The Bridge Flows, but the Water Does Not Flow

Writings of Master Yuanyin

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“Empty-handed, I grasp the hoe; walking on foot, I ride the water buffalo. A person crosses over the bridge; the bridge flows, but the water does not.”

This verse by Layman Fu seems rather abstruse and puzzling. The phrase “A person crosses over the bridge” is easy enough to understand: we cross over a bridge.

But how can “the bridge flow, while the water does not”? How can one “grasp the hoe” empty-handed? And how can one “ride a water buffalo” while walking? What is the meaning of this? It means that our physical body is like the house in which we live, while Buddha-nature is the true person dwelling within it.

Sentient beings, deluded by physical appearances, mistakenly take this material body to be the self. They do not know what Buddha-nature is, and thus create karma, undergo retribution, and remain unable to transcend birth and death. This verse reminds us to recognize the master and not mistake false appearances for reality. Last time, I spoke of Chan Master Linji’s words: “Look closely at the puppet show upon the stage: its pulling and guiding depend entirely on the person within.” This means that the physical body cannot move, speak, or hear by itself. Our ability to move, work, walk, speak, and hear is entirely the functioning of this master.

This verse praises this master. “Empty-handed, I grasp the hoe” means that although I am not holding anything, the hand that holds things—that is, the physical body—is like your hoe; it is the master who directs it to function.

“Walking on foot, I ride the water buffalo”: your ability to walk and run is likewise the wondrous functioning by which the master directs the physical body, just as a person rides a water buffalo and urges it onward. “A person crosses over the bridge”: the physical body is compared to a bridge, and the person is the master.

One lives in this world only for a time and then must depart, must pass into parinirvāṇa; it is like crossing over a bridge.

Therefore, in light of the impermanence of human life, the ancients said: “Heaven and earth are but a temporary lodging for the myriad things; time is but a passing traveler through the generations.” This society and this world are merely an inn where we stay temporarily before we must depart.

Why, then, must everyone contend here for supremacy, struggle without cease, and kill without end? “A person crosses over the bridge; the bridge flows, but the water does not.” As people cross over the bridge, our physical shell is not lasting but constantly changing.

From youth to maturity, and from maturity to old age—is not this “bridge” in constant flux and change? “The water does not flow”: water represents our Buddha-nature, which does not move. It abides from time immemorial, neither coming nor going, neither moving nor wavering. This verse praising the master is excellent: it is meant to lead us to realizing the mind and seeing one’s true nature.

But opening up and seeing one’s original nature only brings one to the edge of the dharmakāya.

It is like returning home but reaching only the outside of the house: one has not entered the room, nor even ascended the hall. One is still far from it! You must apply yourselves to practice and never slacken at any time. If you practice today but stop tomorrow, how can that do? You must understand that in “sitting meditation,” “to sit” means sitting so as to see one’s true nature, while “to strike” means striking dead deluded thoughts.

If you can sit and see your true nature at all times, that is genuine sitting meditation. It is not merely sitting there and allowing deluded thoughts to surge while putting on the appearance of meditation. Therefore, in cultivating this Dharma, we must work on the mind-ground and never relax our efforts for a moment.

The first phrase of the Heart Sūtra, “Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva,” is not merely a general reference to some bodhisattva. It teaches us how to practice: contemplate freedom—constantly illuminate your own true nature, and do not depart from your original ground. If you cannot sit peacefully when on the meditation cushion, and after leaving it do not gather in your mind and maintain contemplation, but let deluded thoughts wander freely, then you are drifting about. You will have missed an entire lifetime.

Seeing only the edge of the dharmakāya does not count. At this point, one cannot yet save oneself and must continue to exert oneself, entering the proper position of

the dharmakāya and then going beyond the dharmakāya in order to perfect the fruition of Buddhahood. What does going beyond the dharmakāya mean? A monk asked Chan Master Changsha Jingcen, “Master, please instruct me: what does it mean to go beyond the dharmakāya?” He replied, “One needle, three feet of thread.”

This means that everything is ordinary: apply yourself according to conditions, without attachment to anything mysterious or marvelous. The monk did not understand and asked the master for further instruction. He replied again, “Cloth from Yizhou; silk from Yangzhou.” The cloth of Yizhou and the silk of Yangzhou were both famous. This teaches us that after realizing the Way, we should be at ease amid favorable and adverse circumstances in our daily work.

It does not mean rejoicing and laughing loudly when circumstances are favorable, then becoming afflicted and angry when they are adverse. One must be well whether circumstances are favorable or adverse, at ease and free in both, tranquil and content, carefree and unattached to things, allowing everything to come to its natural end in serenity. Only then is one “a carefree person of the Way, beyond learning and contrivance.” At that point, there is no longer any need even to sit in meditation; one is peacefully without concern.

Confucius said, “At seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without transgressing the bounds.” That is, whatever he wished to do, he would not go beyond the proper limits. This was because his mind was empty: he no longer clung to appearances and would no longer commit immoral acts.

Someone asked me, “If I cultivate until my mind is empty, may I then kill people or commit arson?” Such a question is laughably childish. If you kill people or commit arson, is your mind still empty? Why would you want to kill or burn? Is it not because you cling to appearances—because you want to steal goods or seize wealth? This is precisely attachment to existence, so how can you speak of an empty mind? If your mind were truly empty, the dual operation of compassion and wisdom would arise, and you would

feel compassion for sentient beings who do not understand ultimate reality, cling to deluded emotions, create karma and undergo retribution every day, and vainly suffer the cycle of birth and death. You would seek every means to liberate them. How could you commit acts that offend heaven and violate principle?

Going beyond the dharmakāya means penetrating principle and being perfectly unobstructed in phenomena. It does not mean doing nothing all day long, remaining motionless as though dead. Sitting there rigidly in deathlike stillness can never lead to realization of the Way. To eliminate the attachments and deluded habitual tendencies accumulated through many lives and kalpas, one must train amid

circumstances, encounter many setbacks, and undergo repeated tempering. Only then can habitual tendencies be completely worn away.

If one does not train amid circumstances but merely remains fixed in samādhi, the seeds of deluded habits lie latent within. Once stirred, those habits become even stronger and cannot be suppressed. Therefore, to eradicate deluded habits completely, one must train amid situations and uproot them altogether. This cannot be settled simply by cultivating a samādhi of cessation and suppressing the seeds of delusion there.

Our ignorance has four levels: coarse, subtle, very subtle and extremely subtle delusions. These four kinds of delusion, especially the latter two, must be worked through amid circumstances and tempered while moving among sentient beings; only then can they be eliminated.

The habits and habitual tendencies of sentient beings all differ. If you wish to liberate them, you must set aside yourself and accommodate others; you must accord with them. First, you must eradicate your own habitual tendencies before you can move along with others. Bodhisattvas have the four means of embracing sentient beings, and accommodating others is the means of embracing them through working together. Only by working together with them can you draw them over.

Every sentient being has a different temperament. Only when you can adapt to them all and respond appropriately to each person's capacity can your subtle subjective habitual tendencies be exhausted and your mind-capacity become broad. This ignorance is extremely subtle and as numerous as dust and sand; in the teachings it is called dust-like delusions. Such deluded thoughts can be brought to an end only through liberating sentient beings.

Therefore, when you liberate sentient beings, never claim merit or become arrogant. Rather, you should thank sentient beings, for it is through their help that you realize the Way. Without sentient beings, you could not transform your habitual tendencies, nor could you accumulate merit and virtue. At the beginning of practice, there must be deliberate effort and attachment. But proceed step by step. When the practice becomes mature, one moves from safeguarding to letting be, and from letting be to transformation. Then one enters non-contrivance. Yet one must not abide even in non-contrivance; one must advance further until everything is thoroughly transformed and forgotten, and only then can one perfectly realize bodhi.

Practice does not fall from the sky. There is no Śākyamuni who is a Buddha by birth; all Buddhas are formed through cultivation and tempering. Every one of us possesses Buddha-nature, the same as that of all Buddhas. So long as we earnestly cultivate and diligently eliminate our deluded habits, all can attain accomplishment.

Someone asks: “If we now cultivate away ignorance and become Buddhas, might ignorance later be added again, so that a Buddha becomes a sentient being once more?” The answer is no. Since beginningless time, from the very time we have possessed this Buddha-nature, ignorance has existed simultaneously with it, and we have never awakened. It is like gold in a mine, mixed with sand. Through refining, ignorance is completely removed, just as pure gold taken from the mine and cleansed of impurities does not reenter the mine. Once cultivation is accomplished, ignorance will not arise again.

“A human body is difficult to obtain, yet now it has been obtained.” Although the world has several billion people, those who obtain a human body are no more than the amount of soil under a fingernail. Compared with the earth itself, the number of those who do not obtain a human body is immensely greater.

There are untold numbers of bacteria, fish, insects, mosquitoes, flies, and the like. How pitiful that they cannot obtain a human body! Now that we have obtained one, we must cherish it. We must not fail it, squander it, or waste it. We should regard it as precious and use it to do things that benefit sentient beings. Only then will we not have come into this world as human beings in vain.

“The Buddhadharma is difficult to hear, yet now it has been heard.” How many people can hear the Buddhadharma? Far fewer still. What some people hear as “Buddhadharma” is merely burning incense and worshipping Buddhas, asking Buddhas and bodhisattvas to grant them long life, happiness, filial children, a good marriage partner, success and wealth in business, and so forth—the Buddhadharma of seeking whatever one desires. This is not the true Buddhadharma.

The Buddhadharma teaches us how to conduct ourselves, how to remove deluded emotions, how to understand the origins of the human body and the universe, how to be liberated from the two forms of birth-and-death—segmented and transformational—and how to guide sentient beings so that all may transcend the suffering of rebirth in the six realms and share the natural joy of their true nature. But our Buddhas and bodhisattvas are deeply compassionate and seek to liberate sentient beings widely, so they must first lead them through the gate.

They first satisfy sentient beings’ desires. If you want cattle, they give you cattle; if you seek wealth or official position, they grant you wealth or office. Whatever you want, they give it to you. Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva and the Medicine Buddha are the most typical examples. When you obtain these things, a seed is planted in your mind: all of them are bestowed by Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Once the Buddha-seed has been planted, one will certainly become a Buddha in the future. This is called “first enticing them with what they desire.” Once you have studied the sūtras and treatises and understood the principles, you will know that

everything is false and unreal, like the reflection of the moon in water, which cannot be grasped. Then you let go of everything, and the Buddha's wisdom opens fully. After further diligent practice, when deluded habitual tendencies have been completely removed and the great Way has been realized, you can benefit others and liberate sentient beings. This is called "then leading them into the Buddha's wisdom." In order to liberate sentient beings, the Buddha exhausts every possible means. Such compassion is truly immense.

Our Heart-of-Heart Dharma, too, is for opening wisdom and attaining Buddhahood. The six mudrās have different functions. The second mudrā can eliminate karmic obstacles, cure illnesses, and open the divine eye. Once the divine eye is opened, one can see Buddhas, bodhisattvas, hells, the realm of hungry ghosts, and the worlds of the ten directions. But do not be afraid: all appearances are yourself. If you are afraid, then do not use it.

In the past, someone wished to open the divine eye. He formed the second mudrā for a year, and suddenly he saw a vajra deity who subdues demons. Its appearance was terrifying. He was instantly frightened out of his wits, suffered a mental breakdown, and later died. Therefore, if the mind is not empty, do not open the divine eye, lest you bring disaster upon yourself and lose your life.

In Shanghai there was someone practicing another esoteric Dharma. While meditating, he saw Buddhas and bodhisattvas and felt great joy. Suddenly, he recalled that certain demons can also transform themselves into the forms of Buddhas and bodhisattvas in order to delude people, so he asked his teacher how to distinguish Buddhas from demons.

His teacher told him, "To test whether they are genuine, simply recite 'Om Ah Hum' to test them. A real Buddha will not flee, whereas a false one will be unable to stand firm." Following his teacher's instructions, when he again saw a Buddha appear before him, he recited "Om Ah Hum" to test it and saw that the Buddha did not move.

He was delighted, believing it to be a real Buddha. Every day he meditated, and every day he saw Buddhas and bodhisattvas. He was immensely pleased. Little did he know that once he became attached to appearances, demons would exploit the opening. One day, when he sat down to meditate, a terrifying form suddenly appeared and reached out with sharp steel claws to seize him. He was instantly terrified, and his mind became disordered. From then on, he went mad and lost all awareness.

His teacher harmed him. Whenever one sees any appearance, one should pay it no heed—simply ignore it. Do not rejoice at good appearances or fear bad ones. If the mind remains unmoved, nothing will happen.

One of our Dharma brothers saw, while meditating, a huge hairy hand the size of a fan pressing over his face. He was terribly frightened and hurriedly recited mantras —this mantra and that mantra—until he had recited every mantra he knew, yet the huge hairy hand did not go away.

Then he thought: “If it will not go away, so be it. In any case, the physical body is false, while the dharmakāya is indestructible. Let it do as it pleases.” Once his mind became empty and unmoving, the huge hairy hand disappeared. Therefore, when encountering any circumstance, the mind must not move. Do not be afraid, nor should you rejoice. All kinds of experiences may arise during meditation; under no circumstances should you be moved or afraid.

Let me give another example. A man in Beijing had more than ten rooms in his home, one of which was used especially for storing trunks. One day, he was meditating in his own room. When he emerged from samādhi, he suddenly discovered that he had arrived in the room where the trunks were kept.

The room was locked from the outside, so he could not get out. He called from inside, and his family came to open the door. They asked how he had gotten there, but he himself did not know. What had happened? Previously, he had entertained the thought that this quiet room for storing clothes would be a good place for meditation. When he entered samādhi, his mind-seal and the wisdom mental factor came into accord, and he was suddenly transported there.

When he entered samādhi, his mind became empty and the appearance of his physical body vanished. That is why one can pass through walls. This is also the principle by which we can attain spiritual powers. When the mind is truly empty, spiritual powers manifest naturally. When Kumārajīva was young, he accompanied his mother to a temple to offer incense, and he suddenly lifted up a large incense burner.

Afterward, he thought, “How could someone as young as I lift such a heavy thing?” His mind moved, and when he tried to lift it again, he could not. Once the mind arises, there is obstruction, and it cannot be lifted. Similarly, when Li Guang was hunting, he saw a large stone amid the grass and took it for a tiger. With a snap, he shot an arrow into it.

When he went closer to look, he exclaimed, “Oh! It is not a tiger, but a large stone!” How could an arrow have entered a large stone? When he shot again, the arrow could not enter it. The power of our mind is this great! As mentioned earlier: when Shenggong expounded the Dharma, stubborn stones nodded their heads. This was because his mind-capacity was vast. The minds of ordinary beings are too narrow; they can extend only throughout their own physical bodies and cannot move anything else.

Therefore, we must advance toward the dharmakāya and train ourselves, using the mudrā to open the narrow “red point,” so that great functioning may arise. Sitting behind a dark mountain, one will not succeed in one lifetime, two lifetimes, or three lifetimes.

Śākyamuni Buddha said: “In the final period of the Dharma-ending age, the Buddhadharma will be in the hands of lay practitioners, not in the hands of monks and nuns.” There are differences between the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna in precepts, samādhi, and wisdom. Take the precept concerning alcohol: alcohol can disturb one’s nature. In the Hīnayāna, one may not drink it oneself, but may sell it to others. In the Mahāyāna, one may drink it oneself, but may not sell it to others.

Why? Because one who drinks it oneself has confidence that one will not become addicted to alcohol. The Hīnayāna attitude is: “As long as I do not drink and thus do not cause trouble, it does not concern me if others get into trouble.” There are two kinds of saṅgha. One is the Hīnayāna arhat saṅgha, who study the three trainings of Hīnayāna precepts, samādhi, and wisdom; shave their heads; and wear saṅgha robes.

The second is the Mahāyāna bodhisattva saṅgha, who study the three trainings of Mahāyāna precepts, samādhi, and wisdom; do not shave their heads; do not wear saṅgha robes; and wear ordinary clothing. This is the Mahāyāna bodhisattva saṅgha. If we uphold the precepts and practice according to the Buddha’s teachings, have no family household, can directly realize our true nature, and can teach the Dharma to others, then we are saṅgha; this is leaving home.

We must practice diligently and not belittle ourselves: “Oh, I am merely an ordinary being.” No! We are all Buddhas; we are all bodhisattvas. There is only one small difference between us and the Buddha: when arousing the resolve, we do not dare to assume responsibility for being Buddhas ourselves. Buddhism distinguishes five vehicles.

All sentient beings are Buddhas. All possess undefiled wisdom equal to that of the Buddha, and their capacities are no different from the Buddha’s. All can become Buddhas. This resolve is the Buddha vehicle. If one looks down on oneself—“I am an ordinary being; at most, in a future life I may become a good person or be reborn in heaven and enjoy some blessings”—that is the lowest human and deva vehicle. Christianity is a human and deva vehicle.

For it relies on God and, after death, ascends to heaven. At most, it reaches the Great Brahmā Heaven, which is still within the form realm and does not transcend saṃsāra. From this we can see that the distinctions among the human and deva vehicle, the arhat vehicle, the pratyekabuddha vehicle, the bodhisattva vehicle, and

the Buddha vehicle are entirely determined by the greatness or smallness of our own aspiration; they are not arranged by any Buddha or bodhisattva.

Chan Master Guifeng said: “Recognize that an icy pond is wholly water, and rely on the sun’s warmth to melt it; awaken to the fact that an ordinary being is itself a Buddha, and rely on the power of the Dharma for permeation and cultivation. When ice melts, water flows and moistens, thereby displaying its capacity to irrigate and cleanse; when delusion is exhausted, the mind becomes spiritually responsive, and only then does it bring forth the functioning of penetrating luminosity.”

This tells us that ordinary beings are Buddhas and must rely on the Buddhadharma for permeation and cultivation, just as ice is water and needs sunlight to melt it. When ice melts into water, it can flow, irrigate, and cleanse. Once we practice and cultivate the Dharma until deluded habitual tendencies are exhausted, we too can manifest spiritual powers and bring forth wondrous functioning. Everyone can manifest spiritual powers; there is nothing remarkable about it.

Some people are very arrogant and look down on others. This is incorrect. Everyone can bring forth wondrous functioning. We often say: “Spiritual powers and wondrous functioning are carrying water and hauling firewood.” Who cannot carry water and haul firewood? If these are not spiritual powers and wondrous functioning, then who is it that can “carry” and “shoulder” them? Is this not the spiritual functioning of our true nature? As for penetration, it means passing through without obstruction. Once deluded thoughts arise, there are obstructions everywhere; without deluded thoughts, one naturally penetrates freely.

The three terms deluded mind, deluded thoughts, and deluded imaginings may seem to have the same meaning, but they differ greatly. The deluded mind is our originally genuine mind mixed with ignorance. Thus, the eighth consciousness is a union of arising-and-ceasing and non-arising-and-ceasing. Because ignorance is present, it clings to external objects; like water stirred into waves, it becomes the deluded mind. This is fundamental ignorance.

Once the deluded mind encounters an object, the mind moves and thoughts arise; this is called deluded thought. Once a deluded thought arises, one wishes to grasp and possess what one loves; what one does not love, or what conflicts with one’s own mind, one detests and abandons. When the mind clings to an object and will not let go, it becomes deluded imagining. Chinese characters contain profound meaning: the character for “imagine” is formed by adding the character for appearance to the character for mind. When material appearances cling to the mind and do not depart, imagination arises.

The character for thought is likewise so: it signifies the mind of a person becoming two minds. When the originally pure and true mind encounters an object and

moves, a second mind arises; that is thought. To eliminate delusion, do not let the mind move. If the mind does not abide in appearances, deluded imaginings will disappear. But one must not suppress thoughts so that they do not arise; suppression is ineffective. It is like using a stone to weigh down grass: once the stone is removed, the grass grows again.

Even if you suppress them to death, you will become like earth, wood, metal, or stone, unable to bring forth wondrous functioning. How then could you become a Buddha? Therefore, use a living method of transformation: whenever a thought arises, recognize it and transform it. If the force of deluded thoughts is strong, recite the Buddha's name or hold a mantra, turning the mind toward the Buddhadharma; in this way, deluded thoughts are transformed.

If thoughts arise and you do not recognize them, but follow them along, that is incorrect. Therefore, the ancient worthies said: "Do not fear the arising of thoughts; fear only delayed awareness." Let thoughts come. When you come, I transform you; I do not allow you to remain, nor do I follow after you. If a hundred thoughts arise in you, I have a hundred and one transformations. In the end, I still prevail.

I surpass you, and quantitative change becomes qualitative change. You know that in chemistry, to turn something acidic into alkaline, if there are one hundred milliliters of acid, one uses one hundred and twenty milliliters of alkali to neutralize it. The acid then follows the alkali, and all becomes alkaline. Therefore, when deluded thoughts arise, there is no need to fear them. What is to be feared is failing to recognize them.

When a thought arises, if you follow the deluded thought and fail to recognize that you have entered into it, it becomes deluded imagining. Seeds of delusion are planted in the eighth consciousness, and the deluded mind becomes still more entrenched. Delusion is added to delusion—how can one realize the Way? Therefore, practice consists in gradually eliminating deluded habitual tendencies until they are completely eradicated.

Esoteric Buddhism can enable one to realize the Way because of the excellence of the Buddha's empowering blessings; it does not require twenty or thirty years. Yet many people today engage in false practice of the true Dharma: while sitting, they indulge in deluded thoughts—"Oh dear, how should I arrange this matter? How should I settle that affair?" Others sit today and stop tomorrow.

How can that do? They are not even as good as qigong practitioners, who genuinely practice a false method. Qigong cannot liberate one from birth and death, so it is a false method. Yet they cultivate it very earnestly and apply themselves with all their might. "One can sell ten fakes in a day, but cannot sell a single genuine article in ten days." Sentient beings in the Dharma-ending age are truly foolish in the extreme!

Once our Heart-of-Heart Dharma has been transmitted through empowerment, Dharma protectors will protect you. If you do not apply yourselves, they will weep. You have received this great Dharma, yet do not cherish it and practice diligently; you disappoint the profound concern of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. How regrettable, how utterly ignorant! A disciple in Shanghai formed a mudrā incorrectly. Someone beside him said, “Your mudrā is wrong.”

Startled, he asked, “Who is speaking to me?” Looking to his left and right, he saw a blue-faced figure standing on one side and a red-faced figure on the other. He was terrified. These were Dharma protectors manifesting themselves to correct his mistake and encourage him to practice the Dharma diligently. Therefore, after receiving the Dharma, you must rouse your spirits and practice diligently. Never treat it lightly and disappoint the grace of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

There was a Chan Master Gaofeng on Mount Tianmu in Hangzhou who would always doze off while investigating Chan. He thought, “When will I ever realize the Way like this? I will go investigate Chan on the inverted lotus!” The inverted lotus was a precipitous cliff. Standing upon it required the utmost caution; a moment’s carelessness would send one falling, with the danger of being smashed to pieces.

He thought that investigating Chan in this way would surely heighten his vigilance and prevent him from dozing off. But his habit of sleeping was very strong. Even while standing on the cliff, he dozed off and suddenly plunged down. “Oh no! This time I am finished.”

Yet he emerged entirely unharmed. Opening his eyes, he saw a deity in golden armor standing before him, holding a vajra. “Is this not Wei Tuo Bodhisattva?” he thought.

The visitor was indeed Wei Tuo Bodhisattva. A thought suddenly arose in him, and he said to the bodhisattva, “Wei Tuo Bodhisattva, you have come to protect the Dharma for me. Perhaps there are few people who practice as diligently as I do.” Wei Tuo Bodhisattva said, “Those who practice as diligently as you are as numerous as the hairs of an ox. Since you have given rise to such arrogant pride, I will not come to look after you for a hundred kalpas.” Having said this, he vanished.

Hearing this, he regretted it beyond measure and could only sit there weeping. “This is terrible! Without the bodhisattva’s protection, how can I practice the Dharma?” After weeping for a while, he thought, “When I first cultivated the Way, I never expected to rely on Wei Tuo Bodhisattva’s protection. I set birth and death aside. I shall act as though he were not there and stand up there again to practice!” He practiced and practiced, then became momentarily dazed and fell again. He thought that this time he truly would lose his life, yet again he was entirely unharmed.

When he opened his eyes, Wei Tuo Bodhisattva was again before him. He reproached the bodhisattva, saying, “Oh! You bodhisattva have spoken falsely. You said that you would not protect me for a hundred kalpas, so why have you come again?” Wei Tuo said, “You foolish fellow, you do not understand. The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says, ‘One thought suddenly transcends a million kalpas.’ A single thought of courageous resolve can surpass a million kalpas.”

“Do not speak of a hundred kalpas; even a million kalpas have long since passed.” “Oh, how foolish I was! I bow in reverence, I bow in reverence.” Gaofeng deeply reproached himself, apologized, and practiced with still greater diligence. He later became a great Yuan-dynasty master of the Linji school. Investigating Chan depends entirely on one’s own effort; one must arouse a great sense of doubt. As the saying goes, “Great doubt, great awakening; no doubt, no awakening.”

Without doubt, deluded thoughts cannot be cut off, and one cannot open up the Original Face. Modern Chan practitioners cannot arouse a sense of doubt; they merely repeat, “Who is reciting the Buddha’s name?” Thus they gain no strength from their practice and cannot awaken. Seeing this, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva transmitted the Heart-of-Heart Dharma, which relies on the Buddha’s power, to Yugong, in order to make up for the deficiencies of the Chan school and continue the Buddha’s wisdom-life. Therefore, we must cherish this great Dharma and cultivate it with reverence and earnestness. We must never treat it lightly!

It is not easy to obtain this Dharma of ours! In Tibet, one must practice it for twenty or thirty years before it may be transmitted and learned. This is because Tibetans need something with form upon which to rely; without such a support, they cannot practice.

Japanese Eastern Esoteric Buddhism also has this Dharma. But because it is the heart-essence of Esoteric Buddhism and a most profound Dharma, it cannot be transmitted casually. One must have the rank of an acharya in order to transmit it, and ordinary people cannot learn it either. Now that we are able to receive it, it is truly unsurpassed good fortune.

Therefore, we must cultivate with all our strength, in the hope of swiftly opening up our original nature and seeing buddha-nature. Then we must temper the mind through circumstances and diligently eliminate deluded habits, advancing upward through the first, second, and third bhūmis. By the third bhūmi, one can manifest a mind-born body; above the fifth bhūmi, one can realize three or five transformation bodies and effect transformations. Above the eighth bhūmi, our first five faculties—eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body—undergo transformation, and the world too undergoes transformation.

What is called a mind-born body complete in all kinds and free from deliberate activity means that mountains, waters, houses, flowers, and grasses—everything—is present and can be manifested through transformation. Though such transformations can be manifested, they leave no trace of manifestation. This is non-contrivance: it does not mean that nothing is done, but that there is no need to do anything intentionally; transformations occur naturally.

As stated above, Maitreya Buddha told Sudhana: “By liberating sentient beings extensively and accumulating merit and virtue, one brings about an adorned reward land. You too must practice in this way, diligently eliminate deluded habits, and liberate sentient beings extensively. Only then can you attain differentiated wisdom and perfect the sambhogakāya and nirmāṇakāya.” Therefore, we must not be satisfied with a little. After realizing and seeing our intrinsic nature, we must advance ever higher, reaching the thirteenth bhūmi before we can completely realize Buddhahood.

The length of time required to realize Buddhahood depends entirely on oneself; there is no fixed time limit. For example, when Śākyamuni Buddha saw the boundless luminous sambhogakāya of an ancient Buddha, he greatly admired it. He thought, “I too must realize this sambhogakāya.” So he applied himself with all his might, day and night, and as a result attained realization seven kalpas early.

In our practice, we often put things off from today until tomorrow, from tomorrow until the day after. If we keep putting things off, we will not attain realization even when Maitreya Buddha descends into the world. But if we apply ourselves with all our might, there is no one who cannot realize the Way ahead of time. In the Chapter on Bestowal of Prophecy in the Lotus Sūtra, Śākyamuni Buddha bestows prophecies upon his great disciples: when each will become a Buddha in the future and what name each will bear.

Are the time limits set forth in these individual prophecies fixed? No. Those who truly apply themselves and sweep away their habitual tendencies can become Buddhas ahead of time. The so-called three great asaṃkhyeya kalpas are the unknowable periods for realizing the fruition of the Way through the three stages of seeing the Way, cultivating the Way, and realizing the Way. The duration of time depends wholly on whether one makes the effort.

For example, Venerable Ānanda and Śākyamuni Buddha aroused the resolve to cultivate the Way at the same time. Yet the Buddha had already realized Buddhahood while Ānanda had not yet awakened. This is clear evidence. “Oṃ bala bala …” This mantra swiftly clears away habitual tendencies. When you are about to lose your temper, you may recite the mantra aloud to extinguish your anger. In

cultivating the Way, we must constantly accord with sentient beings; we are not to demand that others accord with our wishes.

To accord with sentient beings for a moment is easy, but to do so continually is difficult. Thus, doing one good deed is easy, whereas doing it persistently is difficult. But as children of the Buddha, we must cultivate this power of perseverance!

Awakening is not easy to seek. Do not be anxious; let matters come to fruition naturally. When the mantra is recited to the point of no thought, recitation naturally ceases. At a certain moment, the mind that recites and the mantra being recited both suddenly fall away; then one opens up the original nature and directly realizes one's intrinsic nature. But if one seeks it, it will not come.

The complete and sudden Dharma gate teaches the nonduality of principle and phenomena: principle is phenomena, and phenomena are principle. If principle is reached, phenomena should also be reached. If one says that principle has been reached but phenomena have not, then principle has not truly been awakened to. Only when phenomena are reached is there genuine awakening.

It does not speak of habitual tendencies at all; to speak of habitual tendencies means that one has not thoroughly awakened. Once one has thoroughly awakened, what habitual tendencies remain? The Śūraṅgama Sūtra says: "Principle belongs to sudden awakening; upon awakening, they are all extinguished." This means that at the time of thorough awakening, all habitual tendencies are completely eliminated. Later generations relied on this principle to say that the Chan school ended with the Sixth Patriarch; what came afterward was not considered the school itself, but only doctrine.

Why? Because later Chan practitioners all spoke of sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation: sudden awakening to principle and gradual cultivation in phenomena. Once there are gradual stages, it becomes doctrine. "Principle belongs to sudden awakening; upon awakening, they are all extinguished. Phenomena are gradually removed and exhausted according to stages." Doctrine distinguishes sudden awakening and gradual cultivation; thus the Śūraṅgama Sūtra speaks of two kinds of Dharma.

The first is sudden awakening and the second gradual cultivation; it is incorrect to combine them as one Dharma. Now, accommodating the habitual tendencies and capacities of sentient beings, we combine sudden awakening and gradual cultivation, saying that one must first open up the original nature and realize the principle-body, then train amid phenomena and gradually eliminate deluded habits. The Dharma originally taught by the Buddha has its own strengths according to the differing states of realization of different people.

When the Buddha was in the world, after one teaching his disciples began arguing in discussion, each claiming to be right. They asked the Buddha, and the Buddha said, “What each of you says is not my meaning, but all of it may be used. If it suits a person’s capacity and can be used, that is sufficient.” Sudden awakening and gradual cultivation suit the capacities of people today; if they can be used, they may be regarded as correct.

The two verses by Huineng and Shenxiu are both unsatisfactory. Shenxiu’s speaks of gradual cultivation, whereas the Chan school is the complete and sudden Dharma of sudden awakening, sudden cultivation, and sudden realization. Therefore, the Fifth Patriarch did not give him the robe and bowl. The Sixth Patriarch said, “Originally, there is not a single thing.” This falls into biased emptiness.

Therefore, the Fifth Patriarch said, “You have not yet seen your nature either!” If he had truly seen his nature, why did the Fifth Patriarch still teach the Dharma to him at the third watch of the night, so that Huineng had a great awakening only upon hearing, “Give rise to the mind without abiding anywhere”? This verse should be revised: “Let bodhi provisionally serve as a tree; let the bright mirror provisionally serve as a stand.”

Manifested appearances have wondrous functioning; there is no harm in provisionally having a tree and a stand. “Originally there is no defilement; to speak of purity is itself dust.” If there is purity, it is still dust. Intrinsic nature is neither defiled nor pure, empty and without a single thing. Since defilement does not exist, whence could purity arise? Yet it is also quite useful now to combine these two verses.

Because people today have dull faculties and do not “constantly polish and wipe,” sweeping away their deluded habitual tendencies, how can they realize the Way? If they do not understand “originally there is not a single thing,” how can they avoid clinging to existence? Therefore, modern people say: Taken together, the Sixth Patriarch and Master Shenxiu are such that the Sixth Patriarch is one eye of Maheśvara, while Shenxiu is the perfect radiance of both eyes. This is indeed no falsehood.