Teachings from Master Yuanyin’s Seven-Day Retreat at the Ancient Temple

Teacher Qi Zhijun

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Before the Retreat Began

A student asked: “During the seven-day retreat, how do we ‘grasp hold’ of it?”

Teacher Qi: “‘Grasp hold’ is only a borrowed expression. If you really try to seize it with effort, there is no way to grasp it. It cannot be relinquished, yet it cannot be obtained. When I understand—there is an awe-inspiring awakening, clearly present before me—I have already grasped it! If I try to grasp it again, it is gone instead. This is truly something that can only be apprehended inwardly and cannot be transmitted in words. When the time comes, it is very simple.”

“Without that experience, if you try to understand it theoretically, you will not understand it even if you exhaust yourself to death. Put theoretically, so-called ‘grasping hold’ is not grasping hold; this is called grasping hold.”

Asked: “Our Heart-of-Heart Dharma involves forming mudrās, reciting mantras, and listening inwardly to the mind’s recitation. Why is it said to begin with the eighth consciousness?”

Teacher Qi replied: “Hearing and contemplation belong to the sixth consciousness. But we take dhāraṇī as our method: forming mudrās and reciting mantras, with their secret functioning. It is not something accomplished through your own mental

struggle or by thinking things through. Rather, it comes about without your noticing."

"So long as you are willing to practice, there is no need to engage in mental persuasion; you need not even persuade yourself. After sitting in meditation and maintaining contemplation for a long time, doubts naturally disappear. There is no need to posit a sixth consciousness and an eighth consciousness theoretically. Its secret functioning works by subtle influence and gradual transformation. This Dharma is powerful; its efficacy is indeed very strong. If you put it into practice, you will know that it is true and not false! This is what is meant by cultivating from the eighth consciousness."

Teacher Chen added: "In the course of our practice, the seeds in the eighth consciousness must be brought forth; this is very evident. In fact, practices of the sixth consciousness merely transform your thoughts, while the seeds of the eighth consciousness remain untouched. To practice from the eighth consciousness is to pull them out by the roots. To practice from the sixth consciousness is to transform things from the mind faculty, like cutting leaves from a tree—continually cutting and cutting the leaves."

"Actually, do not investigate how something is the eighth consciousness or how it is the sixth consciousness. Its actual effect is simply like this. Look at how intensely our seeds are being brought forth! It is painful! You may recite the Śūraṅgama Mantra heart-mantra."

Teacher Qi further added: "In fact, this Dharma first transforms the eighth consciousness into great perfect mirror wisdom. The common method of the doctrinal schools is first to transform the sixth consciousness into wondrous observing wisdom, then the seventh consciousness into the wisdom of equality, then the eighth consciousness into great perfect mirror wisdom, and finally the first five consciousnesses into the wisdom of accomplishing what is to be done."

"If you insist on having a theory that clearly distinguishes the sixth consciousness from the eighth consciousness, that is quite a meticulous theoretical system. Unless you read the sūtras and treatises extensively, you may only become more confused. Simply put, our method begins with actual cultivation, proceeding from practice."

Before Taking One's Seat at the Beginning of the Retreat

Asked: "In the video recording we watched, the master said, 'At the point where thought ceases—what is this? Seeing one's true nature in this very moment.' Is it really that simple?"

Teacher Qi: "Cease!"

The entire hall fell silent; then everyone smiled.

“It is present before you! It is that simple!”

Everyone immediately frowned.

The teacher said: “Doubting again! If you doubt, then go do a seven-day retreat!”

Asked: “It is said that during a seven-day retreat, patriarchs of every generation come to the site to bestow blessings?”

Answered: “They are bestowing blessings right now. Master Yuanyin has heard what you said.”

Someone nearby asked: “Where is the Master?”

Answered: “He is in the mind of the one asking; otherwise, how would that person have thought of this?”

Asked: “Teacher Qi, what do you hope your disciples will gain from this seven-day retreat?”

Answered: “Best of all, nothing!”

Someone nearby asked: “Then isn’t it superfluous for us to come and do a seven-day retreat?”

Answered: “The Buddha taught the Dharma for forty-nine years, discoursed on the sūtras in more than three hundred assemblies, and set forth eighty-four thousand Dharma gates—all without speaking a single word. So is this seven-day retreat not superfluous?!”

Teaching:

“Patriarchs throughout the ages would never say, ‘You have seen your true nature,’ and then have the disciple reply, ‘Thank you, Master, for confirming it.’ If an arhat said, ‘I have attained the fruit of arhatship,’ that person would be far from being an arhat! Do not expect a dialogue such as ‘You have seen your true nature’ during this seven-day retreat.”

“Those doing a seven-day retreat generally do not ask, ‘Is this seeing my true nature?’ Usually, they first describe it at length and then ask, ‘What is this?’ I would tell them: ‘I know what you are asking about, but if you become attached to this, there can be no talk of seeing your true nature at all!’ Some persistently press the matter, hoping for the dialogue mentioned above.”

“Then I state clearly: I would rather offend you than harm you! If I say that you have seen your true nature, I harm you; if I do not say so, I offend you. But I have not said that you have not seen your true nature. Other people’s words are unreliable. It is not for me to decide; you must have assurance for yourself.”

Teaching:

“It is not found within language that can be understood, yet language can evoke it and enable one to apprehend it. If one can apprehend it, then ‘Beat him to death and feed him to the dogs’ is truly repaying the Buddha’s kindness! If one cannot apprehend it, then it is slandering the Buddha. Patriarch Yunmen was a great patriarch of his generation—how could he speak carelessly? He said this in a particular setting; in a different setting, it would be slandering the Buddha. Such words cannot be understood rigidly. ‘It’ is not within language that can be understood.”

Asked: “Sitting meditation is an auxiliary practice, while practice off the cushion is the main practice? …”

Answered: “That is how practice is ordinarily discussed. During a seven-day retreat, we do not speak of this; simply concentrate on sitting in meditation.”

“If, at six o’clock in the evening, you cannot sleep and deluded thoughts are flying about, then rather than trying to maintain contemplation, it is better to recite the mantra. An awe-inspiring awakening, clearly present before you—that is contemplation. As soon as a deluded thought arises: ‘Hey!’ Empty and open, clear and pure. It is not a matter of seeking out some light or image and fixing your gaze on it. That is not it at all!”

Asked: “When one loses one’s temper, is it karmic cause and effect, or …?”

Answered: “‘Do not eliminate deluded thoughts or seek the true.’ It is not a matter of eliminating deluded thoughts in order to seek some truth. Even amid battle, sword in hand, one must see one’s true nature—much less when merely angered!”

Teaching:

“What is Buddhism? It can be defined in three sentences: Do no evil (the human path); practice all good (the heavenly path); purify one’s own mind (the path of liberation).”

Teaching:

“The Buddha is the great king of physicians. If there were no illness, there would be no medicine. The fundamental principle of the Buddha-Dharma is no dharma: ‘No-

dharma is also Dharma.' This was what the Buddha said to the first-generation patriarch, Venerable Mahākāśyapa—not the first patriarch of the Chan school, but the first patriarch of Buddhism, the first patriarch of all the schools. The Chan school came into being only after the Sixth Patriarch; before the Sixth Patriarch, this was the orthodox tradition of Buddhism."

"'The Dharma that is fundamentally Dharma has no dharma; no-dharma is also Dharma. Now, when the no-dharma is transmitted, how have dharmas ever been dharmas?' Originally there was no Dharma to be spoken, yet it was still spoken because sentient beings are ill. 'How have dharmas ever been dharmas?'—not a single word has still been spoken."

Teaching:

"The Sixth Patriarch spoke of employing thirty-six pairs. These are medicines prescribed according to the illness—Dharma gates for counteracting it."

Asked: "I can fully understand 'the previous thought has ceased and the next thought has not yet arisen.' But when there is not even a dream in sleep, and one knows nothing at all …?"

Answered: "'The previous thought has ceased and the next thought has not yet arisen' belongs neither to 'knowing' nor to 'not knowing.' It has even less to do with dreams."

Asked: "I can accept that I am originally a Buddha, but when deluded thoughts arise, I still cannot be my own master and follow them along?"

Answered: "Your strength is not yet sufficient! This is the power of emptiness and luminosity, not the power of grasping something. It would be better called the power of throwing away: once it is thrown away, the power becomes great."

Teaching: "What does non-contrivance mean? It does not mean doing nothing; rather, having acted, it is as though one has not acted. Chan Master Baizhang was like this: busily occupied, yet he called himself an idle person."

Teaching: "'To cut off afflictions only increases the illness; to pursue suchness is also deviant.' This is said in the Chan school's Records of the Transmission of the Lamp."

Asked: "I have continuous, long-term tinnitus. It continues ringing even while I recite the mantra. What should I do?"

Answered: "Let it ring; you recite."

Asked: “How does one practice diligently?”

Answered: “Generally speaking, making an earnest effort in practice is called diligence. But this is not ultimate diligence. Ultimate diligence is expressed thus: ‘If the mind gives rise to diligence, it is delusion, not diligence. If the mind is free of delusion, diligence is boundless.’”

After Entering the Retreat (the First and Second Seven-Day Periods)

Asked: “I think that every world completely pervades empty space and the Dharma realm …”

Answered: “There is an original passage in the Buddhist sūtras: ‘Like jewels in Indra’s net, each light mutually encompasses the others.’ If misunderstood, it may become rigidly conceptualized.”

Teaching:

“The place of Śākyamuni Buddha is originally the Pure Land. The Sahā world of the five turbidities in which we dwell is Śākyamuni Buddha’s Land of the Common Residence of Ordinary Beings and Sages; it appears in the form of the Sahā world of the five turbidities. Lotuses grow from fire: one realizes the Way in such a painful world. Here is Śākyamuni Buddha’s most pristine Pure Land.”

I once asked some people: “Suppose someone says, ‘I will not go to the Western Pure Land; I will go nowhere. I will remain in this Sahā world of the five turbidities. I have faith in the empowering power of Śākyamuni Buddha, and life after life I will never regress here.’ Does this person count as a believer in the Buddha?” Most people said that he did not count as a Buddhist.

In fact, this person is the most authentic of Buddhists. Life after life, he practices with Śākyamuni Buddha—how is that not authentic?! Yet so many people say that he does not count as a Buddhist. This is the result of the Pure Land school’s long-term teaching. Nowadays some Chan masters also preach the teachings (which is still much better than merely performing sūtra and repentance rites), but even when they preach, they do not speak of the ultimate meaning of the Noble Truth.

For example, the passage in the Diamond Sūtra, “Thus I liberate immeasurable, innumerable, boundless sentient beings, yet in reality no sentient being is liberated,” is not discussed. Nothing without characteristics is discussed; only what has characteristics is discussed. It has even become the notion that “whoever speaks of the formless is evil.”

If this continues, the essence of Śākyamuni Buddha’s Dharma will be utterly extinguished! Master Yuanyin was bold enough to raise the matter. Now that people

hear the Elder teaching the Dharma, they all come to study. Those with the capacity for liberation will, in the end, still have the capacity for liberation; they will never be satisfied with that simple, standardized format.

Apart from simple standardization, there is also the desperate striving upward: offering one's body to feed a tiger, cutting flesh to feed an eagle, burning one's fingers as an offering to the Buddha. In fact, not everyone can do such things. If one burns one's fingers, one cannot practice the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, because one cannot form the mudrās! Each has its own expedient means. Burning one's fingers has its spiritual significance, and one cannot say that it is wrong.

But one cannot obtain anything in exchange for burning one's fingers. If one thinks, "I have burned my fingers, so can the Buddhas and bodhisattvas give me something?" Can they? If they could, Śākyamuni Buddha would have given it to us long ago—why would there be any need to burn one's fingers? It was originally an expedient means, but some people have turned it into the ultimate. Therefore, it is only natural that Master Yuanyin was attacked. He was bold and dared to speak the truth—the true doctrines of the Buddhadharma."

Question: "What does it mean to say that rebirth in the Pure Land is a horizontal transcendence of the three realms, and that there is a barrier one must pass?"

Answer: "How would I know what he means? These words originally make a great deal of sense. This truly is a very good expedient method, but once it is overstated and made absolute, all other paths are blocked off.

"There are also teachings given as expedient means. For example, two people agree to go to the Inner Court of Tuṣita. One arrives first; later, the other passes through the outer court, becomes attached to it, and remains there. These are all expedient teachings. Also, the Mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra says, 'In the age of Dharma decline, billions upon billions practice, yet scarcely one attains the Way; only by relying on Buddha-recitation can one be liberated from birth and death.' I have searched the Mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra several times but have not found this passage."

According to the prevailing set of ideas, it is understandable that the Elder was attacked. But we are not satisfied with that set, because they explain the Buddhist sūtras entirely in terms of existence. Although they recite the Heart Sūtra all day long—"no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind; no forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touchables, or dharmas, … no wisdom and no attainment"—and recite nonexistence all day long, they insist on existence and dare not speak of nonexistence.

They fear that speaking of nonexistence will cause them to be accused of annihilationism! The Way cannot be obtained and cannot be relinquished—can it be annihilated? That is the true teaching, the ultimate meaning of the Noble Truth! This

is the foundation of the Buddhadharma. How fortunate we are! We have encountered the Elder, who accords so closely with the Buddhadharma. We should rejoice in this! Let others say whatever they wish."

Question: "When we are about to depart, will Maitreya Buddha come to receive us?"

Answer: "What is there to fear? We have the mantra of Maitreya Bodhisattva; it is the mantra that brings us home."

Question: "Are there any signs of rebirth in Tuṣita Heaven? For example, when one is reborn in the Western Pure Land, there are signs such as the body remaining supple?"

Answer: "In fact, the auspicious signs now spoken of in connection with rebirth in the Pure Land may occur, but they are not inevitable. Whether signs appear or not, one can still be reborn in the Pure Land. Moreover, rebirth in heaven may also be accompanied by such auspicious signs."

Question: "Is assisted Buddha-recitation necessary?"

Answer: "Of course it is very good. In assisted Buddha-recitation, the deceased liberates the living. Do not get it backward—do you liberate them? What ability do you have to liberate them? They provide you with an opportunity to assist in recitation. You think you have helped someone, but you yourself also benefit. That is what it means: they liberate you."

Question: "Master Yuanyin will come to receive us disciples of heart esotericism, won't he?"

Answer: "Master Yuanyin comes to receive those whose practice has not been very good. Those who have practiced well have no need to be received at all."

Question: "If we wish to be reborn in the Western Pure Land, will the Elder send us there directly, or first receive us into the Inner Court and then send us there?"

Answer: "Where do you wish to go? Is the Pure Land outside your mind? Is there any need to run there? To take a step back, if you are unwilling to go, the Elder can do nothing about you. For example, an intermediate-state being will be liberated if it listens to your words; it continues in rebirth only because it is unwilling to listen."

Question: "Does this intermediate state refer to the eighth consciousness?"

Answer: "By then, it has already entered the womb; the seventh consciousness and the first six consciousnesses have all arisen. It simply has a very subtle body—it does

have a body. If it were only the eighth consciousness, it could not think in that way or hear what you say."

Question: "What is our empowerment?"

Answer: "Empowerment means telling you the six mudrās and one mantra; without empowerment, they are not told to you. Do not imagine it to be something so miraculous. Even if miraculous things exist, they cannot fill your stomach. I do not deny the existence of empowering power, but it cannot fill your stomach and cannot substitute for realizing the Way. Truly realizing the Way means transcending that empowering power; if you cannot transcend it, you cannot realize the Way.

"It is of no real use. It merely helps those whose faith is insufficient to increase their faith: they feel the empowering power and thereby develop faith. That is its only function. It cannot help you open up and see your true nature ahead of time. Rather, if you let this go, those who let it go quickly may do so sooner. One can see one's true nature only by letting go of these things with characteristics."

Question: "What is empowering power?"

Answer: "It is a kind of force, but we do not attach importance to it. We do not attach importance to it because it has little to do with realizing the mind and seeing one's true nature."

Question: "If a guru has extraordinarily strong empowering power over me, but I do not feel drawn to it, will it have no effect?"

Answer: "Even if you do feel drawn to it, it is of no use. Eliminating karma and carrying karma are expedient teachings; they cannot replace your own diligent practice."

Question: "Chan Master Yongjia said, 'Within the essence, the six perfections and myriad practices are complete.' How should we conduct ourselves in daily life? ..."

Answer: "You may have misunderstood. When you speak of the six perfections and myriad practices, you are establishing an appearance of the six perfections and myriad practices. In fact, Chan Master Yongjia saw through the six perfections and myriad practices. The meaning of the Song of Realizing the Way is certainly not to establish the six perfections and myriad practices as something with characteristics. It sees through the six perfections and myriad practices and breaks through their appearance. That is the true six perfections and myriad practices."

Question: "But what needs to be done should still be done, should it not? Is it not said that we should neither abide in appearances nor discard appearances?"

Answer: “Originally, there is no obstruction: what should be done should still be done. But once it is put this way, there is a problem, for it becomes a kind of exchange. If you cultivate blessings, your efforts will certainly not be wasted; if we do good deeds, our efforts will certainly not be wasted. But doing good deeds and awakening to see one’s true nature are two different matters. Not doing them does not hinder awakening to see one’s true nature. Doing them does not further awakening to see one’s true nature.

“It is not a matter of using worldly things with characteristics as something to exchange. There is no such marketplace of exchange in the Buddhadharma. Yet this may serve as an expedient teaching. For example, digging a mountain cave does not mean that one can realize the Way, but one might dig and dig until the time is ripe, and suddenly awaken to the Way. But now, when we undertake a seven-day retreat and speak of the unsurpassed Way, we do not speak of such things.”

Question: “Is it not said that one proceeds from the first bhūmi to the eighth bhūmi, and then above the tenth bhūmi …?”

Answer: “If even a single trace of these concepts remains as an obstruction in your mind and has not been swept clean, then you have not realized even the first bhūmi, so there is no need to speak of what comes later. A first-bhūmi bodhisattva has long since swept these things away completely. If these matters are not thoroughly cleared away, there is no room for anything else.”

I will give an extreme example: at a distribution center devoted exclusively to propagating the Pure Land, only Pure Land books are distributed.

Someone resolves to distribute the Record of the Source-Mirror—a work written by Chan Master Yongming Yanshou, a patriarch of the Pure Land school. (Chan Master Yongming Yanshou’s birthday is observed as Amitābha Buddha’s birthday, because everyone regards him as an incarnation of Amitābha Buddha.) Originally, it would have been entirely appropriate for his Record of the Source-Mirror to be distributed there.

But after the people at the distribution center leafed through the Record of the Source-Mirror, they said that the book could not be distributed, because it did not speak of Buddha-recitation and was therefore a non-Buddhist work. How pitiful! It was written by a patriarch of the Pure Land school! This is going too far.

The concept of the “tenth bhūmi,” like other expedient teachings, has no connection with realizing the Way. Do not try to connect any thing with characteristics to it. I also agree very much with these expedient teachings, but although gold dust is precious, when it enters the eye it becomes a speck.

A monastic asked: “After practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, will it affect us if we also perform sūtra and repentance rites?”

Answer: “It may be impossible not to perform sūtra and repentance rites when circumstances require it. To give an example, without speaking of others: if I had the opportunity to become a monastic and were the abbot of a temple, then if I did not perform sūtra and repentance rites, I might not be able to shoulder the responsibility either.”

Because most of those who come are that kind of person, and only a few seek liberation. I cannot possibly serve only the few! Even when a certain old monk meets people, he says: “Get rich! Get rich! Get very rich!” If he did not say this, he would have nothing to say to those who come, because they come seeking wealth! So let the scripture-chanting and repentance rites be just that!

People like all of you, who genuinely seek liberation and want to awaken and see your true nature—these are the elite of Buddhism! Precisely because of this, after the character mo in “Dharma-ending Age” there is still the character fa, Dharma: the true Dharma still exists. Otherwise, the Buddha-Dharma would long since have disappeared; how could there still be any Buddha-Dharma?”

Question: “Speaking of the Pure Land school, do we have anyone in our country like Dharma Master Jingkong…”

Answer: “Several years ago, debates about Dharma Master Jingkong arose. These debates continue to this day, yet no Dharma master has had influence greater than Dharma Master Jingkong’s. We are speaking only of influence, not of anything else.”

Several years ago, people spoke of “three abnormal phenomena currently existing in Buddhist circles”: first, the phenomenon of compiled editions; second, the phenomenon of the Original-Vow Dharma Gate; and third, the phenomenon of Dharma Master Jingkong. Once Dharma Master Jingkong was singled out for criticism, problems arose. Dharma Master Jingkong has many supporters, and when they heard this, they objected and argued with him. These disputes have not yet ended. Let us not become involved in this controversy.

Actually, some Pure Land patriarchs emphasized “faith.” Whatever skillful means they used in speaking were all intended to emphasize faith. Their entry point is “faith,” which differs from our Dharma, whose entry point is “practice.” We are not afraid of others’ criticism; we are only afraid that you will not practice! For our Dharma was transmitted by Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. What kind of bodhisattva is Samantabhadra Bodhisattva?!”

Question: “In ordinary circumstances, I can restrain myself in matters concerning men and women. But last night, in a dream, I saw a woman who was so beautiful! As soon as my mind stirred, I lost my vital essence. How can one maintain restraint in a dream?”

Answer, counter-questioning: “Do you think that during the day you truly can keep your mind from stirring?”

Another question: “In a situation like this, should one wait five or six hours before sitting again, as the practice manual says?”

Answer: “That is a general instruction. We are now in the special circumstances of a seven-day retreat; how could it work to wait five or six hours before sitting again? And, for example, suppose that when you come off the cushion one day, you urgently need to urinate or defecate. Must you rigidly endure another fifteen minutes before relieving yourself?”

Question: “Teacher Qi, when reciting a mantra, should one visualize the mantra sound issuing from the dantian?”

Answer: “Who said that?!” He immediately turned to a practitioner beside the questioner: “How absurd! Yesterday you said that your head swelled and hurt badly when reciting the mantra. I told you first to see a doctor to determine whether there was something wrong with your head. Later, you said the doctor found nothing wrong, but your head still hurt, so only then did I tell you to use this method as a remedy. It was directed specifically to you personally, yet you told others that they should practice this way? How absurd! If there is always a ‘dantian’ there, how could the body possibly dissolve into emptiness?!!! How absurd!”

The Third Seven-Day Retreat

Inner attendant asks: “Please give us instruction concerning observing silence.”

Answer: “One can only say that it is a rule. Things are different now from ancient times! In ancient times, the local government was also the law-enforcement authority. They understood that during a Chan seven-day retreat one absolutely could not leave. If someone died, they would place the body beneath a table and wait until the retreat ended before taking it out for cremation; they simply paid no attention to it.”

Could this be done now? Would it be acceptable for someone to die during a seven-day retreat? Would the police not investigate? Moreover, we come from all over the country. If someone complained to the police, could they refrain from handling it? Therefore, we cannot now compel you to observe silence as they did in ancient

times. If you insist on talking, you are free to come and go; simply end your retreat and go outside to talk!"

Question: "What Dharma did the World-Honored One use for cultivation in those days?"

Answer: "Śākyamuni Buddha came to manifest an example. What Dharma would he need? 'The Dharma is originally dharma-less; even the dharma-less Dharma is a dharma. Now that I transmit the dharma-less Dharma, when have dharmas ever been dharmas?' He has come into this world eight thousand times already, each time to manifest an example. What Dharma would he cultivate? It is we who need to practice according to the example he manifested!"

Question: "Are awakening and seeing one's true nature the same thing?"

Answer: "One may put it that way: they are the same thing. There are also other expressions—nirvāṇa, bodhi, and so forth. If you wish to distinguish among the terms, you may say that there are distinctions. But on this occasion, we will not discuss theories of distinction or non-distinction. The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch states it very clearly: 'The self-nature of bodhi is originally pure. Simply use this mind, and directly attain Buddhahood.'"

Question: "But I still feel that there are distinctions…"

Answer: "If you wish to master the theory thoroughly, I would simply suggest that you enter solitary retreat and study the Buddhist canon. Do not listen to any spiritual teacher; listen directly to the Buddha's words. When you truly attain great and perfect understanding, how could you fail to comprehend? Great and perfect understanding does not mean merely understanding the theory; it is another way of speaking about awakening and seeing one's true nature."

Instruction: "Another expression for seeing one's true nature is to be liberated from birth and death and to realize nirvāṇa. But is there any birth and death for you to be liberated from? Liberation from birth and death does not mean that there was originally birth and death and now there is nirvāṇa. It is not the attainment of some grand theory; rather, everything is simply normal. Do you understand? It has always been so: originally there is no birth and death; originally there is nirvāṇa."

Question: "What is ignorance?"

Answer: "Do not imagine some extremely profound meaning such as 'the origin of the universe.' Simply put, 'ignorance' means not understanding."

Question: "What is ignorance?"

Answer: “Originally pure—where could ignorance be? The Heart Sūtra states it very clearly: ‘There is no ignorance, and also no ending of ignorance.’”

Day Eighteen

Question: “When reciting the Extended Rebirth Mantra, what other mantra should one add?”

Answer: “I know that the person asking this question must certainly have doubts about the Extended Rebirth Mantra; otherwise, merely having heard this mantra, one would already have been reborn there without even reciting it! There would be no need to recite it again! This is beyond all doubt. Otherwise, what other mantra would there be to add? There is an even simpler way: one does not even need the Extended Rebirth Mantra; reciting a single Buddha-name can bring rebirth in the Western Pure Land. There is an even simpler example: Chūḷapanthaka attained arhatship through the single word ‘broom.’ So what mantra should be added? Do not add another mantra—add a broom, and sweep away those doubts!”

If he still has doubts, we do not demand so much from everyone. Therefore, we simply require the recitation of the Extended Rebirth Mantra forty-nine times each day. Do not add anything else. If you add something else, it will make this mantra seem powerless.”

Question: “After one thousand sessions, if we still have not awakened, what should we do?”

Answer: “Take the Pure Land as the ultimate destination. The Heart-of-Heart Dharma has three statements. Without the final statement, ‘the Pure Land as the ultimate destination,’ and with only the first two statements, the threshold for the Heart-of-Heart Dharma would be too high; very few people could study it. After one thousand sessions, if one recites the Buddha’s name, its power is altogether different.”

One thousand sessions is the minimum; the more, the better! This does not mean that after one thousand sessions one must stop meditating. These matters are not fixed; they must be determined according to circumstances. After one thousand sessions, if one’s state of mind is the same on and off the cushion, it makes no difference whether one meditates or not. We are not concerned with sitting meditation; we are concerned with one’s state of mind. If your mind becomes scattered when you do not sit, but becomes settled as soon as you sit, then you must continue sitting.”

Question: “Does it matter whether one has seen one’s true nature or not?”

Answer: “That is not something a person who has not seen their true nature can speculate about. There is no use speaking of it, for they will not understand it anyway. So let us simply not raise that issue. As when people drink water, they themselves know whether it is cold or warm; inwardly, they know clearly. If it were false, could it have been transmitted down to the present?”

Question: “What is the relationship between an explosion and seeing one’s true nature?”

Answer: “Take an example: every graduate sets off a string of firecrackers, but one cannot say that someone who did not set off firecrackers did not graduate. Some people have very strong attachment to appearances; even if they have an explosive experience, they still do not see their true nature. They are attached to the appearance of explosion. Originally there was no term ‘explosion’; the ancients called it ‘shattering to pieces.’ In ancient times, there was no word for explosion.”

The Chan school puts it more simply: with a single ‘hou!’ sound, everything is understood at once. This cannot be reached through speculation. What can be speculated about is an explosion; seeing one’s true nature cannot be speculated about, for it is not within your thinking. An explosion may bring the real to prominence, but the real is not an explosion.”

Originally, there was no need for one thousand sessions to uncover one’s original nature. But one constantly seeks through appearances, and so it does not appear. When dark clouds cover it, the blue sky does not reveal itself. When the blue sky reveals itself forcefully, it resembles an explosion; when it does not reveal itself forcefully, it does not resemble an explosion.”

The old master said that sometimes it is like an explosion; sometimes it is like a rolled-up curtain suddenly falling down with a crash—then one understands! For some, the body feels as if it suddenly shatters like porcelain! For others, it feels as though the bottom has dropped out from beneath them, with a thump—as though the bottom of a bucket has fallen away—then one understands! For still others, it is even simpler: ‘Oh!’—so that is how it is! These are all the same.”

Instruction:

“Only through a great death can there be a great life. Unless this present thinking mind dies away, it cannot come alive. Only when the worldly mind has died completely can the wisdom-life of the dharmakāya come alive. How does one die? I often say this online: choose a Dharma gate suited to you—whether Buddha-recitation, Chan investigation, or Esoteric practice—put it into practice, cut off conceptual understanding, arouse a lasting resolve, persevere without letup, and go deeply into one practice.”

Question: “If a person has no education at all, does not read books or watch DVDs, and simply practices in this way, will that person’s practice be exactly the same as that of someone highly educated?”

Answer: “Not necessarily. Some may even be faster. Some people hear a single line of scripture and are opened up—for example, the Sixth Patriarch.”

Question: “Could it be that they themselves do not know it?”

Answer: “How could they not know? They themselves know best.”

Dharma Brother from Jiangxi: “I have made a vow that I must accomplish this within this seven-day retreat…”

Answer: “What standard determines whether you have accomplished it or not? Is it of any use to rely on Teacher Qi’s words? If he says you have accomplished it, then you have; if he says you have not, then you have not? If you ask me, I may refuse to say. If I do not say so, does that mean you cannot attain it?”

Dharma Brother from Jiangxi: “If I cannot attain it, then I cannot attain it!”

Qi: “Wouldn’t that be unjust? In fact, you may have attained it, but I might deliberately refuse to say so. If you establish your standard on what I say, you will be taken in.”

Dharma Brother from Jiangxi: “I am not afraid of being taken in.”

Qi: “Then I will deliberately say that it is not so—keep saying that it is not so—and see what you do.”

Dharma Brother from Jiangxi: “That is fine.”

Qi: “Then tell us.”

Dharma Brother from Jiangxi:

“During the session just now, I recited until I could no longer recite. I felt terrified inside, as though I were going to die. I was afraid of death! Then I remembered Master Yuanyin’s words: ‘Do not fear death!’ I recited once, and it passed. When I came to, there was nothing. I thought I would see what happened the next time. I recited again, and it passed again. This would not accomplish the purpose! It continued four or five times in succession.”

“Afterward, I simply stopped thinking about it and kept reciting the mantra without interruption. Then I recited, ‘Om bala bala—pa!’ and felt so cool and refreshed! So relaxed… Om bala bala—ba! Oh! Then it was over!”

Qi:

“When the explosion occurred, you felt relaxed! … We had just agreed that I would deliberately say it was not so, to see what you would do. What I mean is this: if you place the completion of your task in the hands of another person—even in the words of Teacher Qi—it is a tragedy. You know the score in your own mind. It should be as when one drinks water: one knows for oneself whether it is cold or warm.”

“When the time comes to lay everything out, we can compare notes and say, ‘Yes, that is it,’ and compare whether the states of mind are the same. Comparing the states of mind is what is called verification. Verification definitely does not mean conferring some designation upon you. It is not something conferred; you yourself know with absolute certainty.”

Dharma Brother from Jiangxi:

“My feeling is that the mantra must not stop. When the mantra does not stop, my feet do not hurt and my hands do not hurt. The mantra must not stop. If it continues without stopping, it is relatively effective; if the recitation stops, the purpose cannot be achieved.”

Qi:

“All this stuff! You have piled up a whole lot of miscellaneous baggage. Ah! I am not asking you to say, ‘I do not even wish to hear the word Buddha,’ nor am I asking you to say, ‘Beat me to death and feed me to the dogs.’ But at the very least, do not let this miscellaneous baggage become an obstacle.”

“If these things are still present, and you claim that you have opened up and seen your true nature, others will laugh at you! Look at what Patriarch Linji said. What are tenth-bhūmi bodhisattvas? What is bodhi? What is nirvāṇa? Look through his writings—did he ever speak of such things? He did not want such names and forms to obstruct your sight! You have this great heap of names and forms, like halos around you; of course he would reject them.”

“If such names and forms are not given to you, does that mean you have not seen your true nature? Awakening and seeing one’s true nature are also names and forms. The Diamond Sūtra puts it this way: Can a srotāpanna entertain the thought, ‘I have attained the fruit of stream-entry’? No, such a thought is not entertained! Once such a thought arises, one cannot realize that fruition. Sweep it all away! Even the Dharma should be relinquished, much less what is not Dharma! …”

Question: “How can one extend an instantaneous moment to half an hour or an hour?”

Answer: “No one is asking you to extend it.”

Question: “How does one preserve it?”

Answer: “Do not preserve it. There is nothing worth preserving.”

Question: “Once it manifests before one, is there no need to preserve it?”

Answer: “Once it is discovered, you cannot drive it away even if you try—so why would it need preserving? If what ‘manifests before you’ needs to be preserved, it is certainly mistaken; it certainly is not that. You have substituted something with form for that which is formless. Formless awakening cannot be driven away. It cannot be grasped or discarded; it is not within grasping and discarding. This is neither arising nor ceasing; this is nirvāṇa.”

Question: “I feel that a few minutes are not satisfying enough. I have read collections of questions and answers in which some experiences did not disappear for several weeks.”

Answer: “Those are light-images, not ordinary mind. Ordinary mind is the Way.”

Question: “Some Dharma brothers say that they drive for dozens of kilometers without knowing whether they have passed red lights or green lights.”

Answer: “That too is merely a light-image! Light-images have their own course, and that course is very obvious, but it is not the essential nature. Even if the car flies through, even if one passes through space and time, it is still a light-image, not the essential nature. The essential nature has none of those appearances.”

Teaching:

“Nowadays, some people take whether the body feels uncomfortable, or whether one is ill, as the criterion for awakening and seeing one’s true nature, as the measure of practice. The ancients said, ‘If one hears the Way in the morning, one may die content in the evening.’ Illness is one of our characteristics; it is an attribute inherent in life. How many patriarchs throughout the generations manifested illness? What does that have to do with anything? People are always using something with form as a measure; they are far too accustomed to clinging to appearances.”

Question: “Are explosion and breaking free the same thing?”

Answer: “Explosion itself is not breaking free, but an explosion may make it stand out more clearly, making it easier to see one’s true nature. Experiences are conditioned appearances; all appearances are illusory. To seek what is real amid

illusion—is that not like climbing a tree to look for fish? In fact, if there has truly been an explosion, would one still argue about it? How could one remain entangled like this? You keep asking what happens after an explosion—have an explosion once and see for yourself! How could you fail to recognize it? It is extremely obvious."

Question: "That Dharma brother just now has already exploded!"

Answer: "No! He has exploded within theory! He still cannot get out of those terms. If there were truly an explosion, his entire set of theories would naturally be forgotten."

Question: "Can everyone who has awakened penetrate Chan koans?"

Answer: "Not necessarily. If their mind is not on that, what is there to penetrate? If their mind is on it, perhaps they can. But there is one point: their speech is much like a Chan koan. This is because it is natural, not deliberately contrived. Their teaching is very direct, without beating around the bush; they lay everything out, and it is very ordinary."

Question: "Why must the mouth move during mental recitation?"

Answer: "We speak of mental recitation to distinguish it from oral recitation. 'Hearing with the ear' means that it is heard—the saying goes, 'In this land, the true substance of teaching lies in pure hearing of sound.' The mantra is heard through the ear faculty. But if you cannot gather it in, then move your mouth a little—ah! You hear it. Yet it still depends on hearing it."

Question: "While reciting a mantra, I feel as though I see the mantra turning round and round?"

Answer: "The mantra is heard. At times, when the six sense faculties mutually encompass one another, it is seen; but in actuality, it is still heard."

Teaching:

"'Originally, dharmas are dharma-less' means following the principle of 'dharma-less.' 'Dharma-less dharmas are also dharmas' means that immeasurable dharma gates arise from this principle. 'Now that I transmit the dharma-less' means that what I now impart to you is this fundamental 'dharma-less.' Thus, 'When have dharmas ever been dharmas?' Everything said before was never really said. Do not transmit my words; transmit the root. This uses the term 'dharma-less,' but in fact it is Buddha-nature. There are simply many terms for it."

Question: "How should one proceed along the road ahead?"

Answer: “There is no road; there is no need to walk.”