



# KEYS TO BUDDHISM

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## Foreword

This book presents the teachings of Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Thanh Tu. Buddhism first came to Viet Nam from India in the third century, with Masters K'ang Sen Houci, Marijivaka, and others. In the sixth century, Zen came with Master Vinitaruci, who received transmission from the Third Chinese Patriarch Sengcan. In the centuries after, Zen flourished but declined during the wartimes of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 1970's, Thich Thanh Tu revived Zen, combining a mixture of teachings and practices of the Second Chinese Patriarch Hui-Ke, the Sixth Chinese Patriarch Hui-Neng, and the First Vietnamese Patriarch Tran Nhan Tong of the Truc Lam (Bamboo Forest) Zen sect.

While the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha are timeless, the manner it is taught has to fit time and place. Our intention with this translation is to make Master Thich Thanh Tu's teachings available to English readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Other English translations of the Master's works are available but this is the first work to be translated in Viet Nam. The main advantage to this is that practitioners with deep understanding of the Buddha-dharma, and who have practiced with the Master for a long time, therefore, understanding well the way he teaches, have been involved. In addition, as this work took place at Truc Lam Da Lat, the current resident of the Master, we were able to consult and clarify with him many points. The Buddha-dharma, in general, and Zen in particular, has many subtleties. The way it is explained or translated can make all the difference. For example, choices in verb tense, whether a pronoun is needed or not, or whether a sentence (especially in those koans!) is a question or a directive, can make all the difference between an explanation which will just give us a neat story, to laugh or ponder over, or one which will point our minds towards freedom.

Another intention is to make these teachings applicable to Western audiences while keeping the Master's tone and the cultural nuances of Vietnam. Hopefully, this has been achieved.

May the words in this book and the practices it can inspire bring all beings to true happiness and wisdom.

October 2007

## Preface

This book was written for people who are beginning their study of Buddhism. Although the first steps may seem minor or insignificant, they are important. If overlooked, it may be hard to keep up with the following steps. If the beginner does not properly understand the spirit of Buddhism, the path of their practice may go astray. Those who have the responsibility of guiding beginners cannot underestimate the value of this task. A strong foundation is essential in leading others to the proper path of practice.

Because I want to show beginners what is correct and incorrect practices so that they will not make mistakes, I have dared to point out some faults of Buddhism in Vietnam as I see them. I very much want to weed out the superstition that has been incorporated into some parts of Buddhism here; like wiping off dirt to show the true face of the Buddha underneath. By doing so, my intention is not to reopen ugly scars<sup>1</sup>, but rather to promote a Buddhist practice that is more in line with our current society and can serve us in the future. We are now living in the age of science, an age in which the search for truth has become of utmost importance. Buddhism is also a search for truth. It is a Buddhist teaching that the truth is always present, waiting to be found. There is no need to distort it, promoting misunderstandings. In this spirit, I take full responsibility for what is written in the following pages, even if others may disagree. May we all find and experience the truths of the Buddha's teachings.

Respectfully,  
Thich Thanh Tu

## Who Was the Buddha?

The word "Buddha" means "awakened one." More than 2500 years ago, in the North central Indian city of Kapilavastu, a prince was born in the palace of King Suddhodana. He was given the name Siddhartha. When grown, while visiting the gates of the palace walls, he saw the four messengers: an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and a religious seeker. He suffered when he saw the first three and was inspired by the fourth. Therefore, he decided to leave the luxurious life

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<sup>1</sup> A Vietnamese expression similar to "airing dirty laundry"

of the palace to go into the forest in search of a path out of the cycle of birth and death. After eleven years<sup>2</sup> of different practices, including six years of ascetic life and 49 days of meditation under the bodhi tree, he attained completely enlightened, from then on called “Shakyamuni Buddha.”

After enlightenment, the Buddha saw clearly the original causes which carry human beings along the cycle of birth and death. He also understood completely the way out of this cycle. In other words, he knew the cause and effects of suffering and its solution, the way to emancipation. He knew clearly how all things come into existence and are destroyed. This wisdom of his is called Sarvatha-jnana, or omniscience. Embodying this wisdom, he taught others how to become enlightened.

The Buddha’s solution to the suffering from the continual involvement in the cycle of birth and death is the teaching of Interdependent Origination.<sup>3</sup> Looking at these twelve steps, we see that ignorance is the initial element of the cycle. To eliminate ignorance is to be free from the cycle of birth and death. When the initial element remains, the branches keep on developing; when the initial element is eliminated, the branches stop growing.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Mahayana Buddhism, Siddhartha renounced worldly life at the age of 19 and became enlightened at 30, eleven years later. Hinayana Buddhism places these ages at 29 and 35, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Interdependent Origination (Sanskrit: *Pratitya-samutpada*): “conditioned arising” or “interdependent arising.” All psychological and physical phenomena constituting individual existence are interdependent and mutually condition each other; this at the same time describes what entangles sentient beings in the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*).

Interdependent Origination consists of twelve links: (1) ignorance (*avidya*) – lack of recognition of the four noble truths, ignorance of the suffering-ridden nature of existence – conditions (2) formations or impulses (*samskara*), which precede actions. These can be good, bad, or neutral and are related to physical, verbal, and psychological actions. In turn they condition (3) consciousness (*vijnana*) in the next life of the individual. This consciousness reenters another womb after the death of an individual who has not been liberated and instigates there the arising of (4) “name and form,” the psychological and physical factors (*namarupa*), i.e., a new empirical being constituted by the five aggregates. Which womb the consciousness chooses is determined by its qualities, which in turn depend upon the formations or impulses. Interdependently with *namarupa*, (5) the six bases (*shadayatana*) arise. These are the six object realms of the senses, which present themselves to the being after its birth, thus conditioning (6) contact (*sparsha*) with its environment. This contact invokes (7) sensation (*vedana*), out of which develops, for someone who is ignorant in the Buddhist sense, (8) craving (*trishna*). Ignorant and craving lead, after the death of the individual, to (9) clinging (*upadana*) to a womb, where (10) a new becoming (*bhava*) is set in motion. This is followed by (11) birth (*jati*), which again comes to an end in (12) old age and death (*jara-maranam*).

What is it about ignorance that gives it such a powerful capacity? Ignorance is false perception, a lack of awareness of the true nature of things or the true essence of existence. We are often mistaken yet will not admit that we do not know what is true or false in life. On the contrary, the Buddha knew clearly that which is false and recognized that which is true, so he was called “The Awaken One.” When he became enlightened, not only was he freed from the cycle of birth and death but he also was able to develop wonderful means which are beyond human understanding. This state is called “inconceivable liberation.”

The Buddha was a real person, not a myth or a legend. We can learn about his genuine enlightenment through the teachings in the Tripitaka.<sup>4</sup> At this time, he also introduced the achievements and vows of other buddhas in the ten directions.

## The Teachings of the Buddha

The Buddha–dharma is the teachings of Shakyamuni. These teachings came from his direct intuitive experience, unlike the intellectual philosophies of other masters of his time. The Buddha–dharma is the truth, expressed in different ways so that it can be understood and practiced on many levels. The teachings on common, relative, and absolute truths are presented below.

### Common Truths

Common truths are principles which are easily seen. When the Buddha points them out, if we examine them carefully, we will find that what he says makes sense to us. Two main principles are the law of Causation and Conditionality.

#### Causation

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<sup>4</sup> Tripitaka: (Sanskrit for “three baskets”) Buddhist Canon which is divided into three categories: the Sutra or sermons of the Buddha; the Vinaya or precepts and rules of monastic discipline; and the Abhidharma or commentaries of the teachings.

All things manifest with cause and effect. The law of cause and effect, or causation, applies to everything. Nothing that has form and creates effects is beyond this law. This is further broken down into principal, secondary, favorable, and adverse causes, making it more complex. When causes are so subtle or too far in the past to remember, it can become even more difficult to understand. Let us look at how this law is played out in the plant and animal realms.

No grass or plant comes into being without a cause, from either a seed, root, bud, leaf, or trunk. Where there is a cause, there is an effect. From the cause, the effects are varied, such as, the plant growing, flowering, and producing fruits. No plant produces fruit by chance. For example, if an orange seed is the main cause; fertilizer, soil, water, and sunlight are the secondary causes; care for the plant is a favorable cause. Therefore, depending on secondary or favorable causes, a tree will be able to produce fruit. Even when the seed grows into a tree, if it is not well cared for or its roots are eaten by insects (adverse causes), it may not produce fruit or may perish. Again, when all conditions are adequate, an orange seed generates, grows, and produces fruits.

In some cases, it may seem that the effect may come into being without a cause. For instance, we clear a plot to cultivate, making sure that all of the grass is removed. However, after some rainfall, there is grass growing all over the ground! Where did the grass come from? Did the soil produce grass? No. In fact, tiny grass seeds that we could not see were buried deep in the soil. Absorbing rain water, grass seeds naturally generated. In this case, the cause was too small for us to see and therefore, perhaps giving rise to false deduction.

Here is another case. One day, the monks and I visited our garden. We picked two sour sops from two different trees growing four meters apart. Tasting the fruits, the monks were surprised because one was sour and the other was sweet! Looking at one another, they inquired, "These two trees are of the same variety and planted in the same garden, why do they produce fruits of different tastes?" Each person had his own idea, but I just smiled as they speculated. At last, I explained, "These two fruits have different tastes because, previously, I cultivated them with seeds from two different plants." In this example, when people do not know the reasons from the past, they may wonder. The law of cause and effect can be complex because of subtle reasons. Not understand thoroughly, we may make quick and superficial deductions.

Animals also come into being due to the law of cause and effect. Depending on the species, the cause may be an egg, such as a fetus. No animal is created by chance. Due to main, secondary, favorable, and adverse causes,

animals will develop well or become feeble and die. It can be said that all beings on earth and the earth itself come into being in the realm of cause and effect.

This law also influences the actions of all beings. For example, with human beings, unselfish, altruistic words and actions that bring happiness and peace to everyone are wholesome causes. These words and actions will bring us peace and happiness in the present and the future. They produce wholesome results. On the contrary, harmful words or actions that make people suffer are unwholesome causes. The resulting sufferings, called unwholesome effects, will return to us in the present or in the future.

When we help people who are in misfortune, they happily thank us after they are out of trouble or danger. Seeing them safe and at peace, we feel light-hearted. Though we do not expect anything in return, these people may want to repay our deed when they have the chance. Conversely, when we hurt or bring suffering to others, they may be vexed, resentful, or want to argue with us. This makes it hard for us to be at peace. Someday perhaps, when the opportunity arises, they may take revenge, only feeling satisfied when we have had multiple sufferings. Doing wholesome causes, we reap wholesome effects; doing unwholesome causes, we harvest unwholesome results.

Sometime, a case may seem to be an exception to the law of cause and effects, but, in fact, it is not. For instance, we have created a wholesome or a unwholesome cause, but during our lifetime, we seem not to reap the effect. The reason is that the cause has not yet ripened. However, the cause still produces its process in time. In another case, we seem not to have created a cause but acquired an effect. This may be because we cannot remember the cause from the remote past.

The results of thoughts are not seen outwardly but can still have considerable consequences. Thoughts are the stimulus for all words and actions. When we have a wholesome thought, it gives rise to a wholesome cause. Then, word and action accordingly create further wholesome causes or effects. When there is an unwholesome thought, word and action accordingly create other unwholesome causes or effects. When people understand this law, they are careful with their thoughts. Thoughts have cause and effect like words and actions.

However, the law of cause and effect is not as simple. Many people assume that it is a simple matter of raising wholesome cause to reap wholesome effect or raising unwholesome cause to reap unwholesome effect. There are cases that seem to contradict this since cause and effect is a changing process operating within the three times of past, present, and future. We cannot take out a

segment of time from the whole process to judge or make predictions. If we want to thoroughly understand this law, we have to base our examination within the three times. When we grasp this law fully, understanding the way it works, we will be very confident in ourselves, not relying on outside supernatural powers. We recognize that we are the masters of our own lives. Causation is a continuous, changing flow of birth and annihilation and, therefore, is an example of impermanence. Due to impermanence, sentient beings are tossed about in samsara<sup>5</sup>, resulting in reincarnation. This law is not fixed or definite in the way it works but is flexible, depending on various causes.

If Buddhist practitioners clearly understand the law of cause and effect, they will have a stable foundation for their practice. From this foundation, they will rid themselves of idle superstitions. When we know the wholesome or unwholesome influences of our actions, we may repair and build our lives accordingly, now and into the future; courageously taking responsibility for all our wholesome or unwholesome actions, not complaining or feeling resentful. When people understand that nothing in the world is fixed, unique, or haphazard, but is formed by cause and effect, they will not be so dogmatic about ideas such as fate, destiny, monotheism, or chance.

### **Conditionality**

Another common truth is that all things are formed by conditionality, meaning many elements combine to make one thing. Things, in themselves, are not self-created but are a union of many elements. Also, phenomena do not exist in isolation, but depend upon numerous conditions to arise. All things with form on this earth, including the earth itself, are made-up of many elements and conditions. Even formless phenomena operate according to conditionality.

First, let us examine a few forms near us. This desk, previously, did not come into being by itself. It had to have wood, nails, plane, chisel, saw, etc. and the labor of a carpenter using these various tools to assemble all the pieces. The materials, tools, and labor are elements and conditions which have been combined to make up the desk. Supposing someone asks us, “What is this desk made of?” and we reply, “It’s made of wood, by a carpenter.” This is a straight and simple answer but not a complete one. We may keep insisting that we are correct, but we are really only partially so.

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<sup>5</sup> Samsara (Sanskrit meaning “continuous movement”): the endless cycle of birth and death.

Similarly, the house in which we live cannot come into being by itself. If it is a thatched house, it requires pillars, rafters, grass, etc. If it is a concrete house, it needs bricks, cement, sand, tiles, wood, etc. In both cases, people are needed to assemble the elements to make a house. When the house is formed, it is from gathered conditions. When the house deteriorates, it is due to dispersed conditions. The thing called “house” only exists in between gathered and dispersed conditions.

After examining these examples, we realize that all things are combined from conditions; even tiny things like a needle or a piece of grass to large things like mountains, oceans, or the earth. Formless things which still created affects are also conditioned. We cannot see electricity or wind, but we can see their manifestations. With electricity, when negative and positive charges combine, we have electric power. When there is unequal air pressure, wind is created.

Similarly, for thoughts to arise there needs to be the meeting of the six sense organs and their respective outside objects. If either organ or object is not present, no thought will arise. Therefore, all thoughts, words, actions, and their effects are created due to conditions.

When we apply the law of conditionality to phenomena, we see that there is no solid or enduring form. Therefore, the name given to it is also empty. For example, we try to analyze a house by naming its parts (such as bricks, tiles, etc.) in an effort to define it. When these conditions come together, we temporarily give it the name “house”. That name has a temporary value because, before and after the combination forms, it does not apply. Even when the house is combined, we cannot find the true substance in each of the elements which were used to make it. So we say, “All things are formed by conditions, having no real individual essence.” Before it formed, there was nothing. After deteriorating, it disappears. In the middle, it is unreal. Therefore, the presence of the combination is a mirage. In relation to conditionality, all things are false and illusory.

Understanding thoroughly conditionality, we are freed from two diseases: bias and ignorance. Ignorance, which leads to bias, is really the more serious disease, and therefore, the more difficult to cure. Anything that forms due to combination is false and unreal, but we take to be real. Once we believe it to be real, then likes and dislikes form accordingly, creating greed and hatred. This is the reason why we are in the ever-rolling cycle of birth and death. When we know that conditioned combinations are false, we end our ignorance and

become enlightened. Understanding conditionality can be a gateway to enlightenment.

In this part on common truths, the law of cause and effect and the law of conditionality are two principles that govern everything, including human actions. These principles do not change in the past, present, or future. Nevertheless, they may be subtle and difficult to understand. When people are patient enough to study, reflect on, and carefully analyze these laws, they can realize these principles. These two principles work in two dimensions: the law of causality functions in the dimension of time while the law of conditionality operates in the dimension of space.

## **Relative Truths**

Relative truths are principles operating in the realm of duality. These dualities are brightness and darkness, cold and hot, bad and good, sorrow and joy, movement and stillness, birth and death, no-birth and no-death, etc. Living in the relative realm, we cannot deny the truth of duality. However, we need to be wise enough to use duality as a skillful mean in order to make progress. For example, a doctor has to use dualistic discrimination in order to diagnose a disease correctly. Understanding medical methods, he is able to choose the correct medicine to cure a patient. Similarly, the Buddha-dharma is the medicine to cure the diseases of sentient beings. Therefore, we call the Buddha "Supreme Medicine King." To clarify this issue, here are some examples of how to use duality as skillful means.

### **Light versus Dark**

We know that darkness does not exist by itself but is the absence of light. If we create conditions, such as a lit lamp or a flashlight, the darkness disappears, of course. Conversely, if we want darkness, we create the opposite conditions by turning off the light sources. The above are examples of darkness and brightness of outside phenomena. Similarly, inside mental darkness and brightness also depend on conditions. Due to a lack of knowledge, we are in the darkness of ignorance. When we have the light of knowledge, the darkness of ignorance gradually dissipates.

### **Hot versus Cold**

When we contact cold air, wind, or water, we shiver. Aware of this, we create conditions for heat to arise: a fire, radiator heat, or a blanket. Vice versa, when we are hot, we cool off with cold water, a breeze, or air-conditioning.

### **Suffering versus Ease**

There are many kinds of sufferings, such as, suffering from cold and hunger, suffering from diseases, suffering from ignorance and afflictions.

To treat the suffering from cold and hunger, we create conditions for clothing and food. When we are sick, we reduce our suffering by using medicine to cure the disease.

The sufferings of ignorance and afflictions are treated with knowledge of the Buddha-dharma. Of the three poisons, ignorance is delusion while craving and hatred are afflictions. We use wisdom to treat ignorance. For instance, we may use the method of contemplation of distinguishing the realms, the analyzing of our body, both insides and outsides, as different parts with their different limits. This analysis will help us to see properly that our bodies and minds are not real or substantial, gradually helping us to develop wisdom. Or, we may use the contemplation on Interdependent Origination to understand conditionality. If we do not observe or analyze conditions around us, it is difficult to develop wisdom.

When we experience the affliction of greed, we need to distinguish which of the five classic types we have: money, sex, fame, food, and sleep.

The treatment for greed of money is generosity. Wanting to accumulate and save is being greedy while generosity is about giving and sharing. If our intention is to give to others, how can we be possessive? When our generosity is sincere, greed for money will gradually lessen.

We may use the traditional method of contemplation on impurities to treat the greed for sex and food. When we examine our body in its various processes, we will see that impurities are stored in our body like a covered chamber pot which leaks, spreading its putrid smell. All kinds of perfumes and decorations are just skillful cover-ups for the chamber pot. If the body was clean, we would not need to use these cover-ups. Similarly, when food is on a dish, it looks delicious, but becomes unclean by the time it goes through our digestive system. This traditional contemplation on impurities can help with our greed for sex and food.

To treat the greed for fame and sleep, we use the contemplation on impermanence. We contemplate how worldly things appear and disappear in the blink of an eye. The fame we gain may fade in a moment, like dew on grass or a flash of lightning. If we keep close to our hearts this understanding on impermanence, how could we even think about pursuing fame?! Human life is uncertain: fresh in the morning, only to fade away by the afternoon. Therefore, when we are still healthy and active, we should use time wisely. Try to do helpful things for ourselves and others, not wasting our lives. When we see clearly that time is precious, how can we waste it in sleep?

The three cures for resentful anger are the contemplation on compassion, the practice of endurance, and the practice of joy and equanimity. Anger is a form of hatred and resentment is a feeling of bitterness. When we are angry at somebody, we may want to penalize them, making them suffer to satisfy our anger. Compassion is ability to love to everyone without exception, considering others' happiness and suffering as our own. When we love others as we love ourselves, we would not think of hurting or harming them. For example, when the left hand unknowingly hurts the right hand, the right hand bears the pain without returning the beating, knowing that both are of one body.

Similarly, when we consider others as ourselves, although people may cause us serious harm, we would not become angry or take revenge. Tolerance is acceptance. When anger arises, we try to repress and control ourselves, accepting it, and then letting it pass. However, repression is just a temporary means and cannot completely uproot anger. Only when we have successfully contemplated compassion, will our anger be uprooted. Bitterness is holding on to indignations which is a root of suffering and may cause illnesses. Joy and equanimity are happily letting go of everything, filling us with lightness, ease, and peace; no longer suffering.

Suffering is the result of unwholesome causes. Physical and material sufferings may come from a lack of resources or adverse conditions. Mental sufferings are brought about by ignorance, craving, and hatred. Being ignorant, not knowing the truth of things, creates craving. When things are not in accordance with one's craving, aversion and anger can arise. These three poisons are the principal causes which create suffering effects. These suffering effects are known in Buddhism as the Truth of Suffering. Their causes and conditions are the Truth of the Origin of Suffering. Knowing clearly the causes and conditions and then applying the Buddha-dharma as treatment is the Truth of the Path.

Ending all the causes of suffering is the Truth of the Cessation of the Suffering. These Four Noble Truths are used as treatment for suffering.

### **Motion versus Calmness**

Motion is agitation, restlessness, and disturbance. Calmness is quiet and peace. When we have mental agitation, we are restless and disturbed; our consciousness becomes weak and dim. We use calm and peace as treatments for these agitations. However, we also need to have an understanding of the causes which produced these states. When our minds run after the gain and loss of money, lust, fame, food, and sleep, we will become restless and disturbed. To help us from running after these things, the Buddha–dharma teaches us to follow the precepts. Precepts are like fences to prevent us from running after outside things, such as, seeking after the five types of greed. Then, we use different methods of contemplations (such as, contemplation on the counting of breathes, contemplation on compassion, contemplation on the impurities, and the contemplation on Interdependent Origination) as ropes to lasso our minds. When there are the fences of precepts outside and the ropes of contemplations inside, our monkey–minds will be well controlled, sleeping soundly.

### **Birth and Annihilation/Death versus Non–birth/Nirvana**

In Buddhist terminology, “birth and annihilation” apply to non–sentient and sentient beings. However, “birth and death” only applies to sentient beings. “Nirvana” is the Buddhist terminology for “non–birth.” All sentient beings are bound to birth and death, not knowing how to use non–birth as a treatment.

The stream of mental agitation is the source of birth and death. Minds are agitated due to attachments to the sense of self and to outside dharmas, or phenomena. When we know well that outside dharmas are impermanent and that human bodies are insubstantial, the currents of attachment and craving will cease and the mind becomes calm. When the mind becomes calm, the causes which continues the cycle of birth and death ends. This is non–birth. Just like the wind ceasing or the waves calming down, the surface of the ocean becomes flat and smooth.

Craving is the engine which stimulates mind consciousness to come into being. Therefore, the cycle of birth and death cannot end as long as craving is maintained. For example, when the one we love is absent, we look for that person constantly, seeking endlessly. The search for the other will only end

when craving ceases. Within the twelve links of Interdependent Origination, craving conditions grasping, existence, birth, decay, and then death. When craving ceases, neither grasping nor existence can be maintained. After that, how can birth, decay, and death follow? There is nothing better than using the contemplation on impermanence or the contemplation of non-self as walls to block the winds of craving.

Realizing clearly that this side of the river is birth and death and the other side is Nirvana, practitioners urgently make rafts to cross the river. From the point of view of a sravaka and a pratyekabuddha,<sup>6</sup> when one reaches the other side, one does not return. Still operating with dualistic minds, they think that the cycle of birth and death is real; therefore, they yearn for the extinction of desire and suffering, or Nirvana. On the contrary, bodhisattvas<sup>7</sup> also use duality as a treatment but they consider it as a temporary skillful means and do not want to escape duality for their own enlightenment. Relative truth permeates the world. Everything is in the realm of relative truth. We can make progress on our path towards enlightenment if we skillfully apply dualistic means to destroy unwholesome habits of mind and body. If we do not know how to use this treatment appropriately we may not succeed in our practice. Like a good doctor who knows well the disease, the medicine, and the cure, the Buddha is the physician using his teachings as “curing treatments.”

## **Absolute Truth**

Absolute Truth is independent from causation and conditionality, surpassing all dualities. It does not belong to causation so it is not subject to birth and death or to impermanence. Since it also does not operate within conditionality, it does not rely on conditions to take form. Surpassing the realm of duality, it exceeds treatments, comparisons, discussions, and intellectualizations. Absolute truth is not contingent upon space or time. Essentially, absolute truth is beyond explanations by any means.

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<sup>6</sup> A sravaka is one whose aim is to reach Arhatship by listening to a Buddha and following his teachings. A pratyekabuddha is one who becomes fully enlightened due to insight into 12 links of Interdependent Origination.

<sup>7</sup> Bodhisattva (Skt.): “enlightenment being;” in Mahayana Buddhism, a being who practices the paramitas (perfection of virtues) as a means to buddhahood but renounces complete enlightenment until all beings are saved; as opposed to the Theravada ideal of an Arahant, whose aim is for self-enlightenment.

Absolute truth itself is the origin of sentient beings but they do not realize this. It is ever present within us, but, regrettably, we often forget it. It is our permanent non-birth and non-death essence. We do not remember its existence and accept the impermanent birth and death as ourselves. Forgetting this truth is ignorance. Realizing this truth is enlightenment. Forgetting absolute truth and following birth and death is to fall into samsara. Realizing and living with absolute truth is non-birth and emancipation. Since absolute truth is very important, we need to know some of its names, how to realize it, and its benefits.

Even though, essentially, absolute truth cannot be labeled, within the study of Buddha-dharma, depending on its use, it has been given different names. In the *Diamond Sutra*, it is called "Ultimate Wisdom" because it is hard as a diamond, cutting through everything yet cannot be destroyed. In the *Complete Enlightenment Sutra*, absolute truth is called "The Complete Knowing Nature." In the Dharma, there are many types of truths, when we realize some of these truths, then we are called "partially enlightened." When we realize the complete knowing nature, or absolute truth, we are then called "completely enlightened." In the *Lotus Sutra*, it is called "Buddha Seeing and Knowing" or the "Buddha Vehicle" because it is a medium which brings us to Buddhahood. It is called "Buddha Wisdom" in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. In the *Shurangama Sutra*, it is called "True Mind" or "Tathagata Storehouse." In the *Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra*, it is called "Non-Dualistic Dharma-door." Other commonly used names for absolute nature in Zen writings are: true nature, Suchness, Buddha nature, Dharma-body, The Way, and original face.

Knowing some names for absolute truth is important, but it is essential to realize it in ourselves. How can absolute truth be conveyed to those who do not understand it in order to help them realize it? This is an extremely difficult task! Even though all explanations belong in the relative realm, at this point, I will make the effort by constructing some principles, quote some of the Buddha's teachings, and then, relate some Zen masters' skillful means. I hope the readers, through these efforts, can come to some realization of absolute truth.

Here are three temporarily constructed principles to describe absolute truth: anything that has form is conditioned and illusive; anything that produces a resultant is subject to birth and death; anything with a dualistic nature is unreal. In contrast, anything without form, does not produce a resultant and anything which is non-dualistic is true, permanent, and of non-birth.

That which has no form is not limited by location. Since it has no form and cannot be located, asking about its place is incorrect. Because absolute

truth does not produce an impact, it is not bound to birth and death and is not changed by time. Applying the concept of time to absolute truth is incorrect. The non-dualistic is not subject to comparison and discrimination. Applying the concept of comparison to absolute truth is also incorrect. Absolute truth is ever-present within us; searching for it is incorrect. It is the nature of knowing, not the object of knowing. Trying to know it is incorrect. Absolute truth does not have form, does not produce an impact, and is not in the realm of dualism. However, if we try to find it outside of forms, impacts, and dualisms, this is also incorrect.

Essentially, absolute truth can only be realized through one's intuition. The Buddha's teachings and the patriarchs' means are like using a stick to hit the grass to scare away the snakes or hitting the water surface to scatter fish. We can skillfully recognize absolute truth through skillful trainings and teachings; like seeing the moon by following the pointing finger. The moon is not at the finger's tip; we just follow the finger's direction to see the moon in the sky. Similarly, seeing the reflection in the mirror, we can get a sense of our true face, but we should not consider the reflection as our real selves. If we do, when we move the mirror and do not see our reflection anymore, we may become frightened and shout, "Where am I?"

These are principles which are used as temporary means. By utilizing them, we may realize our true nature. This true nature is manifested through our six sense organs,<sup>8</sup> but it does not completely rely upon them. However, it is often easier for us to realize our true nature through our eyes and ears. In order to point out true nature, the birth-less and deathless nature, the Buddha used certain means to point directly at our eyes and ears. Here is an example from the *Shurangama Sutra*, volume 1:

While in front of the assembly, the Buddha raised his hand, closed it, then opened it. He did this twice. He then asked Ananda, "What did you see?"

Ananda responded, "I saw the Tathagata's hand closing and opening."

The Buddha said, "You say my hand was closing and opening. Was it my hand closing and opening or your seeing nature that was closing and opening?"

"It was the Tathagata's hand closing and opening I saw and not my seeing nature that was closing and opening."

"Which moved and which was still?"

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<sup>8</sup> Eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind

“The hand of Buddha moved; my seeing nature was not still, much less, moved.”

“You are correct!” the Buddha praised Ananda.

At this time, from the Buddha’s palm, a ray of precious light shined upon Ananda’s right shoulder. Ananda immediately turned right to look at it. Again, the Buddha shot a ray of precious light upon Ananda’s other shoulder. This time, Ananda turned left.

“Why does your head turn in that way?” the Buddha asked.

“I saw the Tathagata’s precious light shining upon my right and then left shoulder, I followed the direction of the light, making my head turn,” Ananda replied.

“You look at the rays shining upon your right and left shoulders, making your head turn. Did our head turn or did your seeing nature turn?” the Buddha then asked.

“My Lord, it was my head, itself, that moved; my seeing nature did not stay still, much less, moved,” Ananda replied.

“You are correct!” the Buddha once again praised him.

Then, the Tathagata spoke to the assembly:

Human beings accept the moving, namely outside dust,<sup>9</sup> accept the not staying still, namely inside guest. When you looked at Ananda, his head turned while his seeing nature did not move. When you looked at me, my hand opened and closed while your seeing nature did not open and close. Why do you believe in the activities of your body or outside phenomena? From the beginning to the end, you follow one thought after another as they come and go, forgetting about your true nature, therefore, behaving in incorrect, inverted ways. Missing your true nature, you consider things to be the self. Because of this, human beings go adrift in the stream of birth and death.

From this passage, we realize that the Buddha wants to show Ananda and the assembly that outside phenomena are ever changing in birth and death just like the Buddha’s hand opening and closing. The body is impermanent and in

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<sup>9</sup> meaning “object”

motion, just like Ananda's head turning. Only the seeing nature can see and know outside changes without being effected, relying on the moving of the head without being moved. The changing and moving are false, unreal, and impermanent. Why then do we consider the changing of the outside environment and the movements of our body as true? On the contrary, the seeing nature that has never been moved is true and of non-birth. We forget this, willingly enduring drifting in samsara. Here is another passage from the *Shurangama Sutra*, volume 2:

King Prasenajit stood up and asked the Buddha, "Previously, not having been taught by the Buddha, I heard Kakuda Katyayana and Sanjaya Vairatiputra<sup>10</sup> saying that this body annihilates after death, calling it Nirvana. Now, although I have met you, still I wonder, 'How can I have insight into the mind that is beyond birth and death?' Among the assembly, those who still have afflictions and are in the cycle of birth and death also want to hear."

The Buddha asked, "My Great King, your fleshy body is as permanent and indestructible as a diamond or not?"

"My Lord, my body belongs to change and annihilation," King Prasenajit answered.

"My Great King, you have not died yet. How can you know it will annihilate?"

"My Lord, my changing, impermanent body has not annihilated yet, but as I observe and see, moment by moment everything is unceasingly changing, like a fire extinguishing, becoming ash, and dying out. This process is endless. From this I know that my body is decaying."

"That is correct," the Buddha replied. "You are now old, becoming feeble. Is your appearance like in your youth?"

"My Lord, when I was a child, my skin was fresh and moist. In my youth, my energy was vigorous. Now, I am old and weak, my appearance is withered, my mind is dulling, my hair is white, my face wrinkled, and I will soon die. How can I be compared to my youth?"

"My Great King, your body cannot become old in one moment, can it?"

"Lord, it has been changing year after year without my noticing it until now. I have become old. How is that? When I was 20 years old, although I was still in my youth, my appearance was older than when I was 10. When I was in my 30's, I was not as strong as when I was in my 20's. Now, that I am 62, looking back, I find that in my 50's I was quite vigorous. Lord, I have spoken

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<sup>10</sup> Two of six heterodox teachers in Buddha's time

of the changes in my body of the past decades, but, in fact, it has changed every year, every month, and every day. When I carefully and closely observe it, changes occur in every moment of thought. Therefore, I know that my body changes and will finally die.”

The Buddha said, “My Great King, seeing the continuous changes in your body, you know that it is bound to death. Do you know something in your body that does not die?”

The King, putting his palms together, addressed the Buddha, “Lord, I really do not know.”

“Now, I will help you to realize the non-birth and non-death nature.” Then, the Buddha asked, “At what age did you first see the Ganges River?”

“When I was three years old, my mother carried me in her arms to the temple of Jivaka. At this time, I saw the Ganges.”

“My Great King,” the Buddha continued, “As you have just said, when you were 20, you were older when you were 10. You have been changing every year, every month, every day, and every moment---until now, when you are in your 60’s. You also said that you saw the Ganges River when you were three years old. How was your seeing when you saw it again at thirteen?”

“It has not changed from three until now, at 62,” the King replied.

“You are worrying about your white hair and wrinkled face. Your face is definitely more wrinkled than when you were young. Nevertheless, when you see the Ganges today, is your present seeing nature older than in former times?”

“My Lord,” the King answered, “No, it is not.”

“My Great King, although your face is wrinkled, your seeing nature has not ever been wrinkled. That which wrinkles, changes and that which does not wrinkle, does not change. That which changes belongs to the cycle of birth and death and that which does not change has never belong to the cycle. How can your seeing nature be bound to birth and death like your body? Why did you quote Maskari Gosali<sup>11</sup> teaching as saying that this body is completely annihilated after death?”

In this passage the Buddha explains to us that which is bound to birth and death and that which is not bound to birth and death in your very own body. Your body is a changing stream in every moment; it is temporary, bound to annihilation. Since your seeing nature has not change from the beginning, it

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<sup>11</sup> Another member of the group of six heterodox teachers in Buddha’s time

cannot be annihilated. The seeing nature is the ever-knowing, manifesting at the eye organs when the mind does not go to the second level of dualistic thinking, that of good or bad, beautiful or ugly, etc. It is there whether your eyes are opened or closed. It does not totally rely on the eyes. If you have good eyes, it manifests in a bright way, if you have bad eyes, it manifests in a dim way. Even when the eye-organs die, seeing nature does not die. This is the characteristic of non-birth and non-death. This characteristic does not manifest only through the eyes but also through the ears. In the *Shurangama Sutra*, volume 4:

The Buddha told Rahula to hit a bell, and then asked Ananda, “Now, are you hearing?”

“Yes, we are hearing,” Ananda and the assembly answered.

When the sound of the bell ended, the Buddha again asked, “Now, are you hearing?”

“No, we do not hear it,” they again replied.

Rahula hit the bell again. Once more, the Buddha asked, “Now, are you hearing?”

“We hear it,” Ananda and the assembly answered.

“What do you mean by hearing and not hearing?” The Buddha then asked them.

“When the bell is hit, then we hear the sound,” they answered. “And when the sound of the bell ends, we do not hear.”

The Buddha told Rahula to hit the bell again. He asked Ananda, “Now, is there a sound?”

“Yes, there is a sound,” Ananda and the assembly replied.

After a moment, the sound ended. The Buddha then asked, “Now is there a sound?”

“There is no sound,” they answered.

After a pause, Rahula sounded the bell yet again. Once again, the Buddha asked, “Now, is there a sound?”

“Yes, there is,” Ananda and the assembly replied once again.

The Buddha asked Ananda, “What do you mean by sound and no sound?”

“When a bell is hit, we say there is a sound. When the sound ends, we say there is not a sound,” Rahula and the assembly replied.

“Why did you answer so disorderly?” the Buddha then said.

“Why do you say that we answered disorderly?” They asked.

“When I asked you about the hearing, you said you heard. When I asked you if there was a sound, you answered that there was. You did not answer in a unified way about hearing and sound. That was why I said that you answered disorderly.

“Ananda, when the sound ended, you said you did not hear. If you really did not hear, your hearing nature would cease to exist, like a dead plant. If this was the case, how would you know when another bell was hit? It is the sound that exists or does not exist, not your hearing nature exists or does not exist. If your hearing nature is not present, who is there to know that there was no sound? Therefore, Ananda, when you are hearing, sound may arise or disappear, not your hearing nature that exists or not according to the sound. You inversely mistake the sound for your hearing, so it is no wonder that you incorrectly consider that which is permanent (i.e. hearing nature) to be capable of annihilation (i.e. sound). Ultimately, you should not say that your hearing nature does not exist whether there is agitation and stillness or obstruction and penetration.”

This is our common mistake, accepting the sound for the hearing or the form for the seeing. When there is a sound, you say you are hearing; when there is no sound, no hearing. Similarly with form, when there is a form, you say you are seeing; when there is no form, no seeing. Hearing and seeing are our knowing natures; form and sound are outside objects. We mistake outside objects for ourselves; therefore, losing ourselves and drifting along the stream of birth and death forever. This is clear proof of our inverted ignorance. If we do not try to awaken right at this very point, discovering our true and permanent nature, who knows when we will escape from the cycle of birth and death?

It is the common purpose of all Buddhas to awaken people to their true, permanent nature. From the *Lotus Sutra*, in the chapter entitled “Skillfulness,” the Buddha said:

Shariputra, the buddhas taught according to abilities of the audience and appropriately to the situation even though their teachings are not easy to understand. Why is this so? For example, I use many means, methods, examples, and sayings depending on different situations to express the Dharma. The Dharma cannot be intellectually understood. Only buddhas are able to fully understand the Dharma. Why is this so? Buddhas appear in the world only for this one great aim.

Shariputra, why do buddhas appear in the world for this one great aim? Because buddhas want sentient beings to *open* up to their Buddha-knowing (or knowing nature) in order that they may be purified. Buddhas want to *show* sentient beings their Buddha-knowing; therefore, buddhas appear in the world. Buddhas want sentient beings to *realize* their Buddha-knowing; therefore, they appear in the world. Buddhas want sentient beings to *integrate* with Buddha-knowing; therefore, buddhas appear in the world.

Shariputra, buddhas appear in the world only for this one great aim.

All the buddhas' teachings are for one aim only: to lead sentient beings to the innate Buddha-knowing. When there are forms, we say we see; when forms disappear, we say we do not see. Similarly, we say we know due to sense objects; when sense objects disappear, we say we do not know. Nevertheless, who is the person who sees forms disappearing, yet says he does not see? Who is the one who knows when there is no sense object yet says he does not know? Pitifully, we forget ourselves.

Every morning, when we first open our eyes, we immediately start thinking about problems that need solving throughout the day. After dinner, when we go to bed, lying there, we go through the list of problems to determine which have been solved, which still remain to be solved, and the new ones which need to be solved the next day. It is the same routine, day after day until we die! Problems will always remain. These problems are outside things that we insistently try to solve, forgetting the one who makes problems and solve them. Furthermore, there is an Owner who has no problems.

Forgetting oneself to pursue external things is sentient beings' knowledge. Recognizing one's true nature through external things is Buddha-knowledge. Forgetting oneself is ignorance. Realizing one's true face is enlightenment. Buddhas want to awaken sentient beings in order that they may return to living with their Buddha natures, not running after external things and forgetting the Self. To transform sentient beings' ignorance is the cherished intentions of all buddhas. From the *Diamond Sutra*:

Therefore, Subhuti! Bodhisattvas should detach from all forms if they aspire to Buddhahood. They should not dwell on forms, sounds, smell, taste, touch, or mind objects. They should raise non-abiding minds. Their minds cannot be calm if their minds abide anywhere.

The Buddha–mind does not attach to the six sense objects because they are tied to birth and death. The mind which attaches to the six sense objects is the delusive mind. Therefore, if Bodhisattvas want to abide in Buddha–mind, they should not attach to the six sense objects. When they run after the six sense objects, they perceive their minds as inside and objects as outside, still abiding in the realm of false duality. Knowing the six sense objects are of temporal and false conditionality, Bodhisattvas stop following them, returning to live with their true natures. From the *Vimalakirti Nirdesha Sutra*, chapter 9, there is also this teaching on non–duality:

Vimalakirti said to the Bodhisattvas, “Assembly! How do bodhisattvas enter the Non–dualistic Dharma Gate? Just tell us your understanding.”

A Bodhisattva named Dharmavikurvana (Dharma Freedom) answered, “Assembly! Birth and annihilation are dualistic but all dharmas, in their nature, are not born nor annihilated. By embracing this truth of birthlessness, one is able to endure everything. This is entering the Non–dualistic Dharma Gate.”

Bodhisattva Srigandha said, “‘I’ and ‘mine’ are dualistic concepts. Because there is an ‘I,’ so there is ‘mine.’ And if there is no ‘I,’ of course, there is no ‘mine.’ This is integrating the Non–dualistic Dharma Gate.”

Then, Manjushri said, “In my opinion, in regards to all dharmas, there can be no speaking, no discussion, no pointing–out, or no intellectualizing; beyond all dialogues. That is entering the Non–dualistic Dharma Gate.”

Manjushri then asked Vimalakirti, “All of us have spoken already. Now it is your turn to say how bodhisattvas enter the Non–dualistic Dharma Gate.”

Vimalakirti kept silent.

Manjushri praised him, “Very good! Very good! In fact, entering the Non–dualistic Dharma Gate does not depend on a word or a saying”

People who read Buddhist sutras may find them difficult to understand because of the way they were written. We usually say “two” or “one”: if it is not “one,” it is “two;” if it is not “two,” it is “one.” Why then, does this sutra use the term “non–dualistic” and not “one?” Because “one” is opposite of “two” and “two” is opposite of “one.” However, this Dharma Gate is beyond the binary or singular. Only use language to dismiss language. This is similar to what Manjushri said. The ultimate point is that there is no word to express it. As soon as we use language to express the Path, we fall into duality. Directly realizing is enlightenment. This is Vimalakirti’s silence. Speaking, but not speaking, is using language to

eliminate language. Not speaking, but speaking, is subtly showing the absolute truth that is beyond words.

There are many more examples of absolute truth in the sutras. However, let's now look at the methods of some Zen masters. After Hui-Neng became enlightened, his teacher, the Fifth Patriarch Hung-Jen, gave him the robe and bowl with instructions to go south. Hui-Neng went to Mount Yu-Ling, where he was followed by a Dharma brother named Hui-Ming. When he saw Hui-Ming coming, Hui-Neng put the robe and bowl on a rock and hid in a cluster of trees. When Hui-Ming saw the robe and bowl, he tried to lift them, but could not. He called out, "Pilgrim! I've come for the Dharma, not for the robe and bowl!" When the Patriarch heard the call, he came out, saying, "If you have come for the Dharma, calm your mind and then hear what I have to say." Hui-Ming waited quietly. After awhile, Hui-Neng asked, "Not thinking of good or evil, what is Venerable Ming's original face?" Hearing this, Hui-Ming became enlightened.

This is exactly the essential teaching Hui-Neng received from the Fifth Patriarch. It is also the cherished intentions of all Buddhas. "Original face" is another name for the Path, the Dharma-body, Buddha Nature, True Mind, etc. You have an everlasting and unchanging face but you forget this and consider the temporal body to be your self. The body that you are holding on to is changing every moment, coming into being and disappearing without any certainty. How can you say that it is real? It is really an ever-changing, temporal combination. It exists but it does not really exist because it is ever-changing. It remains but it does not really remain because it is not fixed and certain. If you really have to consider it as your self, then think of it as just a temporal self!

Sometimes you realize that your body is false but you still consider your mind as your self because it can distinguish between what is good or evil, right or wrong, good or bad, etc. Nevertheless, dualistic thinking is also temporary. As soon as the mind gives rise to thoughts about good or evil, it is immediately involved in the cycle of birth and death. If you rid yourself of all dualistic ideas, you will not find any trace of "mind." Therefore, where is your self? Did you lose your self? It can be quite confusing when you consider the thinking as your self.

For eons, we have been adrift in the stream of birth and death, or reincarnation; all because we hold on to and consider these temporal bodies and false minds to be our selves. However, it is also at this point, that we can realize and live with our original faces. The stream of birth and death then ceases and we can escape from reincarnation. Our original faces have never been in the cycle of birth and death. How can the unconditioned essence be changed or affected by formation and dispersion? Our original faces have always

existed. When we forget this, it is ignorance. Remembering this is enlightenment.

To point out the original face, there is no other way more effective than using Hui-Neng's question, "Not thinking of good nor evil, what is Venerable Ming's original face?" Everyone keep wondering "what is Venerable Ming's original face," not remembering the more crucial part of the question which says "not thinking of good nor evil." We realize our original faces exactly at the moment when we are "not thinking of good or evil." When our minds are natural, alert, and not thinking of good or evil or right or wrong, our original faces appear. When we think of good or evil, our minds become agitated, falling into the cycle of birth and death and our original faces are covered. Therefore, after hearing Hui-Neng's question, Venerable Ming realized his original face, becoming enlightened. Here is another Zen masters' simple, but great, lecture:

Ts'ung Shen approached Nan Ch'uan and asked, "What is the Way?"

"Ordinary mind is the Way," Nan Ch'uan answered.

"Can we approach it?" Ts'ung then asked.

"Thinking of approaching it is wrong."

"When we don't think of it, how can we know it is the Way?"

"The Way does not depend on knowing or not knowing. Thinking that we know is delusive; not knowing is dullness. If people are really enlightened, they will not doubt the Way, which is like the vast void and does not belong to dualistic ideas about right or wrong."

Upon hearing this, Ts'ung Shen became enlightened.

"The Way" is another name for the original face or the Buddha-body. It is the absolute essence that is innate in us. To think we can find it or approach it is incorrect. To think we know it is falling into delusive thinking. To ignore it, having a hazy mind, is dullness. To judge it as right or wrong is further straying from the Way. Truly, the expression "ordinary mind is the Way," can lift the veils of ignorance, revealing the original face. Thinking of finding the Way and judging dualistically is losing this ordinary mind. Being alert, aware, and tranquil is the essence of the ordinary mind. Ordinary mind has no form, its nature is vast and empty, like space. Recognizing this is enlightenment.

Zen Master Tao Wu said to Ch'ung Hsin, his disciple, "Be my attendant and I will teach you the essentials." Ch'ung Hsin accepted. After living with him for

some years, Ch'ung Hsin felt that he had not been taught anything, so he went to talk with Tao Wu:

“Since I have come here, I have not been taught the essential mind,” Ch'ung Hsin said.

“From the day you came here, I have never not taught you the essential mind,” Tao Wu responded.

“Where have you pointed it out to me?”

“When you served me tea, I received the tea for you. When you brought rice, I took it for you. When you bow to leave, I nodded my head for you. Where did I not teach you the essential mind?” Tao Wu answered. Ch'ung Hsin bowed his head, thinking for awhile.

“It is right here to realize. Thinking of it is wrong,” Tao Wu said.

Hearing this, Ch'ung Hsin awakened.

Tao Wu's essential mind is Nan Ch'uan's “ordinary mind.” In every action, such as eating, wearing clothes, or going forwards or backwards, we express the essential mind completely. Yet, when eating, we often do not really eat, thinking of other things. When putting on clothes, we often do not really just put on clothes, but make plans instead. We cannot live with just our ordinary minds in all daily activities, always drawn away by the thinking minds. Therefore, all day long, we follow thoughts from one category to another, never stopping.

Here, Zen Master Tao Wu showed the essential mind through receiving tea and rice or the nodding of the head. It is very simple and everyday. The essential mind always exists in every action, but we ignore and do not accept it. Because our minds are full of strange images and curiosities, how can we accept this simple, ordinary nature? When we hear teachings about the essential mind, the Way, or the Buddha-body, we imagine that it must be something extraordinary and beyond the ordinary. However, surprisingly, it is in very simple and common things. Throwing away all chaotic thoughts and living with the tranquil nature of the ordinary mind in all common activities is achieving the Way, realizing the essential mind.

Waves rising and falling on the ocean's surface are symptoms of birth and death. When waves become calm and the surface is flat, what then, is birth and death? When waves arise, they take different forms. When waves disappear, then what form can be found? At this time, we cannot say that there is no ocean! Similarly, when all thoughts calm down, our true nature manifests. When we think, our true nature is hidden:

When Huai-Hai was following Ma-Tsu in the garden one day, a flock of birds flew by. Ma-Tsu asked, "What is it?"

"A flock of wild ducks."

"Where have they gone?"

"They have flown away." At this, Ma-Tsu pinched Huai-Hai's nose so forcefully that the latter screamed.

"Didn't you say flown away?"

Immediately, Huai-Hai was enlightened.

Although the essential mind always manifest at the six sense organs, we do not realize this. We keep following the six sense objects. When the eyes see form, we consider that we are seeing. When the form disappears, we say that we are not seeing. We totally depend on outside surroundings. Form is subject to birth and death: suddenly existing; suddenly, disappearing. Our seeing nature has never been born nor will it die, but we often accept forms instead of realizing our seeing nature. Seeing nature embodies the essentials and is our life pulse for numerous lifetimes. Unfortunately, we forget our life pulse, following the outside stream of birth and death. Huai-Hai's case is an example of this. He only identifies that the ducks have flown away, not remembering to stay with his seeing nature. When Ma-Tsu held and twisted his nose forcefully, saying, "Didn't you say flown away?" Huai-Hai suddenly realized his nature that has never 'flown away,' waking up from his dream of forgetting his true nature to pursue objects.

We live breathing in and out through our nose. Our nose is always on our face but we hardly remember or see it. Everyday, we just remember eating, wearing clothes, or being beautiful or ugly, forgetting that which is more vital. Forgetting our breath is forgetting our lives. When we forget about our lives, then there is no meaning to living. We live like we are dead. We live in crazy chaos. Buddhas and patriarchs try to awaken us so that we can remember our true lives. As long as we are breathing in and out, we are not yet dead. Similarly, when we can constantly stay with our true lives, are we not in the realm of non-birth and non-death? Our seeing nature is always within us, but we do not realize it. Likewise, our nose is always on our face, but we forget it. Ma-Tsu held Huai-Hai's nose and twisted it forcefully to make the latter scream. Right at that moment, Huai-Hai became enlightened. This is a skillful technique in the Zen tradition. This is also a wonderful, speechless teaching:

One day, during his visit to K'ai-Yaun pagoda, Prime Minister Pei-Hsiu saw a picture of a venerable monk on the wall. He asked Zen Master Hsi-Yun, "His picture is seen here, but where is the venerable monk?"

"Pei-Hsiu!" Hsi-Yun called out.

"Here I am!" Pei-Hsiu answered.

"Where?" Hsi-Yun asked.

At this point, Pei-Hsiu recognized immediately the priceless gem hidden in the topknot, becoming enlightened.

When we go to visit a friend, we ring the doorbell. If someone immediately opens the door, we know for sure then that someone is home. Similarly, if our knowing nature was not present at our ears, how could we react to a sound so quickly? When there is a call, right away, there is a response. There is no time to hesitate or think. Even when we are sleeping soundly, if there is a sudden call, right away, we are startled, waking up. This illustrates that the knowing nature is always at our ears, never absent. When we are awake, the organs work and our knowing nature is bright. When we are asleep, the organs are closed and our knowing nature is vague. The knowing nature is the real Owner, our original face. We completely forget the Owner, always chasing outside six sense objects. When we forget our true nature, following objects, we are bobbing in the stream of birth and death. When we are working chaotically and someone asks, "Who is the Owner?" we are astonished, not knowing how to answer. Everyday, we say that we live for ourselves, taking care of ourselves, but we are actually losing ourselves. If we know clearly the Owner, we dare to say that we really live. If not, how can we say that we are living? Because living and acting without realizing the Owner is living a borrowed life.

Prime Minister Pei-Hsiu saw the venerable monk's picture but did not know where he was. This reflects the state of a person who forgets the Owner yet is continuously searching for it at the same time. The call from Zen Master Hsi-Yun is like thunder sounding at the ears, startling Pei-Hsiu into responding, "Here I am!" Then, the question, "Where?" opened Pei-Hsiu eyes. Pei-Hsiu had wondered for a long time, anxiously trying to find the Owner. Suddenly, the Owner appeared clearly before his eyes. In the Lotus Sutra, the precious gem in the king's topknot is offered only to the prime minister who has the greatest accomplishments. That day, when he recognized the Owner, Pei-Hsiu received the gem. The most noble and precious essence in our life is the Owner. A house without an owner is a deserted house. A person who does not realize the Owner is a puppet. Therefore, the only purpose of buddhas and patriarchs is to help us

realize the Owner. That Owner is always present at our six senses; we only need to skillfully realize it:

One day, Zen Master Shih–Pei was sitting in his house, attended by a monk. Looking at the floor, he saw a white spot. He asked the monk, “Do you see?”

“Yes, I do,” the monk replied.

“I see and you also see. Why then is one of us enlightened, but the other is not?”

Both of them saw a white spot on the floor but why is the Master enlightened and the disciple ignorant? Because the disciple only saw what was there, forgetting the Owner. This is ignorance. The Master saw, but did not pursue the object of sight. Moreover, due to what he saw, he recognized the Owner, his true nature. This is enlightenment. Both were in the same situation, but they exemplified the difference between ignorance and enlightenment. One forgot the self to follow the object while the other, due to seeing the object, recognizing his true self. Before the assembly at Vulture Peak, the Buddha held up a lotus flower and Mahakashyapa smiled. This story has the same significance. Zen patriarchs take full advantage of all means, like the raising of a hand or stick, in order to help others to realize their Owner through their sight.

When seeing objects, if no thought arises, this is the moment our original face appears. When there is seeing, there is knowing. The knowing which is not dependent on thoughts and comparisons is true knowing, beyond the dualism of birth and death. Since the knowing from thoughts and comparisons is restless and temporary, how can it be true? When discriminating thoughts calm down, knowing nature shows itself brightly. This is our real, true Owner. When the knowing nature is tranquil, there is no birth and death. At this moment, why do we doubt and not accept our true, eternal nature? If we see objects and realize our seeing nature, this is enlightenment. The opposite is ignorance. In another story:

Zen Master Ching–Ch’eng was sitting in his house. He asked a monk standing by his side, “What noise is there outside?”

“It is the cry of a frog caught by a snake,” the monk answered.

“There is not only a suffering being but also a being suffering!” proclaimed the Master.

On another day, the Master once again asked, “What noise is there outside?”

“It is the sound of falling rain,” the monk answered.  
“Sentient beings are inverted, forgetting the Self to pursue objects.”  
“How about you, Master?”  
“I still do not forget the Self.”  
“What do you mean?” the monk questioned further.  
“Getting out of delusions may be easy, but pointing out true nature can be quite difficult,” the Master replied.

When a snake catches a frog, there is a “suffering being” because the more powerful being overcame the weaker. However, there is also a “being suffering” because a being forgot his true nature to pursue outside objects. Every day our ears listen to the coming and going of outside sounds, seldom aware of the permanent hearing nature. Hearing a sound, immediately we dualistically classify it as “useful” or “harmful,” “right” or “wrong,” “interesting” or “boring,” etc. We then decide “like” or “dislike.” We keep doing this, never stopping. Therefore, we say that “sentient beings are inverted, forgetting the true Self to pursue outside objects.”

Mindful people know how to return to themselves. Anything outside, whether agitated or still, is bound to birth and death. The Owner who knows agitation and stillness is beyond birth and death. Whether there is agitation or stillness, the Owner always knows it just as it is. Agitation and stillness chase each other repeatedly while the Owner is still, watching the changes. “Still do not forget the Self” is staying with the Owner, despite the changes in sense objects. Since this cannot really be described, the Master said, “Getting out of the delusion may be easy, but pointing out true nature is quite difficult.”

Hearing sound yet not following and discriminating it and remembering the ever-existing hearing nature is Avalokiteshvara’s practice. Whether sound is loud or soft, far away or nearby, hearing nature always realizes it. If it was possible for hearing nature to stop for awhile, it would mean that we sometimes hear and sometimes do not hear. However, we are always hearing; even when there is no sound, our hearing nature always exists within us. According to the *Shurangama Sutra*, volume 6, among the various methods of returning to true nature, reflecting back on one’s hearing nature is one of the best ways. When the Buddha asked Manjushri to choose the perfect means of practice, he chose the hearing nature method of Avalokiteshvara. Zen masters have thousands of means to help others realize their true nature. Comprehending one means that one can penetrate all others.

What are the benefits once we have realized absolute truth? Though we can clearly see the impermanence of life, we may still long for the permanent. Whenever this happens, we often sigh and think that we are deficient. It is true that most of us do not realize this eternal, true nature. We long and wish for it but we cannot find or touch it. How painful this is! Therefore, when we suddenly realize it, how happy we are! Even bodhisattvas can have similar experiences. Here is a story from the *Lotus Sutra*, in the chapter entitled “Understanding and Believing.” From the day Shariputra started to practice, he only hoped to become an arhat, never daring to think that he could achieve buddhahood. When the Buddha predicted his future buddhahood, it was beyond his dream. To express his happiness, Shariputra used the example of a poor son who was given the precious treasure by his wealthy father.

The Buddha used these examples of a precious jewel or a wish-fulfilling gem to show absolute nature. “Since receiving Ma-Tsu’s kick, I laugh forever, never stopping,” Zen Master Shui-Liao said to his disciples because he found the lost, precious jewel in his hand. From then on, his poor, wandering life ends. “Since I received my treasure-store, I have been using it, never lacking,” exclaimed Zen Master Hui-Hai. “(U)sing it, never lacking,” because it is an endless treasure-store that may be spent freely. This is called the “wish-fulfilling gem.” Holding this precious jewel in his hand, all his needs are satisfied. He can also help others as he wishes. It is truly beneficial to oneself and others.

Human beings greatly treasure their lives, desiring to live long. So, if they have been saved from death, their gratitude is as deep as the ocean or as high as the sky. However, the eternal life is found in realizing and staying with true nature. The Buddha used this example from the *Lotus Sutra*, in the chapter entitled “Duration of the Tathagata’s Life:”

A billion-world universe is crushed into tiny dust particles. A man takes all the particles, goes a hundred thousand myriads of worlds in an eastern direction. He then drops one tiny particle. He repeats this action until he finishes scattering all these dust particles. He then gathers all the worlds he has passed, crushing them into tiny dusts. Each dust particle represents a life. The longevity of the Buddha’s life is a hundred thousand myriads times more than the inconceivable number of these dust particles.

Even a talented mathematician would not be able to calculate it! Here, the Buddha is the Dharmakaya, the absolute truth existing in each being.

Absolute truth not only goes beyond time but also covers all space. In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, Chapter 37, the Buddha again used the example of dust. However, this time, to show the immense nature of absolute truth. In the story, there is a sutra as big as a billion-world universe. It is rolled into a ball and put into a tiny dust particle. A sage saw the particle and knew what it contained. He broke open the dust particle to retrieve the sutra.

This sutra contains all the truths of the billion-world universe. The sutra stands for absolute nature, or Buddha nature, and the dust particles exemplify the bodies of human beings. If we want to know everything in the universe, nothing is better than realizing the true nature which is within our own bodies. Every truth is shown there. Just as it is hard to imagine that a tiny dust particle contains such a big sutra, our bodies, likewise, contains big truths. Sages and wise people realize it.

We never admit that we have a nature so immense it can cover all of space! However, we often consider ourselves as something small like a single reed in the mud or a grain of sand in the desert. Therefore, when we read in chapter 7 of the *Vimalakirtinirdesha Sutra*, about Vimalakirti holding a world in his right hand and moving it to another place, how can we dare to believe this? Similarly, in the *Shurangama Sutra*, volume 3, when Ananda realized true nature, he observed his body and found that it was like dust blown about in a void; sometimes there and sometimes not, like a bubble floating on the vast ocean.

A monk asked Vietnamese Zen Master Tue Trung Thuong Si, "Since birth and death are crucial matters, how should I resolve it?" The Master answered, "In immense space, do two wheels<sup>12</sup> matter? On the vast sea, does a floating bubble matter?" When we compare the size of the two wheels in space or a bubble in the ocean, the conclusion is obvious. Similarly, true nature is illustrated as a priceless gem.

The person who can stay with true nature will have boundless skilful actions that fully benefit him and others. Everyday we live only with false thoughts, thereby, creating hundreds of thousands of useful actions. Imagine if we were to live with the bright nature filled with boundless actions that are immeasurable!

Examining worldly phenomena will shows us this more clearly. For example, that which is coarse has weak action while that which is subtle has powerful action. Soil is coarser than water but can be swept away by water.

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<sup>12</sup> the sun and the moon

Water is coarser than wind which can toss it about. Wind's powerful strength can erode soil and sweep away water but we cannot see its form. Similarly, an atom, though smaller than the eye can see, is incredible powerful.

Thoughts arise when the mind follows mind-objects, becoming mental formations. When we think "mountain," immediately a mental formation of a mountain appears in our minds. Similarly, when we remember a person, a mental formation of that person appears. Mind arises, creating objects. Mind and object go together. The mind which does not detach from an object is called a delusive mind or false thinking. There are thousands of objects so there are thousands of object following minds! Mind creating mental formation is coarse mind. Mind following many different objects is distracted. Coarse and distracted minds have second-rate applications. When all thoughts calm down, a formless, bright nature with unlimited applications shows. Because its skilful actions go beyond intellectualization, it is called the "wish-fulfilling gem." Holding this gem in hand, everything will be fulfilled. On one side, the application is weak and limited. On the other side, it is wondrous, free, and independent, beyond intellectualization.

Absolute truth is not outside but is right within us. If we want to find it, we have to return to ourselves. It is a waste of time to look for it elsewhere. Absolute truth is innate and so is the Owner. After realizing the Owner, we can see all other truths in the universe more clearly. After realizing and living with the Owner, the cycle of birth and death and all sufferings cease. We become completely enlightened and emancipated.

## Learning Buddhism

In worldly life, every subject has its own way to be studied. For example, when a pupil wants to learn about mathematics, he first needs to learn numbers, then how to add and subtract, next, the multiplication tables and division, and then, more complex formulas. When he wants to study writing, he has to learn how to spell, understand proper grammar, how to write essays, etc. Similarly, as Buddhism is a subject that can be studied, it has its own methods.

Three methods to achieve wisdom are learning, reflecting, and practicing. Without wisdom, we cannot enter the gate of enlightenment. The Buddha-dharma is the truth. If we do not have the light of wisdom, how can we clearly see truth in every phenomenon? If we only learn about Buddhism through beliefs, it is a great mistake. This is a serious disease among many

contemporary Buddhist practitioners. To treat this disease, we have to thoroughly apply the following three methods.

### **Wisdom through Learning<sup>13</sup>**

After studying and listening to the Dharma, our wisdom can develop. This is called wisdom through learning. We learn about the Dharma from the teachings of monks and nuns and from our senior dharma friends. These teachings have their origins in the sutras which contains the correct teachings, revealing the truth. The more we listen, the clearer our wisdom becomes. The *Brahma Net Sutra*, chapter 6, precept 7 states, “When one who has just received the Bodhisattva precepts hear that a sutra or the Vinaya is being taught, they should go there to learn even though they may be thousands of miles away.” Directly reading sutras and Buddhist books is another way to develop our wisdom through learning. Diligently studying and listening to the teachings is to enter the house of the Buddha–dharma through the gate of learning.

### **Wisdom through Reflecting**

Reflecting is investigating and contemplating. When deliberation and discrimination are applied when we are presented with the Buddha’s teachings, our wisdom can develop. If we believe immediately what we are told or read, this is not a correct attitude for studying the Dharma. It is better to use our wisdom to judge whether it is correct or not. Only when we find that it is correct should we then believe. One of the last sayings of the Buddha is, “You, yourself, have to light your own torch as you go. Light it with right Dharma.”<sup>14</sup> We want to develop our wisdom but how can we do it by ourselves? We can light our torch from the Buddha’s torch of right Dharma.

How do we light it? When we hear a teacher saying, “All things in the world are temporary,” we should use our wisdom to decide if it is correct by posing a counter question to ourselves. We may ask, “If all things in the world are temporary, are there any exceptions?” If there are any exceptions, this saying is not true. If we find that there are no exceptions, we can believe in the saying.

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<sup>13</sup> From the Chinese–Vietnamese “van hue,” meaning “the wisdom of listening,” because in the time of the Buddha, the teachings were orally taught and learnt. However, we have translated it as “learning” to reflect current times.

<sup>14</sup> From the Samyutta Nikaya, chapter 3, item Ambapali, “Disease.”

Right now, let us investigate together whether human life is temporary or not. Our grandparents and our parents are born, grow up, become sick or old, and, then, die. Similarly, we will go through the same process. All human beings in the world, from long ago and into the future, will experience the same process. Therefore, we may conclude that human life is, in fact, temporary.

Are things like houses, desks, chairs, cars, or buses temporary also? Let us investigate together. Our house is quite fine when it is newly built. However, it will deteriorate with the years; perhaps collapsing after fifty years. Similarly, a desk, shiny when new, becomes old with time (the paint peeling, the surfaces covered with scratches, etc.) and then, falls apart. The devices we use every day are also affected by impermanence. We can examine thousands of things to see that they follow the same process. Therefore, we can conclude that it is true that all things in the world are temporary. Although there may be others who say differently, after we have filtered what we have heard through the wisdom from investigative reflection, we can firmly believe in the truth of impermanence.

Another example is if we hear a teacher say, "Everything in the world is involved in reincarnation." We may ask ourselves, "How is it that all things are in the realm of reincarnation? Is there anything outside of this cycle?" Let us begin by examining the plant kingdom. From seeds, a plant will germinate, grow, bloom, and then produce fruits that bear more seeds, continuing the cycle endlessly. This is the cycle from one generation to another.

Even in one generation, we can see this process. A plant, taking in nutrients from the soil and water through its roots, grows into a large tree with leaves and branches. The leaves and branches fall to the ground, becoming compost. Another example is water evaporating into vapors in sunlight. Vapors rise and meet cold air, condensing into droplets that falls to the earth, where it, once again, becomes vapors, continuing this endless cycle. Also, when the earth rotates, there are light and dark phases. People then create hours, days, months, years, and the four seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter....in an endless cycle. With these examples, we can see that all things in the world follow a cycle of becoming and ceasing, or reincarnation. This is an undeniable truth.

We can use this method of reflecting to investigate other teachings of the Buddha or other sources. Doing so, we will not be misled by incorrect teachings. This is the right attitude for Buddhist practitioners.

## **Wisdom through Practice**

Once we have determined that the Buddha's teachings are true through investigation, if we apply them to our daily lives, the teachings will become even more meaningful. This is wisdom through practice. For example, we may apply the teaching that "all things are temporary" to the following three cases.

When there is something wrong in our own life or with our family, if we remember the teachings on impermanence, it may help us to keep calm and not be scared or fearful. We know that no one can escape impermanence and our fear usually only makes the problem more confusing. When we are not frightened, our minds can be calm and wisdom arises to help us to better solve our problems or to console others who suffer like us.

Likewise, when we are in the heat of craving, if we remember that all things in the world are impermanent, our hearts will cool. We will not struggle for fame, money, or lust anymore because we know that these things are temporary. So, why would we struggle for them, causing ourselves and others suffering? We know this would be like trying to catch the moon by chasing its shadow on the water. When we understand impermanence, the craving for worldly pleasures will be alleviated.

Remembering impermanence, we cannot passively wait for death. We have to try to do good deeds now. When death does come, there is not much we can do at that moment even though we may want to. We should value our time now because we cannot relive the days that have passed. We have to strive to be of benefit to ourselves and others without delay. By wisely applying the teaching that "all things in the world are impermanent" to our daily lives, great benefit will develop. Relating to the teachings in these ways, accompanied by an alert and awakened mind, is called wisdom through practice.

We may also employ the teachings that all things are involved in samsara. When we understand how it applies in our daily lives, we may make better choices. For example, knowing that plants are in the realm of birth and death, we may choose the higher quality seed to cultivate the best fruits for everyone's enjoyment. Similarly, if we are aware that we cannot escape from the cycle of samsara, we would create good causes so that we will be reborn into a good realm. Knowing the rules of samsara, we have to find out which cause is pulling us into the cycle. After that, we have to find the way to escape from the cycle of birth and death, not accepting being involved forever in the cycle of samsara. It is similar to scientists studying the gravitational pull of the earth to understand how much force is needed to propel a spaceship into space. Understanding

samsara and finding the way to escape from it is the spirit of wisdom through practicing.

Learning and reflecting about the Dharma is necessary, but practicing it is more important. If we learn and reflect but do not practice, the wisdom we acquire will be empty wisdom, useless since it has no practical applications to our daily lives. It is through practice that the value of learning and reflecting will be measured. Then, wisdom acquired from practice will, in turn, reinforce learning and reflecting.

These three wisdom practices are totally congruent with modern methods of investigation. To study any worldly subject, first people study the theory, then, analyze and investigate, and, at last, put the theory into practice.

According to *The Mahanama Sutra* in *The Samyutta Nikaya*, the Buddha taught the laity that when they visit temples, they should meet with monks and nuns to inquire about the Dharma. Then, they reflect on and apply these teachings in their daily lives. This is the proper spirit of a practitioner. In *the Shurangama Sutra*, volume 6, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva reported that in a long and remote time before, he met a buddha who taught him these three methods of learning, reflecting, and practicing. Applying these methods, he was able to enter into deep concentration. Therefore, in order to study in the manner the Buddha taught, it is useful to develop wisdom through learning, reflecting, and practicing. Mastering these wisdom practices are based on the principle of self-investigation. When grounded in self-investigation, practitioners are more able to properly read and interpret Buddhist sutras and texts.

## Practicing Buddhism

All buddhas aspire to teach human beings how to practice in order to obtain Buddhahood. However, since humans have various capabilities and learn differently, the Buddha teaches various methods. These are classified into two categories: practicing and remaining in samsara and practicing to escape from samsara.

### Practicing within Reincarnation

As was previous explained, causation and conditionality operate in the realm of common truths. Their main engine is karma. Wholesome or unwholesome karma lead to wholesome or unwholesome results. Karma is the cause and the fruit is the result, or “karmic result.” Karma arises in accordance with conditions, creating and developing phenomena, or “karmic condition.” When karma ceases and conditions disintegrate, the manifestation from their combined forces dies. It is crucial to understand karma since it is the engine of reincarnation.

Karma is volitional actions, coming from body, speech, and mind. Humans create karma and, in return, karma effects their lives. For instance, an artist imagines a woman and paints her. After finishing the painting, he admires her beauty and falls in love with his creation. Similarly, human beings create karma from body, speech, and mind, harvesting the result, and then, creating further karma. This cycle keeps on operating endlessly. The involvement in the cycle of birth and death as the result of karma is reincarnation.

By understanding how karma works, we may better understand and have influence on the directions of our lives. According to the law of karma, the results we receive now have originated from corresponding causes we planted before. Karma has never been created by supernatural powers or any other mystical sources! Our actions, after many repetitions, become habits, affecting our lives in powerful ways. Let us consider alcohol and cigarette addictions as examples. No one is addicted to alcohol or cigarettes after the first try. However, with repeated usage, drinking and smoking can become habits. In time the users may want to give up these habits but it will not be so easy if these activities have developed into dependencies. The forces of karma are similarly powerful.

There are wholesome and unwholesome karma. Both operate within the cycle of birth and death. Buddhist practitioners need to rid themselves of unwholesome karmas and develop wholesome ones. By doing so, more wholesome seeds are planted which, with proper conditions, can result in better reincarnations. Let us consider an example from worldly life. A person who wants to find elegant interests begins to drink tea, cultivate ornamental plants, and compose poems. Day after day, he engages in these activities until he becomes used to them. When he does not have them, he feels depressed, anxious, or irritated because they have enter his life as habits. In another case, a person enjoys listening to music and playing chess with friends. Gradually, these activities become a habit and he finds it unbearable if they are absent from his life. Similarly, others become addicted to gambling and drinking. The above activities become habits due to repeated engagements. Among these

habits, we may consider the first as elegant and decent, the second as joyful and gentle, and the last as detrimental. However, these, or any other habits become unwholesome if they bring suffering to the practitioner or other people. From these examples, we can see that we have the ability to influence our present and future circumstances.

Karma originates from acts of body, speech, and mind. Killing, stealing, and indulging in sexual misconducts are unwholesome acts of the body. Lying, divisive, exaggerated, and harsh speech are destructive acts of speech. Ignorance, craving, and hatred are afflicted acts of the mind. These acts seem to be bad habits that have plagued us for thousands of lives. They are called unwholesome karma because they cause suffering.

Practicing ceasing or transforming unwholesome karma is practicing Buddha's teachings. There are two levels of practice: ceasing unwholesome karma and cultivating wholesome karma.

For a long time, perhaps not heeding the rules of ethical behavior, we have engaged in, directly or indirectly, killing, stealing, or indulging in sexual misconducts, causing suffering. This is creating unwholesome body karma. Now, after learning and practicing Buddhism, we stop creating unwholesome karma of the body. Formerly, we have engaged in lying to deceive, uttering double-tongued speeches to split up, gossiping and speaking frivolously to attract, or using harsh words to belittle others; all acts which brought others pain and misery. Now, to put an end to unwholesome karma of speech, we avoid speaking unwholesome words or in a harmful manner. Previously, our minds have freely followed ignorance, craving, and hateful thoughts and feelings, leading us astray, towards sufferings, and harming others. This is unwholesome karma of the mind. Once we have repented and stop these kinds of thoughts, we cease forming unwholesome mental karma. If we stop these three types of unwholesome karma, no longer causing suffering, then, how can unwholesome karma push us to harvest retributions?

However, ceasing unwholesome karma is only practicing passive good deeds. We also need to cultivate active good deeds. This is how we transform karma. For example, if before, we were engaged in killing, stealing, or indulging in sexual misconducts, now, we refrain from killing or actively work to save lives, help others, and live ethically. This is changing unwholesome into wholesome body karma. Similarly, instead of lying, divisive speech, gossiping or frivolously speech, and using harsh words as in former days, now, we speak truthfully, harmoniously, plainly, and amicably. By doing so, we turn karma of speech from unwholesome to wholesome. Moreover, if previously, our minds

have been accustomed to ignorance, craving, and hatred, from now on, we change this unwholesome karma into wholesome karma by applying wisdom, giving things away, and being compassionate. Therefore, by practicing cultivating these wholesome karmic habits, not only will practitioners attain ease but they will also create wholesome, peaceful, and happy conditions for others. If everyone in the world practiced transforming karma, the world will be filled with happiness, now and in the future!

However, there are happy and unhappy people everywhere. Although still within the realm of samsara, people who practice ceasing and transforming karma often live with more ease, filled with joy and happiness that can be felt by those around them. Those who continue to indulge in unwholesome acts of body, speech, and mind, are often afflicted with unsettled and troubled minds, affecting how they view and live their lives. According to the law of karma and depending on conditions, the causes human beings have planted in the past greatly effect present and future situations.

To practice stopping and transforming karma fruitfully and completely, the first and determinate condition is taking refuge in the Triple Gems<sup>15</sup> and receiving the five precepts.<sup>16</sup> Taking refuge in the Triple Gems is setting direction for our lives. What is the purpose of practicing stopping and transforming karma? Is it not because we want to follow in the Buddha's footsteps, apply his teachings, and look to monks and nuns for guidance in order that we may improve our lives? Once we understand the purpose of this practice, we may no longer be afraid or hesitate, but bravely and consciously overcome every obstacle to follow the Buddha-dharma.

We use the precepts as a barrier to prevent our mind, speech, and body from developing unwholesome karma. Upholding the five precepts is forming the first resting station on the path to stopping karma. Without this station, we do not have enough energy and well-being to climb safely up the mountain of wholesome karma. Furthermore, the five precepts are the first step to complete emancipation. Feelings of peace, happiness, and freedom can come from keeping the five precepts. Therefore, practitioners need to respect and keep the precepts as if they were protecting their most precious jewels. Since taking refuge in the Triple Gems and keeping the five precepts is crucial, Buddhists practitioners need to fully realize their significance before advancing to other Dharma gates.

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<sup>15</sup> Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha

<sup>16</sup> Not killing, not stealing, not misusing sexuality, not lying, and no intoxicants

## Practicing to Escape Reincarnation

We know that karma is the main engine for reincarnation. Acts of body, speech, and mind are the origins of karma. As long as karma exists, samsara exists; when karma ends, samsara ends. Among the three, the mind is the leader because, with thoughts, speech and actions follow. Therefore, if we want to end our karma, we have to purify our mind. Purifying our speech and actions without cleaning our minds is superficial cleaning:

A long time ago, Patriarch Huai-Jang in Nen-Yueh often saw Tao-i (later known as "Ma-tsu") meditating all day. The Patriarch asked him, "What are you meditating for?"

"To become a buddha," Tao-i answered.

The next day, Huai-Jang took a brick and rubbed it against a rock near where Tao-i sat meditating. Tao-i was surprised and asked, "What are you rubbing that brick for?"

"I want to make a mirror." Huai-Jang replied.

"Rubbing a brick cannot make a mirror."

"Meditating cannot make you a buddha."

"What, then, is the correct way?"

"Like an ox pulling a cart, if the cart does not move, do you hit the cart or the ox?" Huai-Jang asked.

Tao-i had no word.

The cart is a passive object and the ox is the active doer. If you want to move the cart, you have to stimulate the doer. Hitting the passive object is useless effort. Similarly, our speech and body are the passive objects while the mind is the active doer. Making our bodies sit straight or forcing our mouths to chant is useless efforts if we cannot control our minds. Controlling and refraining the mind is not limited to sitting or standing, but also includes when walking or lying down. We have to watch our minds all the time. With constant watching, we may be able to stop mind karma. Speech and body karma will then be purified accordingly.

The aim of Buddhist practices such as chanting sutras, reciting mantras or buddhas names, and meditating are used to stop mind karma. Respected teachers often say that chanting sutras without distracted thoughts will bring

merit and virtues, reciting mantras without agitations will bring miracles, invoking buddhas' names mindfully will bring rebirth into the Pure Land, and meditating with a tranquil mind leads to concentration. These practices produce calm and settled states of mind karma. Although the methods are different, their ultimate goal is to stop mind karma. If we see things from an ultimate point of view, we can accept all methods without opposition. If we just judge which method is being used, we will find many contradictions. Therefore, broadminded people will see the aim; whereas, narrow-minded people can only see the methods. The Buddha-dharma is like a house with many doors: people may enter from any door, seeing each other and the things in the house. Beginners often wonder why other people enter the house from other doors. They often try to advice others to use the same door they did. The advice from wise and open-minded people is, "With ease, choose an appropriate door for your current situation. Entering the house is for your benefit."

At this point, I will give simple and general explanations on only two methods for practicing: the Pure Land method of recitation of Buddha's name and the Zen method. Practitioners may apply these methods to escape from reincarnation.

### **The Recitation of Buddha's Name**

This method includes contemplative visualization and recitation. Contemplative visualization is taught in the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* and recitation in the *Amitabha Sutra*. While contemplative visualization is similar, we will only cover the recitation method in this book. All Buddhist practice methods have two parts: temporary means and ultimate aims. Temporary means are like gates; ultimate aims are like the hosts. When one wants to see the host, first, one must enter through the gate. If one does not use the gate, one cannot come to the house, let alone, meet with the host. Using the gate is the necessary step before meeting the host. It is difficult to fulfill one's wish without this condition. If one wants to achieve the best result with this recitation method, one has to skillfully apply the method.

What is this method? Reciting the Buddha's name is using emotions to replace emotions or using a thorn to remove a thorn. People in the world are usually absorbed in worldly passions. Everyday their minds run after these passions and cannot stop. Seeing this, the Buddha felt pity for us, teaching the

*Amitabha Sutra* which describes the wonderful landscape of Sukhavati<sup>17</sup> and disparages the sufferings and defilements of the Saha<sup>18</sup> world. Hearing this sutra, people may feel the desire to be reborn in Sukhavati and become tired of the Saha world. When people's minds are overly filled with likes and dislikes, it is easier for them to become single-mindedly focused on their recitation. Otherwise, people may recite with distracted minds. Therefore, this method uses like to replace dislike: more specifically, the liking for the loveliness of the Pure Land to replace the dislike for the ugliness of the Saha world. The feelings of like and dislike becomes the gate for entering the land of Sukhavati.

What do people like? In the *Amitabha Sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha described Sukhavati as containing "inhabitants (who) do not suffer but only have pleasure, so it is called the Land of Ultimate Bliss." Moreover, in this land, all the fences, trees, and nets are made of the four precious elements of gold, silver, crystals, and lapis-lazuli. The ponds are full of the eight-virtue<sup>19</sup> water, surrounded by buildings made of seven treasures.<sup>20</sup> These ponds are filled with lotuses with leaves as big as wheels that radiate colorful lights and give off a pure and wonderful scent when they blossom. There is also celestial music, rains of flowers, birds chirping Dharma songs, etc.

There, Amitabha Buddha,<sup>21</sup> the ruler of the Land of Ultimate Bliss, teaches the inhabitants: sravakas and bodhisattvas who will no longer regress in their practices. These are all the highest level of good people. This land also has all the elements that we desire: no suffering, full of happiness, the landscape is grand and beautiful, full of seven treasures, saintly teachers, good friends, longevity, good health, freedom of dress and movement, etc. These things make people wish to be reborn to this land. This is the method of arousing the likes.

What do people dislike? The Saha is so full of sufferings that it is even hard for Shakyamuni! According to the last part of the *Amitabha Sutra*, the Buddha said, "Buddhas in the ten directions praise my unthinkable merit, saying that I can do the hard-to-do thing of becoming a buddha and preaching hard-

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<sup>17</sup> Also known as The Pure Land or The Land of Ultimate Bliss

<sup>18</sup> Saha (Skt. for "endurance") the worldly world of suffering

<sup>19</sup> The eight virtues are clarity, coolness, sweetness, lightness, moistening power, the ability to give comfort, the ability to quench thirst, and the ability to improve health

<sup>20</sup> The 7 treasures are gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate, red pearl, and carnelian

<sup>21</sup> Also known as Boundless Light or Boundless Longevity

to-believe teachings to human beings while living in the five-fold defiled world.”<sup>22</sup> The Buddha’s criticism of the Saha world arouses our dislikes.

The two worlds are clearly described: one is grand and beautiful, full of happiness and luxuries while the other is full of filths, defilements, and sufferings. One arouses our likes while the other reinforces our boredom of worldly sufferings. These are the gates for entering the Land of Ultimate Bliss. The arousal of these two states helps the restless mind that usually follows worldly passions to gradually become calm and cool. Then, we can effectively apply the recitation method, chanting Amitabha Buddha’s name.

To practice this method, everyday we must magnify our likes and dislikes to an extreme level while also vowing to be reborn in Sukhavati. We turn any attachments for the Saha world towards Sukhavati. For example, when we see filthy garbage, we say to ourselves, “This Saha world is so filthy and boring; whereas, Sukhavati is so beautiful, grand, and full of the seven treasures that it is worthy of aspiring towards. I am determined to be reborn into the Pure Land so that I will not see this filth anymore.” This is turning the dislike of filth into the liking for purity.

When we face sufferings and adverse conditions, we say to ourselves, “In this Saha world, there are many unsatisfying conditions; whereas, Sukhavati is full of pleasure, happiness, and satisfying conditions. I am tired of this world and wish to be reborn into the Land of Ultimate Bliss.” This is turning the dislike of suffering into the liking for happiness.

When we go about and hear curses and insults, we say to ourselves, “In this Saha world, I often hear bad words; whereas in Sukhavati, I always hear celestial music and birds singing the Dharma. I’m quite bored of this Saha world and vow to be reborn into the Pure Land so that everyday I may hear the Dharma.” This is turning the dislike of defilements into the liking for Bodhi.<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes, when friends betray us, we say to ourselves, “Friends in this Saha world are not very good, making me sad, bringing me sufferings. The Land of Ultimate Bliss is full of the highest level of good and respectful people. I am determined to be reborn into the Land Ultimate Bliss so that I may be friends with these people.” This is turning the dislike of unwholesome friends into the liking for wholesome friends.

When we have to work hard to earn a living yet still lack food and clothing, we say to ourselves, “In this Saha world, poor me, I have to work hard

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<sup>22</sup> Defilements of view, passion, the human condition, the life-span, and the world condition

<sup>23</sup> Sanskrit for “awareness”

without having enough. However, in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, without effort, I have food when I want to eat and I have luxurious things to wear when I need clothing. Therefore, I am determined to be reborn into the Land of Ultimate Bliss so that I may have delicious food and luxurious clothing without effort.” This is turning the dislike of poverty into the liking for comfort.

In brief, we should skillfully redirect the dislikes of all unfortunate situations towards the aspiration to be reborn into the Pure Land. The more we focus on our boredom of the Saha world, the more we will strengthen our aspirations to be reborn into the Pure Land. This is skillfully using the doorway of the temporary means of likes and dislikes to enter the Pure Land.

What is the ultimate aim of this method?

According to the *Amitabha Sutra*, after introducing the Land of Ultimate Bliss, Shakyamuni Buddha said, “If good men and good women, hearing of the Amitabha Buddha, focus on their recitation without any distractions for one day, two days, three days, four days, five days, six days, or seven days, the Amitabha Buddha and his saintly sangha will appear before them at the time of their death. With their calm minds, they will be reborn into the Land of Ultimate Bliss of Amitabha Buddha.”

Practitioners recite the phrase, “Namo Amitabha” as their every day practice. They use these words as a collar to hold their monkey-minds still **and** in one place. Silently or aloud, practitioners constantly recite the Amitabha’s name as they are walking, standing, sitting, lying down, or working. If they patiently recite without any distractions, their discriminating minds will gradually become calm and settled; until one day, it becomes single-minded. At this point, their mind-karma will be purified; as will their body karma and speech karma. When the three types of karma are purified, nothing can pull us into the cycle of birth and death. This is reflected by the recitation, “With the three types of karma purified, one is reborn in the Pure Land with Amitabha Buddha.”

Nevertheless, it is necessary to distinguish between single-minded and no-minded. When one recites single-mindedly to be reborn into the Pure Land, this is practical recitation. When one recites no-mindedly until one realizes true Amitabha nature and know that one’s mind is the Pure Land, this is ultimate recitation.

One practices practical recitation by reciting, “Namo Amitabha,” without any distractions, using one thought to replace all other thoughts. When one holds on constantly, without interruptions, to the recitation in all activities, one becomes single-minded. Single-mindedly, one vows to be reborn into the Land

of Ultimate Bliss. At this stage, there is still a sense of a place outside of ourselves that we need to reach.

One recites “Namo Amitabha” as an excellent medicine to treat all the diseases of distractions. When these diseases are cured, there is no need for the medicine anymore. This means that one recites until one achieves no-mind mind and only Suchness remains. At this point, one realizes one’s nature is both Amitabha and the Pure Land. This is ultimate recitation. The alert and aware essence of one’s true nature is called “Boundless Light”. It is also called “Boundless Longevity” as it is outside the cycle of time (never born nor die). From the beginning, one’s nature was always pure, yet is defiled by agitated, false thoughts, following karma into the six realms.<sup>24</sup> When all the false thoughts have settled, only the pure mind, or the Pure Land, remains. This is reflected in the saying, “When the mind is pure, the land is pure.” Ultimate recitation is realizing that everything we need is within ourselves, and, therefore, innate. This way of practicing is quite suitable to the Mahayana spirit and other Buddhist methods.

Practitioners can believe in this method because Shakyamuni Buddha introduced it. As practitioners raise likes and dislikes, they need to rely and fix their minds on the Pure Land of Amitabha. It is not necessary to analyze whether the Pure Land exists or not. If practitioners firmly have faith that Shakyamuni did not mislead them and apply this recitation method, they will have great benefit. They need to focus on their recitation constantly, day and night, without any distractions or worries about how much time have past. They do this until they become single-minded. They must also skillfully vow to be reborn into the Pure Land no matter what situation they find themselves facing. Having faith, practicing, and vowing are necessary elements for practicing the recitation method.

When we examine any method, we should look at its ultimate goals and not get bogged down in the means. According to the different degrees of human understanding, the Buddha installed different methods to fit the different needs. We should not be attached to our abilities and criticize others nor over-value others’ abilities and devalue our own. Wise practitioners try to understand themselves and where they are in their practice first, then, choose a suitable practice method.

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<sup>24</sup> Also known as the Six Planes of Existence: hells, hungry ghosts, animals, human beings, asuras, and celestials.

## **The Method of Meditation**

Practicing meditation is a way of looking directly inside and clearing out thoughts and plans. This method also includes temporary means and ultimate goals. A temporary means of this method is using wisdom to remove emotions. Practitioners directly examine and analyze phenomena, seeing that they are temporary and combined from numerous causes and conditions. With this realization, their emotions become cool and calm, not agitated or passionate as before. Therefore, they decide to begin practicing in order that their minds may also become settled.

There are many different meditation methods. Generally, Buddhist meditation includes relative meditation and absolute meditation.

### **Relative Meditation**

Due to human's attachments to worldly things, the Buddha taught relative methods as a doctor prescribes medicine according to the disease. The teacher needs to know clearly the practitioner's spiritual disease in order that they may give the suitable method for practicing. However, the practitioner has to skillfully apply the meditation method to achieve the desired results.

There are many different methods in relative meditation to cure the different spiritual diseases. People who often think need to use the method of counting the breath. People who have strong lust need to use the method of contemplation of impurities. People who often have anger will find the method of contemplation on compassion helpful. People with great ignorance may use the method of contemplation of distinguishing the realms, the analyzing of our body, both inside and outside, as different parts with its different limits. With these relative meditation methods, practitioners contemplate a subject until their minds grow accustomed to the object, becoming settled. Here, only the counting of the breath, the most common method, will be explained.

The method of breath counting, Anapanasati, is also the first of the Six Wonderful Strategies.<sup>25</sup> As mentioned earlier, this is the ideal method for those who often think. Thinking is a common habit of all human beings. This method will focus our thinking; starting with the breath because it is so crucial to

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25 Anapanasati is broadly used in various schools of Buddhism while the Six Wonderful Strategies is from the Mahayana branch

human life. To begin, meditators regulate their breathing; the first step towards peace of mind and health of body. After this, they can approach the dharma door of the Six Wonderful Strategies.

The Six Wonderful Strategies are counting, following, focusing, contemplating, returning, and calming. Applying these steps, practitioners proceed from coarse to subtle levels as they progress through the six strategies. Also called the Six Wonderful Dharma Doors, this method helps practitioners to effectively calm all their thoughts. Here are simple explanations of the six strategies.

### **Counting the Breath**

After settling into a meditative posture, use the method of counting the breath to focus your minds. While inhaling deeply and exhaling thoroughly, count one. Inhaling deeply and exhaling thoroughly, count two. Continue until ten. Then, start again from one. If you become distracted and lose count, start from the beginning. Practitioners have to pay attention to the counting and the breath subtlety. If the mind becomes distracted, readjust immediately. If the mind is excited or uncontrollable, practitioners may divide the breath counting process into two parts, for example: inhaling, count one; exhaling, count two, etc. When the awareness and the counting of the breath can be sustained for half-an-hour to one hour, then the mind is fairly calm and the practitioner may go on to the next step.

### **Following the Breath**

At this stage, practitioners now follow instead of counting the breath. Keep the awareness with the inhalations and exhalations. The same is true with long, short, cold, or hot breaths. We follow the breath as a lender follows his debtor. The mind follows the breath without any distractions. When the mind becomes calm and settled, practitioners may go on to the next step.

### **Focusing**

Now, practitioners no longer follow the in and out breaths but place the mind on the nose to watch the breath. Focus the mind on one point around the nose area, such as the rims of the nostrils or just below the opening. Be aware of the

breath at this point. During the sitting session, when the mind can sustain this stage, go on to the next step.

### **Contemplation**

Not clinging to the calm state achieved in the focusing step, practitioners now start to observe the continuity of the in and out breath, noting its impermanence. The body depends on the breath, and, as such, it is also impermanent. The time it takes for one inhalation and exhalation is short just as the body exists then decays. The in-breath has no location and neither does the out-breath. Therefore, the breath does not truly exist. The body survives dependent on the breath, so it is ephemeral and not real. With this observation, attachment to the body-as-self loosens. When practitioners no longer believe that their body is real and ever-lasting, they may go on to the next step.

### **Returning**

At this point, practitioners watch the observing mind to see what it is and where it resides. Look for it everywhere and see that it cannot be found. As the practitioner looks at the observing mind, the silence and stillness of the mind reveals itself. Now the practitioner is ready for the last step.

### **Calming**

Now, let go of the watching of the observing mind until there is only the knowing that is the pure and alert mind, which has neither distractions nor drowsiness. Once the practitioner can stay with this state of mind all the time, the final goal of the six wonderful strategies is achieved. At this point, the changing stream of consciousness comes to an end and karma created by the mind consciousness is purified. This means that defilements can no longer draw practitioners into the cycle of birth and death.

If meditators can skillfully apply the six wonderful strategies, they can enjoy the fruit of their practice and escape from the cycle of birth and death. However, there will be other difficulties and obstacles as well as uncommon experiences during the practice process. Therefore, you will need to have an experienced teacher to guide you.

## **Absolute Meditation**

This type of meditation originated from the story at Vulture Peak in which Shakyamuni Buddha raised a flower without speaking, at which time, Mahakashyapa smiled. With this act, he received transmission of the true Dharma. This understanding of the Buddha-dharma without words is considered the beginning of Zen. This transmission continues up to the twenty-eighth patriarch, Bodhidharma. From India, Bodhidharma went to China, transmitting his teachings to Hui-Ke. The Buddha-dharma then spread to Viet Nam, Korea, and Japan. Bodhidharma's main proclamation was:

“Not dependent upon words and letters,  
Transmission beyond scriptures and doctrines,  
Directly pointing at the mind,  
Recognizing one's true nature and becoming a buddha.”

From this proclamation, the absolute character of this meditation is revealed. This meditation may be further divided into two kinds of practices: from nothing to having and from having to nothing. From nothing to having is first knowing that all phenomena are unreal and temporary and then realizing that one's true mind is the absolute essence. Constantly living with this non-birth and non-death nature is achieving enlightenment. Conversely, from having to nothing is first recognizing one's true mind, and then knowing that all phenomena are unreal and temporary. Constantly staying with one's Owner is recognizing one's true nature and becoming a buddha.

### **From Nothing to Having**

When practitioners reflect, they can see that all things which are created from conditions do not have solid or real nature, but are empty, of temporary and conditioned combinations. When conditions coalesce, things are called “born;” when conditions disperse, then we say things have “died.” “Born” or “die” has no real nature; just the coalescence and dispersion of conditions. When practitioners use their prajna wisdom<sup>26</sup> to reflect in this manner, they will realize that all things are like bubbles and shadows, empty of a solid self. This is why Zen meditation is considered the gate to understanding emptiness.

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<sup>26</sup> Sanskrit for Fundamental Wisdom that is beyond intellect.

From the gate of prajna wisdom, practitioners may enter the house to see the Owner. Realizing the true from the false, practitioners end thousands of lifetimes of ignorance and live with complete wisdom. This is enlightenment and deliverance. Conversely, mistaking the false for the true and forgetting the eternal absolute truth is ignorance. False formations are “born” or “die” while true nature has never been “born” or “die.” Therefore, realizing and living with this true nature is to be free from the cycle of birth and death. This is “recognizing one’s true nature and becoming a buddha.” True nature is innate in every sentient being, not created nor achieved through practicing.

Also, there really is no Dharma to speak of since it is beyond dualistic descriptions. Reading thoroughly this section on Absolute Meditation, you will not be able to find any step-by-step method for practicing since it is not bound to any form. Therefore, there are no preparations, staying, or relaxation steps as in other types of meditations. Instead of asking for a practice method, practitioners need to use the prajna sword<sup>27</sup> to clear out the forest of tightly grasped views. Only then will the ultimate goal appear. If practitioners try to search for a method of practice, they will be disappointed:

Hui-ke said to Bodhidharma, “My mind is not at peace. Please teach me how to pacify it.”

“Bring me your mind and I will pacify it,” Bodhidharma answered.

“I cannot find it.”

“There, I have pacified your mind for you.”

At this, Hui-ko understood the essence.

Reading this, practitioners may become disappointed, thinking “How can I find a method for pacifying the mind?” The half-real and half-false reply from Bodhidharma to Hui-ke’s earnest question makes us embarrassed. Yet, right at that moment, Hui-Ke understood. How amazing this is!

When practitioners have distracted, false thoughts during meditation, their minds cannot be at peace. Many practitioners think that trying to pacify the mind is necessary. Therefore, when they hear about a Zen master, they immediately set out on their way to look for a method. If they study this method or that method to pacify their minds, this is only using hot to treat cold or using bright to erase darkness. All these dualisms are unreal and false symptoms. Bodhidharma did not teach that way. He simply said, “Bring me your mind and I

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<sup>27</sup> Clear wisdom that cuts through delusional views.

will pacify it.” When one looks directly at the anxious mind, it will disappear, leaving no trace. Hui-Ke had to say, “I cannot find it.” Bodhidharma only had to reply, “There, I have pacified your mind for you.” Hui-ke right away saw the Way.

For a long time now, we have believed that the agitated, thinking mind is real. However, if we look inside we will find no trace of the thinking mind and will then know it is empty of ownbeing. When we know it is empty, our thoughts no longer grab our attention and so will not disturb us. When thoughts arise, if we do not follow them, our minds will be calm. Following thoughts, thinking of this or that, never stopping, our minds cannot be at peace. The moment that a thought arises, if we know that it is empty and do not follow it, it will disappear by itself. This is a wonderful way for pacifying the mind. This way does not rely on any method or form.

Also, if we look directly at the false thoughts, they will disperse like clouds or smoke. This is “directly pointing at the mind,” not relying on any means. If we all practiced in this manner, no one would be unwise enough to run after their thoughts, trying to destroy illusions. We only need to know that thoughts are false and not follow them. This is the essence of Bodhidharma’s pacification of mind.

A monk once asked Zen Master Tsung-mi, “How does one practice Zen?” The master replied, “Knowing illusions is practicing.” This answer is simple and complete. Knowing that thoughts are false and not following them, our minds become calm by themselves. This is the wonderful practice of Zen. And, even though we say “practice,” it is not practice, because we do not create, destroy, or alter anything. We use wisdom only to penetrate illusions. This “non-practice” practice begins with understanding the emptiness of the thinking mind and continues when you embrace the single mind essence. Master Wei-Hsin of Tong dynasty said, “Thirty years ago, I saw mountains and rivers as mountains and rivers. After I heard the Master’s teachings, I saw mountains and rivers not as mountains and rivers. Now my mind is clear so I see mountains and rivers being mountains and rivers.”

Before Master Wei-Hsin practiced Zen, he saw things the way most people do: only as physical mountains and rivers. After understanding Zen, he saw mountains and rivers as temporary, conditioned combinations; as things with non-real nature. After looking at everything through the eyes of wisdom, Master Wei-Hsin rid himself of all defilements. A pure, single mind essence was revealed. He saw mountains and rivers as mountains and rivers because he was free from all rigid viewpoints and discriminations. Master Wei-Hsin was really a

person who reached the goal of the path of birds.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps a more concrete example of this practice can be found in the conversation between Zen Master Yuan-Kuan and a monk who managed the garden:

The monk asked, “What should we do when we cannot control our internal enemies?”

“They would not be deadly foes if you knew them,” the Master replied.

“What should we do after we know them?”

“Banish them to the non-birth land.”

“Is non-birth land his<sup>29</sup> dwelling place?”

“Stagnant water cannot keep a dragon.”

“What is active water that will keep a dragon?”

“Spreading ripples yet not making waves.”

“How is it when suddenly swamps tilt and mountains crumble?”

“Do not say that any corner of my kasaya<sup>30</sup> gets wet,” said the Master, stepping down from his seat and grabbing the monk.

The hard to control “internal enemies” are the false thoughts arising when the six sense organs contact with the sense objects. When we know their false nature, they cannot harm us. On the contrary, we are able to control them, and then they become calmer and calmer. This is “staying in non-birth land.” However, we should not become stuck, thinking of this state as our ultimate goal. Our minds need to be in full awareness, alert and flexible yet not agitated – a state of boundless skillful abilities. This is “active water that can keep a dragon.” At this stage, although the sky may collapse or the ground may tilt, the practitioner’s mind cannot be disturbed. This is what is meant by “(no) corner of my kasaya gets wet.”

The point of this practice is not for achieving miraculous or supernatural powers. What is important is for practitioners to no longer be moved or disturbed by the eight winds.<sup>31</sup> Although practitioners face challenges or difficulties, if their minds remain unmoved, this is complete success.

## From Having to Nothing

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<sup>28</sup> “The path of birds” is a Zen saying, meaning the fastest way to reach the goal

<sup>29</sup> The true Self

<sup>30</sup> An ordained person’s robe

<sup>31</sup> Eight worldly conditions of prosperity, decline, disgrace, honor, praise, censure, suffering, and pleasure

When we recognize true nature in ourselves, we realize that all phenomena are temporary forms that are combined from conditions. True nature is formless, beyond both conditions and non-conditions, permanent and impermanent. This nature is always present in all sentient beings, bright and alert. It does not increase when one is enlightened. Neither does it decrease when one is ignorant. However, people usually forget this. When they can recognize this true nature in themselves, they become Buddhas:

One day, Ta-an asked Patriarch Pai-chang, "I want to know Buddha. What should I do?"

"It is like a person who looks for his ox while he is on its back," Pai-chang replied.

"What is it like after knowing that?"

"Like the person who rides his ox home."

"I do not know how to guard it?"

"It is like the herder who holds a rod while watching his ox, not letting it eat the rice in the paddy."

At this, Ta-an understood.

We have a Buddha nature in each of us but we dare not accept it. Instead, we run around searching for it. We are like the man who is looking for the ox that he is sitting on! When we realize our true nature within ourselves, we will not worry and look for it any more; like the man who rides his ox home. However, knowing that we have not yet finished our task, we need to persistently watch and tame our thinking minds. It is like the ox herder who holds a rod while watching his ox. This is crucial practice for those who have just recognized their Owners. Zen Master Ta'an further instructed his disciples:

What are you all looking for when you come to Ta'an? If you want to become buddhas then see yourselves as buddhas. Why do you carry your buddhas to your neighbors, asking for buddhas? You are like thirsty deer running after sunlight for water, chasing mirages. How could you ever succeed? Each of you has a priceless gem. It radiates through your eyes, illuminating mountains and rivers, trees and grass. It radiates through your ears, apprehending all good and evil sounds. Your six senses constantly radiated day and night. This is called the "light emanating samadhi." You do not know this essence, embracing your four-

constituent bodies<sup>32</sup> as solid selves. Yet, these bodies are dependent upon inside and outside conditions so need always to be carefully taken care of. It is like someone with a heavy load on his back, crossing a bridge made from a single tree trunk. This person has to always keep his balance for fear of losing his step.

Reading these lines, we know that Buddha nature is innate in each of us, manifesting through the six organs. The harder we run looking for Buddha nature, the more strained and tiresome we become. We just need to look back to see it. Unfortunately, we rarely accept our true natures. Instead, we accept the four-constituent bodies which readily decay when inside or outside conditions are insufficient. Therefore, we often are worried and fearful of impermanence. When we are able to embrace this unchanging true nature which cannot be harmed by anything, we can experience nirvana.

A monk asked Zen Master Shih-Chiu, “What is the gem in the hand of Kshitigarbha<sup>33</sup>?

“Do you have it in your hand?” the Master responded.

“I do not understand.”

“Do not tell lies,” the Master replied. He then recited:

*Not knowing your family treasure,  
You follow outside phenomena.  
It is like a person who stands in sunlight,  
Yet at the same time, tries to escape his shadow,  
Or, like an idiot who, without a mirror,  
Cannot see his head so thinks he does not have one!*

Human beings always run after outside phenomena and forget their true nature. It is like the monk in the story who wanted to ask about the gem in the hand of Kshitigarbha, forgetting the gem in his own hand. Even though we have drifted about in the six realms or wandered in the triple world, true nature is always with us as shadow follows form. We are like Yajnadatta in

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32 According to Buddhism, sentient beings’ bodies are made of four basic constituents of earth (solid matter), water (liquid), fire (heat), and air (energy or motion).

33 Also known as Earth Repository or Earth Store Bodhisattva; who saves suffering beings in the hells, usually represented standing, holding in his left hand a pearl, and in his right hand a pilgrim’s staff. His famous quote is: “Not until the hells are emptied will I become a Buddha.”

volume 4 of the Shurangama Sutra who looked in the mirror one day. He liked the head in the mirror because he could see it. However, when he stepped away from the mirror, Yajnadatta could not see his head. From this, he falsely reasoned that he had lost his head so ran madly about.

Everyday, we follow our thinking minds, believing these thoughts and then creating a self from them. When all thoughts calm down, we are startled, thinking that we have lost ourselves. Thoughts are always arising and disappearing, having neither location nor root. However, we grasp them as selves. When thoughts are calm, our faculties for seeing, hearing, and knowing still remain. How then can we say, “losing ourselves?” And who is it who is thinking “losing ourselves?” Only when we recognize the Owner, we will not be cheated by outside sense objects and false thoughts. As Zen Master Fa-Yen said, “I have a thing that is not worldly nor saintly, not wrong nor right, yet naturally know how to deal with events.”

The Owner in us is the absolute essence that is beyond duality. When in contact with the world, the Owner is aware and knows everything. This essence, also called the eternal Dharmakaya, was never born and will never be annihilated. It is true, permanent, and formless. It is, therefore, often described as emptiness. One who embraces the Dharmakaya sees his body, mind, and all phenomena as temporary and unreal, like bubbles, shadows, mist, or lightning. If one is always with the Owner while walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, one is doing “birthless practice.”

Zen Master Ruiyan Shiyan often sat on a rock, now and then calling to himself. “Owner!” he would shout. “Yes!” he would then answer, adding, “Be alert and do not let people deceive you!” Calling and replying to oneself may seem silly, but this is an effective practice for remembering the Owner. Practitioners should be alert, always with their eternal Owners, and do not let the outside world deceive them. This is an everlasting principle for those who want to return to themselves. There are many different ways to express this returning to oneself: enlightenment, deliverance, Nirvana, or the Place of Jewels<sup>34</sup>. When practitioners do return to themselves, nothing in the world can disturb them. This type of meditation attaches special importance to the mind, not to a definite schedule. In all activities, while walking, standing, sitting, lying, and even resting, practitioners need to recognize every thought yet do not follow them.

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<sup>34</sup> Meaning “ultimate goal”; from the *Lotus Sutra*, in the chapter entitled “Magic City”

Therefore, outside conditions cannot grab their attention. Whenever they do not live with the Owner and lose their awareness, they are considered to be gravely distracted. Those who are practicing this type of meditation **may** seem to be at leisure, but, in fact, they are paying attention to every thought. This practice is the foundation for becoming patriarchs and buddhas:

One day, Wang Chang Shi came to visit Patriarch Lin Chi's monastery. He walked around and saw many monks staying there. Wang Chang Shi asked, "Do you teach them to meditate and recite the sutras?"

"No!" Lin Chi exclaimed.

"Then what do you teach them?"

"I teach them to become buddhas and patriarchs."

This method of practice is subtle and internal, not belonging to any outward form. It seems difficult to understand, but people still can go through it. This practice has no levels and no means. Practitioners just live with their formless true nature. It may be rather hard for practitioners to evaluate their progress with this method but they must persist. There are people whose main aim in learning the Dharma is to expound it. Instead of practicing, they use buddhas' and patriarchs' sayings to cover their mistakes. These are called thieves of the Buddha Dharma.

In teaching the above ideas on Absolute Meditation, many have asked clarifying questions. Let's look at a couple of these:

Question: Buddhism preaches "no-self" but this section advises people to return to "an Owner." Does the latter contradict the former?

Answer: Buddhism teaches "no-self" in the sense that there is not a self in the body of five aggregates or components: form, feeling, conception, mental formation, and consciousness. We have a tendency to hold on these five aggregates as selves while the Buddha knew that they are conditioned, impermanent, and will cease. This is what he meant by the term "no self." If one considers the existence of the five aggregate body as one's self, how can one be free from the cycle of birth and death? Therefore, in Buddhism, one definition of ignorance is the holding on to of the five aggregates as a solid, enduring self.

The term "Owner" is used here to mean the non-birth-and-death essence within this body composed of the five aggregates. This essence will fully

manifest itself when one's feelings, conceptions, mental formations, and consciousness calm down. It is never apart with these aggregates, but when they are operating, we rarely realize this essence. The Owner is the tranquil, aware essence that has never been agitated, changed, or eradicated. To experience it, try this contemplation: When meditating or sitting alone at a quiet place, note how your feelings, conceptions, mental formations, and consciousness calm down, yet your eyes, your ears, etc., are full of awareness. Then, ask yourself, "Who is it that is seeing, hearing, etc.? Is it the permanent, tranquil, aware nature inside?" Therefore, the theory of "the Owner" mentioned here does not contradict the Buddha's teaching about no self. When we have real experiences, we know it. It is useless to hang on to or argue over theories.

Question: In many sutras, the Buddha reprimanded views about permanence<sup>35</sup> and annihilation<sup>36</sup> while this section says, "the Owner is permanent and unchanging." Is this section similar to heterodox views of permanence?"

Answer: The heretic holds on to the idea that the five-aggregate body is permanent when, in fact, it is impermanent, bound to birth and death. Therefore, the Buddha reprimanded their viewpoint. That which takes form and belongs to birth and death is impermanent. Since the Owner is formless, beyond duality, and free from birth and death, how can it be impermanent? We make efforts to express the Owner by saying that it is permanent and unchanging. In fact, when practitioners realize this aware nature in themselves, they will understand this sense of permanence that cannot be described. Therefore, when we say that the Owner is permanent and unchanging, it is not similar to heterodox views of permanence, and, as such, there is no contradiction.

## Conclusion

Many topics have been discussed within a very limited space. These ideas may not be easy to grasp and comprehend. Hopefully, readers are able to realize the essentials of each topic. For further studies, one may read other books and

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<sup>35</sup> The assertion of the permanence of ego.

<sup>36</sup> The belief of human beings' total annihilation after death.

sutras or rely on instructions from monks, nun, and dharma friends. Here are the essentials points of this book.

1. The Buddha was enlightened and freed from the cycle of birth and death.

2. The Buddha Dharma is his teachings of these Truths:

- Phenomena arise due to causation
- Form arise due to conditionality
- We all have Buddha nature

3. Learning Buddhism is to be on the path towards enlightenment, reflecting on the truths in the Buddha's teachings and applying them to our lives. We need to use the eye of wisdom to do these things successfully. With this practice, we can undo the defilements and wrong views that are ingrained in our minds, bringing us peace right now in the present and forever into the future. Further more, this also means we aspire to be out of duality and the cycle of birth and death, free from all bounds or limitations in order to become free people.

When we have profound and intuitive understandings of these essential teachings, we will know that we already have bright torches in our hands and will not become lost as we return to our land. To study Buddhism is to practice what we have learnt, not keeping it at the intellectually or discursive level. The deeper we practice, the more we will realize the value of the Buddha Dharma. Those who just want to learn Buddhism so that they can preach it are like those who have eaten all kinds of foods but cannot digest it; or like bank tellers who count money all day long yet return home empty-handed.

Dear readers, may the teachings in this book inspire your practice.

## **About the Author**

Venerable Thich Thanh Tu was born in 1924 in Tra On District, Can Tho province, Southern Vietnam. At the age of twenty-four, he became a novice, learning basic Buddhism under Master Thich Thien Hoa, ordaining in 1953. He completed his advanced studied in 1958. At this time in Vietnam, most followers of Buddhism practiced Pure Land recitation. As his teacher was a Pure Land master, Thich Thanh Tu learnt these methods. He also wanted to practice Zen but was not able to find a master. In 1960, he became one of Vietnam's predominant Dharma teachers, given the post of Director of the Buddhist

Educational Department of Southern Vietnamese Sangha. From 1964 to 1967, he was the Manager of Hue Nghiem Buddha Dharma Institute.

In 1968, deciding to practice just Zen meditation, Master Thich Thanh Tu went into retreat on Mount Tao Phung in Vung Tau, vowing to stay until he found the Truth. After a summer retreat, Master Thanh Tu realized the essence of form and emptiness that is beyond duality. The meanings of the Mahayana sutras and the patriarchs' teachings, which were inaccessible to him before now, became clear. At this time, he decided to revive Vietnamese Zen Sect which had disappeared centuries before.

Master Thich Thanh Tu built his first Zen monastery in 1970, naming it Chan Khong, meaning True Emptiness. Since then, many people have come to practice with him. Currently, under his guidance, there are nineteen monasteries in Vietnam and sixteen abroad. His main instructions are to be fully aware of the false nature of thoughts, and then, to stay with True Nature which manifest through the six organs.

Zen Master Thich Thanh Tu has translated many scholarly texts from the Chinese and has written numerous books of his own. He is a living example for those who aspire Truth. Master Thanh Tu had traveled to Kampuchea, India, Sri Lanka, Japan, and China. He has also lectured live in France, Switzerland, Canada, the United States, Indonesia, and Australia. He currently resides at Truc Lam Zen Monastery in Dalat, Vietnam.