Dharma Gate of Perfect Penetration through the Ear Faculty

Writings of Master Yuanyin

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A. Essential Instructions for Practice and Realization

In the chapter on perfect penetration through the ear faculty in the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva tells us: “At first, I entered the stream of hearing and lost the object. Once the object entered was stilled, the two characteristics of movement and stillness clearly no longer arose. Thus I gradually advanced. When hearing and its object were exhausted, I did not abide in that exhaustion. When awareness and its object became empty, the emptiness of awareness reached utmost perfection. When the object of emptiness was extinguished, arising and ceasing having ceased, quiescent extinction appeared before me. Suddenly I transcended the worldly and supramundane, and the ten directions became perfectly bright. I attained two extraordinary excellences . . .”

When we practice, it is easiest to gain benefit by using Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva’s method of perfect illumination through the ear faculty—turning hearing back to hear one’s intrinsic nature. This is because, among the six sense faculties, the ear faculty of sentient beings in our Sahā world is the most acute and keen. Therefore, using it for practice makes attainment especially easy.

When practicing, we must let go of everything and concentrate the power of the mind on listening to the soundless sound of the mantra recited in the mind. We must hear each syllable clearly. Only then can we firmly gather in the whole body and mind—the six sense faculties of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind—so that

deluded thoughts do not arise. In this way, we enter samādhi, open up our original nature, and directly see Buddha-nature.

In practicing the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, we combine the methods of practice of Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva and Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. When Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva teaches us Buddha-recitation, he says that we must "gather in the six sense faculties and maintain uninterrupted pure mindfulness."

We now use the keenest of the six sense faculties chosen by Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, the ear faculty, to gather in the other five faculties through continuous and seamless mantra recitation. This is precisely to practice according to Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva's instruction: "Gather in the six sense faculties and maintain uninterrupted pure mindfulness." Thus, the methods of practice of these two great bodhisattvas are combined into one, making attainment especially easy. Let us now compare this with how Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva practiced contemplation and attained realization. He says:

"At first, I entered the stream of hearing and lost the object." Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva's initial practice was to use the ear faculty to turn back and contemplate the intrinsic nature that hears sounds. Likewise, when we recite a mantra, mentally reciting it and hearing it with the ear is also a turning back to contemplate our intrinsic nature.

When we recite a mantra and quietly listen to the sound of each syllable, we place our entire body and mind within the stream of the hearing-nature. To place body and mind within the dharmatā that can hear sounds is to "enter the stream."

There are several explanations of "entering the stream." One explanation says that sound enters through one ear and leaves through the other, meaning that once it enters, it flows away and does not remain in the mind. This is also plausible according to the literal meaning of the words. Another explanation says that entering the stream means "going against the stream": when sounds arise, one does not drift along with their current or follow after them. This too is well said.

(The initial method of entering the stream is not to follow sounds.) The correct explanation of "entering the stream" is to place one's entire body and mind within the stream of the hearing-nature—that is, within the dharmatā that can hear sounds. "Losing the object" means that the external objective environment, such as sounds, entirely dissolves. When one can "enter the stream and lose the object," body and mind settle into stability and are no longer disturbed by external circumstances. Therefore, the first step in practice is to recite mentally and hear with the ear. Only then can one hold fast to deluded thoughts without drifting after them and enter samādhi. Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva next says:

“Once the object entered was stilled, the two characteristics of movement and stillness clearly no longer arose.” This means that, as we practice, the mind that recites comes to rest; deluded thoughts cease moving, and the mantra can no longer be recited. Even if we try to arouse it forcibly, we cannot do so. At this point, we should no longer raise the mantra. “Once the object entered was stilled” means that our deluded mind has become silently motionless.

When thoughts stop and no longer move delusively, there are no longer the two characteristics of movement and stillness. Movement and stillness exist only in relation to each other. Since there is no movement or disturbance, there is no stillness or quiescence either. “Clearly no longer arose” means that, although the two characteristics of movement and stillness are absent, this is not an absence of awareness like wood or stone; rather, they clearly no longer arise.

When we are practicing in samādhi, there is no need to raise the mantra again. Simply observe quietly: Who is this that is without a single thought, tranquil and yet clearly aware? At this point, although the two characteristics of movement and stillness clearly no longer arise, they have not yet dissolved into emptiness; there still remains a thought of non-arising. Going a step further, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva tells us:

“Thus I gradually advanced. When hearing and its object were exhausted.” At this point, one’s practice has reached the stage where both the hearer and the heard have entirely disappeared. One abides in tranquil dhyāna, feeling great joy, ease, and serenity, beyond comparison with any worldly pleasure. Yet one must not remain in this state of bliss. Once one clings to it, one cannot advance and will not see one’s intrinsic nature. When our practice reaches this point, we often develop a small spiritual power and become smug, imagining that we have arrived home. We do not realize how far away we still are. Therefore, Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva next says:

“When hearing and its object were exhausted, I did not abide in that exhaustion. When awareness and its object became empty.” Suppose at this time a great light shines forth, or Buddhas or bodhisattvas appear, or many other wondrous states arise. We must not let the mind be moved or pay them any heed. Once there is attachment, not only will we fail to see our intrinsic nature, but we also risk falling prey to demons.

If some adverse state appears, or ghosts or demons manifest before us, we should not be frightened. These phenomena are all illusory appearances and are not real. First, they may be illusory manifestations of karmic obstacles. Second, they may be Dharma-protecting deities testing us to see whether our minds are moved when

illusory states appear before us. In short, these are all false appearances. Do not fear them, and do not heed them; then nothing will happen.

Simply put, “when hearing and its object were exhausted, I did not abide in that exhaustion; when awareness and its object became empty” means that, when the hearer and the heard have been completely exhausted and one enters deep dhyāna, experiencing certain blissful feelings or minor spiritual powers, one must not abide there and come to a halt. One must abide in no state whatsoever—whether favorable or adverse—but dissolve them all into emptiness.

Going still further, one must also dissolve into emptiness the awareness of “not abiding in the exhaustion of hearing.” Only then can the mind that is aware and the object that is known be completely emptied. For the aware and the known are still mutually opposed, deluded awareness; unless they are emptied, one cannot see one’s intrinsic nature. Yet when deluded awareness is emptied, emptiness still remains. Emptiness too is an illusion, and there is still the illusory duality of that which empties and that which is emptied. This is beginningless ignorance, which must likewise be seen through. Therefore Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva further says:

“The emptiness of awareness reached utmost perfection; when the object of emptiness was extinguished.” This means that both that which empties and that which is emptied—the relative and illusory—are extinguished. Only upon reaching a state that is utterly bare, without establishing a single dharma, utterly pure and naked, can one thoroughly see the true mind.

When our practice reaches its utmost point, and suddenly the mind that recites and the mantra recited, or the mind that contemplates and the object contemplated, simultaneously fall away, this is the moment when good news arrives.

At this critical moment, one must urgently exert one’s utmost energy and observe: Who is this that is without a mind to be called mind, yet clearly and distinctly aware? Is it still one’s own Original Face? If one pauses even slightly to deliberate, one will be deluded by its shadow. But if one seizes it decisively at the crucial moment, one directly realizes one’s intrinsic nature.

Yet practitioners often mistakenly regard emptiness as supremely good: there is not the slightest thing at all, and it is most tranquil. They abide in emptiness and do not consider advancing further. They do not realize that this is a side road. Once they become attached to emptiness, they fall into “indeterminate neutrality”—they die there, and that is the end of it. The Chan school rebukes practitioners who abide in emptiness as being “sitting behind a dark mountain, in a ghost cave, soaking stones in cold water.” Such people will never see their intrinsic nature. Therefore, emptiness too must be extinguished. Only by advancing further can one reach—

the state in which “arising and ceasing having ceased, quiescent extinction appears before one,” and thereby see one’s intrinsic nature. “Arising and ceasing” refers to all phenomena, all things, all appearances, and all thoughts, for these all arise and cease.

When all these things that arise and cease have been entirely exhausted, and even emptiness has perished, then Buddha-nature—which neither arises nor ceases, neither moves nor wavers, neither comes nor goes, neither increases nor decreases—can appear before one. Only this is truly realizing and seeing one’s intrinsic nature. When our practice reaches the point where subject and object both fall away—when the mind that recites and the mantra recited simultaneously fall away, when internally body and mind and externally the world perish together, and even empty space is shattered—then we suddenly awaken and directly realize our intrinsic nature.

Does realizing and seeing one’s intrinsic nature mean that one has completely arrived home? Not yet. Because the habitual tendencies accumulated over countless lives and kalpas are deeply rooted, only those of the very highest capacity can awaken once and penetrate thoroughly. One must still temper the mind through circumstances and eliminate all deluded habits before spiritual powers can freely manifest and Buddhahood be fully realized. There must be a process in which “awakening in principle is sudden, but cultivation in phenomena is gradual.” Therefore, one must still engage in the practice of continuous and seamless safeguarding realization, eliminating all deluded habits. Only then can one radiate great light, brightly illuminate the ten directions, and attain the excellent fruition of the “perfect brightness of the ten directions” realized by Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva.

B. Essential Instructions for Safeguarding Realization of the Way

I. At the point where not a single thought arises, the clear and distinct numinous knowing is precisely a person’s buddha-nature. If practitioners can truly remain unalarmed and unafraid here, have deep faith without doubt, stand firm, abide in and safeguard it, utterly cleanse away deluded habits, and perfectly realize Buddhahood, this is certainly not a matter of wholesome roots planted by one, two, three, four, or five Buddhas, but of all manner of wholesome roots planted by innumerable Buddhas.

II. Contemplation means to turn the light inward: look within the mind, not outward. Contemplate the point where not a single thought arises—the point before a thought has begun. When a thought arises, see it; do not attend to it or drift along

with it. This step is most crucial. If thoughts arise and you do not see them, it will not do.

After directly realizing one's intrinsic nature, one must contemplate and safeguard it in walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. "Outwardly, do not be pulled along by circumstances; inwardly, do not turn with thoughts" is the best method of safeguarding. When a thought arises, do not abide in it or drift along with it; this is no-thought. It does not mean suppressing thoughts so that they do not arise, nor does it mean extending the period in which not a single thought arises and calling that no-thought.

III. In daily interactions and affairs, one must "in affairs, have no clinging mind; within mind, retain no affair." That is, while doing something, have no second thought: neither thoughts of gain and loss nor thoughts of praise and blame, success and failure. Once the matter has been done, let the mind remain wholly unencumbered, as though it had never been done. This does not mean avoiding affairs and rigidly abiding in a box of having nothing to do.

IV. After directly realizing one's intrinsic nature, all deluded mind, deluded imaginings, and deluded thoughts are transformed into the wondrous functioning of the true mind. The distinction between wondrous functioning and deluded activity lies in abiding and non-abiding: with abiding, wondrous functioning turns into deluded activity; with non-abiding, deluded activity is gathered into wondrous functioning.

V. In the practice of safeguarding realization, one must first maintain continuous and seamless protection, never forgetting it at any time. Next, while safeguarding, do not rigidly hold to it. Finally, when not guarding it, one must be able to transform.

VI. If one can diligently temper oneself amid circumstances and continue the practice without interruption in walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, then within three to five years one will certainly become continuous and undivided. Without seeking spiritual powers, spiritual powers will arise of themselves.

VII. Seeking nothing and attaining nothing, one can enter Buddhahood and also enter Māra: this is truly arriving home. Practitioners often become attached to spiritual powers, believing that unless such powers manifest, they have not realized their intrinsic nature. This is a grave error. One must know that being able to stand firm without being deluded by the seductive words of demons, and remaining at all times and in all places free and at ease, receiving genuine benefit, is the greatest spiritual power.

VIII. The Mind-Ground Dharma Gate is the birth of a prince. If one practices on the mind-ground, one will certainly become a Buddha in the future. Any other excellent

form-based dharma gates are all merely outer ranks of meritorious achievement. Even if one develops great spiritual powers, one can only render merit and receive rewards, bow one's head, and serve as a subject; one cannot become a Buddha.