Dharma Discourse at the Heart-of-Heart Dharma Empowerment

Master Yuanyin: Lectures Given in Shanghai in August 1993

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Mind-Ground Dharma Gate

When practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, practitioners should use Vajra Recitation while sitting in meditation—that is, move the lips slightly while reciting the mantra, but make no sound. This is because reciting aloud may exhaust vital energy, while purely mental recitation may strain the blood. In our practice, we must first take proper care of the body and avoid harming it. Both meditation and daily cultivation should be carried out in a way that protects the body.

However, if during meditation karmic seeds begin to stir, the mind becomes agitated and restless, and we can no longer sit steadily; or if drowsiness arises, sleep overtakes us, or confused dreamlike states appear before the mind, then we should recite the mantra aloud. In this way, scattered delusive thoughts and the demon of sleep can be dispelled, allowing us to enter samādhi. If these conditions do not arise, we should continue to practice Vajra Recitation.

The speed of mantra recitation should be about ten to twelve times per minute. While reciting, we should practice “the mind recites, and the ears listen.” This means that each syllable of the mantra should pass clearly through the mind, one syllable at a time. It is not merely reciting with the mouth while the mind is absent. Rather, we should use our ears to attentively listen to the mantra sound arising from within the mind, hearing each syllable clearly and distinctly. Only in this way can we gather and still our delusive thoughts, preventing them from moving, and gradually enter Samādhi.

Of our six sense faculties—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind—the mind faculty is like a monkey long accustomed to jumping about restlessly. It is extremely

difficult to make it quiet, still, and free from delusive thoughts. Yet if we cannot gather and still it, we cannot enter samādhi, open wisdom, and attain the Way. Therefore, Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva taught that when reciting the Buddha's Name, we must "gather in all six faculties, and let pure mindfulness continue without interruption."

With utmost sincerity and wholehearted devotion, we use the sacred name "Amitābha Buddha" to gather the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind so that they do not move. Only then can we peacefully enter samādhi. Among these Six Faculties, the Mind Faculty and the Ear Faculty are the most difficult to gather.

By closing the eyes and not looking at external objects, the Eye Faculty can be gathered. By reciting the mantra, the Tongue Faculty can be gathered. By not following external scents, the Nose Faculty can be gathered. By avoiding contact with external objects, the Body Faculty can be gathered.

However, the human ear is extremely sensitive. It can hear sounds from very far away—even across mountains. External noise can easily disturb the mind. As for the Mind Faculty, it is even harder to gather. Even when we do not want it to move, thoughts arise from within on their own.

Why is this so? It is because of the habitual tendencies accumulated over countless lifetimes and eons. The mind has become accustomed to movement and cannot easily remain still. In the Buddhist scriptures, this is called mental attention (manaskāra). It is also the first of the five universal mental factors taught in the Consciousness-Only (Yogācāra) school: attentiveness, contact, feeling, perception, and volition. Residing throughout all eight consciousnesses, stirring at every moment and flowing ceaselessly like a stream. It is therefore called "the continuous flow of arising and ceasing." This activity is extremely subtle and ordinarily imperceptible to us.

Some people say: "When we do not practice the Dharma or sit in meditation, there seem to be no thoughts. But as soon as we begin practicing the Dharma and sitting in meditation, thoughts start arising instead. Has something gone wrong with our practice? Have we somehow practiced incorrectly and caused thoughts to appear?"

No. This is because in ordinary life the mind is scattered and confused, so we do not notice thoughts moving about. When the mind becomes a little quieter through practice, we then begin to see thoughts arising and moving. What should we do then? How do we calm these delusive thoughts? The only method is to use the Ear Faculty to gather the Mind Faculty.

By quietly listening to the sound of reciting the Buddha's Name, the delusive thoughts can be gathered and calmed. Because the mind cannot focus on two things

at the same time, when attention is fully placed on listening to the Buddha's Name, the delusive thoughts naturally become still. Therefore, when reciting the Buddha's Name, we should focus on the six-character phrase "Namo Amitābha Buddha" or the four-character phrase "Amitābha Buddha." Each syllable should be heard clearly and distinctly, one by one. Only in this way can delusive thoughts be gathered and stilled.

Likewise, when reciting a mantra, each syllable should pass clearly through the mind, and the ears should hear each syllable clearly and distinctly. Only then is the practice in accordance with the Dharma. Therefore, the essential point of seated meditation is: "The mind recites, and the ears listen." By gathering and calming the delusive thoughts in this way, one gradually enters Samādhi. Otherwise, if one sits reciting the mantra or the Buddha's Name with the mouth, while the mind continues thinking about many other things, then Samādhi cannot be attained. One must practice "the mind recites, and the ears listen," and practice seated meditation single-mindedly.

However, the most important thing is still the emptiness of mind. The purpose of cultivation is to transcend the Three Realms and go beyond the realm of worldly conditioning. Therefore, everything must be let go before one can enter the Way. Lay practitioners have one more layer of obstacles than monastics. They have families and many afflictions. Before one matter is finished, another matter already arrives. There are endlessly many things to deal with.

Therefore, we must constantly remain vigilant and see through these external appearances. They are all false and ultimately unattainable. If the mind does not cling to them, then the coarse delusive thoughts will not arise. After this, when one diligently practices seated meditation and mantra recitation, subtle delusive thoughts will still continue to arise. These are habitual tendencies accumulated through countless lifetimes. The mind has become accustomed to movement, so it cannot suddenly stop. But there is no need to fear this.

If thoughts arise and we are able to see them, and simply do not follow or pay attention to them, then the delusive thoughts will naturally dissolve. If thoughts arise and we do not see them, then we follow them and are carried away by them. In that case, one cannot enter Samādhi. Therefore, the most important point in seated meditation is to let go of everything. The mind should remain clear and aware. The moment a thought arises, we should immediately see it, but neither follow it nor suppress it. Nor should we dislike it,

because the very act of disliking is itself another delusive thought. Suppressing thoughts also does not work. Thoughts cannot truly be eliminated through suppression. It is like using a stone to press down grass: once the stone is removed,

the grass grows again. That method is ineffective. Even if thoughts were forcibly suppressed, one would become like earth, wood, stone, or metal—rigid and lifeless, unable to function freely. Therefore, we should use a living method of transformation, not suppression. When thoughts arise, simply do not pay attention to them. Bring up the mantra, and the delusive thoughts will naturally be transformed.

By practicing diligently in this way and persevering in seated meditation, one eventually reaches single-minded concentration; the mantra then naturally falls away and can no longer be intentionally brought forth. Why is this so? Because the mind that recites the mantra is still a delusive mind. There are still a subject and an object: the mind that recites, and the mantra that is being recited. (The same applies to reciting the Buddha's Name: there is the mind that recites, and the Buddha who is being recited.) As long as there is this duality of subject and object, it is still a delusive mind.

All dualistic oppositions are unreal and not true reality. The True Mind is beyond all duality and without form. Anything that possesses form or appearance is ultimately illusory. If we truly practice until reaching Single-minded concentration, then all relative and illusory phenomena naturally fall away and disappear. At this moment, the body, mind, and the phenomenal world completely vanish into emptiness. Even the void itself is shattered, and only then will the authentically real, innate true nature fully reveal itself.

After receiving the empowerment and practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, there may be a period of diarrhea. There is no need to be afraid. This occurs because the power of the Dharma is beginning to take effect. This practice possesses tremendous empowering grace, causing you to purge impurities, defilements, and habitual obscurations through your stool, essentially transforming your inner vessel. This is a good thing, so you must not fear.

After practicing the Dharma for a period of time, one may begin to understand teachings of Chan. However, this is only an awakening at the level of principle and intellectual understanding. Mere understanding through words and language is of little use. Because there has been no direct realization and the power of Samādhi is still insufficient, although one may understand some principles, when actual situations arise one is still unable to remain unmoved. Therefore, awakening through intellectual understanding cannot end birth and death. One must attain direct realization. Only by personally realizing the Original Nature does true power arise.

"To see" here, of course, does not mean seeing with the physical eyes. Rather, it means directly realizing one's original nature through the Dharma-eye of the mind-

ground. The original nature is formless; the physical eyes can see only things that have form. At that point, even the person you take yourself to be is no more—so what eyes could there be, and what could there be to see? Although the Dharma-body (Dharmakāya) has no form that can be seen, it is not a dead emptiness or annihilation. It is the source of limitless function and boundless power. All phenomena and all states appearing in the world are manifestations and transformations of it.

It is like electricity: the eyes cannot see it, yet without it the world cannot function. It is also like the salty taste within seawater: people can see the seawater, but they cannot see the saltiness within it—yet it truly exists.

When our practice reaches the point where the conditioned mind comes to rest and the world itself dissolves into emptiness, then spiritual awareness naturally arises, and through direct inner realization, one comes to see the Way. Therefore, it is said that the Mind-Ground Dharma Eye can perceive the Way. But after seeing the Way, has one truly succeeded? Many people think that once this happens, the work is complete. It is not so. One is still far from completion.

One has only just opened the treasure store and caught a first glimpse of the Buddha Nature. This is merely the beginning of realizing the Dharma-body (Dharmakāya) and is not yet the ultimate matter. Birth and death have still not been transcended. One must continue to practice diligently and completely remove all habitual tendencies and deeply rooted patterns before the work is truly finished. Because of this, Pure Land practitioners often criticize Chan, saying that even if one realizes the mind and sees one's true nature, birth and death still cannot yet be ended. They say it is more stable and reliable to practice Buddha-recitation in the Pure Land tradition and be reborn in Amitābha Buddha's Western Pure Land, where birth and death can truly be transcended.

When one has just realized the mind and seen the Original Nature, this is only the initial awakening. One has only broken through the first barrier and crossed the first threshold. Delusive habitual tendencies still remain, and birth and death have not yet been transcended.

Therefore, one must diligently protect and nurture this realization, tempering the mind through all circumstances encountered in daily life. One must completely eliminate the delusive habitual tendencies and attachments accumulated through countless lifetimes. Only when one truly accords with the teaching of the Diamond Sutra: "All appearances are illusory." —so that in favorable circumstances one does not become delighted, and in adverse circumstances one does not become disturbed, remaining inwardly unmoved in all situations—only then can one resolve the delusions of thought and transcend segmented birth and death.

The Diamond Sutra also says:
“The past mind cannot be grasped, the present mind cannot be grasped, and the future mind cannot be grasped.” Since the mind itself cannot be grasped, what is there to move? A person who has truly seen Nature retains only this pure awareness; everything else is unattainable. Yet one must go even further. Even this awareness, and even the notion of “unattainability,” must not be clung to. Only then is there true realization. If, upon encountering external conditions, thoughts arise and one is turned by thoughts and circumstances, then one has not truly realized Nature and awakened.

The reason why the attainment of the Arhats is divided into four stages is precisely according to whether thoughts and mental reactions still arise. A First-Fruit Arhat may dwell in the mountains and forests in purity and freedom from defilement, but upon entering a busy city, the eyes become dazzled and thoughts begin to arise in confusion. This is because the delusions of thought have not yet been fully resolved. The delusions of thought refer to giving rise to thoughts in response to external conditions, becoming confused by appearances and phenomena, mistaking illusion for reality, and generating delusive attachment and the desire to possess.

During seated meditation, many kinds of experiences and appearances may arise, such as beautiful visions of Buddhas, the radiance of Bodhisattvas, and other auspicious appearances, or frightening and ugly demonic appearances. None of these should be paid attention to. All appearances are unreal. Once one clings to appearances, one can easily fall into delusion.

Furthermore, when passing from form to formlessness, certain changes may occur. One may feel that the body has disappeared, or that the hands, feet, or head are gone. One should neither interfere with nor cling to these experiences. Even if it feels as though the breath is stopping or the head is about to explode, there is no need for fear. These are signs that body and mind are about to fall away. The moment fear arises, or the mind becomes startled and reacts, all previous effort is lost and one immediately comes out of samādhi.

When the time and conditions are fully mature, there may suddenly be a great inner “explosion.” Internally, body and mind dissolve; externally, the world also dissolves. Even empty space itself is shattered, and the Original Nature then manifests directly. However, one must never become attached to this experience or deliberately seek such an “explosion.” The moment one becomes attached to appearances, one is obstructed by delusive thoughts. Not only will this “explosion” not occur, one will not even be able to enter emptiness.

One advantage of Esoteric Buddhism is that practitioners often receive the blessings and support of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Sometimes an external sound, such as

an explosive noise, may trigger an inner breakthrough experience. Nevertheless, one must never seek or wait for such an experience, nor anticipate its arrival. All appearances arising within meditative states should be ignored and left alone. One must firmly remember the teaching of the Diamond Sutra: “All appearances are illusory.” All forms and appearances are unreal. If one does not cling to them, there is no problem. But once one becomes attached to them, there is the danger of falling into delusion.

A Second-Fruit Arhat is one in whom, becomes aware of a thought as soon as it arises. Although such a person is able not to abide in appearances and, after awareness arises, returns to inner stability and stillness, thoughts still arise and cease—meaning that birth and death remain. Therefore, one must still go through another round of birth and death before truly transcending segmented birth and death.

For this reason, when a person has opened the Original Nature, it does not mean that the great matter is finished. One must still diligently remove habitual tendencies and advance to the stage of the Third-Fruit Arhat, where the mind no longer moves when encountering circumstances. One must continue upward into the realm of the unconditioned, reaching the stage of Non-Retrogression (Avaivartika). Only then can it be said that the work has been initially accomplished. Any thought, delusive emotion, or deliberate contrivance belongs to the realm of the conditioned.

In cultivation, from the First Bhūmi, Second Bhūmi, Third Bhūmi, and onward up to the Seventh Bhūmi, all are still within the conditioned realm. Only upon entering the Eighth Bhūmi does one truly enter the Unconditioned. Although at the Seventh Bhūmi one has already realized the Unconditioned, there still remains a subtle trace of the Unconditioned—a shadow of it still remains—so it is not yet completely pure. Only at the Eighth Bhūmi does even this shadow disappear.

Therefore, each of us should carefully examine ourselves and see whether, when encountering external conditions, the mind truly remains unmoved. If delusive thoughts still rise and fall in ordinary life, that is still not sufficient. And if one becomes attached to circumstances and states, it is even less acceptable. At all times and in all places, the mind should remain empty and clear. One should be able to respond and function according to conditions, without attachment. True Emptiness is Wonderful Existence; Wonderful Existence is True Emptiness. Only this is a genuine awakening.

Besides seated meditation, the most important thing is daily practice in ordinary life. At all times we should observe ourselves. The moment a thought arises, we should immediately see it and not follow it. If a thought arises and we fail to notice it, and

only realize it after following it for a long stretch, then that is not sufficient. In Chan Buddhism there is a saying: “Do not fear the arising of thoughts; fear only awakening to them too late.”

There is nothing to fear when thoughts arise. What matters is whether we are aware of them. Once we follow thoughts and are carried away by them, that is birth and death. If we follow thoughts for a long time before becoming aware of it, then it is as though we have already “been dead” for a long time. This also shows that in the future we will still not be able to transcend birth and death. If we are able to do this —when the previous thought arises, the next thought immediately becomes aware of it, without following the thought—then we can attain freedom in rebirth. However, freedom in rebirth does not mean that birth and death have already been completely transcended. Birth and death still remain. It simply means that at the moment of birth and death, one is able to remain master of oneself, able to go wherever one wishes, no longer dragged by karma or passively carried along by karmic retribution.

Stages of Practice

The first step in practice is: when thoughts arise, do not follow them. If one is able to do this, then even within birth and death one can remain master of oneself, no longer dragged by karma, and attain great freedom.

The second step is to personally realize the Unconditioned. Whatever situations may arise, the mind remains unmoved. This is true accord with conditions, not suppressing the mind and forcing it into stillness. Suppression does not work.

One should continue responding to all kinds of situations and accord with all conditions naturally, without giving rise to distinctions of good or bad. When favorable conditions arise, there is no delight; when adverse conditions arise, there is no aversion. Only then can the mind remain peaceful and enter the state of equality and the Unconditioned. When this stage is reached, one attains freedom in transformation, and segmented birth and death is transcended. The first stage is freedom within birth and death; the second stage is freedom in transformation. One is able to transform the coarse into the subtle and the short into the long, reaching the level of an Eighth-Bhūmi Bodhisattva and manifesting at least thirty mind-born bodies.

The third step is the elimination of the subtle flowing stream. The subtle flowing stream refers to the mental attention (manaskāra) mentioned earlier. This mental attention (manaskāra) flows continuously within the field of the Eight Consciousnesses, and ordinarily one cannot perceive it at all. Only by entering deeply into the great Samādhi of Vajrasattva can one perceive it and eliminate it.

When this stage is reached and the subtle flowing stream has been completely eliminated, one is able to manifest hundreds of thousands of millions of transformation bodies in order to liberate hundreds of thousands of millions of sentient beings. Only at this point can it truly be said that one has come home. Therefore, it is not the case that everything is accomplished once one has awakened. One is still very far from completion. For this reason, one must continue to practice diligently and apply sustained effort in cultivation.

Without Bodhicitta, one cannot attain the Way. What is Bodhicitta? Simply explained, it means: “Above, seek the Buddha Way; below, liberate sentient beings.” We practice the Dharma in order to benefit and liberate sentient beings, not merely for our own personal liberation.

To be able to receive this Dharma today is truly a supreme blessing.

In the practice of Chan Buddhism, one may need decades of wholehearted investigation and practice before opening the Original Nature. Moreover, in modern life, people generally do not have enough time to engage in Chan investigation from morning to night. By relying on the Heart-of-Heart Dharma and receiving the empowering blessings of the Buddha, the process becomes much more expedient and rapid. Practicing Chan through self-power alone is like walking on two feet, whereas practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma with the empowering blessings of the Buddha is like traveling by car or airplane. Thus, the two differ greatly in the speed at which one progresses.

Since you have obtained this Dharma, you must cherish it, value it carefully, and protect it well. Even more importantly, you must practice diligently and continuously without interruption. One cannot practice today and stop tomorrow. In that way, accomplishment will never be attained. What is especially wonderful about the Heart-of-Heart Dharma is that it integrates all Dharma methods into one.

Śākyamuni Buddha taught that by practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma and forming the Fourth Mudrā, one may be reborn in the Western Pure Land of Amitābha Buddha, and even be reborn according to one’s vows in any of the Pure Lands throughout the ten directions. This corresponds to the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism. To open the Original Nature and see the True Nature—this is the essence of Chan. When realization reaches its ultimate stage, the mind pervades the worlds of the ten directions, and the worlds of the ten directions are perfectly contained within one’s mind. All Buddhas are within my mind, and I am within the minds of all Buddhas. Light interpenetrates light, mutually containing and reflecting one another in layer upon layer without end; all interpenetrate one another freely and without obstruction. This is precisely the vision of the Huayan (Avatamsaka) school.

Therefore, when we say that the Heart Esoteric School encompasses all other Buddhist schools without remainder, this is by no means an exaggeration. This Dharma is not easy to obtain. Therefore, everyone must practice diligently, persist in seated meditation and inner observation, and never treat it casually. More important still is the practice outside of meditation sessions. One cannot simply meditate for two hours and then afterward let the mind run wild and behave carelessly. Whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, one must continuously maintain awareness and inner observation. Only then can one accord with the Great Way.

Six Essential Points of Practice

First: Let Go of Everything and Commit Yourself Wholeheartedly, Without the Slightest Reservation
If we remain attached to worldly things and cannot let them go, what use is that? All things in this world arise through causes and conditions and have no true substance. They are like passing clouds and drifting smoke—empty and unreal, impossible to truly obtain or keep.

Even our own bodies are only temporary and illusory existences. They cannot be preserved forever and ultimately cannot be grasped. The same is all the more obvious of external possessions and worldly things. To take worldly things as real and cling tightly to them is therefore a folly laughable to one who understands the Way. Learning the Buddha-Dharma and cultivating the Way is a matter of great wisdom and great insight. It is not something that those of limited capacity and small wisdom can accomplish.

If one wishes to attain the Way, the first requirement is to see through all illusions. Only sitting in meditation with total resolve and complete commitment can one enter Samādhi and awaken. If while sitting in meditation the mind keeps thinking this and that, with delusive thoughts flying endlessly in confusion, then the practice is ruined. One must let go of everything completely and sit as though one were already dead.

Second: Practice Seated Meditation and Mantra Recitation — “The Mind Recites, and the Ears Listen”
This is the essential key to practicing the Heart-Seal Dharma (short form of the Heart-of-Heart Dharma). It is extremely important for entering samādhi and attaining awakening. Therefore, this instruction is repeated again and again, and it must be practiced exactly as taught, without the slightest deviation. The mind has long been accustomed to the movement of delusive thoughts. If one does not concentrate wholeheartedly on listening to the inner sound of the mantra recitation and thereby gathering the Mind Faculty, then the delusive thoughts cannot be

calmed. And if delusive thoughts are not calmed, how can one enter Samādhi or awaken? Therefore, one must practice “The mind recites, and the ears listen.” Each syllable should arise from the mind clearly, one syllable at a time, and the ears should hear each syllable clearly and distinctly. Only in this way can the Mind Faculty be gathered, preventing delusive thoughts from arising, and allowing one to gradually enter Samādhi.

Third: The Moment a Thought Arises, Be Immediately Aware — Neither Suppress Nor Follow It.
When thoughts arise, one should immediately become aware of them. If one fails to see them, then one will follow them and be carried away. Once one follows thoughts, delusive thoughts will scatter endlessly, and one will be unable to enter Samādhi. Therefore, the moment a thought arises, one must immediately awaken to it. Neither follow the thought and drift along with it, nor suppress it and force it not to arise. Simply do not pay attention to it. Bring forth right mindfulness and recite the mantra single-mindedly. In this way, the delusive thoughts will naturally dissolve, and one will peacefully enter Samādhi.

Fourth: Sit in Meditation at Regular Times — Neither Too Eager Nor Too Relaxed
Sit in meditation at regular times every day. Once this becomes a habit, it becomes easier to enter Samādhi. It is best to meditate in the morning, and even better during the early hours before dawn. When sitting in meditation, do not be anxious to enter samādhi. With a peaceful and balanced mind, sit calmly in an ordinary and natural state. Recite the mantra steadily and unhurriedly, neither forcing nor slackening. One should seek neither samādhi nor awakening, much less supernatural powers. The very thought of seeking Samādhi, awakening, or supernatural powers is itself a delusive mind. Once such a mind arises, it obstructs one’s own gate of awakening. Not only will awakening not be attained, one will not even be able to enter Samādhi.

Fifth: Maintain Mindful Observation After Meditation — Continuously and Without Interruption
Carry the stillness and concentration developed through cultivation practice into daily activities and ordinary life. Whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, quietly apply the practice inwardly at all times. Maintain continuous and unbroken Mindful Observation. Abide nowhere and cling to nothing. Do not allow external conditions and circumstances to pull the mind along, nor follow and drift with delusive thoughts.

Sixth: Be Broad-Minded and Embrace Everything
Those who cultivate the Way should not be narrow-minded. One should be broad and generous in heart, able to embrace and accept everything. Even if others treat us poorly, we should treat them even better, without giving rise to the slightest

notions of love or hatred, liking or disliking. According to conditions and according to one's abilities and circumstances, one should do all kinds of good deeds. At all times and in all places, remain perfectly at ease and untethered; free from the anxiety of gain and loss, and untouched by notions of praise and blame, success and failure. This, indeed, is the greatest supernatural power.

Remember these six essential points and practice according to them. If you truly cultivate in this way, you will certainly open the Original Nature and personally realize the Buddha-Nature. If these six points are practiced well, without the slightest slackness or interruption, then one will surely attain complete realization of Bodhi and achieve great accomplishment.