid “conjecture” in our discussion. So-called ultimate reality —another name for Buddha-nature—is the most real and is not illusory. Let me restate what you mean. I will speak directly and not go around in circles about what “cannot be spoken”: the feelings of “the great earth sinking away,” “the bottom falling out of the bucket,” “suddenly bursting open,” and “sudden, complete clarity” are formless! Now say it directly yourself: is that what you mean?

Question: Yes.

Answer: Then, when the great earth sinks away, there is the appearance of sinking; when the bucket bottom falls away, there is the appearance of falling away; when something suddenly bursts open, there is the appearance of bursting; and when there is sudden, complete clarity, there is the appearance of opening. How should these appearances be dealt with?

Question: If it sinks, it sinks; if it explodes, it explodes. What more is there to deal with?

Answer: Exactly! You have meditated, and you have let go of appearances. What more could there be?!

Question: Ah! This disciple bows in reverence!

(3) Do Not Cling to “Explosion”

Question: Did Master Yuanyin really say that when practice reaches an explosion, one can see Buddha-nature?

Answer: The Chan school also says, “Empty space shatters; the great earth sinks away.” Opening the original nature does not fall within language or offend against thought; it is absolute reality. Without a genuine experience, would this not be like soaking a stone in cold water? The patriarchs feared that students, failing to recognize it, might miss it while it stood before them, and so they described it in all kinds of skillful and expedient language.

In ancient books, the term “explosion” was not commonly used, so the word “shattering” was used instead. To help modern people understand, the Master used the word “explosion.”

What inherently cannot be described in language was expressed only out of necessity. How could one cling to language? Not to mention that analyzing language cannot yield its meaning: even if one has truly experienced it, because residual habitual tendencies of deluded attachment have not yet been eliminated, one can very easily “stir a thought and make a holy interpretation, abandoning the ocean and taking a floating bubble for it.” At such a time, the Master would say: “What

explosion or non-explosion is there?" I am not merely guessing that the Master would say this; these very words actually appeared in a letter he wrote to me!

As for the "explosion" spoken of by the Master, if one has personally experienced it, one must not cling to it. More than once, I received the Master's rebuke: "What explosion or non-explosion is there?"

154. "Luminous Knowing Free from Thought"

(1) "Who Saw Me Open My Mouth?"

Question: Can we regard numinous knowing free from thoughts as merely an intermediate transition, not yet as a synonym for ultimate Buddha-nature? For as soon as a thought arises, numinous knowing free from thoughts is obscured. But so-called ultimate Buddha-nature cannot be obscured by anything; it is such that even "the bright moon overhead" cannot be obtained. Numinous knowing free from thoughts is only comparable to the bright moon overhead.

Answer: If one thing is true, all things are true; if one thing is false, all things are false. Dharma is beyond words.

Leaving aside the term "numinous knowing free from thoughts," can even the term "ultimate Buddha-nature" stand in the Chan school? The Chan school does not establish a single dharma! Wherever there is language, there is no real meaning.

The Chan school does not establish words and letters, yet it is not apart from words and letters. Rely on the meaning, not on the words.

If it can inspire students to awaken, then "numinous knowing free from thoughts" will do, and "ultimate Buddha-nature" will do as well. If it cannot inspire students to awaken, then neither "numinous knowing free from thoughts" nor "ultimate Buddha-nature" will do. Sitting amid the grass atop a solitary peak: "atop a solitary peak" is a metaphor for where language cannot reach; "sitting amid the grass" means that the patriarchs, for the sake of others, do not hesitate to become wholly entangled in the grass.

Atop a solitary peak is beyond language. Whether it is called "numinous knowing free from thoughts" or "ultimate Buddha-nature," neither can speak of it. It can only be apprehended inwardly, not transmitted in words. Yet the patriarchs must still inspire students to enter into it, and so they do not hesitate to become wholly entangled in the grass, setting forth all manner of skillful means.

For example, if a student immediately enters into this "numinous knowing free from thoughts," then surely nothing whatsoever can be obtained; even this "numinous knowing free from thoughts" cannot be obtained.

If one does not enter into it, but insists on finding some thing in the words, one has long since ceased to be “free from thoughts,” nor can there be anything “numinous” about it. It becomes a kind of conceptual understanding (a dharma-object). If one then comments on this conceptual understanding, can one possibly comment on numinous knowing free from thoughts itself? What one comments on is one's own understanding, the dharma-object one has produced oneself. Yet one stubbornly claims that one's understanding is the original meaning of others. In fact, it is not the original meaning at all, but only one's own understanding.

When Master Yuanyin was alive, he saw such critical essays. The old master merely smiled and let them pass. “Deliberately planting flowers, they do not bloom; casually inserting a willow branch, it grows into shade”—so of course he merely smiled and let them pass. What did the old master say? “Who has ever seen me open my mouth?”

(2) Do Not Fall into Language and Conceptual Thought

Question: Is numinous knowing free from thoughts a designation, like Buddha-nature, suchness, and bodhicitta?

Answer: There is a kind of designation that uses no words, but instead stubbornly clings to a “concept.” Though such a concept does not fall into language, it falls into conceptual thought. For example, according to etiquette, someone ought to pay respects to a certain monk, but he discriminates, “I am awakened; I cannot bow to him.”

He may even find a reason: “I am afraid he cannot bear it if I bow to him; I am protecting him.” Look! Is there not something stuck in his heart? So long as there is something there, it is the “deep pit of liberation.” This is not to say that there is no correspondence, but that it has not been completely eradicated.

Those biased toward meditative stability easily fall into luminosity and shadow; those biased toward wisdom easily fall into concepts. These are the two great wrong paths of Chan practitioners today!

155. “Not a Single Thought Arises; Knowing Is Clear and Distinct” Is an Expedient Expression

Question: The master often speaks of “not a single thought arises; knowing is clear and distinct.” Does the no-thought here have the same meaning as the no-thought spoken of in “thought after thought does not linger”? I have also heard it said that even if one realizes that “empty space is shattered and the great earth sinks away,” this cannot count as truly seeing one’s nature; one has seen only half of it. One has merely gained an entry point into the nature-substance, or emptiness. Only by

seeing one's nature through appearances, with essence and function nondual, does one thoroughly see it. This seems very reasonable to me, but I do not dare to say whether it is correct.

Answer: Remove the question marks from these two questions, and they amount to one kind of answer.

Question: Please consider this: "Question: If one extinguishes all thoughts completely, so that it is like a bright mirror appearing before one, is this Buddha-nature? Chan Master Yuexi answered: It is not Buddha-nature." How should this be understood?

Answer: The patriarchs taught the Dharma by provisionally establishing names; we should rely on the meaning, not on the words. There was once someone who greatly emphasized, "Wherever there is language, there is no real meaning." He said, "Master Yuanyin taught: 'The numinous knowing in which not a single thought arises and knowing is clear and distinct is the Buddha-nature of the person concerned.' This statement is not ultimate."

I asked him, "Is this very term 'Buddha-nature' ultimate?" He said, "Wherever there is language, there is no real meaning." I said, "Exactly! Do you know what the old master would do if someone rigidly took numinous knowing to be Buddha-nature?" He was speechless.

I said, "I have seen it myself: the old master thoroughly rejected such rigid fixation! When not a single thought arises and knowing is clear and distinct, one must urgently turn back—mountains, rivers, and the great earth are precisely the Tathāgata! One must not rigidly fix upon some so-called 'Buddha-nature.' To do so is to give rise to a thought; not only is it not 'not a single thought arises,' but one immediately loses 'knowing is clear and distinct.' To explain the meaning according to the words is to wrong the Buddhas of the three times!"

Question: Is intrinsic nature originally neither seeing nor non-seeing?

Answer: I would also like to ask you to speak of what true mind-ground is. Or do you believe that there is no true mind-ground?

Question: At the point where a thought ceases, knowing is clear and distinct; this is "true mind-ground."

Answer: The second moon. Only when the clear and distinct knowing at the point where thought ceases is also completely unobtainable is it "true mind-ground."

A monk asked Caoshan, "When the bright moon is directly overhead, how is it?" Caoshan replied, "You are still a man below the steps." The monk said, "Please,

Master, lead me up the steps." Caoshan replied, "We shall meet when the moon sets."

Question: What is the second moon?

Answer: It resembles it, but it is not it.

Question: It is not?

Answer: What is it? (Out of nowhere, you have added "is" and "is not.")

Question: When the old master spoke of Buddha-nature, he gave two accounts: first, that which can speak and can hear; second, when the preceding thought has ceased and the following thought has not yet arisen, with the divisions of before and after cut off, knowing is clear and distinct. How should these be understood?

Answer: Yet I attach importance to this statement of the old master: "Who has ever seen me open my mouth?"

156. Do Not Mistake It for a Fixed Guiding Star

Question: One night two days ago, as I was about to sleep, after sitting in meditation I lay down and recited the Heart Sūtra while maintaining contemplation as I fell asleep. Moving appearances, still appearances, faculties, awareness, emptiness, and cessation came one after another. Later, I felt a mass of white light, and my head seemed about to explode. Suddenly I lost consciousness . . . When I awoke the next day, I realized that I had experienced this state. Teacher Qi, was this seeing one's nature?

Answer: No.

Question: When I was in my teens, I was very interested in qigong and learned some methods of seated breathing and circulating qi through opening and closing. One day, lying on my back in bed, I pondered the mysteries of human life and the universe—nothing more than questions such as, "Why do I exist? Why do I die? Where do I go after death? Why does the universe exist?" They were both frightening and extraordinarily engrossing. Then, in but an instant, I suddenly turned around, and felt as though I had gone beyond this world.

After I began studying Buddhism, I suspected that emptiness had manifested before me. I hoped this state would return so that I could verify it again, but it has not returned for several years.

Answer: I also experienced similar states in my youth; they cannot be counted on.

157. Unwilling to Take Responsibility

Question: The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says, “The mind merely knows the causes of inversion; when the actual inversion appears before it, it truly cannot recognize it.” Both speak of “knowing.” Since “the mind knows” the causes of inversion, why does it also say, “when the actual inversion appears before it, it truly cannot recognize it”? Could you give an example?

Answer: For example, you clearly know that it is complete and present right here, yet you still harbor doubts.

Question: I think the preceding sentence has another meaning: “awakening.” Awakening at the level of principle does not count; only realized awakening will do.

Answer: Ha ha! Indeed! Indeed!

Question: I am originally perfectly integrated. Ah, but is there still some method for applying the mind? Even a method without methods is still a method.

Answer: Remove the word “I.” Only “originally perfectly integrated” is good.

Precisely when the mind is applied, there is precisely no mind applying it. Crooked talk of names and characteristics is laborious; direct speech is without burden.

No-mind precisely functions; constant functioning is precisely without. Now, in speaking of the place of no-mind, it is not different from mind with intention.

Question: Yes, removing “I” is better. Sometimes even after awakening, one has only recognized it. From the standpoint of the fundamental essence, nothing has changed, right? Yet once one understands, one understands after all. What is there in between? I am a little confused. I have been sitting muddleheadedly for two years; it is time I recognized it.

Answer: You recognized it two years ago, but to this very day you are still unwilling. Clinging to an “awakening” and refusing to let go—that is precisely your unwillingness! Let it go!

Question: If one has already let it go, then what?

Answer: No “if.” You plainly have not let it go.

Question: It seems that one must still speak honestly and be an honest person!

Answer: Such pedantic talk! The nostrils of a patched-robed monk have their large end facing downward. If you do not believe it, go ask Sister Wang in the eastern village.

Question: Ha ha! Teacher, I went and asked her; Sister Wang turned out to be a woman!

Answer: I knew that without going to ask.

Question: I keep wanting to prove, by some means of verification, that Sister Wang is a woman.

Answer: There you go making an affair of it!

Question: But people generally ask it this way nowadays: “What is Buddha?” Answer: “You are!” Then they go on to ask: “Really? Which sūtra says that? Other people do not say so.”

Answer: That is because they are unwilling to accept it.

Question: Yes, they are unwilling to accept it.

Answer: Since they will not accept it, then tell them, “You are a sentient being.”

Question: Then it turns into terminology and concepts.

Answer: Actually, he is simply himself. Why acquire so much superfluous furniture?

Question: Yes, but nowadays some people are willing to acquire furniture, fearing only that they do not have enough.

Answer: Then give them one more piece.

A: It is not found only on the forum; all sentient beings throughout the dharma realm have it.

Answer: If that is so, why call to ask whether it is or is not? Adding an “is” or an “is not”—is that not like putting another head on top of one’s head?

Question: If it were counterfeit, how would he dare hawk it on the forum?

Answer: Set aside whether it is counterfeit; what is it that he doubts?

Answer: Let us not speak of counterfeits. Call it “similar,” then, for the root of doubt has not been cut off.

Question: At a critical moment, if you place a brick beneath someone’s feet, they can stand firmly on the ground. The only fear is that they may then clutch the brick as though it were a gold brick and refuse to let go. Still, of two harms, choose the lesser. Rather than wander about in poverty, it is better first to write a check for ten

thousand yuan and hold it close for a while of comfort. (When the time comes to cash it, one will naturally understand.)

Answer: There are already far too many people writing this kind of bad check.

158. Always Feeling Uneasy at Heart

Question: I always feel uneasy at heart.

Answer: In the Chan school, this is called “one’s heels not touching the ground.” Actually, you are caught in doubt.

Question: That is so. But now I am unwilling to practice honestly and earnestly!

Answer: Ha ha! If one were truly grounded, whether one practiced or did not practice would both be superfluous words.

Question: I am always afraid of losing it, but in fact, when I am afraid, I have already lost it.

Answer: Once you recognize it, you have not been wronged. Clouds have arisen; it is not that the sky has been lost. Even if the earth were destroyed, the sky would not be lost.

Question: The more I fear losing the sky, the larger the clouds become.

Answer: Ha ha! Then contemplation is like a strong wind that blows the clouds away.

Question: I would have him let there be neither wind nor clouds, neither earth nor sky.

Answer: ^o^

Question: White clouds fill the green mountains, yet the green mountains remain!

Answer: Green mountains are simply green mountains; how could white clouds obstruct them?

Question: This line is also good: “Though the bamboo is dense, it does not hinder the water from flowing through; though the mountain is high, it does not obstruct the white clouds from flying.”

Answer: ^o^

Question: Teacher, I feel unsettled for no apparent reason. How did you deal with this problem at the time?

Answer: I too asked the Old Master. He stared at me for quite a while, then slowly said, “Then you will just have to endure it for a while.”

Question: Teacher, what exactly is the cause of this?

Answer: It is the subtle aspect of deluded views. It is caused by not having thoroughly cut off deluded views.

B: His state seems much like mine. I feel this very deeply now; I should be close to awakening, shouldn’t I? At last I have found it. … I keep circling around here. At first I do not notice it; once I do notice it, I still keep exerting myself from time to time and cannot set my mind at rest.

Answer: I also told you frankly: having read your post, I deeply feel that you are straightforward, because I was just like you! Fortunately, the Old Master’s merciless blows, shouts, and negations were there. That is why I say: “Though this body were shattered into fine dust, it would still be hard to repay even one ten-thousandth of the Old Master’s profound kindness!”

Question: Last time in the chat room I asked you: Since I firmly believe that I inherently possess the Tathāgata’s Buddha-nature, why must I directly realize it once more? Is it in order to “believe more firmly”? I have always felt that, although I understand it in principle, I still need to “prove” it, because I have never exploded, nor experienced the feeling of the bottom dropping out of a bucket. So I always feel uneasy, and whenever I sit in meditation, I want to enter samādhi, hoping to open to my original nature within five hundred sessions.

Answer: Given your situation, even if you had exploded and experienced the bottom dropping out of the bucket, you would still feel uneasy at heart.

Question: Now I feel that it is indeed superfluous. It is like proving to oneself that one is a human being! In fact, whether one receives a seal of approval or not makes no difference. Only someone who does not firmly believe would seek proof for themselves.

Answer: Only those who feel uneasy at heart need a “seal of approval.” In fact, even after being “sealed,” they will still feel uneasy.

Question: Now I feel that seeing one’s nature, exploding, and such are all superfluous matters.

Answer: A clear-eyed person falling into a well!

Question: Hee hee, I nearly wronged and killed all the heroes under heaven. Teacher, your rescue was timely.

Answer: Xuedou said: “Wronged! It bears telling! Clear-eyed patch-robed monks, do not take it lightly.”

159. Different Kinds of Awakening

Question: I cannot approve of that Dharma brother at all. In his anxiety, he says anything whatsoever. It is quite pitiable, and painful to see.

Answer: Now you understand what the “summit stage” is, do you not?

Question: If one proceeds by inertia and is turned about by habitual tendencies, the consequences are unbearable. From ancient times to the present, most people have lingered here without advancing; otherwise, this would not be called the Dharma-ending age. This is how I see it. What is your view, Teacher?

Answer: The “summit stage” is not frightening either. One must then advance further through the “stage of patience” and the “highest worldly stage,” resolutely shattering this superfluous furniture. Only when empty space is pulverized, the great earth levels out, and body, mind, and world all vanish may one be called a first-bhūmi bodhisattva. Moreover, in ancient times, those who lingered here without advancing were not the majority. Nowadays, those able even to linger here are as rare as phoenix feathers and unicorn horns.

Question: Taking this as an example, please analyze in detail the cause of this illness and prescribe the appropriate remedy.

Answer: The “summit stage” is like climbing to a mountaintop: one may go up or down. Whether one can continue advancing after this, pass through the “stage of patience” and the “highest worldly stage,” and even directly realize the first bhūmi depends primarily on one’s initial resolve. Is there not a saying: “If the causal ground is not true, the fruition will be distorted”? At the end of the Buddhadharma, although many people recite the Buddha’s name, cultivate, and meditate, their aims differ. Among them, the proportion of those who genuinely arouse the resolve to seek liberation is not large.

Question: Teacher, directly realizing the first bhūmi is the stage of seeing the Way. At what stage does the often-mentioned “delusion after awakening” occur? If one becomes deluded after awakening, then one’s seeing of the Way was incomplete. How can it be called awakening? Have you ever encountered someone who, after thorough awakening, obscured their innate knowing because of deep habitual tendencies accumulated over many kalpas?

Answer: There is no dharma outside mind. Stages of fruition are in fact simply the course traversed by the mind; they do not exist outside mind. The course of the mind is subtle, whereas human language is crude and cannot fully convey meaning.

Thus, “the meaning lies beyond the words,” and thus one should “rely on the meaning, not on the words.” Here, I shall borrow the Tiantai classifications of the Tripiṭaka, Shared, Distinct, and Perfect teachings to explain four senses of the word “awakening.” In fact, there are far more than four senses; this is only for the sake of your question and merely borrows these four classifications:

First sense: breaking through the “highest worldly stage” and directly realizing the first bhūmi is called “awakening.” —Perfect

Second sense: breaking through the “stage of patience” and entering the highest worldly stage is called “awakening.” —Distinct

Third sense: breaking through the “summit stage” and entering the stage of patience is called “awakening.” —Shared

Fourth sense: breaking through the “warmth stage” and entering the summit stage is called “awakening.” —Tripiṭaka

The “delusion after awakening” of which you speak—obscuring one’s innate knowing because of deep habitual tendencies accumulated over many kalpas—belongs to the fourth sense of “awakening.” Why merely say, “Have you ever encountered it?” Are not such “awakenings” everywhere before your very eyes now? If it were the first sense, “perfect awakening,” how could even the slightest trace of “awakening” or “delusion” remain? With first-sense “perfect awakening,” it is no longer meaningful to speak of “after awakening” or of “delusion.”

Question: Brother, you are truly fierce! Even the four words “I awakened long ago” have never been uttered by the teacher.

Answer: Ha ha! Perhaps the term “awakening” also differs according to the Tripiṭaka, Shared, Distinct, and Perfect teachings.

Perhaps it is like this:

Bodhisattvas before the bhūmis consider the first bhūmi to be awakening.

Bodhisattvas on the bhūmis consider the eighth bhūmi to be awakening.

Bodhisattvas above the eighth bhūmi consider equal enlightenment to be awakening.

Question: Heh heh, may I ask which kind you are, Teacher!?

Answer: The same kind as you.

160. The Seal Without a Seal

(1) Can the state of the first barrier be confirmed by using mind to seal mind?

Answer: Let me speak plainly: if any trace of the three barriers remains, then even the first barrier has not been broken through.

(2) If I feel that I have awakened, what should I do next?

A: If one has awakened but there is no enlightened teacher nearby, what should one do?

B: There is an enlightened teacher here—LVM.

Answer: Go easy on me! Go easy on me!

B: Please do not begrudge us your instruction, Teacher; it may also benefit all the fellow practitioners.

Answer: If he has truly awakened, then he is an enlightened teacher. How can one speak of having no enlightened teacher at one's side?

A: On what basis did the Fifth Patriarch, Master Yan, know that Yuanwu Keqin had awakened?

Answer: Look and see whether the original text contains the words "awakening" or "enlightenment." It will not. The ancients called this "the present-day taboo." If there is still an awakening to be attained, then delusion and awakening stand distinctly opposed. Could that be true awakening? Have you not heard the Diamond Sūtra say: "Does a srotāpanna think, 'I have attained the fruit of srotāpanna'? No, World-Honored One. A srotāpanna does not think, 'I have attained the fruit of srotāpanna.'"

A: If I feel that I have awakened, what should I do next?

Answer: There is no need for "what comes next." Right now, even "awakening" cannot be attained.

(3) After seeing one's true nature, must one still meditate?

Answer: So long as there is this idea of "after seeing one's true nature," one must still engage in contemplation and meditation.

(4) Seeing is itself nature—what further nature is there to see!

Question: Seeing one's true nature is merely a consolation prize. It is said that Teacher Qi has a habitual saying: "I have never certified anyone as having seen their true nature and awakened."

Answer: Yes, I have never certified anyone as having seen their true nature and awakened. If there is still a nature to be seen or an awakening to be attained, one has not even reached the threshold of the dharmakāya.

Seeing is itself nature—what further nature is there to see!

If it is called original, how can one speak of opening or closing?

(5) I discovered that there are even those who cling to nature.

Question: [Reposted] “Appearance itself is nature, but it is mistakenly taken to be appearance. It is like water: when it takes different forms, it is still water (nature). Yet people say that it is a wave (appearance). A wave is originally water. The wave is water, and water is the wave. Water and waves are one; nature and appearance are nondual.” How should this be understood?

Answer: Neither nature nor appearance is wrong; the error lies in clinging to appearances. Yet later I discovered that there are even those who “cling to nature.”

(6) The other half

Question: The Blue Cliff Record says: “Even if one suddenly smashes through the aggregate realms, and body and mind are one suchness, with nothing remaining outside the body, one has still not attained even half.” Where is that half within this half? Let me answer myself: “The staff transforms into a dragon!”

Answer: This is still only half.

Question: Please give me the other half, Teacher.

Answer: Then stop.

Question: What do you consider “the other half” to be, Teacher?

Answer: If I were able to give it, why would I not give you all of it, instead of giving only half? Unfortunately, it cannot be given. Hence the answer: “Then stop.”

Question: Since it cannot be given, Teacher, then keep it for yourself!

Answer: Oh! It cannot be given, cannot be kept, and cannot be thrown away either.

Question: Ha ha, a shadow! A shadow!

Answer: The ancients did indeed use this metaphor: like a shadow following the form.

B: Teacher, if someone asking for this “other half” were standing before you, would you give him a hard kick?

Answer: Ha ha! How did you ever come up with that idea?

Question: Do not listen to his instigation, Teacher. I am a lump of iron.

Answer: Sawing apart a scale weight. ^o^

Question: I am not asking you for it. Please give me a hint: why do you say that what I called “the staff transforms into a dragon” is also only half?

Answer: So long as this remains, one has not attained even half. “The moment you raise the staff, you behold its wondrous functioning in every direction. To speak in this way is already entanglement in vines; how much more so to transform it into a dragon!”

(7) Do Not Be Hasty

Question: In Records of Flower-Twirling, Master Yuanyin touches the head of a monastic and praises him for practicing the Pratyutpanna Samādhi. When I saw this scene, I nearly burst into tears. Is there feeling here? Homage to our fundamental teacher, Śākyamuni, the World-Honored One!

Answer: “Homage to our fundamental teacher, Śākyamuni, the World-Honored One!” Is there feeling here?

Question: Are Avalokiteśvara’s tears of great compassion real or false? Homage to Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva!

Answer: The sun rises in the east while rain falls in the west; they say there is no feeling, yet there is feeling.

—If you can penetrate the phrase “beat him to death and feed him to the dogs,” this life will not have been lived in vain!

Question: Understood!

Answer: I was searching for the ten questions in the Zongjing Record. They happen to be just what is needed now.

Question: Are these the ten questions in the Zongjing Record for examining whether one has realized the Way? First, have you clearly seen your true nature, as one sees forms in daylight, like Mañjuśrī and the like? Second, when encountering conditions and objects—seeing forms, hearing sounds, lifting and lowering your feet, opening and closing your eyes—do you fully understand the essential principle and accord

with the Way? Third, when reading the whole body of teachings delivered by the Buddha during his lifetime, as well as the sayings of the patriarchs of old, do you hear profound teachings without fear and understand them all truly and without doubt

or not? Fourth, when challenged with differentiated questions and all manner of probing inquiries, can you possess the four kinds of eloquence and completely resolve others' doubts? Fifth, at all times and in all places, does the light of wisdom shine without obstruction, with every thought perfectly unobstructed, so that you see no dharma capable of becoming an obstacle and never allow even a momentary interruption? Sixth, when all favorable and adverse, pleasing and unpleasant circumstances arise before you, do you remain without separation from them and recognize them all as penetrated? Seventh, within the mind and objects of the hundred dharmas

do you perceive, one by one, the subtle essence, root source, and point of arising of each, without being confused or disturbed by birth and death or by sense faculties and their objects? Eighth, amid the four deportments of walking, standing, sitting, and lying down; in respectfully receiving and responding; in dressing, eating, undertaking work, and acting—can you distinguish the real in every instance? Ninth, on hearing of Buddha or no Buddha, sentient beings or no sentient beings, praise or blame, right or wrong, can you remain unmoved in one mind? Tenth, on hearing of differentiated wisdom, can you understand it all clearly, penetrate both nature and appearance, remain unobstructed in principle and phenomena, discern the source of every dharma, and remain free of doubt even should a thousand sages appear in the world?

Answer: Since you have already said "understood," let us see whether you have penetrated these ten questions.

Question: Ha ha—if there is "understanding," then even this one point of mine is absent.

Answer: If you can penetrate them, no one in the world can do anything to you. If you cannot penetrate them, do not be so quick to say "understood." You must penetrate them one by one. Do not be hasty!

Question: Amitābha Buddha!

Answer: Allow me to make a fool of myself for a laugh: (The remarks following the ten questions are annotated by Teacher Qi—editor's note.)

1. Have you clearly seen your true nature, as one sees forms in daylight, like Mañjuśrī and the like?

—To emerge from the earth is delusive brightness.

2. When encountering conditions and objects—seeing forms, hearing sounds, lifting and lowering your feet, opening and closing your eyes—do you fully understand the essential principle and accord with the Way?

—Who would willingly fall into this pit of liberation?

3. When reading the whole body of teachings delivered by the Buddha during his lifetime, as well as the sayings of the patriarchs of old, do you hear profound teachings without fear and understand them all truly and without doubt?

—Buddhas and patriarchs have never had sayings or phrases.

4. When challenged with differentiated questions and all manner of probing inquiries, can you possess the four kinds of eloquence and completely resolve others' doubts?

—How could the four kinds of eloquence answer such probing questions?

5. At all times and in all places, does the light of wisdom shine without obstruction, with every thought perfectly unobstructed, so that you see no dharma capable of becoming an obstacle and never allow even a momentary interruption?

—Perfect penetration leaves no mark of a living being with a lifespan.

6. When all favorable and adverse, pleasing and unpleasant circumstances arise before you, do you remain without separation from them and recognize them all as penetrated?

—Seeing forms and hearing sounds, one has never been deaf.

7. Within the mind and objects of the hundred dharmas, do you perceive, one by one, the subtle essence, root source, and point of arising of each, without being confused or disturbed by birth and death or by sense faculties and their objects?

—Outside the mind, how could there be even the slightest dharma?

8. Amid the four deportments of walking, standing, sitting, and lying down; in respectfully receiving and responding; in dressing, eating, undertaking work, and acting—can you distinguish the real in every instance?

—When have chewing rice and hanging gauze ever been so?

9. On hearing of Buddha or no Buddha, sentient beings or no sentient beings, praise or blame, right or wrong, can you remain unmoved in one mind?

—Without Buddha and without mind, it is originally unmoved.

10. On hearing of differentiated wisdom, can you understand it all clearly, penetrate both nature and appearance, remain unobstructed in principle and phenomena, discern the source of every dharma, and remain free of doubt even should a thousand sages appear in the world?

—Not accomplishing Buddhahood is great penetration.

…

To emerge from the earth is delusive brightness; who would willingly fall into this pit of liberation?

Buddhas and patriarchs have never had sayings or phrases; how could the four kinds of eloquence answer such probing questions?

Perfect penetration leaves no mark of a living being with a lifespan; seeing forms and hearing sounds, one has never been deaf.

Outside the mind, how could there be even the slightest dharma? When have chewing rice and hanging gauze ever been so?

Without Buddha and without mind, it is originally unmoved; not accomplishing Buddhahood is great penetration.

(8) A Secret

A: On the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month last year, after finishing a nine-session retreat at home, during another rest period, there were several occasions when the external world disappeared, yet there was still an inner sense of “me” (this was how it felt at the time). I did not understand why. The next day I reported this to my teacher, who said that this was the Original Face.

Alas! It was so plain and unremarkable that I simply could not believe it. I remained doubtful until one day, while reading the Elder’s Mahāmudrā of the Ganges, I came to a certain passage and suddenly understood, as if awakening from a dream. Looking at the patriarchs’ words, I found them so plain and endearing. Feeling deeply wronged, with tears filling my eyes, I thought: How foolish and deluded I truly am!

Answer: Which teacher does “teacher” here refer to? To say, “That is the Original Face,” is actually a lapse into words.

B: Is saying “That is the Original Face” a falling into words?

Answer: Saying “That is not the Original Face” is also a falling into words.

B: Then how should it be verified? Without verification, people easily become doubtful and go around in circles. For example, someone arrives at a scenic site and asks the guide, “This is the genuine artifact, isn’t it?” If the guide says, “See for yourself,” the person will easily doubt that it is genuine—and perhaps it truly is not. Therefore, I think verification is necessary. I do not know what concerns the teacher has.

Answer: It is not a matter of concern. Verification lies in leaving behind “is” and “is not.”

C: What harm is there if the grass grows several zhang deep?

Answer: I fear you may mistake the grass for a golden body.

C: Teacher, leave the grass behind and find another golden body for us to see.

Answer: Look—this is leaving behind “is” and “is not.”

“I fear you may mistake the grass for a golden body”—this leaves behind “is.”

“Leave the grass behind and find another golden body for us to see?”—this leaves behind “is not.”

C: Ha ha, a single blade of grass. Farewell, golden body.

Answer: ^o^

B: Unfortunately, at that time he was not as utterly resolute as he is now. Only when there is doubt does one seek verification. If there is no doubt, verification is unnecessary. For example, a young child who has left home grows up under the care of the old steward. Later, the child encounters people who look very much like his parents, but cannot remember what his parents looked like and dares not determine whether they truly are his own parents. If the old steward then says, “These are indeed your parents,” the family is reunited, and the old steward’s years of care have not been in vain. How wonderful that would be!

Answer: Let me tell you a secret:

The words of the old master quoted at the beginning of the Record of Holding Up a Flower disc are expedient words, words spoken in response to the listener’s capacity; they do not hesitate to descend into the weeds for the sake of others. If you cling to them as literal truth, the old master is wronged!

(9) The knower is originally already complete and present.

Question: It is like a person who possesses a treasure: though unaware of it, they have never lost it.

Answer: If one does not know of it, the treasure is like dung and dirt.

Question: Originally it has no price, yet ten thousand pieces of gold cannot buy it.

Answer: For one who does not know, ten thousand pieces of gold cannot buy it; for one who knows, it is originally already complete and present.

Question: With a wave of the hand, the road by which I came is already cut off; looking afar, there is no city of nirvāṇa. The Dharma King's splendor is already complete and present; with a laugh, he expounds the unborn. (Written upon taking leave of my kind teacher, Teacher Qi, and his wife.)

Answer: How about changing two or three characters: With a wave of the hand, the road by which I came is already cut off; only upon realization is there no city of nirvāṇa. The Dharma King's splendor is already complete and present; with a laugh, he expounds the unborn.

Question: In matters, always remain even and ordinary; in mind, always remain calm and light. Here one must apply effort, yet scrupulously avoid "exerting" effort. Is there still a tail?

Answer: Of course there are still traces. It is like a divine turtle dragging its tail: it sweeps away its footprints, yet adds the traces of sweeping.

Let me give you an example without traces: "Zhi, hu, zhe, ye! The nostrils of a patch-robed monk have their large ends facing downward. If you do not believe it, ask Elder Sister Wang in the east village!" If you find that too wordy, let me give you another: "So it turns out that nuns are women."

Question: You once put it more plainly: "What's all the fuss about?"

(II) Safeguarding Realization

161. On Safeguarding Realization

Question: Is it necessary to carefully preserve the thought of suchness and intrinsic nature, so that it sees itself thought after thought and is not obscured by deluded thoughts?

Answer: This is called safeguarding realization.

Question: In Master Yuanyin's lectures, he says that after awakening one must safeguard realization continuously and seamlessly, yet one must not suppress it to death. What is the standard for safeguarding realization continuously and seamlessly without suppressing it to death? How do we know whether we have done so without suppressing it to death?

Answer: Safeguarding realization means maintaining freedom from deluded attachment; suppressing it to death means suppressing thoughts to death. One need only be free of deluded attachment; there is no need to suppress thoughts to death.

Question: Could you put it this way, Teacher: instead of saying “safeguard,” which gives people the feeling that there is something to be safeguarded, would it not be more appropriate to say “remain alert at all times”? What is “safeguarding”? It is simply “remaining alert at all times”!

Answer: Yes! “Alertness” is more fitting.

Question: It would be better if everyone used “alertness” rather than “safeguarding.” I originally relied all along on alertness, but later the “safeguard” in “safeguarding realization” confused me for nearly half a year. I looked everywhere for a way to “safeguard.” I think the term “contemplation” also carries this same risk.

Answer: There is nothing wrong with “safeguard,” either. It means maintaining alertness.

Question: So bao means “to maintain.” I had always thought it meant “to protect.” This polysemous character tormented me for half a year!

Answer: “Protect” is also correct—protect this alert mind.

162. Eliminating Habitual Tendencies

(1) Habitual Tendencies

Question: Once intrinsic nature appears, one then knows that mind and consciousness are truly empty and delusive, utterly without real substance. Yet their momentum does not seem to diminish. Is this the inertia of cyclic wandering?

Answer: This is called habitual tendencies.

Question: How strange! If I do not wander, I feel distressed; if I wander, my mind is vexed!

Answer: You have seen your karmic habits, have you not? There is no karma outside the mind, and no mind outside karma.

Question: Teacher Qi, may I ask what is the difference between attachment and habitual tendencies?

Answer: Because one has become accustomed to attachment, it is called habitual tendencies.

Question: I respectfully ask Teacher Qi to discuss the difference between karmic force and habitual tendencies.

Answer: Neither karmic force nor habitual tendencies is apart from the mind; both are activities of mind.

The cycle of rebirth in the six realms is not outside the mind, and karmic force is the driving power of that cycle. Take a motor vehicle as an analogy: the turning wheels represent the cycle of rebirth in the six realms; diligent practice is like applying the brakes; the engine's power is like karmic force; and realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature is like turning off the engine. Although the engine has been turned off, inertia remains. The force of this inertia is “habitual tendencies.”

View-delusions are cut off completely in an instant, and the root of the tree is severed. Yet after the root has been severed, the trunk may still contain abundant nourishment, and the branches and leaves may temporarily remain luxuriant. This is called “habitual tendencies.” If the root has not been severed, it is not called “habitual tendencies” but “karmic force.” Habitual tendencies are residual force: they only diminish and do not increase. Karmic force, however, grows like a snowball.

(2) How Does One Eliminate Habitual Tendencies?

Answer: Through continuous and seamless contemplation, habitual tendencies may wonderfully disappear all at once.

(3) For Those Who Rest Once They Awaken, There Are No Habitual Tendencies to Eliminate

Question: After practicing any Dharma—including the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, Pure Land, or the Chan school—and attaining awakening at the level of principle or direct realization of the original nature, is what remains simply to clear away habitual tendencies, “diminishing and diminishing them until nothing remains,” so that one becomes harmonious and unobstructed in daily life?

Answer: To say “practicing any Dharma” is somewhat rash. For example, the practice of phowa is not like this. Again, before attaining Buddha-recitation samādhi, Pure Land practice emphasizes only rebirth in the Western Pure Land; it does not concern itself with such matters as “awakening” or “the original nature.”

The Chan school and heart esotericism speak in this way. However, for those of the highest capacity and keenest wisdom, who rest once they awaken, there are no habitual tendencies to eliminate.

Question: Apart from Śākyamuni Buddha's manifestation, it seems that historically no one has rested once awakened—is that so? I believe that the Sixth Patriarch's great awakening in the presence of the Fifth Patriarch was only at the level of principle.

Answer: There was. The Chan lamp records mention a “Butcher Guang'e” who was like this.

Question: After awakening, we must still diligently eliminate habitual tendencies; only when they have all been eliminated is the matter finally complete. When Śākyamuni Buddha realized the mind and saw his true nature beneath the bodhi tree, had he already eliminated all habitual tendencies? Why was his gradual course of practice different from ours? Why is there this difference?

Answer: Take a three-thousand-meter race: Śākyamuni Buddha had already reached the finish line, while we are still halfway there.

163. Turning Up Karmic Seeds

(1) What Are Seeds?

Question: In the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, what do “seeds” refer to?

Answer: They refer to karmic seeds latent in the eighth consciousness. Each seed is a karmic retribution. Seeds are planted by one's own past actions, and when they sprout, it is like repaying debts. Only by bringing them forth and dissolving them can one be liberated. Otherwise, it is like having creditors pursuing you for payment—could you still be free?

(2) Turning Up Karmic Seeds Is Much Like Menopause

Question: I once practiced qigong. After sitting in Heart-of-Heart Dharma meditation, is qi rising upward what is called turning up karmic seeds?

Answer: No. Turning up karmic seeds mainly consists of unaccountable agitation and is much like menopause. It passes quickly, at most within a few days.

Question: Once it has passed, one seems to become extraordinarily calm. I mean after turning up karmic seeds.

Answer: Of course. It comes in waves, until it is gone.

Question: When they arise, one truly experiences every possible feeling; only after they pass does one realize that they were unreal. It seems that the more chaotic it feels, the more one must endure it in order to develop strength; otherwise, one's effort is wasted.

Answer: Well said! They were inherently unreal; it is simply that we have become accustomed to taking what is false for true.

164. The Difference Between Turning Up Karmic Seeds and Eliminating Habitual Tendencies

Question: What should one do when habitual-tendency seeds are turned up?

Answer: Eliminating habitual tendencies and turning up karmic seeds should be regarded as two separate matters:

1. Eliminating habitual tendencies: After practitioners of heart esotericism see the original nature (equivalent to breaking through the first barrier in the Chan school), because their habitual conditioning is deep and heavy, they still cannot take charge when circumstances arise. They invariably follow circumstances and lose sight of the original nature.

At this point, one must urgently awaken with solemn clarity. With the original nature present, do not follow circumstances. Let favorable or adverse circumstances appear as they may; my mind remains unmoved. (For a period, one must proceed in this way.) This is eliminating habitual tendencies. This is called “contemplation.” (For a period, contemplate in this way.) It is the principal practice of heart esotericism, while sitting in meditation with six mudrās and one mantra is an auxiliary practice. Thus, eliminating habitual tendencies is very important. Once one's practice has matured over a long time, one suddenly realizes: originally, habitual tendencies are unobtainable. Only then are habitual tendencies truly eliminated!

2. Turning up karmic seeds: As meditation deepens, karmic seeds from the field of the eighth consciousness are turned up, producing unaccountable afflictions similar to menopause. One must urgently pay them no heed. (This too is a stage of contemplation.) They arise for several days, then quiet down for several days; then they arise again and quiet down again, becoming weaker and weaker with each occurrence. When the original nature opens up in an instant, one then enters the above stage of eliminating habitual tendencies.

165. After Cutting Off View-Delusions, Those Who Cut Off Thought-Delusions Quickly Do So in This Life; Those Who Do So Slowly Return Seven Times Among Humans and Devas

Question: It truly is very difficult! Cutting off thought-delusions is even harder than knowing “that”!

Answer: Yes. Cutting off thought-delusions is far more difficult than cutting off view-delusions. I once asked the elder: after view-delusions have been cut off in an instant, when can thought-delusions be completely cut off? The elder said: if view-delusions have truly been cut off, thought-delusions are not difficult to cut off either. Those who are quick do so in this life; those who are slow return seven times among humans and devas.

Question: I do not hope for seven returns; I await only this life!

Answer: How could a great person be otherwise?

(III) Wondrous Functioning

166. Non-Contrivance, Yet Nothing Left Undone

Question: I try to proceed in this way: before doing something, I seek nothing and follow conditions; while doing it, I concentrate and do my utmost; afterward, I am neither pleased nor troubled by the result. Please judge whether this is right or wrong.

(The following answers are presented in sections.—Editor’s note)

Question: Before doing something, I seek nothing and follow conditions.

Answer: That is genuinely following conditions.

Question: Living each day this way also saves effort.

Answer: There are no days to get through and no effort to save. That is truly saving effort.

Question: While doing something, I concentrate and do my utmost.

Answer: Once you add the effort of “concentrating your energy,” you cannot do your utmost. When one is actually doing, there is precisely no doing.

Question: Yes, yes—like forcing oneself to eat, struggling against oneself.

Answer: An ancient Chan master said, “All day long I eat, yet I have not bitten a single grain of rice.”

Question: Afterward, I am neither pleased nor troubled by the result.

Answer: “Not moved by circumstances,” of course.

Question: Is this the standard for testing one’s level of practice?

Answer: To conjure up a standard for no reason is to create another affair!

Question: Please judge whether the foregoing is right or wrong.

Answer: Here there is neither right nor wrong.

Question: Teacher, after clearing away the landmines, you still have to fill in the holes. The traces of your activity remain.

Answer: “Who has ever seen me open my mouth?”

Question: During the May Day holiday, I undertook an expedient seven-day retreat. My mind seemed to have some awakening, and I composed a verse. I hope you will not laugh at it: “I searched everywhere—within, without, and in between; / Yet saw self-nature amid appearances. / How does one become a Buddha or a patriarch? / Every day, sleeping and eating.”

Answer: I rejoice in it: “Within, without, and in between, it cannot be found; / Form and formlessness are all mere idle talk! / Who needs to become a Buddha or a patriarch? / When tired, sleep; when hungry, eat.”

Question: One of Chan Master Puming’s verses on the Oxherding Pictures: “Only after long days and deep practice does it begin to turn its head; / The mad and unruly force of mind gradually becomes tame and gentle. / The mountain lad is not yet willing to grant it full approval; / He still uses a hempen rope to tie it down.”

Answer: A responding verse in the same rhyme: “Having struck the southern wall, one knows to turn one’s head; / The mind’s aspirations become pliant as silk wound around the fingers. / Even if clear-eyed ones grant no approval, / Wherever it must be tethered, tether it still.”

Question: Teacher, you say that one is “a carefree person of the Way, beyond learning and contrivance.” Why, then, did you write such a long Song of Enlightenment?

Answer: If one is truly beyond learning, then there is no learning one does not undertake; if one is truly without contrivance, then there is nothing one does not do.

Appendix: Teacher Qi Zhijun’s Replies to Five Students’ Letters

(Five practitioners' emails are excerpted here. Teacher Qi's replies largely take the form of section-by-section annotated responses to the first letter, followed by further exchanges with the practitioners. To distinguish them, the first email is set in Kai type, while the teacher's answers and the practitioners' subsequent replies are set in Song type.—Editor's note)

1. A Practitioner's Email Seeking the Dharma

Practitioner: My teacher once instructed me that when sitting in Chan meditation, I should not visualize or recite mantras; I should relax the coccyx and the six sense faculties. As the Heart Sūtra says, "no eye realm, up to and including no realm of mind-consciousness."

On this occasion, while burning incense and sitting in Chan meditation, I relaxed to the point that my eyelids naturally opened. At that moment, I saw a bright point of incense fire—a white light—flash toward me in an instant and strike the point between my eyebrows. It immediately exploded, filling the whole room with white light. My entire body felt as if struck by electricity; both the experience and myself vanished, and great fear arose. For a long while, my whole body was numb and I could scarcely move.

(I had thought myself unafraid of death, but this experience seemed even more terrifying than death.) Even now, I often still feel a cool sensation between my eyebrows. My teacher said, "This is merely seeing the light of Vairocana Buddha's Dharma body. Do not cling to this appearance." Since then, I have wanted to experience it again but have been unable to find it. May I ask, Teacher, whether this white light is my Original Face? Thank you for telling me.

Answer: You should also ask your own teacher.

Practitioner: You are surely a true teacher. May I become your student?

Answer: How would I dare? In fact, I am an exceedingly ordinary person.

Practitioner: I see you as one in whom the extraordinary emerges from the truly ordinary.

Answer: What do you sit in Chan meditation for?

Practitioner: I do so to cast off a lifetime of karmic habits and see my Original Face. Above, I wish to repay the fourfold kindness; below, to relieve the suffering of the three lower realms. I aspire to cultivate the six pāramitās. My father died early in my childhood, and with no one to guide me, I made bad friends, committed many evil deeds, and ended up in prison. Later, I met my teacher, who skillfully guided me with the Buddhadharma. Upon reading the Practices and Vows of Samantabhadra, I

first realized that there could be such a person in this world. I wept bitterly and vowed to study Buddhism all my life. My teacher is a lay practitioner and has not attained the rank of acharya. He instructed me that, if I encountered a great spiritual teacher, I must draw near and study under that teacher. That is the only cause and condition.

Answer: There are some questions here: What exactly do you mean by “a lifetime of karmic habits”? Are those “bright point” and “white light” your Original Face? And what relationship do they have to “casting off a lifetime of karmic habits”?

Practitioner: By “a lifetime of karmic habits,” I mean my innate attachment to self and acquired habitual tendencies. Because of attachment, body and mind become rigid, creating all kinds of obstacles to study and practice. I wish to ask a virtuous teacher to impart a practice to me, transmit a precept to me, and point out a path of return. As for whether the “bright point” and “white light” are my Original Face, and what relationship they have to “casting off a lifetime of karmic habits,” I suppose they were some states that appeared when body and mind had relaxed to a certain degree. Please instruct me, Teacher.

Answer: By no means mistake the fixed star for what it is not.

(What follows is a section-by-section annotated response to the foregoing reply, together with a more in-depth exchange.—Editor’s note)

* By “a lifetime of karmic habits,” I mean my innate attachment to self and acquired habitual tendencies. Because of attachment, body and mind become rigid, creating all kinds of obstacles to study and practice.

Answer: Then you must constantly go against your habitual tendencies.

* I wish to ask a virtuous teacher to impart a practice to me.

Answer: The Practice Manual for the Four-Armed Avalokiteśvara Practice of the Six-Syllable Great Bright Mantra (omitted; see the preceding material.—Editor’s note).

* Transmit a precept to me.

Answer: The arising of a thought is itself a violation of the precepts!

* Point out a path of return.

Answer: Returning is precisely not returning; not returning is precisely returning.

* As for whether the “bright point” and “white light” are my Original Face, and what relationship they have to “casting off a lifetime of karmic habits,” I suppose they

were some states that appeared when body and mind had relaxed to a certain degree. Please instruct me, Teacher.

Answer: The sun, moon, and stars; mountains, rivers, and the great earth; even flowers, birds, fish, and insects—none are apart from the Original Face, much less those “bright point” and “white light”! But do not cling to one and lose the myriad, and by no means mistake the fixed star for what it is not.

Practitioner: May I ask, Teacher, whether at some convenient time in the future you might confer empowerment upon me, so as to make manifest the lineage of the Buddhadharma and enable me to benefit from the blessings of the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and guru?

Answer: Empowerment can fulfill your wish. Please contact the forum moderator here (http://www yxjs org/forum php).

Practitioner: I bow in reverence. With one mind, I take refuge and entrust myself.

2. A Practitioner’s Email Concerning Bowing to the Buddha

Practitioner: Respected Teacher, I have recently stopped bowing to the Buddha. I feel that I myself am Buddha, so why should I bow to wood? A certain Dharma brother strongly disapproves. Of course, I can go along with him and bow to the Buddha. It is all flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water anyway, so what harm is there in bowing? But he says that one must have a reverent mind when bowing to the Buddha; I do not agree.

Buddha-nature does not establish a single thing. The moment one gives rise to a reverent mind, one has already gone against Buddha-nature. Fundamentally there is no self, so where could there still be Buddhas and sentient beings? And how could a Buddha be seen by means of physical form? Even if Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva truly appeared before me, I would not bow.

There is a Chan koan: A monk went to Mount Wutai to pay homage to Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, but missed him even though he was directly before him, and later deeply regretted it. After the monk awakened to the Way, Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva came to him on one occasion, but the monk simply ignored the bodhisattva.

Even when bowing to the relics of the World-Honored One or Venerable Master Xuyun, it is not a matter of having or not having a reverent mind; one should bow with an empty mind, with not a single thought arising. In truth, I have no doubts about these matters, but this Dharma brother has lately kept saying that I am arrogant. He has cited many examples of great masters reverently paying homage to the Buddha. He truly means well by me, so I feel I should ask for your instruction.

Once, Patriarch Linji arrived at Bodhidharma's stūpa. The stūpa keeper asked, "Will you first bow to the patriarch or first bow to the Buddha?" Patriarch Linji replied, "I bow to neither." Chan Master Zhaozhou said, "I do not like to hear even the word 'Buddha.'" How should these be understood? Also, when you speak of your guru, Teacher, you seem very reverent and nostalgic. Does this belong to the emotional attachment among the seven emotions and six desires? Once I saw another teacher speak of his guru in what seemed a very matter-of-fact manner. If I have said anything wrong, please scold me severely; I am not afraid of being scolded by you.

(What follows is a section-by-section annotated response to the first letter, together with a more in-depth exchange.—Editor's note)

Practitioner: Respected Teacher, I have recently stopped bowing to the Buddha.

Answer: Do you mean that you formerly treated bowing to the Buddha as a daily practice?

Practitioner: I never had such a daily practice. It is simply that there is a Buddha image in my home, and I used to bow every morning after getting up, as though saying good morning.

Answer: Good morning!

Practitioner: I feel that I myself am Buddha, so why should I bow to wood?

Answer: Then should the wood bow to you?

Practitioner: The wood is me, and I am the wood.

Answer: What is wrong with a wooden person looking at flowers and birds?

Practitioner: A certain Dharma brother strongly disapproves.

Answer: I disapprove as well. I disapprove because you have this "not bowing."

Practitioner: Of course, I can go along with him and bow to the Buddha. It is all flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water anyway, so what harm is there in bowing?

Answer: If you have "flowers in empty space and the moon reflected in water," that is equivalent to not bowing.

Practitioner: Then how, in the end, should one bow?

Answer: Good morning!

Practitioner: But he says that one must have a reverent mind when bowing to the Buddha.

Answer: If there is no reverent mind, why bow to the Buddha at all? Is there any dharma outside the mind?

Practitioner: Apart from Buddha-nature, there is no Dharma. vv Answer: Apart from all dharmas, where could one seek Buddha-nature?

Practitioner: I do not agree. Buddha-nature does not establish a single thing. The moment one gives rise to a reverent mind, one has already gone against Buddha-nature.

Answer: Buddha-nature fully possesses all dharmas. Does it not include a reverent mind?

Practitioner: I have indeed fallen into biased emptiness.

Answer: Recognizing this prevents it from becoming an injustice. You must also recognize that emptiness is precisely presence.

Practitioner: Fundamentally there is no self, so where could there still be Buddhas and sentient beings?

Answer: Fundamentally there is no person, so where could there be bowing or not bowing? Yet in your case there is “not bowing.”

Practitioner: I have been abiding in not bowing.

Answer: Not bowing is bowing; bowing is not bowing. Not bowing means customarily paying respects as one does in ordinary matters; bowing means not seeking through attachment to “Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha.”

Practitioner: And how could a Buddha be seen by means of physical form?

Answer: Whether one bows or does not bow, it is not necessarily seeing through physical form. Yet either may also be seeing through physical form. When you see a piece of wood, is that not physical form?

Practitioner: How should “seeing” be understood?

Answer: The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says: “When seeing sees seeing, that seeing is not true seeing.”

Practitioner: Even if Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva truly appeared before me, I would not bow.

Answer: Is a bodhisattva not worthy of respect?

Student: There is a Chan koan: A monk went to Mount Wutai to pay homage to Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, but missed him even though he was right before him, and afterward regretted it deeply. Later, after attaining realization himself, Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva came to him once, yet the monk actually ignored the bodhisattva.

Answer: This is the koan of Chan Master Wenxi: The bodhisattva manifested in the steam above the stove, and the master struck him with a ladle. The bodhisattva said: "A bitter gourd is bitter to its root; a sweet melon is sweet to its stem. Having cultivated for three great kalpas, I am nevertheless disliked by an old monk." Wenxi is Mañjuśrī, and Mañjuśrī is Wenxi.

Student: Even when paying homage to the relics of the World-Honored One or Venerable Master Xuyun, it should not be done with a respectful mind or without a respectful mind; one should pay homage with an empty mind—not a single thought arising.

Answer: But is that not still paying homage?

Student: Ah.

Answer: Ha ha!

Student: Actually, I have no doubts about these matters, but a certain Dharma brother has recently kept saying that I am arrogant.

Answer: What he says is of no use. What do you yourself think? If you ask me, I would only say that you have "fallen into emptiness"; I would not say that you are "arrogant."

Student: Now I have great doubts. How can I avoid falling into either emptiness or existence?

Answer: Good morning!

Student: He also cited many examples of how great masters reverently paid homage to the Buddha. He truly means well for me, so I feel that I should still ask for your instruction.

Answer: Let me also cite an example: I once personally saw Master Yuanyin paying homage to the Buddha.

Student: Once, Patriarch Linji arrived at the stūpa of Patriarch Bodhidharma. The stūpa keeper asked, "Will you first pay homage to the patriarch, or first pay homage to the Buddha?" Patriarch Linji said, "I pay homage to neither." Chan Master

Zhaozhou said, “The single word ‘Buddha’ is something I do not like to hear.” How should these sayings be understood?

Answer: Even if, for as many kalpas as there are grains of sand in all the Ganges rivers, one pays homage to Buddhas and patriarchs, such reverence does not equal Linji’s “not paying homage.” People call Zhaozhou an “ancient Buddha.”

Student: Also, I feel that when you speak of your guru, you are extremely respectful and deeply nostalgic. Does this belong to the “affection” among the seven emotions and six desires?

Answer: Then when you address me as “teacher,” does that belong to the “affection” among the seven emotions and six desires?

Student: This is what I have always wanted to ask you.

Answer: You can still ask me, but whom am I to ask? Namo, Root Guru Acharya Yuanyin!! I remember Root Guru Acharya Yuanyin with deep longing!!!

Student: If I have said anything wrong, please feel free to scold me severely. I am not afraid of being scolded by you.

Answer: How far apart are scolding and paying homage?

Student: Then they are all the same, are they not?

Answer: What comes after “the same”?

Student: This disciple bows in full prostration!

Answer: Eh! The entire piece is about not paying homage—so how did you begin paying homage? Is that not contradictory?

Student: I am completely confused. Teacher, you must save this disciple. It is your misfortune to have a disciple as stupid as an ox.

Answer: Likewise! It is also your misfortune to have a so-called “teacher” who cannot explain things clearly.

Student: No matter what, this disciple must still bow in full prostration to you!

Answer: Oh my! Another ladle!

3. A Student’s Email Concerning Causes and Conditions

My Causes and Conditions

I have studied Buddhism for more than three years. Three years ago, a lay practitioner who studied Buddhism gave me some books, but I did not so much as glance at them. Three years later, when my affinity with the Buddha had matured, I took refuge in the Three Jewels and diligently studied and practiced Pure Land, Esoteric Buddhism, and Chan. I strove without cease, as urgently as though saving my head from fire. In the blink of an eye, another three years passed. Under the guidance of Buddhist doctrine, a genuine and true "resolve for renunciation" arose in me.

Therefore, I wanted to leave home. A monastic friend of my own age learned that I was preparing to leave home, and invited me to discuss the matter. The following was part of our conversation at that time. The master asked, "Why do you want to leave home?" I answered, "To concentrate on cultivation in a pure practice center."

The master asked, "Do you think that once you leave home, you will be able to practice well? Will your mind then be pure?" I answered, "Surely it will be so." The master asked, "Do you know what you must first do after leaving home?" I answered, "Concentrate on practice and make rapid progress." The master said, "After leaving home, every day you will have to strike instruments, chant, perform Buddhist services for the faithful, and receive visiting lay practitioners. Where will you find time for pure practice?" Hearing this, I was silently speechless.

The master continued: "If you are truly a practitioner, everywhere is a practice center. You can cultivate and attain realization at home; there is no need to leave home to practice." I did not accept his view: "Practice at home is even more difficult. There are many worldly affairs and afflictions. One must study Buddhism and practice the Dharma, while also working and making a living. How can one practice under such conditions?" The master did not argue with me. As he saw me down the mountain, he said one more sentence: "If there truly were a Tathāgata, that would be laughable; for a hundred-year dream, one is deceived by monks."

After returning from Dizang Temple, I was truly somewhat bewildered. I could not understand its meaning despite much thought. At every moment I reflected on the conversation between the master and me, and began to doubt everything I had done since first studying Buddhism.

How should one study and practice? In my mind I wondered: "Deceived by monks for a hundred-year dream"? Were the monastics wrong? Was I wrong to want to leave home? Was I mistaken? What is the purpose of studying Buddhism? What is its goal? Why sit in meditation? Can seated Chan make one a Buddha? Are the present methods of practice correct? I cannot practice at home, yet the master says leaving home will not work either? What is this???"

Doubts arose everywhere within me, and I did not know what to do. I thought of many things: this seemed right, and that seemed right; doing this seemed wrong, and doing that seemed wrong. What was right? What was not right? I was simply turning round and round in a dead end.

I could not get out, nor could I turn back. Studying Buddhism and practicing the Dharma were so exhausting! So painful! In a state of exasperation, utterly spent and deeply miserable, I could never find an answer. I was nearly mad! I simply stopped studying and stopped thinking. Whatever was good or bad; whatever was right or wrong; Buddha-recitation, mantra recitation, visualization; whatever was Buddhadharma or not Buddhadharma—I thought of none of it any longer… It all disappeared…

At that moment—no, in a single instant—not one thought arose. There was only blankness, tranquility, and numinous stillness. Ah! Suddenly I was overwhelmed with joy. I had emerged from darkness, from the dead end! There was utter brightness! The sea was vast and the sky boundless! It seemed that heaven had no limit and earth no boundary! Suddenly, I felt there was no self and no mind; with the mind empty, there was freedom! I realized that the wayward son who everywhere sought Buddhas and asked about the Dharma,

who stirred up trouble and gave rise to deluded thoughts and attachments, was a jade-faced Avalokiteśvara of kindly mien! Truly: “Having worn out iron shoes in a fruitless search, one finds it here without having moved from the spot!” Thereafter, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, I always maintained that feeling which was not a feeling; that state which was not a state; that realm which was not a realm. Neither empty nor real, thinking without thought and thought-free yet thinking—what was it? It had neither face nor back; it could not be touched or seen, but could only be known by wisdom.

It was neither within nor without. Whether one practiced or did not practice, it was originally already present; everyone inherently possesses it. It is the mind of intrinsic nature, the true mind, the Original Face. It is “the present moment”; it is “the Way.” It is the “essence”; it is “the true form of reality, which is formless.” The Sixth Patriarch said, “It is not the wind that moves, nor is it the banner that moves; it is your mind that moves,” yet it has never moved.

Of it, the Heart Sūtra says, “Neither arising nor ceasing, neither defiled nor pure, neither increasing nor decreasing.” Of it, the Lotus Sūtra says, “Dharmas abide in their dharma positions; the worldly appearances ever abide.” It may have more than a hundred names, yet once it is named, it is no longer it. The Way is originally wordless; verbal expression is delusion. It is like a person drinking water: only they themselves know whether it is cold or warm.

“If one does not recognize one’s original mind, studying Buddhism is of no benefit.” Those who study Buddhism and practice must realize it. Let us follow what the Buddhist sūtras teach: “When the mad mind can rest, that itself is bodhisattvahood”; “Give rise to the mind without abiding anywhere”; “If you wish to know the realm of the Buddha, purify your mind like empty space.”

Verse:

A wanderer has a home, yet does not know to return; for more than thirty years, he has roamed at the ends of the earth.

Avalokiteśvara manifests to point out the way; with Amitābha in mind, one may return on one’s own.

Joyfully accepting the teaching in faith and reverently putting it into practice, one diligently investigates principle and arduously trains in practice.

Traveling everywhere and broadly practicing Pure Land, Esoteric Buddhism, and Chan, one wears out iron shoes yet in the end does not see it.

Beset on all sides, doubts arise; when mad thoughts are exhausted, the dream awakens of itself.

The wondrous mind of nirvāṇa is nowhere to be found; without moving a single step, one sits upon the lotus seat.

(What follows is an annotated reply to the content of the first letter, together with a more in-depth exchange.—Editor’s note)

My Causes and Conditions

Answer: What characters are these two boxes meant to represent?

Student’s reply: Teacher, you naturally know what these two boxes stand for. I left them blank so as not to cause other Dharma brothers to develop biased views.

Answer: Ha ha! That is what I thought. You still cannot get away from this, can you?

Student: I have studied Buddhism for more than three years. Three years ago, a lay practitioner who studied Buddhism gave me some books, but I did not so much as glance at them. Three years later, when my affinity with the Buddha had matured, I took refuge in the Three Jewels and diligently studied and practiced Pure Land, Esoteric Buddhism, and Chan. I strove without cease, as urgently as though saving my head from fire.

Answer: “The thought of striving diligently is delusion, not diligence. If the mind gives rise to no delusion, diligence has no limit.”

Student’s reply: What the teacher says is correct. This is how all practitioners are when they first enter the gate of Buddhism.

Answer: You have just entered the Buddhist gate? Then what about ?

Student: In the blink of an eye, another three years had passed. Guided by Buddhist doctrine, I gave rise to a genuine and unfeigned aspiration for renunciation. So I wanted to leave home.

Answer: Then renounce the household of birth, death, and afflictions.

Student: The teacher is right. The true meaning of “the aspiration for renunciation” is to have the resolve to “renounce the household of birth, death, and afflictions.”

Answer: “Yoga, fascicle 11, page 14, says: ‘Because one can transcend such faults as anger, it is called renunciation.’” —FROM: Dharma Characteristics Dictionary, Zhu Fuhuang

Student: A monastic teacher of my own age, who was a friend of mine, learned that I was preparing to leave home. He invited me to speak with him about it.

Answer: What did you discuss, and what was the outcome?

Student: What follows is the content of that conversation.

Student: In January 2002, at Dizang Monastery, the master strongly opposed my fervent, hope-filled wish to leave home. It was truly like having a bucket of cold water poured over me, chilling me from head to toe.

Answer: He may not have strongly opposed it. What he opposed was only your misunderstanding of ordination.

Student: Here is part of our conversation at that time. The master asked, “Why do you want to leave home?” I replied, “To cultivate single-mindedly in a pure practice center.” The master asked, “Do you think that once you leave home, you will be able to practice well? Will your mind then be pure?” I replied, “Surely that must be so.”

The master asked, “Do you know what you must do first after leaving home?” I replied, “Practice single-mindedly and make rapid progress.” The master said, “After leaving home, every day you will have to perform ritual percussion and chanting, conduct Buddhist services for the faithful, and receive visiting lay practitioners. How will you have time for pure cultivation?” Hearing this, I was speechless.

Answer: Do not be speechless! Why did you not say, “Is this not also pure cultivation?”

Student: At that time, I did not think so.

Answer: You did not think so then? What about now?

Student: The master also said, “If you are truly a practitioner, everywhere is a practice center. You can attain realization through practice while remaining at home; there is no need to leave home to practice.” I was unconvinced: “Practice is even harder at home. There are many worldly affairs and afflictions; one must study Buddhism and practice the Dharma, as well as work and make a living. How can one practice like that?”

Answer: Why can you not practice? Is not monastic practice likewise “performing ritual percussion and chanting every day, conducting Buddhist services for the faithful, and receiving visiting lay practitioners”?

Student: But at that time I forgot that, while doing these things, one must also cultivate the mind!

Answer: Ha ha! Not only is there , but this is there as well.

Student: The master did not argue with me. As he saw me off down the mountain, he added, “If there truly is a Tathāgata, how laughable it is; in a hundred-year dream, one is deceived by monks.”

Answer: An excellent verse!

Student: Later, I heard Teacher Nan say the same thing!

Student: After returning from Dizang Monastery, I was truly rather confused. I pondered it endlessly but could not grasp its meaning. At every moment I reflected on the conversation between Master Chuan San and myself, and I began to doubt everything I had done since first studying Buddhism. How should one study and practice? I thought to myself: “In a hundred-year dream, one is deceived by monks?” Were the monastics wrong?

Answer: The monastics were not wrong; what was wrong was your “thinking to yourself.”

Student: Yes.

Student: Was I wrong to want to leave home?

Answer: There is nothing wrong with leaving home. What was wrong was your wish that others would “perform ritual percussion and chanting every day, conduct Buddhist services for the faithful, and receive visiting lay practitioners,” thereby supporting you so that you could specialize solely in meditation or Buddha-recitation.

Then you further imagined that, after succeeding in your specialized practice, you would return to liberate those people who had supported you and who had left home before you. Because they were supporting you, they could only attend to matters that they could not avoid, and thus delayed their own specialized meditation or Buddha-recitation and delayed realizing the Way. Look! Is this not “the very thought of striving diligently is delusion, not diligence”?

Student: Yes—entirely correct!

Student: Was I wrong?

Answer: Ha ha! What do you think?

Student: At that time, I could not make up my mind.

Student: What is the purpose of studying Buddhism?

Answer: Is it not so that all sentient beings may be liberated and attain realization?

Student: Yes, for the benefit of sentient beings, I vow to attain Buddhahood!

Student: What is the aim of studying Buddhism?

Answer: Is it not to “perform ritual percussion and chanting every day, conduct Buddhist services for the faithful, and receive visiting lay practitioners,” thereby creating conditions for others to undertake specialized practice?

Student: Yes, it is to attain wisdom.

Answer: In the end, it cannot be separated from this. The Heart Sūtra says: “No wisdom and no attainment.”

Student: Why meditate?

Answer: How could you not know that?

Student: At that time, I truly did not know.

Answer: It is not too late to know now.

Student: Can one become a Buddha through seated meditation?

Answer: If you reject seated meditation, can you become a Buddha?

Student: At that time, I had doubts. Later I came to understand that one can become a Buddha while walking, standing, sitting, or lying down.

Student: Is my present method of practice correct?

Answer: Ha ha! Hold on! You should ask, “Am I practicing now?”

Student: The teacher is right.

Student: I cannot practice while living at home.

Answer: Do not rush to conclusions. At home, you will also encounter problems like those described above regarding leaving home. That is to say, you still cannot do without others supporting your specialized practice.

Student: Yes, that is so. Every practitioner is like this.

Student: Did the master say that leaving home would not work either?

Answer: I do not think the master said absolutely that leaving home would not work. He only said that leaving home with ideas like yours would not work either.

Student: The teacher is right.

Student: This???

Answer: Stop having deluded thoughts. Let a lotus bloom in the fire.

Student: What followed was the absence of deluded thoughts; the wild thoughts were completely empty!

Answer: Take great care not to “give rise to a thought and interpret it as sainthood, abandoning the sea and mistaking a floating bubble for it.”

Student: Doubts arose on every side, and I did not know what to do. I thought about many things and felt that this was right and that was right; that doing this was wrong and doing that was wrong. What was right? What was wrong? It was simply like going round and round in a dead end. I could not get out, nor could I turn back. Studying Buddhism and practicing the Dharma were so exhausting! So painful! I was frantic, utterly exhausted, and in extreme anguish. I could never find an answer—I was nearly mad!

Answer: You did not know? How could you not know? Having heard your account, let me tell you: you had driven yourself mad searching for the four great conditions for

specialized practice—Dharma, companions, financial resources, and a place. You did not truly want to leave home; in fact, you wanted to find these four conditions.

Student: At that time, I had exhausted myself with thinking, so I stopped thinking.

Student: I would simply stop studying and stop thinking—about what was good or bad, right or wrong, Buddha-recitation, mantra recitation, visualization, what was Buddhadharma and what was not Buddhadharma. I would think of none of it at all… It all disappeared…

Answer: Ha ha! I speak bluntly. If my words cause offense, please forgive me before I say them. The map is exhausted, and the dagger is revealed!

Student: That is one way to put it: the map was exhausted, and the dagger was revealed! Jing Ke attempted to assassinate the King of Qin! It was immediately knocked away by Teacher Qi.

Answer: From what I can see, it still has not been knocked away.

Student: At that moment—no, in that instant—not a single thought arose. There was utter blankness, utter stillness, utter numinous quiescence. Ah! Suddenly I was beside myself with excitement: I had emerged from darkness, from the dead end! Everything was brilliantly bright! Vast as the sea and open as the sky! Like the boundless heavens and the limitless earth! All at once, I felt there was no self and no mind; with mind empty, I was at ease!

Answer: Can it be obtained?

Student: Affirming and negating at the same time.

Answer: At precisely such a moment, are such idle furnishings as “affirmation” and “negation” present?

Student: It turned out that the prodigal son, who had everywhere sought Buddha and Dharma, stirred up trouble, and clung to deluded thoughts, was a kindly-faced, jade-visaged Avalokiteśvara!

Answer: Yet here one must avoid mistaking the fixed star!

Student: Yes. To recognize it is already wrong; not to recognize it is right. Stir a thought and one has already gone astray.

Answer: To recognize it is wrong; not to recognize it is also wrong. It is not a matter of recognizing or not recognizing; this is provisionally called realization. It is not a matter of coming or going; this is provisionally called seizing and bringing forth.

Student: Truly, “After wearing out iron shoes in a fruitless search, one finds it here without moving from the spot!”

Answer: Oh! So it can be obtained after all.

Student: I have attained an emptiness, a nothingness—that is, there is nothing whatsoever and nothing to be attained.

Reply: I remember a Chan master who put it this way: “So it turns out that a nun is made of woman.”

Student: From then on, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, I have always maintained that feeling—which is not a feeling; that state—which is not a state; that realm—which is not a realm: neither unreal nor real, thinking yet without thought, without thought yet thinking. What is it?

Reply: Do not boast. I would guess that you cannot maintain it. So long as it can be attained, it cannot be maintained.

Student: I attained an emptiness, a nothingness; I attained nothing to be attained. Nor is there any need to preserve it—just leave it alone!

Reply: Not needing to preserve it is itself preserving it. You cannot grasp it, and you cannot drive it away—so how could you manage it?

Student: It has no front and no back; it cannot be touched or seen, but can only be known by wisdom.

It is neither within nor without. Whether one cultivates or does not cultivate, it has always been there; everyone inherently possesses it.

It is the mind of intrinsic nature, the true mind; it is the Original Face.

It is “the present moment”; it is “the Way.”

It is “essence”; it is “the formlessness of true reality.”

The Sixth Patriarch said, “It is not the wind that moves, nor the banner that moves; it is your minds that move,” yet it itself has never moved.

Of it, the Heart Sūtra says, “Neither arising nor ceasing, neither defiled nor pure, neither increasing nor decreasing.”

Of it, the Lotus Sūtra says, “Dharmas abide in their dharma positions; the worldly appearance is ever abiding.”

It may be given more than a hundred names, but as soon as it is named, it is no longer it. The Way is originally wordless; verbal expression is delusion.

Like a person drinking water, one knows for oneself whether it is cold or warm.

“Without recognizing the original mind, studying Buddhism is of no benefit.” Those who study Buddhism and cultivate practice must realize it. Do as the Buddhist sūtras teach: “When the mad mind can rest, that is bodhisattvahood”; “Should give rise to that mind without abiding anywhere”; “If you wish to know the Buddha’s realm, purify your mind like empty space.”

Reply: I seem to have encountered these words in many books.

Student: That is not surprising. The words we write and speak have all been spoken and written by others before us; we know them through learning.

Reply: If you do not go beyond these, you have not even reached the edge of the dharmakāya!

Student: A verse says:

A wanderer has a home but does not know to return; for more than thirty years, he has drifted at the ends of the earth.

Avalokiteśvara manifests to point out the way; with Amitābha in mind, he can return of himself.

Joyfully receive it in faith and reverently put it into practice; diligently investigate principle and arduously train in practice.

Traveling everywhere, broadly cultivating Pure Land, Esoteric Buddhism, and Chan, he wears out iron shoes yet in the end finds nothing.

Surrounded by songs of Chu, a sense of doubt arises; when frantic thoughts are exhausted, the dream awakens of itself.

The wondrous mind of nirvāṇa cannot be found anywhere; without moving a single step, one sits upon the lotus throne.

Reply: If the lotus throne were dismantled, then what?

Student: How would you dismantle the “lotus throne”?

Reply: Better to dismantle the lotus throne!

Student: The three-thousandfold great thousand-world system is itself the lotus throne; the lotus throne is everywhere. What you dismantle is the lotus throne of “appearance” and “function.” The lotus throne of intrinsic nature and essence is thusness, unmoving; it has never existed and never not existed. No one can dismantle the lotus throne of your intrinsic nature.

Reply: I have encountered such words in many books.

Student: I need Teacher Qi to verify the result.

The World-Honored One’s holding up a flower is unobtainable; Mahākāśyapa’s smile is ultimately empty.

Green leaves and withered grass are all splendid, yet one alone clings to spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

Reply: The World-Honored One’s holding up a flower is unobtainable—therefore the splendor of green leaves and withered grass is also unobtainable.

Mahākāśyapa’s smile is ultimately empty—therefore spring, summer, autumn, and winter are also ultimately empty.

Green leaves and withered grass are all splendid—since they are unobtainable, one must not cling to them.

Yet one alone clings to spring, summer, autumn, and winter—since they are ultimately empty, one must not become attached to them.

4. Emails in Which a Student Seeks Instruction on Doubts Concerning Practice and Realization

First exchange of letters:

Student: Greetings, Teacher! Even if there is no self, I still doubt myself; this shows that I have not yet thoroughly awakened. I feel much like Chan Master Dahui Gao in his early days, as though I am always short by one final ladleful. Deluded thoughts and attachments are clearly like duckweed: as soon as I contemplate them, they vanish. My strength has increased considerably.

At times I feel quite well: whenever anyone speaks of Buddha or awakening and the like, I feel that it pollutes Buddhism’s original intent, and when others discuss awakening, I myself laugh. Yet at other times I too fall into problems concerning “awakening.” For instance, recently the term “thorough awakening” has kept ringing in my ears and is hard to dispel. Your post (see item 161 above—editor’s note)

happened to lift the lid off this matter. Sometimes I am well and sometimes poorly. Teacher, may I ask what is happening?

Reply: “This shows that I have not yet thoroughly awakened”—what do you yourself think of that sentence?

Student: Judging from that sentence, I have not even had a minor awakening. But I am rather unusual: I am intermittent. When I am well, a thousand Buddhas cannot move me; when I am poorly, even the wind can blow me to the ground.

Reply: When you are well, there is no well; when you are poorly, there is no poorly. “When the great thousand-world system is destroyed, is this destroyed or not?” “Destroyed!”

Student: That thing has neither good nor bad; even if I die, I cannot destroy it. But I still have doubts about the level of awakening to it. I always think that, because it cannot remain before me at every moment, but appears and disappears, it is somewhat impermanent. So I wonder: is what cannot remain before me at every moment still everlasting and unchanging?

Reply: Do not imitate the non-Buddhist proponents of eternalism.

Student: I now understand. When I regarded that thing as light and shadow, I assumed that when it was not before me, it had disappeared. It truly cannot be driven away. It is not that the moon lacks light, but that the dark clouds have not dispersed; it is not that the mirror lacks brightness, but that there is too much floating dust.

Reply: Even these dark clouds and floating dust are the radiance of the ocean-seal.

I think thorough awakening must meet the following standards, yet I have not attained them:

1. Once awakened, forever awakened, with doubt never arising again.

2. Once seen, forever seen: not turning with thoughts or shifting with circumstances, functioning naturally and spontaneously. Even if a thought arises, one can immediately notice it, rather than realizing it only later.

Perhaps I am mistaken. I should not understand the nonobstruction of principle as the nonobstruction among phenomena. Yet after realization and awakening, there should be an obvious difference in practical matters. My strength has increased, but there has been no earth-shaking change, so at times I become suspicious that my treasure may be counterfeit.

(What follows is an annotated response to the foregoing, with further in-depth discussion—editor's note.)

Student: I think thorough awakening must meet the following standards, yet I have not attained them:

1. Once awakened, forever awakened, with doubt never arising again.

Reply: The stolen goods have been exposed!

Student: Where is the stain? If there is doubt, can it still be called awakening? There is nothing wrong with that statement.

Reply: Then I cannot blame you; I concede half the point.

Student: It may be put this way: I have a treasure in my hand. Although I sometimes suspect that it is counterfeit, that doubt does not make it counterfeit; it is simply that I do not recognize it.

Reply: Whether it is genuine or counterfeit, simply throw it away and spare yourself the trouble.

Student: 2. Once seen, forever seen: not turning with thoughts or shifting with circumstances, functioning naturally and spontaneously. Even if a thought arises, one can immediately notice it, rather than realizing it only later.

Reply: Do not mistake a donkey's saddle for your father's chin!

Student: Perhaps I am mistaken. I should not understand the nonobstruction of principle as the nonobstruction among phenomena. Yet after realization and awakening, there should be an obvious difference in practical matters. My strength has increased, but there has been no earth-shaking change, so at times I become suspicious that my treasure may be counterfeit.

Reply: If I tell you that it is genuine, does that not amount to saying that it is false?

Student: With that one sentence from you, Teacher, I could sleep for a thousand years.

Reply: In truth, it is exceedingly simple: the mind that seeks attainment has not yet withdrawn!

Another email:

Student: Greetings, Teacher! Today I wish to report something and ask a question. This morning, while reading about the "second moon" in the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, I had

previously held only a vague understanding, but suddenly realized that it refers to “seeing one’s true nature”—that it is the “rock at the summit” in your saying, “Do not cling to the rock at the summit.”

I truly understand what “beyond the dharmakāya” means: from lucid clarity to no longer emitting light, all things are wholly true, and there is no longer some separate “truth” present. My former understanding was all hearsay; I could know it, yet it was not intimate. This time I have personal experience of it. In my delight, I wrote a poor little poem to mark my visit here:

Realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature seemed all too real; I nearly stopped and settled in this mind.

At dawn, I rose and turned over from dreamless sleep; only then did I know that awakened emptiness is a monkey.

My question is this: Emperor Yongzheng’s teacher, Master Changkya, once compared levels of realization to viewing the sky through a hole punched in window paper, viewing the sky from a courtyard, and so on. Which kind is mine?

(What follows is an annotated response to the foregoing, with further in-depth discussion—editor’s note.)

Student: Greetings, Teacher! Today I wish to report something,

Answer: The second moon.

Student: May I ask a question? This morning, while reading of the “second moon” in the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, I suddenly understood what I had previously understood only vaguely: it refers to “seeing one’s true nature.”

Answer: The third moon.

Student: It is the “peak-top rock” in your saying, “Do not cling to the rock at the summit.”

Answer: The fourth moon.

Student: I now truly understand what “beyond the dharmakāya” means.

Answer: The fifth moon.

Student: I have brought counterfeit moons to the Bureau of Industry and Commerce to sell. That is good too; let us count it as a free appraisal.

Answer: ^o^

Student: From luminous clarity to no longer shining: all things are wholly real, and there is no longer some separate “reality” present.

Answer: Ha ha! It is not that it is “no longer there.” This is precisely the original portion of true light—the first moon!

Student: Thank you for the free appraisal.

Answer: Watch out for the sixth moon!

Student: My former understanding was all heard from others. I could know it, but it was not intimate. This time I have had an experience of it. In my delight, I wrote a crooked little poem to mark that I have been here:

Answer: A visit to your own home?

Student: Realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature seems all too real; I nearly stopped and settled in this mind.

At dawn, dreamless, I turn over and rise; only then do I know that awakening to emptiness is the work of a monkey.

A question: Zhangjia, the teacher of the Yongzheng Emperor, once compared different degrees of insight to viewing the sky through a hole poked in window paper, viewing the sky from a courtyard, and so forth. Which kind do I belong to?

Answer: The kind that has not broken through the confines of either of those two.

Student: Thank you, Teacher, for breaking it open for me!

Answer: Watch out for another confinement!

5. Letters from a Student Seeking Instruction on Chan Koans

First Exchange of Letters:

Student: Greetings, Teacher! Last time, through your compassionate instruction, I felt as though I had been anointed with ghee upon the crown of my head. Taking the occasion of this correspondence, I again seek your instruction. I shall presumptuously offer an answer to a koan on someone else’s behalf. Please tell me whether it is correct, and then please give your own answer:

“The mountains, rivers, great earth, sun, moon, and stars of the external world—are they seen or not seen? If they are seen, one is deluded by external objects; if they are not seen, one falls into annihilation. Say a word about this.”

My proposed answer: “Come forward, and I will tell you.” If he then asks, “Please tell me,” I would say, “You have missed it.”

The foregoing questions and answers may invite ridicule, but I truly seek your instruction for the sake of practice.

Answer: If I were then to ask you, “What has been missed?” how would you answer?

Student: I would answer, “Even all the Buddhas of the three times do not recognize it.” Or I would stand with my hands folded, or bow and withdraw, or cite a saying of my teacher, Elder Yuanyin: “What a fine charm that cannot be painted.” (Though these are words of the ancients, there is no harm in borrowing them for my own use.)

Also, after reading the Three Barriers of Huanglong, I had further insight. I write it down now and ask for your instruction: 1. To the question, “Where do you come to life?” I answer: “Here” (pointing with my pen). 2 and 3. “My hand is a Buddha’s hand; my foot is a donkey’s foot.” Then I would give a shout and say: “Where is there any distinction here between your Buddha’s hand and donkey’s foot? I merely use my hands to take things and my feet to walk.”

Also, I have always found it difficult to answer the old Chan masters’ question, “Where do you come from?” If I answer with a place, it seems as though there is a point of attachment; if he presses me with another question, I am left speechless. Could you give me instruction here? I now think that I should diligently practice the Dharma, speak less, and teach the Dharma to others less. After I have truly attained accomplishment, I can liberate sentient beings. Otherwise, one blind person leading many blind people will cause all to fall into a great pit of fire, harming both others and oneself.

(What follows is an annotated response to the foregoing, with a more in-depth exchange—Editor’s note.)

Student: I would answer: “Even all the Buddhas of the three times do not recognize it.”

Answer: What is it that “even all the Buddhas of the three times do not recognize”?

Student: Do not recognize.

Student: Or I would stand with my hands folded.

Answer: What does standing with one’s hands folded express?

Student: Folded hands.

Answer: Is it still so if you use the word “express”?

Student: Or I would bow and withdraw.

Answer: By bowing and withdrawing, what do you obtain?

Student: A bow.

Student: Or I would cite a saying of my teacher, Elder Yuanyin: “What a fine charm that cannot be painted.” (Though these are words of the ancients, there is no harm in borrowing them for my own use.)

Answer: What does “What a fine charm that cannot be painted” refer to?

Student: Painting.

Answer: If it could be painted, would it not have form?

Student: Buddha-nature has neither shape nor form; to fall into verbal formulation is already mistaken. It can only be indicated through various wondrous functions. But if I were to answer your “is,” “express,” “obtain,” and “refer to” concretely, would that not be vain discrimination?

Student: Also, after reading the Three Barriers of Huanglong, I had further insight. I write it down now and ask for your instruction:

1. To the question, “Where do you come to life?” I answer: “Here” (pointing with my pen).

Answer: “Coming to life” carries the sense of “Where does birth come from?” Do you come from where your pen points?

Student: In response to your sentence, “Do you come from where your pen points?”—could you possibly come from anywhere else? (Or do you have anywhere else?)

Student: 2 and 3. “My hand is a Buddha’s hand; my foot is a donkey’s foot.” Then I would give a shout and say: “Where is there any distinction here between your Buddha’s hand and donkey’s foot? I merely use my hands to take things and my feet to walk.”

Answer: Can a donkey’s hand not take things? Can a Buddha’s foot not walk? Why speak of a “Buddha’s hand” and a “donkey’s foot”?

Student: In answer to the statement about a donkey’s hand and a Buddha’s foot taking things and walking: they can do far more than take things and walk; the three-

thousandfold great thousand-world system is within them as well.

Answer: “Vain discrimination,” “a donkey’s hand and a Buddha’s foot.”

Student: This is merely the Chan master using these two things to confuse students.

Answer: Not a word spoken by the Chan master departs even half a step from Buddha-nature.

See whether you are discriminating over these two things and being turned about by them. Thus, not to mention a Buddha’s hand and a donkey’s foot, even a demon’s hand and a pig’s foot are merely for taking things and walking.

Student: Also, I have always found it difficult to answer the old Chan masters’ question, “Where do you come from?” If I answer with a place, it seems as though there is a point of attachment; if he presses me with another question, I am left speechless. Could you give me instruction here?

Answer: “I come from Henan.”

Student: If, in response to “I come from Henan,” I were to ask, “Did you come by train or by bicycle?” how should you answer?

Answer: When did I ever come?

Student: I now think that I should diligently practice the Dharma, speak less, and teach the Dharma to others less. After I have truly attained accomplishment, I can liberate sentient beings. Otherwise, one blind person leading many blind people will cause all to fall into a great pit of fire, harming both others and oneself.

Answer: Very good.

Student: Teacher, I now seem very conflicted. At times, I suddenly seem to understand everything: becoming a Buddha and seeing a Buddha are all dreamlike illusions and bubbles; I have always been just thus; all states, wife, wealth, children, and good fortune are false and unreal, all unobtainable.

Answer: At times you understand.

Student: But at other times, I remain deeply attached to all these things. Though I know that I should not be attached, I cannot stop myself.

Answer: At times you are confused.

Student: Moreover, my conduct and manner of late have been especially unrestrained. Unlike when I first began studying Buddhism, I am no longer cautious

and careful in what I do and say. Now I seem to have a rather wild feeling: as long as I strive in the Way, it does not matter much if I commit such minor faults.

Answer: Habitual tendencies from practicing Chan in former lives.

Student: One night, while sleeping, I suddenly coughed, and my body and bed suddenly became huge. I paid no attention to it, but simply recited a mantra, after which they returned to normal.

Answer: Was not reciting a mantra itself paying attention to it?

Student: I have also understood that this capacity to act is precisely your originally inherent Buddha-nature, and that this capacity too is unobtainable. After recognizing this, one safeguards realization continuously and seamlessly. Finally, safeguarding realization too is unobtainable; there is only "when hungry, eat; when tired, sleep." Does this mean that the afflictions of views have been broken through? (In fact, the foregoing understanding too is unobtainable.)

Answer: If it is already "when hungry, eat; when tired, sleep," where are the afflictions of views?

Student: Finally, I would like to ask you about a koan. Chan Master Zhaozhou had only the phrase that eating and sleeping are a mind of mixed activity. I am puzzled: since he was one of great accomplishment, was there still a mind of mixed activity or a mind not of mixed activity?

Answer: It should be put the other way around: only if there is no mind of mixed activity can one attain great accomplishment.

Another Exchange of Letters:

Student: Greetings, Teacher! I bow three times! The other day, you mercifully gave me a severe blow, freeing me from adhesions and bonds, as though a burden of a thousand jin had been lifted from me (though there was originally nothing at all, I vainly exerted myself). This enabled me to realize the Tathāgata's wisdom and virtuous characteristics of neither arising nor ceasing, neither defiled nor pure, neither increasing nor decreasing (what is it worth? A dry shit-stick).

Only upon reaching this point does one trust that the words of all Buddhas and patriarchs are not false, and know the wondrous matter of walking hand in hand with all Buddhas and patriarchs. Only upon reaching this point does one know that the Land of Ultimate Bliss and Maitreya's Inner Court are all things within this very reality. What need is there to speak of birth or nonbirth, going or not going? Only upon reaching this point does one know that birth and death, nirvāṇa, afflictions, and bodhi are all mere play of words. They are like water and waves: two forms, yet

in essence truly one. Upon reaching this point, the mind is like vast space—limpid, serene, and still (though already obscured by a wisp of white cloud)!

At this point, if someone were to ask me, “You youngster, what have you gained from your master that you dare to be so wildly arrogant?” I would recite:

When attainment is attained, what has ever been attained? When nothing is attained, that is true attainment.

If one takes attainment to be real, it is still not attainment; truly, I have no way to open my mouth and speak of it.

If he still did not awaken and pressed me further, asking, “Then what of all that you have said above?”

I would give a great shout: “Who has seen me open my mouth?” Then I would recite:

With nothing amiss in the mind-ground, one’s bearing is lofty; all phenomena are originally empty, and wondrous functioning is unsurpassed.

Had I known earlier that today’s matter was so easy, why did I vainly toil in the past?

In a peaceful world, the people are at ease; birds sing and flowers bloom, and everywhere is tranquil.

Even when wind, rain, thunder, and lightning arise, the sky remains deep blue.

After finishing the verse, I sat silently for a long while, then went to sleep.

With respectful regards,

Your disciple bows in reverence three times

Respectfully written after washing my hands, July 10, 2002

Reply: It is said that 2,500 years ago, an outstanding prince was born in Kapilavastu in ancient India. He was unwilling to inherit the throne, but sought the “Tathāgata’s wisdom and virtuous attributes,” which neither arise nor cease. This was truly the arousal of bodhicitta for the sake of birth and death. Over six years, he visited ninety-six non-Buddhist paths. Because his faculties were so keen, he surpassed his teachers within only a few days.

Having exhausted his visits and still not found the “Tathāgata’s wisdom and virtuous attributes,” he bathed and ate, then sat beneath the bodhi tree and vowed: “If I do not realize unsurpassed perfect enlightenment, I would rather have this body shattered to pieces than leave this seat!” After exactly forty-nine days, he emerged

from samādhi at midnight, suddenly saw the morning star, and attained great awakening: “All sentient beings possess the Tathāgata’s wisdom and virtuous attributes; it is only because of deluded thoughts and attachments that they cannot realize them.”

(What follows is an annotated reply to the foregoing, together with an in-depth exchange—Editor’s note.)

Student: At this point, if someone were to ask me, “You youngster, what have you gained from your master that you dare to be so wildly arrogant?” I would recite:

When attainment is attained, what has ever been attained? When nothing is attained, that is true attainment.

If one takes attainment to be real, it is still not attainment; truly, I have no way to open my mouth and speak of it.

Reply: After attainment, there is nothing to attain; before attainment, it too is already there. When absent, it pervades worlds as numerous as Ganges sands; where it is present, it has nothing to do with inside or outside.

Student: If he still did not awaken and pressed me further, asking, “Then what of all that you have said above?” I would give a great shout: “Who has seen me open my mouth?” Then I would recite:

With nothing amiss in the mind-ground, one’s bearing is lofty; all phenomena are originally empty, and wondrous functioning is unsurpassed.

Had I known earlier that today’s matter was so easy, why did I vainly toil in the past?

Reply: When the mind is even, there is neither low nor high. If essence and function are one suchness, how can there be anything surpassing? It has always been complete and at hand, with nothing to do; when has there ever been any need for painful, vain toil?

Student: In a peaceful world, the people are at ease; birds sing and flowers bloom, and everywhere is tranquil.

Even when wind, rain, thunder, and lightning arise, the sky remains deep blue.

After finishing the verse, I sat silently for a long while, then went to sleep.

With respectful regards,

Your disciple bows in reverence three times

Respectfully written after washing my hands, July 10, 2002

Reply: Now look at the Chan school's ox-herding progression.

Student: I bow in reverence three times! Now that matters have come to this, if one entertains such a thought, then even if one makes offerings to Buddhas as numerous as Ganges sands, one's karmic offenses are still boundless. If one does not entertain such a thought, then even if one commits the gravest offenses of the Avīci hell, one's merit and virtue are still immeasurable. In seeking the Buddha, there is ultimately nothing to be found; in seeking Māra, there is no such place. Where, then, is there walking hand in hand with Buddhas and patriarchs? Where is there fighting the Demon King while holding a spear?

I had intended to apply myself vigorously to practice, advancing another step from the top of a hundred-foot pole. Yet I knew that, originally, there is nothing to do and realization comes naturally; limpid emptiness and stillness have no stages. When Baizhang watched the geese, where was there coming or going? The Three Barriers of Huanglong are just this one move. Though empty space has no surplus thing, white clouds turn into rain and moisten the great earth. Perhaps a visitor may ask, "Will you not henceforth scold the Buddha and revile the patriarchs atop a solitary peak?" I would shout, "Why engage in such empty posturing? I shall simply go and do whatever I ought to do." With respectful regards,

I bowed and withdrew.

Reply: Ha ha! Can you not speak without leaving these words behind? Look at how Chan Master Zhantang spoke:

"Zhi, hu, zhe, ye! A patch-robed monk's nostrils have their large ends facing downward. If you still do not understand, ask Elder Sister Wang of East Village."