



印順導師

Introducing
Venerable Yinshun
to the West

Bhikṣu Changtzu

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Venerable Yinshun
to the West**

By Bhikṣu Changtzu

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Preface

Each year, the Yin Shun Foundation of the USA organizes Dharma retreats in both English and Chinese. This collection of Dharma articles contains my Dharma talks given at the English Dharma retreats since 2008. As English is not my mother tongue, in order to teach the Dharma in English, I need to prepare detailed drafts of my class notes. From these draft notes, I also prepare PowerPoint slides and use these slides to present the Dharma to students who are native English speakers. All of these Dharma teachings aim to introduce the Buddhist ideology of Venerable Yinshun, as well as his interpretations of the scriptures and his guidance on how to practice the Buddha's teachings. These articles can be considered quite rare when we take into account the related Buddhist teachings that are available in both Chinese and English. Upon the requests and encouragement of many Dharma friends, I have compiled these draft teaching notes into a written format, and with the coming together of many favorable conditions, this book is finally now in print.

From 2008 until now, it is exactly a decade. During these ten years, the process of deep reflection on Venerable Yinshun's teachings in order to expressing his thinking in English has brought me immense joy and tranquility. On the other hand, the difficulties encountered when trying to translate the teachings into English has made me realize that there are many areas of Venerable Yinshun's thinking that I have yet to fully understand. And yet, because of my inability to fully understand his intricate thinking and logic, my interest and respect for Venerable Yinshun's works have become even stronger. After reading Venerable Yinshun's works over and over again carefully, and also consulting his other related teachings, one by one I found solutions to these areas of difficulties, which also align well with the Buddhist doctrines. In the end, the understanding I gained was very persuasive.

Preface

Looking back at the causes and conditions for this publication, it stems back to a rare opportunity that was afforded to me by my master, Venerable Hou-Guan, and the Senior Venerable Jen-Chun. Back in 2000, Master Jen-Chun initiated the project to hold Dharma retreats at Bodhi Monastery, New Jersey. This set the platform for the opportunity to spread Venerable Yinshun's teachings in the USA. With the support and encouragement of Venerable Hou-Guan, I accepted the invitation to present Chinese Dharma classes at those retreats. Little did I know then, it would flourish into the opportunity to teach Venerable Yinshun's works in English. It is amazing where the invisible force of cause and effect can lead! I am truly grateful for the opportunity both venerables have gifted to me.

Each time I faced the task of preparing English Dharma talks, I wanted to ensure that I communicated Venerable Yinshun's Buddhist ideology and thinking accurately. Thus, I sought the assistance of a native English speaker to help me check the suitability of the expressions in my draft notes. Under the blessing of the Triple Gem, during my studies in Australia, I met with a Buddhist devotee, Miss Mandy Phan (now Venerable Yan Rong). With her tireless assistance, my English talks were able to take on a natural flow when I presented to the English audience. This enabled the audience to listen to the teachings without being hit with awkward expressions. Venerable Yan Rong's tireless work for the Buddha-dharma did not end after my return to Taiwan upon finishing my studies in Australia. Through her continual efforts and assistance, my draft class notes over these years have successfully been compiled and edited. This has greatly contributed to the smooth transition to convert my draft notes into print. Here I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Venerable Yan Rong.

Last, I would like to give a brief overview on the chapters in this book. Each chapter corresponds to the chronological order of Dharma talks

given since 2008. Due to commitments to complete my studies in Australia within the set timeframe of the university, from 2009 to 2012 I had to withdraw from attending the Dharma retreats in the USA. Thus, there are only six years of teachings in this compilation. For those who attended the English Dharma classes and/or have the recording, these published notes have been amended to suit the written form; hence, you may find some small discrepancies. Nonetheless, the main contents are there and hopefully will help the students to review and delve deeper into the wonderful Dharma.

Now, as this book is about to be published and circulated, I write this preface to explain the causes and conditions for its arising and to express my deepest appreciation to all involved.

Bhikṣu Changtzu

Written on the 7th of October, 2017
Fuyan Buddhist Institute, TAIWAN

Chapter 1

The Pāramitā Practice Based on the Three Essentials

Bodhi Monastery Dharma Retreat, July 2008

This series of talks was given in 2008. The key source for this material comes from Venerable Yinshun's work 'Compendium of Fundamental Buddhist Teachings' (佛法概論). In particular, this teaching is based on the material in Chapter 19, which focuses on the key elements of the Six Pāramitās and the Three Essentials in the bodhisattva practice.

1. Introduction

In this Dharma teaching, two major subjects on the path of the bodhisattva will be covered—the Six Pāramitās and the Three Essentials. It is hoped that, by the end of this teaching, you will be able to see the importance of practicing the Six Pāramitās with the Three Essentials as foundation. From this, I'd like to highlight Venerable Yinshun's fundamental conviction, which is that the practice of Buddhism begins with right human conduct and the attainment of Buddhahood reflects the perfection of superior human qualities.

2. The Three Essentials

The practice regarding the Bodhisattva Path is deep and extensive. However, it can be summarized in Three Essentials, which are:

1. to maintain mindfulness of supreme bodhi
2. to be guided by great kindness and compassion, and
3. to rely on the wisdom of non-grasping as skillful means.

The first essential is the practice of bodhi mind, which is the aspiration of the bodhisattva. The second essential relates to the motive and the third essential, wisdom of non-grasping, refers to the skill to perform deeds. With the Three Essentials as a foundation, practitioners of the Bodhisattva Path are on the right way.

To Maintain Mindfulness of Supreme Bodhi

According to Mahāyāna teachings, one who has made the resolution to attain supreme bodhi (bodhi mind or bodhicitta) is called a bodhisattva. That is to say, the basis of a bodhisattva is the bodhi mind.

In the beginning, when one resolves to attain supreme bodhi, the emphasis is on the firm establishment of the great vow to seek the Buddha Way and to transform sentient beings. The bodhi mind at this stage is called the aspiring bodhi mind. This is fully reflected in the four great vows of the bodhisattvas:

- ◆ I vow to save boundless sentient beings.
- ◆ I vow to eliminate endless afflictions.
- ◆ I vow to learn innumerable doctrines.
- ◆ I vow to accomplish the unsurpassed Buddha Way.

Cultivation of bodhi mind is the first significant step on the way to Buddhahood. How can we develop this bodhi mind? Bodhi mind comes from the mind of compassion. The practice can begin with respect for elders and a wish to save one's loving parents, and then gradually one extends their bodhi mind to a vow to save all sentient beings and seek the Buddha Way. It arises from the thought that others and oneself are the same; therefore, benefiting other sentient beings and cherishing oneself are also the same. Ultimately, this means one's practice reaches a stage where one is willing to sacrifice oneself to benefit others.

Resolving to attain bodhi mind means more than just occasionally thinking about attaining Buddhahood in order to benefit sentient beings. It requires persistent practice to fortify one's resolution so that it reaches a stage where it is firm and unwavering.

To Be Guided By Great Kindness and Compassion

To be guided by great kindness and compassion means to have concern for the suffering of sentient beings. This is the motive for carrying out any beneficial deed.

In the sūtras, sometimes we see that the Buddha uses compassion only to talk about the teaching of great compassion. But at other times he taught it by using loving kindness and compassion. Generally, great compassion can refer to loving kindness and compassion combined, or to compassion alone. In a wider sense, great compassion refers to loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity. Collectively, these are known as the Four Immeasurables, and their meanings are as follows.

- ◆ Compassion is to have a mind intent upon relieving living beings from their miseries.

Chapter 1

- ◆ Loving kindness is to be intent upon bringing joy and happiness to sentient beings.
- ◆ Appreciative joy is to have joy, and not jealousy, arise in our mind when we see or hear about living beings gaining relief from misery and obtaining success and happiness.
- ◆ Equanimity is to treat others equally without differentiating between those we like and dislike. In other words, it means to have an impartial mind.

To give happiness and to eradicate suffering are the main ingredients of this essential. However, some people who are habitually jealous usually feel displeased when they see others being happy and content. They may even feel animosity towards them as a result. On the other hand, these people may also have strong attachments to their beloved ones and dote on them all the time. These emotions will never initiate impartial loving kindness and compassion. This is the reason why bodhisattvas must also develop appreciative joy and equanimity.

To Rely on the Wisdom of Non-grasping as Skillful Means

What is the wisdom of non-grasping? When people want something, they will try to catch and grasp it as if they can own it forever. If this expectation is not fulfilled, they feel upset. If it is fulfilled, they get upset as well. Why? This is because they start to worry about losing what they have gained. Thus, either way they become upset. The cause of this is attachment to something and regarding that thing as real and eternal. If bodhisattvas cling to all that they do, like the example mentioned above, how can they perform great beneficial deeds? To address this, bodhisattvas need to develop the wisdom of non-grasping. How do they develop it? The practice of thoroughly understanding emptiness is the basis. As they carry out practices that benefit others, bodhisattvas

contemplate how every part of the process is formed by causes and conditions. Nothing is real and eternal. Everything is empty. In other words, with the motive of compassion, they realize that although suffering pervades this world, it is possible to make it perfect by engaging in matters that are beneficial to sentient beings. Without attachment, bodhisattvas are actually able to relieve sentient beings' suffering without creating harm. Therefore, when bodhisattvas practice beneficial deeds, they should utilize this wisdom as a skillful means. In short, the practice of a bodhisattva cannot be accomplished without this wisdom.

An example I once heard involved an old lay devotee who visited some temples and donated part of her savings to support the saṃgha community every week. Every time, after volunteering at the monastery, she prayed to the buddhas and bodhisattvas for the welfare of her family. One day, her eldest son was sent to prison for smuggling drugs. She requested the monastery for help to pay bail for her son. The saṃgha community informed her politely that they could not fulfil her request. Because they did not provide assistance, she got angry and swore at the Triple Gem.

Generally, when people help others, their motives are accompanied by a degree of selfishness. Depending on the level of this selfishness, a commensurate level of harm can result when favors are not reciprocated, as in this story.

3. The Practice of the Six Pāramitās

The practice of the Six Pāramitās is the main practice on the Bodhisattva Path. However, if practitioners of the Bodhisattva Path do not cultivate the Six Pāramitās with the Three Essentials as foundations, there is no way for them to achieve Buddhahood. What are the Six Pāramitās? They are:

Chapter 1

1. the pāramitā of generosity
2. the pāramitā of morality
3. the pāramitā of patience (or tolerance)
4. the pāramitā of determination (or diligence)
5. the pāramitā of dhyāna (or meditation), and
6. the pāramitā of prajñā (or wisdom)

Pāramitā of Generosity

According to Mahāyāna teachings, when bodhisattvas practice making offerings, they give to all sentient beings everything they own, including their bodies, knowledge or any merit from the cultivation of any Dharma practice. In other words, they do not regard their property as something that belongs to them alone. Instead they see it as actually belonging to all sentient beings. Why? All phenomena in the world are formed by causes and conditions. Without these causes and conditions, nothing can be achieved.

For example, let's look at rice that is imported and eaten in the United States. If there were no farmers to plant the rice, or if it was planted but suffered from storms or some other disasters, or if it grew successfully but was not harvested, or if everything went well before arriving in the United States but then there was no one to deliver it from the west coast to the east coast... how can we have rice to eat at lunchtime? Also, each factor in this process is affected by many different other factors. Therefore, without assistance from others, we have no chance of accomplishing anything. So how can we regard what we have as something belonging purely to ourselves? In fact, we just have the right to manage it. It is in this way that the bodhisattvas do not view anything as being their own possession, including the virtues from the cultivation of

Dharma practices. This is because they learn the methods from their teachers. Further, the merit comes from benefiting sentient beings. If there were no such sentient beings as part of the conditions in this process, how can bodhisattvas acquire merit?

To sum up, by contemplating the dependent origin of this world, bodhisattvas thoroughly understand the mutual relationships between one another. Accordingly, they realize that all sentient beings have a close relationship to them. This gives rise to great compassion within them, and so they long to relieve sentient beings from suffering as if it were their own suffering. In other words, when bodhisattvas see sentient beings that are suffering and ignorant, they regard this as their own suffering and strive to relieve this suffering by offering anything they have. Further, they think that, because they themselves have not perfected their merit to the stage of the buddhas, they are unable to completely eradicate suffering. Therefore, they continue striving in their practice of the Bodhisattva Path and work tirelessly to benefit sentient beings and free them from all suffering. When they achieve this aim, they simultaneously attain Buddhahood.

Pāramitā of Morality

This pāramitā is basically the expansion of compassion, derived from unbounded respect for the welfare of all sentient beings. To keep the precepts involves not only passively avoiding unwholesome deeds—such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicants—but also actively ceasing suffering with great compassion and skillful means.

Normally, bodhisattvas should adopt gentle approaches. However, in extreme situations, they also need to think about how they should respond in order to benefit both a “bad” person and other people. Then, with great compassion, the thought may occur: “I would rather deprive them of their

life than let them continue to cause more serious evil, which is detrimental to both themselves and others”. Although bodhisattvas understand that this will make them break their own precepts and be reborn in hell and suffer misery, they do this compassionately without any hatred at all, for the purpose of benefiting both the bad person and others. This is not to kill a few in order to save the majority, but to save all, particularly the bad person. The bodhisattva’s intention is to prevent the bad person from doing evil, so he or she will not be reborn in hell. In the sūtra, it is said: “It is to achieve the pāramitā of morality that bodhisattvas, with compassion and without any hatred, break their precepts in order to save and benefit all sentient beings”.

Pāramitā of Patience (or Tolerance)

In order to protect sentient beings further, bodhisattvas practice the pāramitā of patience. The practice of generosity and morality can build good relationships with sentient beings and serve their welfare. However, due to their ignorance, sentient beings may not be grateful for the generosity they receive and may even respond with hatred and harmfulness. If bodhisattvas are unable to tolerate this and take revenge, their virtues from giving and keeping the precepts will be destroyed. In other words, they must tolerate any tribulation of severe persecution, even if it means they would lose their life, in order to completely benefit all sentient beings and achieve supreme bodhi.

In Buddhism, patience is further defined into three categories.

1. Tolerating hateful insults and harm. This includes harm from hateful enemies, physical injuries from weapons (e.g. knives or truncheons), and false accusations and malicious slander that cause one to lose their reputation or profit. These are the most difficult things for ordinary people to tolerate.

2. Calmly tolerating suffering of all [other] kinds. Suffering can be experienced both physically and mentally and has three main causes:
 - ◆ external non-sentient things such as wind, rain, cold, heat, natural disasters etc.
 - ◆ external sentient beings such as snakes, scorpions, mosquitoes, lice, etc., and
 - ◆ oneself, such as defilement arising in the mind.

Bodhisattvas must calmly tolerate these situations through mental training and determination. If a bodhisattva fails to do so, they will either trigger afflictions or their progress on the Bodhisattva Path will be impeded. If they stall in their practice, how then can bodhisattvas benefit others? Therefore, calmly tolerating suffering is very important on the Bodhisattva Path.

3. Awareness of Dharma. The term “pāramitā of tolerance” in Sanskrit is *kṣānti-pāramitā*. The word *kṣānti* has the meaning of tolerance and, also, of wisdom when used in the Buddhist context. Dharma here may refer to Buddha’s teachings or the absolute Truth. With regard to awareness of the Truth, in Mahāyāna teachings it is especially called “the thorough understanding on the dharma of non-origination,” which in Sanskrit is *anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti* (無生法忍). The term “dharma of non-origination” (*anutpattika-dharma*, 無生法) here refers to nirvana, or emptiness, which is non-cessation and non-origination. Here, bodhisattvas thoroughly understand the state of nirvana but choose not to attain it. Venerable Yinshun illustrates this with a description from the Agama sūtras. He says, “this is like a person who clearly sees the water in the well but has not tasted it”. In other words, this is a kind of wisdom that has thorough awareness of the Truth. For example, when bodhisattvas thoroughly understand

that all phenomena are empty, they are aware that there is neither a real subject that can hate nor a real object to be hated.

Among the three categories of tolerance, it is most difficult for ordinary people to tolerate damage to their fame, wealth, career and physical body. Therefore, I would like to talk more about “tolerating hateful insults and harm” through the application of awareness of Dharma. Normally, when people are harmed they retaliate or seek revenge. For bodhisattvas, however, by thoroughly understanding the profound dharma of dependent origination, their respect for tolerance is aroused. For example, when bodhisattvas suffer from severe persecution, they pity those who injure and attack them and a further thought will arise in them, spurred by right intention:

“The causes behind why they harm me are driven by their afflictions and influenced by evil forces. If I retaliate with harmful deeds, I will just be fueling their afflictions. This violates my vow to benefit sentient beings and destroys my compassion. Did I not vow to make sentient beings happy? Why can’t I tolerate this persecution and wait for the opportunity to change the situation for the better?”

Accordingly, with such systematic contemplation, bodhisattvas recall their bodhi mind, arouse compassion and thus continue to progress on the way to Buddhahood. This is how bodhisattvas apply awareness of Dharma to tolerate insults and harm.

Pāramitā of Determination (or Diligence)

Diligence in all practices can universally give rise to all good deeds, and thereby to all virtues. Diligence in the Mahāyāna has an even more profound meaning. To practice the bodhisattva deeds means to engage in

endless wholesome deeds, such as approaching and making offerings to all buddhas, learning and practicing all dharmas, making all the buddha lands sublime, liberating all sentient beings from cyclic existence, cutting off all afflictions, acquiring all virtues and so on. In other words, everything is perfectly accomplished.

The following example depicts the diligence of bodhisattvas.

In a previous life, the Śākyamuni Buddha was a merchant. One day, when traveling through a valley, he encountered a mountain ghost blocking his way. He hit the ghost with his left hand, but the ghost seized his hand. He then hit the ghost with his right hand, his left foot, his right foot, and finally his head, but the ghost seized them all. The ghost said, “What a brave traveler! Now what can you do?” The merchant replied, “My mind will never be bounded and wants to move on”. The mountain ghost admired his courage and perseverance and let him pass through.

In the course of practicing the bodhisattva deeds, if one is unable to move on because of insufficient physical strength, one should still be determined to advance like that merchant.

Pāramitā of Dhyāna (or Meditation)

The pāramitā of meditation in Sanskrit is *dhyāna-pāramitā*. In Buddhism, dhyāna means profound thought with concentration. In other words, one of the purposes of cultivating the pāramitā of dhyāna is to develop a mental state where right thought and concentration are balanced. Concentration is a practice to tame the distracted mind, and does not necessarily refer to meditation in a sitting posture. To meditate in a sitting posture is just a good method for practitioners, especially beginners. This

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is not to say that experienced practitioners do not utilize the sitting meditation posture, but that they may also meditate when walking, standing or lying down.

Venerable Yinshun points out that it is significant for bodhisattvas to practice meditation with compassion and non-grasping wisdom. That is to say, with mindfulness and right thought, they tame the mind by engaging in beneficial matters and keep the mind calm in any situation of daily life. Otherwise, if practitioners are eager to attain comfortable states of meditation without achieving a certain level of compassion and accumulating sufficient merit beforehand, they can get attached to the meditative states easily or become uninterested in benefiting others. So, although meditation is one of the Six Pāramitās, bodhisattvas should develop great compassion and non-grasping wisdom more through practicing beneficial deeds before emphasising the practice of the pāramitā of dhyāna. Having equipped oneself with meritorious virtues and wisdom, and after attaining the level where great compassion and wisdom are balanced, then focus should turn to practicing the pāramitā of dhyāna to realize a certain level of faultless wisdom. Note that here the level of faultless wisdom leads to Buddhahood and not Arhathood.

Pāramitā of Prajñā (or Wisdom)

When looking from an ultimate perspective, the wisdom of emptiness realized by an arhat and a bodhisattva, though consistent, is not identical, especially in relation to its quality. This is because the approaches used to realize the wisdom of emptiness are different. On the Śrāvaka Path, the focus is on developing the wisdom of non-self through contemplation of the Five Aggregates (one's physical body and mental states). Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, begin by extensively contemplating the emptiness of all phenomena, and then move on to develop the wisdom of non-self so as to eliminate all defilement. The bodhisattva's approach is further explained

below.

At the first stage, the practice of “extensively contemplating the emptiness of all phenomena” is a process to develop the bodhisattva’s wisdom, which at this point is still at conventional levels but moving towards the ultimate. In this stage, the bodhisattva should have superior understanding of emptiness. Therefore, the mundane can lead to the world-transcending, but the world-transcending does not exclude the mundane. The practice of extensively contemplating the emptiness of all phenomena aims to develop great compassion and eagerness to accumulate merit, as much as they can, with minimal attachment. “All phenomena”, here, includes Buddha’s merit, external objects, and their own physical bodies and mental activities. However, due to the extensive breadth of objects bodhisattvas contemplate, the wisdom that understands emptiness is yet to reach the level that can eliminate defilement.

At the next stage, after having accumulated sufficient merit and developed their great compassion up to a certain level, a bodhisattva refines their wisdom further by centring attention on their physical body and mental activities—the Five Aggregates. This is to achieve the wisdom of non-self, which leads to liberation from defilement. In this stage, bodhisattvas will develop in-depth understanding on the true Dharma—non-origination and non-extinction (anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti, 無生法忍). With such in-depth wisdom, all defilement is completely eliminated. Before having developed this in-depth wisdom, all defilement is only subdued. This is just like wild animals that are not killed but trussed up so tightly that they are unable to move. With this profound wisdom of non-self, bodhisattvas are able to benefit all sentient beings powerfully and extensively, and simultaneously advance their wisdom to melt away the “remaining subtle influences of defilement” (習氣).

The third stage is to continue carrying out matters to benefit all sentient

beings, especially those that will result in their accomplishment of Buddhahood. From the conventional perspective, in order to benefit sentient beings skillfully bodhisattvas need to learn all kinds of knowledge and skills. For example, they need to learn medicine so that they can treat patients properly; for the sake of teaching children, they need to learn the psychology of early childhood and proficient means to teach children knowledge and morals. Venerable Yinshun reminds practitioners of the Bodhisattva Path that without the first stage of extensively contemplating the emptiness of all phenomena, what practitioners would achieve is Arhathood rather than Buddhahood, and consequently this third stage becomes impossible.

4. Perfecting the Essentials via Pāramitā Practice

It is vital that bodhisattvas practice the Six Pāramitās with the Three Essentials as foundation. However, this is not to say that they have to first perfect the Three Essentials and then cultivate the Six Pāramitās. The process of the Bodhisattva Path is to develop the Three Essentials and to cultivate the Six Pāramitās simultaneously. In other words, both are nurtured mutually and harmoniously during the process. When viewing the whole process of the Bodhisattva Path, the Three Essentials are both the basis of the cultivation of the Six Pāramitās on the way to Buddhahood, and also the ultimate aim of the path.

With regard to the relationship between each of the essentials, none of them can be ignored or neglected. Collectively, they should be regarded as a whole. In the sūtras, the Bodhisattva Path is sometimes regarded as the process of developing bodhi mind, great compassion or non-grasping wisdom. In fact, these are really just different aspects to show the order of the stages on the Bodhisattva Path. Each essential actually contains the teachings of the other two essentials.

The following will look at how Venerable Yinshun instructs us in the Bodhisattva Path from the perspective of developing bodhi mind. The cultivation process of the Bodhisattva Path can be divided into two stages containing five levels of bodhi mind. This is presented in the table below.

Table 1. Two Stages and Five Levels of Bodhi Mind

Two Stages	Five Levels of Bodhi Mind	
	From Conventional To Awakening	From Awakening to Perfection
Stage of Wisdom	Bodhi Mind of Vow	—
	Bodhi Mind of Tameness	—
	Bodhi Mind of Awakening (I)	—
Stage of Skillful Means	—	Bodhi Mind of Awakening (II)
	—	Bodhi Mind of Departure and Approach
	—	Bodhi Mind of Perfection

The Stage of Wisdom

In the stage of wisdom, the first three levels of bodhi mind are developed. This process begins with the initiation of the bodhi mind, followed by

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cultivation of the Six Pāramitās, and then the attainment of a certain level of faultless wisdom.

The Bodhi Mind of Vow

To begin the cultivation of the Bodhisattva Path, one must first develop the bodhi mind. This means that bodhisattvas initially aim for Buddhahood, vowing to learn the teachings of the buddhas and to relieve sentient beings from sufferings. Simultaneously they develop firm faith in the great bodhi vows. All this is undertaken based on primary levels of great compassion and non-grasping wisdom. This step emphasizes the importance of faith and unshakeable vow. If compared to the Noble Eightfold Path, this is consistent with the practice of Right View to Right Intention.

The Bodhi Mind of Tamelessness

After the initiation of the Bodhi Mind of Vow, bodhisattvas continue to progress in their practice of the Six Pāramitās. Based on their bodhi vow, they benefit others mainly by cultivating the pāramitās of generosity, morality, patience, and diligence. Also, they learn the pāramitās of meditation and wisdom to enhance their ability to undertake more beneficial deeds. Gradually, their defilement is tamed and the mind becomes connected to the wisdom of emptiness. The process is consistent with the practice of Right Intention to Right Diligence in the Noble Eightfold Path, but here the emphasis of the cultivation is on the deeds of great compassion.

The Bodhi Mind of Awareness (I)

Bodhisattvas focus on and strive to practice deeds of great compassion until they are equipped with sufficient meritorious virtues and wisdom, and great compassion and wisdom are balanced. From then on, they

emphasize practicing the pāramitā of meditation to realize a certain level of faultless wisdom. This is consistent with the practice of Right Diligence to Right Concentration in the Noble Eightfold Path and includes achievement of a certain level of faultless wisdom; that is, they attain thorough awareness of the dharma of non-origination.

The Stage of Skillful Means

This stage is where a bodhisattva, having cemented their vows, tamed their minds and attained a deep level of awakening to the Truth of emptiness, progresses to perfect their practice and attain the ultimate—Buddhahood.

The Bodhi Mind of Awareness (II)

The Bodhi Mind of Awareness has a dual role. Not only does it reflect the development and attainment of faultless wisdom in the Stage of Wisdom, it is also the step of the “advanced bodhi mind of vow” in the Stage of Skillful Means. In other words, the Bodhi Mind of Awareness is the final step of the previous stage (the Stage of Wisdom) and is also the first step in the Stage of Skillful Means. So, based on the bodhi mind, which is now imbued with awakening, bodhisattvas make a steadfast bodhi vow to engage in beneficial matters extensively and efficiently. In this stage, the bodhi mind is connected to the ultimate truth, which is reflected in the unification of faith and wisdom. It is specifically called “confirmed confidence”. There is a story about a bodhisattva who almost stopped engaging in beneficial deeds after they attained faultless wisdom. This is a good example to explain the dual roles of the Bodhi Mind of Awareness.

Once there was a bodhisattva who reached the level of awakening and achieved thorough understanding on the dharma of non-origination. At this point he experienced the stillness of all

phenomena and abided in its great tranquility. All his mental activities at that moment ceased, even the Bodhi Mind of Vow. Because of this, he changed his aim and wanted to enter nirvana instead of engaging in all beneficial deeds. At this time, all the present buddhas of the ten directions appeared in front of him. They stroked his head softly and said to him, “Well done! O good man! You have achieved the supreme understanding on the true Dharma. However, O good man, buddhas have ten kinds of power, four fearlessnesses and eighteen sorts of distinctive merit, etc., none of which you have accomplished yet. Furthermore, it is excellent, O good man, that you have experienced blissful stillness. On the other hand, a great many sentient beings are still far from the right path and suffer due to their defilement. Don’t you remember that you have vowed to save them all? Therefore, you must continue to cultivate all meritorious deeds diligently so that you can perfect virtue and wisdom, and attain Buddhahood”.

Having heard the advice from the buddhas, he recalled his bodhi mind with a more steadfast determination to complete the path to Buddhahood and started to progress onto the next level.

The Bodhi Mind of Departure and Approach

Having achieved the first three levels of bodhi mind, bodhisattvas next place great emphasis on relieving the sufferings of all sentient beings and adorning many buddha lands by leading beings to mature on the Bodhisattva Path. This level focuses on extraordinary beneficial deeds carried out with wisdom. In other words, they extensively and more efficiently practice the Six Pāramitās. In this level, they gradually eliminate all remaining subtle “remnants of defilement (習氣)” and approach Buddhahood.

The Bodhi Mind of Perfection.

At the last level of perfection, bodhisattvas achieve supreme bodhi, which is also called the wisdom of the All-knowing One (referring to buddhas) from the perspective of wisdom. Therefore, this is the attainment of perfect wisdom, too. In this step, all Three Essentials reach the summit. In fact, this is the perfection of the three roots of wholesomeness, which are non-greed, non-hatred and non-ignorance.

5. Conclusion

The practice of the Bodhisattva Path is boundless and profound. When practicing the Six Pāramitās of the Bodhisattva Path, starting from the stage of a worldly being, it is imperative to always hold onto the Three Essentials as the principal tenet of practice. That is, it is vital that the practice of the Six Pāramitās is based on the Three Essentials and that these essentials are purified and perfected. In other words, the process of the Bodhisattva Path is to develop the Three Essentials and to cultivate the Six Pāramitās simultaneously. During the process, both are nurtured mutually and harmoniously. Moreover, the Three Essentials should be regarded as a whole—that is to say, not a single one of them can be ignored or neglected.

Finally, I would like to draw together the content of this Dharma talk with the fundamental conviction of Venerable Yinshun. His position has always been that Buddhism should be human-centred, as this best accords with Dharma principles and human dispositions. That is, on the path to Buddhahood, the best method that accords with both Dharma principles and human dispositions is the cultivation of the pāramitās based on the Three Essentials. Why? Because the cultivation of the Three Essentials, present throughout all the cultivation of the Bodhisattva Path, is the

development of superior qualities of humankind. These qualities are superior ability of recollection, superior pure conduct and superior determination. The relationship between the three superior qualities of humankind and the Three Essentials is as follows.

Table 2. The Three Essentials and Three Superior Qualities of Humans

Three Superior Qualities of Humans	Three Essentials
Superior ability of recollection	Complete and thorough wisdom on emptiness
Superior pure conduct	Universal impartial sympathy—kindness and compassion
Superior determination	Unsurpassed and ultimate vow

The practice of the Bodhisattva Path enables human nature to be purified or distilled, allowing the virtues to develop harmoniously and reach perfection. When one becomes a buddha, the bodhi mind becomes the virtue of dharmakāya, the compassionate mind becomes the virtue of liberation, and the wisdom of emptiness becomes the virtue of prajñā. These three virtues are the absolute perfection of the superior conduct of humans.

In short, the true meaning of the Bodhisattva Path is actually nothing more than the process whereby human beings advance towards perfection—that is, the practice to Buddhahood starts from right human conduct.

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Renjian Fojiao (人間佛教)

Bodhi Monastery Dharma Retreat, July 2013

These talks were presented in 2013 based on Venerable Yinshun's lectures "Humanistic Buddhism that Accords with the Dharma and Current Era" (契理契機之人間佛教). The title of this talk adopts the Chinese term for Venerable Yinshun's key Buddhist ideology. It is commonly translated as Humanistic Buddhism, yet I felt that the essence of his ideology was not entirely captured by the translation, so, for lack of a suitable translation, I used the Chinese Pinyin—"Renjian Fojiao".

1. Introduction

In his book *Humanistic Buddhism that Accords with the Dharma and Current Era* (契理契機人間佛教), Venerable Yinshun explains his thoughts on Buddhism and why it is that he concludes that Renjian Fojiao (Human-Centred Buddhism) is the practice best suited to modern times. However with regard to Renjian Fojiao, it seems many people are still not clear about what it actually means in theory and practice. Generally speaking, it is to practice Buddhism with humans as the core focus, while encompassing all that relates to humans as well, such as family, friends, society and even the environment.

In this series of Dharma talks, I hope to clarify what Renjian Fojiao embodies and how one can practice it accordingly. Before we begin our topic, I would like to briefly introduce the author, Venerable Yinshun, and how he came to promote Renjian Fojiao. Then we move into the main topic by exploring the goals, practices and purpose of Renjian Fojiao.

2. Venerable Yinshun's Background

In his search for the meaning of life, Venerable Yinshun studied at some length various religious practices, including Daoism, Christianity and Buddhism. After making his choice to become a Buddhist, he came into contact with the numerous practices and teachings within Buddhism and began to work his way methodically through the scriptures, discerning which ones were more genuine and which were more suitable for his own practice and for humans in general.

He entered into a three-year retreat to read the Tripitaka (the full collection of Mahāyāna sūtras) and found that there were many practices taught by the Buddha. These practices were intended for humans to apply in their daily lives, and doing so can bring immediate relief from afflictions. This was very different to the chanting services for the dead that were prevalent in China at the time.

During his time, the Buddhism he saw in China was one that mainly engaged in chanting services or certain forms of “Pure Land” practices, which are primarily faith practices. It seemed that the common people only visited monasteries to pray for protection and blessings, or to invite monks to conduct funeral services for the deceased. Apart from this, Buddhism in China seemed somewhat removed from the daily lives and welfare of the people who were still alive.

Life in the decades prior to, during and after World War II—that is, the 1930s, 40s and 50s—was harsh. With the instability of war and famine, some people entered the monastic order not for true religious purposes, but purely to ensure that they were fed, clothed and sheltered. Thus, they did not put in much effort to understand the teachings and merely followed their teachers in conducting chanting services, which was a sure ticket to survival.

Although studies into the Dharma and teaching of the Dharma were still conducted, this treasure could only be found in small pockets of the Buddhist community. It was not widespread or considered a common activity of Buddhists (either by lay or by monastics). Venerable Yinshun was one of the few who preferred to devote time to the study of the Dharma; this was driven by his desire to find out more about what the Buddha taught, and how it could help him understand the meaning of life and find its purpose.

As he studied the Dharma more and more, and under the guidance and influence of his teachers, he began to try and sift through the many Buddhist practices to determine which would be suitable for humans in this day and age. His concern was not only for his own practice; he saw that Buddhism could help people and society improve and advance morally, which would then have positive rippling effects into all areas of human activity.

Through his years of study and practice of the various methods, he concluded that practicing Buddhism should be centred on human beings. His eminent teacher, Venerable Taixu, played a big role in the formation of this concept.

Venerable Taixu is considered a reformist within Buddhist circles. He, too, saw that the current state of Buddhism in China was not healthy. He

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promoted the idea that Buddhist practices and aspirations should be based on humans and the perfection of human qualities. Venerable Yinshun agreed with this position in general, and further provided scriptural evidence to support this motion.

Venerable Yinshun studied the Dharma in depth, not for the sake of scholarship or knowledge—instead, he wanted to find answers to solve questions about life’s purpose and find suitable practices for the present times. His ideas were solidified when he researched the historical development of Buddhism in India. From this, he saw how the Buddha’s teachings became diluted with the practices of other local religious beliefs as they spread through India and adapted to the local customs and people. In the process of adaptation, Venerable Yinshun saw that Buddhism had also lost its foundation and became polluted with practices that the Buddha himself had rejected. When he came across a text in the *Ekottarāgama* that said, “All Buddhas appear in the human realm, never has one become a Buddha in a heaven” (諸佛世尊，皆出人間，終不在天上成佛也)¹, it was like a homecoming for him. It helped him to confirm that Renjian Fojiao was the way forward to revitalising Buddhism and benefiting people in general.

¹ As translated by Marcus Bingenheimer in his article, “Some Remarks on the Usage of Renjian Fojiao 人間佛教 and the Contribution of Venerable Yinshun to Chinese Buddhist Modernism”. In: *Development and Practice of Humanitarian Buddhism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Mutsu Hsu, Jinhua Chen and Lori Meeks (eds.). Hua-lien (Taiwan): Tzuchi University Press, 2007, p.150.

3. Defining Renjian Fojiao

So what does this all mean? What did Venerable Yinshun finally conclude were the proper goals, ideals and purpose of Buddhism and the practice of Renjian Fojiao?

The term “renjian” (人間) in Chinese literally means “human realm” and “fojiao” (佛教) means Buddhism. There have been various translations of this term based on different interpretations. For the time being, I will continue to use the Romanized Pinyin term “Renjian Fojiao” until we come up with a more fitting translation.

Under the practice of Renjian Fojiao, Venerable Yinshun’s conviction is that, as humans, we can purify ourselves to perfection. This perfect state is Buddhahood, and the way to cultivate oneself to perfection is with the practices of a bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is a being who aspires towards Buddhahood. This, in a nutshell, is the goal of Renjian Fojiao.

Although you may think that Buddhahood is beyond your reach, it is too far, or too high a goal, if you truly understand the principle of cause and effect then you need not worry too much about how high that goal is. All you need to know is that it is a goal worth attaining and learn the practices that are the causal seeds leading to the fruit of Buddhahood. In other words, focus on the seed, nurture it, and the fruit will come in due course.

4. Purpose of Renjian Fojiao

The purpose of Renjian Fojiao is threefold.

First, Renjian Fojiao aims to bring Buddhism to the people. Therefore, its practices and goals stress the importance of the human form. Although it

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does not reject or deny the existence of the other realms, like the deities, gods and ghosts, these only come into the picture based on how they relate to humans. The practices promoted are focused on humans and what humans should and should not do in their daily lives, as well as what activities one should promote and undertake in their lifetime. All these practices and activities are grounded in this world for humans. By bringing Buddhism to the people, the purifying benefits of Buddhism can then have its effect.

As the dominant species on this planet, our every action will affect the rest of the world. Though you may think you are not powerful enough to affect the world, with the workings of karma and the complex web of inter-relation between humans and humans, humans and other animals, and humans and the environment, we really do create our own world. The way we act and behave will mold our surroundings, making them potentially better or worse. We can then influence the people around us, whether consciously or not, and so the ripple effect continues. A modern day example is the many tragic stories we hear that arise from careless and even reckless behavior on the Internet. With Internet technology, a simple blog that may show an insensitive piece of news, picture or comic, can bring terrible consequences to innocent people halfway across the world. The blogger may have thought it was only a joke between friends, but as soon as it goes viral on the net, that piece of information may go to the wrong people and become a trigger for protests and violence, and even terrorist activity. So be careful next time you blog; write something nice and kind to help balance the negative media that is circulating on the Internet these days.

The second purpose of Renjian Fojiao is to encourage humans to perfect the three unique qualities that are only found in humans. It is taught by the Buddha that, because humans possess all three of these outstanding qualities, the human form is the best vehicle for the cultivation of the

Bodhisattva Path. These qualities are recollection/memory, diligence/perseverance, and pure conduct/morality. Although we see that some animals may also have some of these qualities, they do not possess all three and the degree to which they have any one of these qualities is likely to be weaker. Let us look at these qualities in a bit more detail.

1. The quality of recollection or memory is very important because it provides the foundation for learning. When we learn something, it then gets stored in our memory and through actively recollecting that memory, bringing it to the forefront of our minds, we can review what we have learned and keep that knowledge clear in our minds. Through the process of recollection, we do not merely recall things, we can penetrate deeper into the meaning as we reflect on what we recollect. This quality of recollection and memory also allows humans to learn from their mistakes. By remembering the consequences of certain actions we learn to avoid it in future.

In the practice of Buddhism, recollection and memory helps with the study and application of the teachings. For example it is an important element that allows us to train the mind in the various ways of meditation, both in samādhi practices and vipaśyanā practices. As we meditate, when distractions arise we need to recall to mind our true object of focus and, if that does not work, we need to recall to mind the methods taught by the meditation teacher to remedy the problem at hand. Taking this quality to the Bodhisattva Path, it is imperative that we always recall the vows we have made. All bodhisattvas make the bodhi vow to attain Buddhahood for the sake of delivering sentient beings to ultimate liberation. If we forget this vow, we may give up on the path.

There is a story about a bodhisattva who had attained the eighth bhūmi on the Bodhisattva Path. At this stage, the wisdom of

emptiness is fully penetrated and the bodhisattva, seeing that all things are mere illusions, was about to give up on the path and enter nirvana. Fortunately, at that moment the buddhas of the ten directions came to help the bodhisattva recall his bodhi vow, after which the bodhisattva continued diligently to realize the vow and attain Buddhahood.

2. Next is the quality of diligence or perseverance. Humans have the remarkable ability to exert effort continually for the sake of a worthy goal. This exertion of effort is over a long period of time. We are not talking about a few minutes, hours or days. We are talking about years and decades. Take, for example, when one aims for a top graduate school like Harvard or Oxford. One will study hard and maybe even work hard to save up money for the education—I hear Harvard is not cheap! You need money and brains to get in. In doing so, they consciously forgo recreation time, so that they can study and so they do not spend too much money. All for the sake of entering that top graduate school, being able to study there and graduating from it with top honors, which then would (hopefully) give them better career choices. Another example of diligence is the time, energy and training put in by top athletes from childhood to adulthood, all for the goal of being the world's best, or to win an Olympic gold medal. Of course, these are obvious examples, but diligence also works in a more subtle way, like the dedication, care and devotion that parents give to their children, making sure they have a good education and are well provided with life's necessities from the time of birth to when they leave home. Some parents, perhaps more so in Asia, even provide for their children after the kids have flown the nest!

Similarly, from the aspect of Buddhist practice, diligence gives us the energy and motivation to study the teachings again and again until we

fully understand them and to practice the methods over and over until we become skilled in them. It gives us the strength to face our weaknesses and errors and to correct our ways by means of practicing. Some people I know of will even go to the lengths of studying another language, such as Chinese, Tibetan or Thai, in order to be able to listen to Dharma teachings in those languages, since English-speaking Dharma teachers are few. On the reverse side, we also have Dharma teachers who spend years learning a language (or two) so that they can teach the Dharma in different languages. These are also examples of diligence. It is an invisible force that can be very, very potent. If we apply it to good, we can achieve great things and make this society a much better place. But, sadly, we can see some people nowadays apply their quality of diligence to meaningless or even harmful purposes, thus wasting their time and bringing pain and suffering into this world instead.

3. Last is the quality of morality or pure conduct. This is very unique to humans. Some even regard this quality as what makes us different from animals. When we talk about pure conduct, the first thing that comes to mind is likely to be the topic of celibacy. Although celibacy is an important aspect of pure conduct, it is not the only aspect. Morality and ethics provides humans with a sense of shame for doing things that are immoral. This shame should not be interpreted in a negative sense. To know shame is a virtue; it provides a force that keeps one from doing things that are impure, that are harmful. Having a strong basis in morality helps us to direct our diligence towards good conduct and worthy goals.

Different cultures have different views on what is moral and what is not. Some are stricter, others more “free”. In Buddhism, we base our morality on the notion of “no harm”. Putting this into practice, we have the Five Precepts that regulate the behavior of actions, speech

and mind (or thoughts). These Five Precepts are not restricted to Buddhism. They are basic human ethics, which can ensure security and peace in society. The Five Precepts are: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no false speech, no taking of intoxicants. Can you imagine what this world would be like if everyone upheld these five simple rules? If everyone abstained from killing, stealing and sexual misconduct, we could live in our homes and walk the streets at any time without fear of invasion or attack. With no false speech we could trust everything people say, even politicians! With no taking of intoxicants, such as alcohol and illicit drugs, our minds would always be clear and we would not break the other four precepts on account of being under the influence of intoxicants. Many of the crimes committed are related to drugs and alcohol. By drugs, we are specifically referring to recreational drugs, taken for that so called “high”; this is different from drugs in the medicinal sense, that are prescribed by doctors for the purpose of curing illnesses.

From the perspective of practicing and attaining liberation, the quality of pure conduct is important because by cultivating this quality to perfection, one can truly be liberated from saṃsāra.

Finally, the third purpose of Renjian Fojjiao is to promote the cultivation of self-purification by means of continually undertaking acts that benefit others. In this way, a bodhisattva can cultivate the path to ultimate liberation and Buddhahood but, at the same time, does not forsake sentient beings. Often when we learn something, the greatest and most effective lesson comes from personally doing it and experiencing it, rather than sitting in a classroom. So, too, with the Bodhisattva Path, the only way to truly learn the teachings and make it a part of our own personal character is to apply it. In Buddhism, some practices can be more self-centered; practitioners may spend years in seclusion and, although they may gain insight into the truth of emptiness and thus free themselves from cyclic existence, this goal is a bit narrow—it

benefits themselves only. The practice of Renjian Fojiao, on the other hand, encourages one to stay within the community and work for the community. Liberation does not only occur in a little hut somewhere in the forest. It can also happen in a big city like New York! Just like someone driving a sports car, they can at best carry one extra passenger or two. But if you drive a bus, you can take many people along with you, and you all get to the same destination together.

So, in summary, there are three main purposes of Renjian Fojiao. It brings Buddhism to the people by promoting practices that are focused on humans; by bringing Buddhism to the people, the purifying benefits of Buddhism can then have its effect. It encourages people to perfect the three unique qualities of recollection, perseverance, and morality. It also promotes the cultivation of self-purification, by means of continually undertaking acts that benefit others. In this way, a bodhisattva can cultivate the path to ultimate liberation, that is Buddhahood, but, at the same time, does not forsake sentient beings.

In terms of practices for bodhisattvas, let us now focus on the Four All-embracing Virtues and how to apply these in our daily lives. Hopefully this can help all of you aspiring bodhisattvas to clarify how to apply the Four All-embracing Virtues into your daily life activities.

5. Practices of Renjian Fojiao

So then, what are the practices leading to Buddhahood? Buddhahood is the goal, the fruit. The seed that yields this fruit is the Bodhisattva Path. The main practices of a bodhisattva can be viewed from several perspectives.

1. From the perspective of self-cultivation, a bodhisattva also undertakes

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the essential trainings of the precepts, meditation and wisdom, also known as the Three Progressive Trainings. These are the foundational practices for all Buddhists, no matter which tradition or school of Buddhism one follows.

2. From the perspective of benefiting others, a bodhisattva nurtures the Three Essentials, which are the qualities of bodhicitta (bodhi mind or bodhi vow), great compassion and wisdom of emptiness (prajñā). It is these three qualities that help a bodhisattva to continue on the path and not retreat in the face of difficulties.
3. From the perspective of application and putting things into practice, there are two sets of practices for a bodhisattva. One is the Six Pāramitās, which consist of giving (布施), morality (持戒), patience/tolerance (忍辱), diligence/perseverance (精進), meditation (禪定) and prajñā (般若). The other is the Four All-embracing Virtues, which involves giving (布施), kind speech (愛語), beneficial deeds (利行) and working cooperatively (同事).

In reality, the practices and studies to be undertaken by a bodhisattva are immeasurable. It is said that the Buddha taught 84,000 methods to suit the various capacities of sentient beings. Although we should not interpret the number 84,000 in a literal sense, we should understand that, in Buddhist texts, the figure of 84,000 is used to imply the idea of many, uncountable, immeasurable and so forth. The above practices of the Three Progressive Trainings (precepts, meditation, wisdom), the Three Essentials (bodhicitta, great compassion, prajñā), the Six Pāramitās and the Four All-embracing Virtues are like a summary that draws together the many practices that can be undertaken and provides a categorical structure and guide for us to use as a reference point.

These guides are important because we need to know which practices should be undertaken and which should be discarded. In the Buddha's day, the disciples and students had the benefit of the Buddha's direct

instructions on what to do and what not to do, what to uphold and what to discard. But now that the Buddha is no longer here, we have to make the decisions ourselves. Taking lessons from the history of Buddhism in India, where Buddhism actually once disappeared for a period of time, we must be very careful about the practices we adopt.

From the perspective of our own cultivation we want to make sure we are planting the right seeds that will lead to Buddhahood. If we (mistakenly) plant the wrong seed, we will never taste the fruit of Buddhahood, no matter how much we nurture that seed.

From the perspective of Buddhism, as one of the major religions in this world, we are the face of Buddhism. What we do and how we behave will show people what Buddhism is about. If we conduct ourselves in the right way, we will be able to bring respect to Buddhism and even encourage others to learn the Dharma too. But, on the contrary, if we undertake practices that are not proper then, in due course, we will bring disrepute to Buddhism and taint the purity of it. This can lead to its decline, as people then see no value in Buddhism. So, as Buddhists we must be careful about how we conduct ourselves at all times.

Practicing the Four All-embracing Virtues

The Four All-embracing virtues, as the name suggests, involves four aspects:

1. Giving or generosity (*dāna*)
2. Kind or gentle speech (*priyavacana*)
3. Beneficial deeds, conduct that benefit others (*arthakṛtya*), and
4. Cooperation with others (*samānārthatā*).

As I discuss these four virtues in details, I hope that you can see that the actual virtue itself encompasses more than what the English terms may

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reflect. At the moment I cannot think of a more precise term in English for these virtues, so if you have some ideas I would welcome your suggestions.

Giving (Dāna)

Dāna is a Sanskrit term and means the act of giving. The practice of *dāna* is very important in Buddhism. In the Six Pāramitās, it is the first pāramitā; here in the Four All-embracing Virtues, it is also the first on the list. There are many stories of the Buddha and his disciples practicing all forms of giving.

Back in the days of the Buddha, the saṃgha relied on the offerings made by people to sustain their physical lives. The people would give them food, clothing, shelter, medicine and so forth. In return, the Buddha, monks and nuns would give back to the people the teachings of the Dharma. Therefore, when we give, we can give both tangible things like daily necessities or material gifts, and also intangible things like knowledge, comfort, care, security, trust, honesty etc.

The practice of giving actually has many aspects. By considering these aspects carefully, our act of giving can be most productive. So what are these aspects? When practicing giving, we should carefully consider who, what, when, where and how.

1. Who to give to—we should practice giving with equality. So we should try not to discriminate between who we give to and who we don't; who we give more to and who we give less; who we give the better things to and who we give our garbage to, and so on. Of course there is the practical issue of one's capacity to give; we may not be wealthy, or the things we have are limited, but nevertheless we should cultivate a mindset that is willing to give to anyone and any being as the opportunity arises. As we gradually expand our mindset to be able

to give to more and more people and other beings, this helps us open our hearts and mind and generate compassion and kindness.

2. What to give—giving normally will involve handing over something. We need to be careful in choosing this gift to ensure that it is what the recipient truly needs. Within this aspect, we need to also think about the quantity of what we give, the quality of what we give, the suitability of what we give and so forth. Have you heard of the saying, “Give a poor man some food, you help him for a day. Teach a poor man to fish, you help him for life”? Of course, it would be better to teach him to grow vegetables! If we just give this poor person food they can get relief right now, but it is momentary. If we teach them a skill to earn a living, they can become independent and help themselves and even help others in future. In Buddhism, the greatest gift is the gift of the Dharma, for this is what can truly help us gain freedom from suffering. So by studying the Dharma and practicing it well ourselves, we can then teach it to others when an opportune occasion arises.
3. When to give—the skill of giving also requires knowing when is the best time to act. For example, in a natural disaster situation, you need to plan carefully the type of aid that is to be given at the relevant time. There are the immediate needs (such as search and rescue, medical aid etc.) and long-term needs (such as mental health support and infrastructure rebuilding). Perhaps a more applicable example for some of you, regarding timeliness, is Valentine’s Day. I hear it is very bad for the relationship if you forget to give your partner something on this day! Luckily for me, I don’t need to worry about this.
4. Where to give—you may think this is a bit odd; what does it matter where I give? But when giving people something we should be considerate about how they feel. Some people may be a bit shy or

embarrassed, so, when we give, we may need to choose a location that they are comfortable with. For example, if someone wanted help with a mental illness, say depression, they may want to talk to someone, but not face-to-face, so we offer them our assistance by talking on the phone, or via email. In this way, they can stay anonymous whilst receiving the help they are seeking.

5. How to give—here the focus is on what mindset we have when giving. This is very important for our practice. Some people give a lot to charity, but their purpose is not to help others; rather, it is to polish up their own name, it is for fame, so they are actually giving for a selfish purpose. Some give, but unwillingly, because they feel embarrassed if everyone else does it and they do not. Some people give, but it is accompanied by arrogance, so they actually expect the recipient to be grateful and show that gratitude in return. Some give, but really they are just trying to spring clean their house and get rid of the things they don't need. Under these types of giving, although some good may come to the recipient, it is still not a pure and wholesome act of *dāna* from the donor's perspective. In the practice of a bodhisattva, we should give with the intention of bringing benefit to others, making others happy, helping them gain relief from suffering. We should also give with gratitude, because without a recipient willing to accept our *dāna*, how can we complete the act of giving in the first place?

In Chinese there is a saying, “With a kind heart, one commits wrong doings”. What this means is that, although our intention is wholesome, because we carry out the action unskillfully we actually cause harm rather than good. Hopefully, by taking into consideration the above aspects, our acts of giving can truly be of benefit to others and ourselves.

You don't have to be rich to give; you can give of your time, your care, your attention and so forth. Simply by upholding the precepts you are

giving people fearlessness, for they know you will not harm them. Giving can be practiced by anyone at any time and of any age. You are never too young or too old to give. Dāna is a great way to create wholesome merits and improve the relationships with the people around you.

Kind Speech (Priyavacana)

The virtue of kind speech encompasses all that we do with our language, not just verbally, but also in writing. It really refers to the way we communicate with others. We should adopt a tone and select our words carefully so that we do not harm others. Harsh speech can be just as sharp as a knife and can even take one's life. We see this, sadly, on the internet these days with cyberbullying, which has led to several cases of the victim taking their own lives.

On a daily personal interaction level, when we talk with others or communicate with others, we should try to be pleasant and courteous, show respect for each other and make others feel at ease when talking to us.

Of course, at times we need to be stern and our tone will need to be appropriate for the occasion, for example when disciplining children. But what we say should hold reason and, ultimately, the intention is to help them learn good behavior. We should not speak with tough tones and harsh language out of malice or hatred. Sometimes, when we catch ourselves getting angry, the best way to practice kind speech is to not say anything at all; to walk away from the situation and give everyone involved some space and time to calm down. Often, in the heat of the moment, we may say things that we will regret later on. This also applies to when we joke around with our family and friends. Sometimes, to the people closest to us, we bring the most pain with careless speech. Unskillful speech can hurt someone, and no matter how you try to mend it,

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there will always be a scar. So guard your speech as you would guard your wealth and use it with care to benefit others.

Within this virtue of kind speech, the issue of honesty also applies. What we say should be the truth. Sometimes we have to be the bearer of bad news, so if what we have to say is a bitter pill to swallow, we need to think even more carefully about how we say it, when we say it and so forth.

If we reflect carefully, much of our interaction with others comes through speech and language, so it is a very strong medium for us to either create merits or burn away merits.

Beneficial Deeds (Arthakṛtya)

Here the Chinese term is *lì xíng* (利行), which actually means “deeds that bring benefit to others”. So, in a sense, it is a bit like the virtue of giving. With giving, we tend to have a targeted recipient; here, it is more about the way we conduct ourselves so that what we do is beneficial and not harmful to others in general. Say, for example, the occupation we undertake should be of benefit and not harm. Within the bodhisattva precepts, there are clearly rules against harmful occupations, such as prostitution, the making and selling of alcohol, making and selling of weapons, selling of meat and so forth. This area is particularly important for lay Buddhists, because you may think that a certain occupation is legal but, from a moral perspective, you need to ask yourselves, is it beneficial to others in general? In addition, often these unwholesome occupations come with high monetary rewards, so you need to be strong and not be lured by the temptations of wealth. Otherwise you may gain in monetary wealth for now, but you lose out in merits for the future.

Beneficial deeds also involve similar considerations as the virtue of *dāna* explained previously. That is, we should plan these deeds to ensure that

they are undertaken in a way that is timely and appropriate.

From a cultivation perspective, undertaking beneficial deeds can help one to create wholesome karma and generate good karmic relationships with other beings. This is important because, if we want to teach others the Dharma in future, we need to have these good karmic relations to provide the connection between them and us. In the sūtras, there is a story highlighting this aspect. Once, when the Buddha was traveling, he needed some water. Ananda went to a nearby house to seek some alms of water for the Buddha, but the old lady there was very rude and asked Ananda to go away. Then Sariputra went to that same old lady for alms and she happily gave him water and food. Ananda asked why this was so, the Buddha explained that in a previous life, there was a dead rat on the road and one traveler kicked the dead rat around for fun. Later, another traveler, having pity on the dead animal, carefully picked it up and buried it. It turned out that the old lady was the dead rat in a previous life. The traveler who kicked the rat was Ananda and can you guess who buried the rat? Yes, it was Sariputra. So, you see a small act of kindness can have far-reaching effects.

Cooperation (Samānārthatā)

The virtue of cooperation helps us to interact better with others. Whether at home with the family, at work with colleagues, or even at the monastery with other volunteers, when working with others we should try to work together, maintain a flexible attitude and be able to adapt to the needs of others. This way we can create a more harmonious and happy working environment and others will find working with us more enjoyable and be willing to work with us and follow our guidance.

I'm sure that many of you would have experienced working with different managers in your careers. Some are good managers who can inspire and

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make you want to work hard. Others are terrible and make us feel useless and depressed, even angry and unhappy. These are the workings of the virtue of cooperation, or lack of it.

An important aspect of cooperation is our own mindset. Although we may be in a position of authority compared to others, we should maintain a sense of humility and respect toward others. If we think carefully, without the contribution of others, how will we get the work done? From a practical aspect, we should be willing to roll up our sleeves and actually provide hands-on assistance and work with others if needed. Lead by example, lead by doing, rather than just sitting high up in your office and giving directions.

Summary of the Four All-embracing Virtues

I have explained the Four All-embracing Virtues at a human-to-human interaction level. But in the things we do, in the practice of giving, kind speech and beneficial deeds, we can also apply these to other beings and the environment in general. For example, by not littering in the forests we maintain a clean environment for all the animals and other humans to enjoy. By using clean fuel sources we maintain a healthier environment for all beings on this planet.

Practicing the virtues of giving, kind speech, beneficial deeds and cooperation places the focus on the present life, building healthy relationships with the people and even the environment around us, and creating an atmosphere of harmony and peace. In this way, we are really purifying ourselves while we undertake actions and deeds to benefit others and promote good human morals and ethics. In this way, we create wholesome karmic affinity with others and, in the long run, we can then guide them to the path of Buddhahood, which is the ultimate goal of Renjian Fojiao.

6. Learning from History to Protect Buddhism

The above discussion is more focused on a personal micro level, looking at the application of the practices with respect to the individual. Now I would like to take the discussion to a macro level, to look at it from the perspective of Buddhism's continuation at large. To ensure the overall continuation and spread of Buddhism, we need to select carefully which practices we undertake. As mentioned before, we are the face of Buddhism and what we do will determine how the world views Buddhism. If we engage in activities that are wholesome and beneficial to others, then people will value and respect Buddhism, even if they are not Buddhist. On the other hand, if we undertake and promote practices that are unacceptable to society, they will question Buddhism's validity as a religion and may even persecute it, as seen in the history of Buddhism in India and even China. Thus, what we do as Buddhist not only affect ourselves and our surroundings, it also affects the propagation and longevity of Buddhism in this world.

Let us consider how we can have a positive influence on the propagation and longevity of Buddhism. Have you considered why in India, the birthplace of Buddhism, the religion was once persecuted and wiped out entirely? Fortunately it spread to other areas before that, and so we still have the main traditions of Theravāda, Chinese Mahāyāna and Tibetan Buddhism available today.

If you read the history books on Indian Buddhism, they will say that Buddhism's decline coincided with the spread of Islam into India. So, naturally, they blame Islam. But that is being irresponsible. Venerable Yinshun, in his research into Indian Buddhism, discovered that the decline began from within and started before Islam arrived. It is like a tree full of white ants—the decay and erosion started early on and was a

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gradual process.

As the teachings of the Buddha spread through India, they had to compete with other religions. The Buddha allowed for the use of adaption as a skillful means to bring others to the teachings. But over the centuries, in the process of adapting to local customs, the foundations of Buddhism were slowly eroded. There was fire worshipping, seeking protection from devas and spirits, and even the sacrificing of life and the use of sex as means to gain liberation. Buddhism ended up incorporating practices and beliefs that actually go against the grain of what the Buddha taught! We can see this by researching some of the Buddhist scriptures. The early texts, such as the *Āgama sūtras*, provide clear instructions on how to tame our mind and purify our defilements. There is even a statement in the *Long Discourses of the Buddha*, the *Dīrghāgama*, which states that the practices used by heretics to bring people to their faith, such as mantras, calling upon deities and spirits, mysticism, divination and so forth, are not to be found in the practice of the Buddha.² Yet, as time progressed, these factors started to creep into the mainstream practice of Buddhism and, sadly, some of these practices are still prevalent in certain Buddhist circles today. Some of these foreign imports became the white ants that started to eat away at the foundations of Buddhism. People could not see the difference between Buddhism and the local beliefs. While these heretical practices were incorporated into Buddhism as expedient means, the foundation of Buddhism was neglected and so Buddhism lost its unique quality and purity. Some onlookers even considered some of these

² 《長阿含經》卷 14：「如餘沙門、婆羅門食他信施，行遮道法，邪命自活，或呪水火，或為鬼呪，或誦剎利呪，或誦象呪，或支節呪，或安宅符呪，或火燒、鼠嚙能為解呪，或誦知死生書，或誦夢書，或相手面，或誦天文書，或誦一切音書，沙門瞿曇無如此事」(Taisho Volume 1, p.89, c5-10)

practices to be base and evil, thus misunderstanding Buddhism as evil.³

If we go back to Venerable Yinshun's days in China, he saw that Buddhism was in decline in a similar way. Few people really understood the Buddha's teachings and even fewer practiced it accordingly. The monks and nuns were busy doing chanting services, so busy that some even picked up bad habits such as smoking and drinking alcohol in order to keep up with the demand! The image that this brings to Buddhism was definitely not positive.

Learning from the lessons of history, Venerable Yinshun thus hopes to promote the bodhisattva practices that are grounded in this world and founded on human beings and human morality. Whether we choose to become a monastic, or remain as a lay Buddhist, we can all still aim for the goal of Buddhahood, which is really to perfect ourselves as human beings and help others to do so as well. Buddhahood cannot be achieved by turning to the heavens, the deities, the ghosts and spirits.

When we take refuge in the Triple Gem, they are our sole place of refuge. We turn to the Buddha, the Dharma and the (true) saṃgha as our guide so that we can practice the proper methods to liberation.

By promoting Renjian Fojiao, Venerable Yinshun hopes to help people advance in their development as humans, as well as revive Buddhism.

³ Note that this is not to criticise the use of skillful means or expedient methods. In the Mahāyāna, skillful means are important tools to bring people to the practice. However, if these skillful means are inappropriately applied, the consequences can be dire. Just like milk and water; to increase the quantity of milk so that more people can taste it and share it, water may be added, but if the milk is diluted too much, it will lose much of the original flavour and the appearance of creamy white milk will also change.

7. Renjian Fojiao and Other Buddhist Schools

I hope that you all have a better understanding of Renjian Fojiao by now. Next, I would like to provide a general comparison of Renjian Fojiao with the other main traditions and schools of Buddhism.

When you hear the term Buddhism, who or what type of practices do you think of? The Dalai Lama, or Chan/Zen meditation, or Pure Land Amitābha chanting, or Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village in France, or Southeast Asian monks in saffron-colored robes sitting in the forest? Buddhism indeed has many images these days.

Main Traditions and Schools of Buddhism

The Buddhism practiced today consists of three main traditions. These are Chinese Mahāyāna, Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhism. Within each of these traditions there are different schools. These schools arise from the different practice methods and main theory that the followers adopt. For the time being, I will treat the Theravāda and Tibetan traditions each as one school, so I will not go into detail about the different schools in Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhism today. However, I would like to compare Renjian Fojiao with the Chinese Mahāyāna schools of Pure Land and Chan, as these two are prevalent in the Chinese Buddhist community nowadays. This comparison will only touch upon the main practices.

Common Foundation of All Buddhist Schools

First of all, true Buddhist traditions and schools have one main thing in common; that is the Triple Gem. As a Buddhist, we take refuge in the Triple Gem of the Buddha, Dharma and saṃgha. Without refuge in the Triple Gem, you cannot consider yourself a Buddhist.

Second, the main teachings and theories are also consistent. These are the teachings on the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, impermanence, cause and effect, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, non-self, emptiness, nirvana, the Three Dharma Seals, compassion, and wisdom. These teachings and theories are the foundational teachings upon which the other teachings arise. These teachings can be found in the Buddhist scriptures from the stage of Early Buddhism⁴ to modern day commentaries. For anyone who wants to learn Buddhism, it is important to ensure that you have a solid understanding of these core teachings.

There is also one practice that runs through all the Buddhist traditions and schools; that is, the Three Progressive Trainings. The Three Progressive Trainings are the training of precepts, meditation and wisdom. These three trainings are interrelated; they form the basis for progression in subsequent studies as follows.

1. At the start there is the study of the precepts. The aim is to cultivate morality and purify the behaviors of body, speech and mind. As a lay Buddhist, at the minimum there are the Three Refuges and Five Precepts. These can be expanded to the Eight Precepts and the lay bodhisattva precepts. For monastics there are the novice precepts, the full precepts and the bodhisattva precepts. The underlying core of these different types of precepts is the Ten Wholesome Deeds: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, no harsh speech, no double tongue, no idle gossiping, no greed, no hatred and no ignorance. The precepts help to purify our actions and mind and tame

⁴ Early Buddhism refers to the scriptural texts that date from the Buddha's time to around 100 years after his passing (parinirvana).

our defilements. With a pure mind, the cultivation of meditation is then possible.

2. Next is the study of meditation, which aims to still the mind so that it is not distracted by defilements. With a clear and still mind that is pure, one can then develop wisdom and gain insights into the Truth. Meditation is a tool that is necessary for the cultivation of profound wisdom. In Buddhism, deep levels of meditative concentration per se are not the goal. If you attach to the bliss of deep meditation, you then run the risk of rebirth in the longevity heavens, which are pure mind realms. Here there is no Dharma to listen to and no practice can be undertaken, so it actually obstructs one's progress on the Bodhisattva Path to Buddhahood.
3. Finally, there is the cultivation of wisdom, which in Buddhism is the true key to liberation. Wisdom, or *prajñā*, refers to direct penetration into the Truth of all phenomena, fully understanding and experiencing the teachings of emptiness, conditional existence and the Middle Way. *Prajñā* is not the same as (worldly) knowledge. You may know many worldly facts and information, but these will not help you to be free from suffering. *Prajñā* is the wisdom of emptiness that can liberate one from suffering and cyclic existence.

Differences Among the Buddhist Traditions

Although the Triple Gem, the core teachings and the practice of the Three Progressive Trainings are the foundation for all Buddhist schools, when we look further into the main practices and ideas of some Buddhist schools and traditions, there are clear differences.

Within Chinese Mahāyāna, the two popular schools that many know of today are Pure Land, in particular Amitābha's Pure Land, and Chan, better known as Zen in the West.

Pure Land School

Pure Land practice can be regarded as a method that makes use of the assistance from the buddhas and great bodhisattvas. There are many buddhas and each has their own pure lands, but the most prevalent today is the practice of Amitābha's Pure Land. The main aim of the practice is to gain rebirth in Amitābha's Western Pure Land, also known as Sukhāvātī, which means the land of bliss. In this pure land, the environment is superior to our present world and one can continue to learn and cultivate the path to Buddhahood without any fear of regression to the lower realms. In terms of the main practices a person must undertake in this life, the Amitābha Pure Land sūtras point out three critical aspects:

1. The practitioner must make a firm vow to be reborn in Sukhāvātī, that is, to earnestly want to be reborn there.
2. The practitioners must chant Amitābha's name continually, especially at the point of death. This practice helps one maintain awareness of the pure land and can also serve as a meditative object of focus.
3. Finally, the practitioner must accumulate good deeds and merits. The vows of Buddha Amitābha says he will receive any being who would like to go to Sukhāvātī; however, there are caveats to this, which relate to those who have committed the Five Grave Acts (killing one's mother, father or an arhat, injuring a buddha, or creating a schism in a harmonious saṃgha). This caveat reflects the fact that the force of negative karma can be extremely strong—so much so that not even the great compassion and vows of the buddhas can overturn the retribution of some negative karmic deeds. Of course, once a person has exhausted the negative karma that arises from the Five Grave

Acts, and they do not commit these acts again, then they can practice Pure Land Buddhism and seek rebirth there.⁵

Chan/Zen School

Now let's look at Chan, or Zen. The term Zen is actually the Japanese equivalent to the Chinese word Chan (禪). When people hear of Zen, images of someone just sitting there in meditation may arise, or the concepts of being calm and blissful come to mind. Although these images and concepts may not be wrong, it is important to know that Chan is more than this. Meditation is an important practice in all schools of Buddhism—it is one of the Three Progressive Trainings. Under the Buddha's teachings, the main practice of meditation consisted of stilling the mind (*samādhi*) and insight (*vipaśyanā*). The orthodox methods to attain *samādhi* and *vipaśyanā* include using the breath, light, compassion, decaying bodies, the skeleton and so forth, as the object of focus. Generally, these methods are still practiced today, particularly in the Theravāda tradition.

The Chan school of Buddhism, however, further developed some unique methods of meditation. Of these different techniques, in the present day only two methods still remain. These are Hua Tou (話頭), sometimes referred to as Sudden Enlightenment, and Mo Zhao (默照) or Silent Illumination. If you have participated in some of Dharma Drum Mountain or Plum Village's retreats, you may have come across these practices and even tried them yourself.

⁵ If they practice the Amitābha Pure Land training and have committed one or more of the Five Grave Acts, although they cannot attain rebirth in their following life, the merits from their practice are not lost and will accumulate to them in future lives.

Sudden Enlightenment, as the name suggests, refers to a sudden awakening to the Truth. These can be partial or full awakenings. The method primarily requires the meditator to repeatedly focus on a question, such as, “Before my birth, who was I?” or “Who is carrying this corpse?” The questions are the object of focus and one intensively searches within themselves for the answer. This intensity builds up and leads to a sudden release and awakening when the mind meets the right conditions. Note that this is not an orthodox meditation method and can have negative side effects. In the history of Chinese Buddhism, many have practiced this method, but only a few truly master it and gain that sudden enlightenment experience.

The other method is called Silent Illumination. As the name suggests, this is a more gentle form of meditation where the object of focus is no object at all, but one tries to simply let the mind settle. Like a cup of muddy water left alone and untouched, the dirt will settle and clarity will arise.

Although Chan practice stresses meditation to directly break through our delusions and gain wisdom and insight, a Chan practitioner is not purely self-absorbed in their own practice. As the main practice of Chan is to purify one’s own mind through meditation, naturally with a pure mind, this then flows through to their actions and speech.

Though some lived a hermit-like lifestyle, from the historical texts that are left behind by the great Chan Masters from China, we can also see that they engaged with many levels of society and provided wise advice even to government ministers. From these records, we can clearly see that these Chan practitioners not only cultivated wisdom, but also compassion. However, given their greater focus on meditation, one could conclude that such practitioners were more inclined to be passive rather than proactive in undertaking beneficial deeds.

Theravāda Buddhism

Now let us look at Theravāda Buddhism. This form of Buddhism is closest to the śramaṇa lifestyle that existed during the Buddha's time. Here, the monks and nuns focus their attention on their own practice to gain enlightenment and become an arhat. Although they spend a lot of their time in seclusion, they do not neglect society entirely. They still teach the Dharma and meditation to lay devotees and encourage them to practice Buddhism. In some communities, the interaction between the lay and renounced practitioners is very strong. Venerable Taixu once commented that although Theravāda Buddhism is criticized as Hīnayāna, in practice they are doing the work of Mahāyāna. This was because he saw that they were closely involved with the people and community they lived in and promoted the practice of Buddhism. In terms of personal practices, these remain largely centred on the core teachings and orthodox meditation practices, as mentioned earlier. One practice that Theravāda Buddhism still undertakes is alms begging. They collectively enter the villages and towns to seek alms. As a result, they eat whatever they are offered. This means they are not fully vegetarian, as they have limited, if any, choice in the food they are offered.

Tibetan Buddhism

Lastly let us consider Tibetan Buddhism. The spread of Buddhism from India to Tibet occurred during the period when Esoteric Buddhism was growing and flourishing. So Tibetan Buddhism reflects much of Esoteric Buddhism's ideologies and practices. During this time, the main teachings emphasized the ideal of tathāgatagarbha, which is an inherently pure Buddha-nature that all beings possess. This doctrine of tathāgatagarbha is influenced by Hindu theology and was popular around the same time that Hinduism was undergoing revival in India. So it is very likely that it was an expedient teaching to cater to the people who were inclined towards

Hindu beliefs. The notion that we all have Buddha-nature gave everyone the hope that they can become buddhas too. Of course, there is no such thing as a free lunch, so to reveal that inherent Buddha-nature, you had to exert effort and practice. Esoteric Buddhism considered that the Bodhisattva Path was too long—three great aeons! What it promoted was Buddhahood in this very life. A main practice it promoted was to visualize oneself as a buddha. Upon successful visualization, the practitioner would become one with that buddha. Although they did not give up the Bodhisattva Path, the thinking was “I will gain Buddhahood first and then liberate sentient beings afterwards”. During the development of Esoteric Buddhism, many of the Indian theistic rituals, such as mantras, divinity, fire offerings, seeking protections from deities, sacrificial offerings of animals and so forth became incorporated into Buddhist practices.

Summary of the Comparison between Some Buddhist Schools

Table 3 summarizes the discussion comparing Renjian Fojiao and some Buddhist schools. From the comparison we can see that, although some schools of Buddhism also aim for Buddhahood, the path they take is different from Renjian Fojiao. This difference is then reflected in the types of practices that these different Buddhist schools focus on.

Table 3. Comparison of Goals, Principles, and Practices in Some Buddhist Schools

	Goal and Principles	Main Practices
Renjian Fojiao	Buddhahood via the Human-Bodhisattva Path	Purify human qualities, Six Pāramitās, Four All-embracing Virtues
Pure Land	Buddhahood via pure land rebirth	Recollection of Buddha Amitābha and chanting his name, accumulating merits as a human
Chan/Zen	Enlightenment	Chan meditation, compassion
Theravāda Buddhism	Arhat	Cultivation of the core teachings and orthodox meditation practices
Tibetan Buddhism	Buddhahood first then liberate beings afterwards	Esoteric practices such as visualization, rituals, offerings and mantras

8. Comparison with Other Religions and Charities

Now I would like to turn the discussion to a general comparison of Renjian Fojiao with other religions and secular organizations. From the previous discussion, we can see that Renjian Fojiao places a great emphasis on carrying out beneficial deeds. But many other world religions and social organizations also carry out good charity work. For

some religions, providing charity is a way to bring people to their beliefs. In China we see this very easily in the poorer locations, where many convert to the religion of the missionaries that help them because they get fed and clothed. They feel a sense of warmth and care and so the affinity with that religion arises and they convert to that faith.

In society today you also see many non-profit or social organizations that provide charity and aid, without a religious overtone. Philanthropy is getting much attention from the rich and famous in America and you have many different foundations set up for various purposes, such as cancer research etc.

So, what is the difference between all these types of charitable deeds? To answer this question, we need to look at the intention behind these charitable works. If charity is used as a way to increase the number of followers in your faith, then the charity is but a bait to bring people into the door of your religion; it is not a pure act of giving. If the charity work is done purely because you want to help someone, then it is a wholesome karmic act, a praiseworthy conduct that will bring good karmic rewards.

In Buddhism, and particularly in Renjian Fojiao, the aim of carrying out beneficial deeds should carry no selfish motives. From doing such charity, we aim to purify others and ourselves. Furthermore, we aim to ultimately realize the emptiness of the giver, gift and receiver; this means we do not attach to the act of giving in any way. Performing charity in this way helps us to develop our wisdom of emptiness. So, we can see, in Renjian Fojiao, although we may carry out acts that appear the same to other worldly religions or social charity groups, the intention behind what we do, the mindset we have when we do these deeds, is not the same.

To summarize, it is important that we choose carefully the type of practices we undertake in our cultivation. Though things may appear

similar and the goals are the same, remember that the methods and intentions differ and this does make a difference. In terms of Buddhism, there are many expedient and skillful means that can help one to awaken to the Truth, but among these many paths, we need to learn to identify between what is appropriate and what is not, what is authentic and what is spurious. Selecting our practices wisely will have positive results for our own cultivation, for the people around us, and for the future of Buddhism. Similarly, an error in selection will have the opposite effect.

Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. I am not critical of the use of expedient methods or skillful means. Renjian Fojiao is not opposed to using skillful means; rather, what I am trying to express is that there is a downside if skillful means are not used with care. This is just like the milk and water simile. Pure milk is nice and creamy, but the quantity is small. So in order to let more people taste the milk, one way is to dilute it with water. This way the quantity will increase and more people can taste the milk. But if the milk is diluted too much, then the taste of milk becomes very weak, even distorted.

9. Implementing Renjian Fojiao

Having discussed the ideal of Renjian Fojiao theoretically, I would like to show you how some eminent masters of our current era have embraced the teaching on Renjian Fojiao and the great work they have done to bring Renjian Fojiao alive. Hopefully this can further help you to understand how to apply it in your daily lives and your Buddhist practice.

The other important thing to do is to seek your input on the best way to translate the term Renjian Fojiao so that, in future, we can use a pure

English term to refer to this great practice, rather than using a loan form.⁶

Renjian Fojiao in Practice

So, now let's look at Renjian Fojiao and how it has been realized in some Buddhist circles. Firstly, I'd like to make clear that Venerable Yinshun did not create the term and practice of Renjian Fojiao. It was a Buddhist movement that was promoted by his teacher, Venerable Taixu. Venerable Yinshun progressed the movement by providing scriptural evidence to support this form of practice. The main area where Venerable Yinshun differs from his teacher, Venerable Taixu, is that Venerable Yinshun prefers to adopt the teachings from Early Buddhism and the Early Mahāyāna period. In contrast, Venerable Taixu's thoughts were still heavily influenced by the traditional Chinese Buddhist teachings from the Tiantai, Xianshou and Pure Land schools, which actually belong to the Late Mahāyāna period.

Venerable Yinshun himself was a quiet person by nature and let his pen do most of the talking. If you have read his autobiography, you will know that his motto was to just flow with the current of causes and conditions. Rarely did he actively pursue something, apart from his studies. But his writings have had far-reaching influence within the Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist community in Asia and abroad. In the circles of Chinese Buddhism, he is regarded as a pre-eminent elder, highly respected for his in-depth understanding of the Buddhist scriptures.

In Taiwan, there are the so-called four major mountains, which refer to the four largest monastic organizations. These are:

⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh uses the phrase “Engaged Buddhism” (Buddhism in action in our human world). Another possible translation is “Humanistic Buddhism”.

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1. Buddhist Light International Association (佛光山), founded by Venerable Hsing Yun. They carry out many educational activities and operate education facilities in several countries.
2. Dharma Drum Mountain (法鼓山), founded by the late Venerable Sheng Yen. They are very active in America and Europe and promote Chan meditation.
3. Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzuchi Foundation (慈濟功德會), founded by Venerable Cheng Yen. This is a Buddhist foundation focusing heavily on charity work, particularly medical and disaster relief.
4. Chung Tai Chan Monastery (中台山), founded by the late Venerable Wei Chueh. This is another Buddhist organization that largely focuses on Chan meditation.

Of the above four major groups the Buddhist Light International Association (BLIA), Dharma Drum Mountain and Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzuchi Foundation (Tzuchi) carry out their works following the principles of Renjian Fojiao. All of the founding masters of these large Buddhist organizations were inspired by both Venerable Yinshun and his teacher, Venerable Taixu. The teachings that these Buddhist organizations adopt and promote, along with the activities they undertake, are all very down-to-earth and have the wellbeing of humans as their priority. But this does not mean that they only focus on humans; remember that Renjian Fojiao focuses on humans and all that relates to humans, including the environment.

For example, the largest of the four organizations is the BLIA. They promote Buddhism through education. They have built and operated multiple schools, colleges and universities in Taiwan and have one

university in California, called “University of the West” (formerly known as Hsi Lai University). In Australia they have the Nan Tien Institute, which is an accredited tertiary education provider of both Buddhism and social welfare subjects. They have also gone into some African countries and built orphanages that provide education and training to the homeless children there to help them become good citizens of their community. BLIA has chapters in all the major continents, from Oceania to Asia, Africa to Europe, and the Americas. Their scope of activity is very wide and yet very human focused. They carry out the work of teaching Buddhism while assimilating to local culture through language, art and cultural exchange.

Then there is Dharma Drum Mountain, which is another large Buddhist organization that places a great focus on education. They operate three main education facilities in Taiwan. One is the Dharma Drum Sangha University, which provides free tertiary education and training to saṃgha members. The second is the Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts (DILA) and the third is the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies (CHIBS). DILA and CHIBS provide tertiary education relating to Buddhist studies and are open to both monastics and lay people. The education at DILA focuses on Buddhist-related research subjects, social sciences and welfare subjects, and also environmental subjects.

From a monastic point of view, they promote the unique Chan practice and operate several meditation centres around the world. The founder, the late Venerable Sheng Yen, holds both the Caodong and Linji lineages. One lineage promotes the Sudden Enlightenment meditation practice, while the other lineage promotes the Silent Illumination meditation practice. Many of their Buddhist activities revolve around meditation, but the way they teach meditation and how to apply it in daily life is very human focused. It is all about how to train the mind so that we can deal with life’s ups and downs, helping others and ourselves to better face the

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challenges of modern living. They also have a strong environmental awareness and promote recycling. The headquarters of Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan is renowned for its environmental efficiency design, while at the same time incorporating the calmness and peace of Chan.

Last, let's turn to the largest Buddhist charity organization in Taiwan, and possibly the world. In Taiwan and Asia, Tzuchi has built many hospitals and medical service centres, such as medical clinics, kidney dialysis and rehabilitation centres. They also have medical schools to train medical staff such, as doctors and nurses. Apart from such activities, they have a very strong recycling policy and even run their own recycling centre. They encourage all members to recycle for the health of the environment we live in. The range of materials they recycle is very broad, including paper, plastics, metal, glass and so forth, and they have even won international recognition for the quality of their recycled products.

They closely link their recycling activities with their other relief aid activities. From recycling plastics they make quality blankets and clothing, which they then distribute in times of disaster relief. Tzuchi is quite renowned for their quick and efficient provision of aid during times of natural disaster. They literally stockpile food and emergency aid material, which can be dispatched to provide emergency relief quickly. They have even entered into war zones, like Afghanistan and some African countries, to provide humanitarian aid and education.

The efforts of these three large Buddhist organizations span countries and continents, and all aim to bring Buddhism to the people, helping people and society to grow in compassion, wisdom and morality, without discrimination based on race or social class etc.

Although these large Buddhist organizations do good work, I would like to point out that their areas of operations cover more than what I have

presented. Both BLIA and Tzuchi have their own TV stations in Taiwan and produce their own broadcasting material. All three organizations have their own publishing and printing houses, and you would be hard pressed to NOT find a Dharma souvenir shop at their various branches. Some operations are more commercial in nature and some people have criticized this. In addition, with such a large membership, the workings of each sub-committee are not always rosy. It is inevitable that some friction and discord will arise.

In facing these less positive issues, I would like to remind all that we are only human, and we come with the baggage of our past bad habits. That is why we need the Dharma to help us cultivate and change for the better. I would also like to point out that although these organizations have applied Renjian Fojiao based on their interpretation, the underlying meaning still differs a little from Venerable Yinshun's intentions.

Under Venerable Yinshun's idea of Renjian Fojiao, the practices must help the practitioner to progress in their cultivation of precepts, meditation and wisdom. They must help the practitioner purify their unwholesome habits and tendencies.

Within these large organizations, the work of charity and education does go some way to helping people advance, but the reality is that not all the volunteers and workers will advance at the same pace. It all depends on their intentions when undertaking the tasks. Some become volunteers because they enjoy the work and believe in the founder's ideals. Others join the group simply because their friends are there and so forth. And some even join for the prestige. Do you see what I am trying to express?

Looking further, Renjian Fojiao is not only promoted in Taiwan-based Buddhist organizations. I'm sure that many of you have heard of Thich Nhat Hanh. He was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther

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King. He abides in France and has built a community called Plum Village. He travels the world teaching Chan meditation and the practice of compassion and mindfulness, in a similar way to Dharma Drum Mountain. Actually, both Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh and the late Venerable Sheng Yen were good friends. Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh promotes what he calls “Engaged Buddhism”, which is actually inspired by Venerable Yinshun’s teaching on Renjian Fojiao. He once commented that the person he revered the most was Venerable Yinshun.

What I have presented above are just some big players within the Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist community and how they have developed their work to fulfill and realize their interpretation of Renjian Fojiao in this world. I hope that you can see how they try to focus on the wellbeing of humans and society.

Some Grey Areas

Within Renjian Fojiao, there are some clear black-and-white demarcations. For example, the practices of turning to the heavens, seeking blessings and protection, or divine readings are not encouraged in Buddhism and do not fall within the gamut of Renjian Fojiao practices. However, some practices fall within a grey area, such as funeral services. In Renjian Fojiao, the provision of chanting services for the deceased is not a main practice. This can be viewed from two aspects. One is that there are many other Buddhist groups that provide such services, so we need not actively pursue such activities; we should try and provide that which is not so readily available. From the aspect of helping the mourning relatives, and even the dying person, through this stressful time, some form of counseling may be provided to help the dying person maintain right mindfulness and to help the grieving family and friends soothe the pain they are experiencing.

Although Renjian Fojiao implies an active role in doing beneficial deeds, it also has an embracing mentality that accepts more passive ways of practice as well. For example, some people tend to prefer the reclusive style of practice, where they live in more secluded places and cultivate on their own or in very small groups. They are doing no harm and often, when the conditions do arise, they happily share their wisdom with others. They are just not as pro-active, that's all. Renjian Fojiao is not opposed to this form of practice. We need to always bear in mind that different sentient beings have different spiritual capacities. Some are naturally more social and so are very well suited to interaction with others, while some find seclusion more conducive to their spiritual advancement. Either way, as a practitioner of Renjian Fojiao, one needs to bear in mind the wellbeing of others. So in the allocation of one's time for practice, we may give 80:20 to beneficial deeds, or vice versa. If you prefer the quiet peace of seclusion and allocate less time to carrying out beneficial deeds, it is important to remind oneself of why we are practicing in seclusion at the present time—that is, to remember that we aim to advance our own spiritual practice, so that we can benefit others in the future. The path to Buddhahood develops in stages. At some stages we need to be more active, at other stages we may need to be “off the radar” a bit. What is important is that we do not forget the goal of Buddhahood, and do not forget to bring sentient beings along with us on this great journey.

10. Translating the Term Renjian Fojiao (人間佛教)

Now let's turn our minds to a very important task: that is, how should the term Renjian Fojiao be translated in English. There have been several terms used to refer to Renjian Fojiao; these include:

1. Human-centered Buddhism

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2. Humanistic Buddhism
3. Engaged Buddhism
4. Socially engaged Buddhism
5. Buddhism for the human realm, and
6. Buddhism in action in our human world.

Although these terms do help to provide a good description of Renjian Fojiao, I feel that they are unable to fully reflect the full meaning of Renjian Fojiao. Perhaps it is because my English is not so good and so may not fully understand the connotations these terms arouse in one's mind.

For example, when you hear Human-centred or Humanistic Buddhism, would you think that the practice also includes the welfare and attention to the environment as well? Or does it suggest a narrow focus on human beings only?

For “engaged” and “socially engaged”, do these adjectives evoke the idea of welfare for humans and all that relates to humans? Or do they introduce other aspects, such as political activities? While I was studying in Australia, as a voting day approached you heard of many political parties trying to collect votes. Some of these have names that include the word “social” so, for me, it may bring unintended political meaning to Renjian Fojiao. I hope you see the dilemma I have in trying to present a pure English term for Renjian Fojiao. That is why I would like to seek you expert advice on this important matter.

Outcome of the Q&A Discussion

It turns out that participants can pronounce the loan word “Renjian Fojiao” very well and also suggest keeping it as a loan word, just like Zen.

Chapter 3

Paths to Liberation, Which Do You Choose?

Bodhi Monastery Dharma Retreat July 2014

In 2014, I chose to present this topic on the different paths in Buddhism and how they relate to the Buddhist doctrine that all beings can attain Buddhahood. These talks relied on Venerable Yinshun's teaching, "An Essay on the Three Vehicle and the One Vehicle practices: Distinction between the Two Paths based on A Practitioner's Mind and Aspiration"

(從學者心行中論三乘與一乘).

1. Introduction

It has been a year since I was here last and it is nice to see some familiar faces again. It is also pleasing to see so many fresh faces. This year, the title of my talks is "Paths to Liberation, which do you choose?" Hopefully, over these talks you can get a better appreciation for the different paths of practice in Buddhism and be able to make a more informed choice for yourselves.

The talks are generally divided into two major sections. In the first half we will look at the three main paths of practice. These are the Śrāvaka

Vehicle, the Pratyekabuddha Vehicle and the Bodhisattva Vehicle. The second half will look at an important ideal we need to maintain in practicing these paths; that is, “all beings can attain Buddhahood”.

2. Main Paths of Practice

In Chinese Buddhism, the debate about which path of practice is better—the Three Vehicle or the One Vehicle—has been a longstanding issue among scholars and practitioners. Is the practice of the Three Vehicle an expedient path or the ultimate path? Does the Three Vehicle encompass the One Vehicle of Mahāyāna? Does the One Vehicle practice take us further than the practice of the Three Vehicle?

Based on the *Sūtra on the Stages of Practice* (修行道地經), translated by Dharmarakṣa, Venerable Yinshun shares with us a unique view on this subject of the Three Vehicle versus the One Vehicle. This teaching by Venerable Yinshun forms the basis of my Dharma talks for this year.

From the perspective of spiritual foundation and aspiration, some people are more inclined to seek a way out as soon as possible, as they have become so weary of life with all its dissatisfaction and suffering. But some people possess great bodhicitta (or bodhi mind) and great compassion, which propels them to do more for the benefit of many beings. To cater to these differences, the Buddha taught many paths to liberation.

Over the centuries, these have been consolidated down into two main paths, the Three Vehicle and the One Vehicle. Some people follow a single path to the end. Some start at the Three Vehicle and progress to the One Vehicle, while some start off on the One Vehicle and move over to the Three Vehicle.

Definition of Vehicle

First, I'd like to quickly explain the term "vehicle", for the benefit of the audience who are new to Buddhism. The term vehicle translates the Chinese character *shèng* (乘), which literally means "chariot" or "cart". Going further back to the Indic origin, it translates the Sanskrit word *yāna*. *Yāna* is from a verb root, $\sqrt{yā}$, meaning to move, to go etc. The suffix *ana* is added to the verb root to form an action noun, *yāna*, which means going, moving etc. and extends to mean vehicle, ship, vessel and so forth.

Thus, its purpose is to relay the image of making use of something to get from A to B, hence the word "vehicle" is used. The Three Vehicle refers to the paths of the śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas and the bodhisattvas. The One Vehicle refers specifically to the path of the buddhas, and is also referred to as the Mahāyāna or Great Vehicle. What this means is that, in Buddhism, for us to get from samsara to nirvana, the path to liberation can be attained by using these different vehicles. Now let us look at these vehicles one by one.

Śrāvaka Vehicle

The Śrāvaka Vehicle is named after the practitioners and their characteristics. The term śrāvaka literally means "hearers" and refers to those who listen to the Buddha's teachings, then practice accordingly and finally attain liberation. In a narrow sense, it refers to the direct disciples of the Buddha, as they are the only ones who personally listened to the Buddha's words and gained liberation as a result. In a broad sense, we can also be called śrāvaka as we are now listening to the Buddha's teachings, although we are not fortunate enough to hear it directly from Buddha himself. Over the centuries, the term Śrāvaka Vehicle has come to define a group of practitioners whose personal aspiration is characterized by the pressing desire to gain liberation and enter nirvana as soon as possible.

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Within this group, there are two types of śrāvakas.

One type are those who are so weary of cyclic existence that they dread the suffering of the three realms (the realms of desire, form and formless) and want nothing but to get out, and get out quickly. They practice the teachings diligently, seek peace for themselves and do not bother others. Their sole aim is to achieve nirvana. In this way, they do not seek to develop bodhicitta. For these people, the Buddha empathized with their suffering and skillfully taught them the Four Noble Truths, showed them the state of the enlightened ones, which is free from suffering, and praised nirvana. For these śrāvakas, nirvana was the ultimate attainment. In practicing this path, they also strengthened their spiritual foundation. Just as they are about to enter nirvana, the Buddha would then show them the Great Vehicle and skillfully guide them to that path. The śrāvakas themselves also realized that the nirvana they thought they were about to attain was not the ultimate and began to develop their bodhicitta under the Buddha's guidance.

The other type of śrāvaka also has the primary aim of self-liberation, but their element of compassion is stronger. They undertake such practices as giving, meditation, cultivating wisdom and upholding the precepts, all with the aim of achieving nirvana. For these śrāvakas, as they progress in their practice, they realize for themselves that the fruit of the arhat is not the ultimate goal and, on their own accord, they move over to the Great Vehicle. They begin to further develop their compassion and nurture great loving kindness, undertake the Six Pāramitās and develop the wisdom of non-attachment and emptiness. They may even then vow to return to saṃsāra to teach and liberate sentient beings.

Generally speaking, these two types of śrāvaka practitioners differ in how they move to the Great Vehicle. The first requires the guidance of the Buddha when the time is ripe, the other gradually develops the awareness

and makes the change themselves. But both types start off with the aim of seeking self-liberation because they have become tired of the endless cycles of existence, which brings them no meaning and only suffering.

Pratyekabuddha Vehicle

Now let's look at the Pratyekabuddha Vehicle. Again, this name is based on the practitioners that are inclined to this path. The term pratyeka means "individual" or "oneself only". The Chinese term is *yuán jué* (緣覺), or sometimes *dú jué* (獨覺), which reflects their sharp skills of observation and using this quality; they continually observe and contemplate the conditional existence of the world around them and ultimately, even without a teacher, they attain nirvana for themselves. These practitioners prefer the hermit life, living in the forest or caves and sustaining themselves on what their surroundings offer, foraging for wild fruits and vegetables.

If looking from the aspect of cause and condition, these practitioners have cultivated the path in previous lives and would have met with the teachings of a buddha in the past. They may even have cultivated bodhicitta in the past and practiced the Six Pāramitās, but somehow, at a later stage, they forgot about it or lost the desire to further develop bodhicitta, and instead they turned to seek self-enlightenment and liberation. What splits them apart from the śrāvakas is that they tend to appear in the world at a time when there is no buddha and, based on their own accumulated wisdom and effort, they finally attain enlightenment for themselves. During the Buddha's time, one of his chief disciples, Mahākāśyapa, who is foremost in the practice of ascetic discipline, once commented that he would have been able to realize the truth of conditional existence and attain enlightenment for himself, if the Buddha had not appeared in this world. In the sūtras, there are also stories of practitioners who have gained enlightenment on their own; however, as

these sages did not study and cultivate the skills of a bodhisattva, they were unable to teach others to achieve liberation and at times could only display their supernatural powers as a way of showing others they had attained the state of a pratyekabuddha.

As both the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas share the common quality of seeking self-enlightenment, they are sometimes grouped together and referred to as the Two Vehicles. For these practitioners, when their spiritual foundation matures, and the time is right, the buddhas will reveal to them the Great Vehicle and skillfully instruct them to cultivate the Bodhisattva Path instead.

Bodhisattva Vehicle

Now we come to the last of the Three Vehicle, the Bodhisattva Vehicle. Again this term, bodhisattva, reflects the unique quality of the practitioners on this path; namely, they seek to develop bodhicitta and ultimately attain Buddhahood. What this means is that their practice is one that aims to benefit themselves and others at the same time, hoping to bring others to the attainment of Buddhahood as well. Venerable Cheng Yen, a disciple of Venerable Yinshun and the founder of the Tzuchi Foundation, once described her practice by using motor vehicles. She said she chose to drive a big bus and make many stops on the way to pick up passengers. In doing so, this will delay the time she arrives at her destination, but when she arrives she is able to bring with her many others. If she chose a smaller vehicle, like a sports car, she may get there earlier, but at most can only bring along one or two people. I think that this is a very fitting simile for this talk on the Three Vehicle.

Among the practitioners of the Bodhisattva Vehicle, there are three types. One, as mentioned earlier, practice the path but somewhere along the way they fall back to the other two vehicles. A classic example is one of

Buddha's chief disciples, Śāriputra, who is known for his outstanding wisdom. The sūtras record that in his past lives, he had practiced the Bodhisattva Path for sixty aeons, but met with difficulties when someone came and asked him for his eyes. Having given his eyes to the seeker, the person complained that Śāriputra's eyes were stinky and threw them away. This led Śāriputra to become disheartened with the task of teaching sentient beings and consequently he retreated to the Śrāvaka Vehicle. From this story, there are several lessons we can learn. Firstly, we should give within our capacity; over-doing it may actually be detrimental to our long-term practice. Similarly, as with anything else in life, we should always reflect on our actions and make wise decisions so that our actions serve the best interests of everyone in the long run, including ourselves. Another lesson we can learn from Śāriputra's story is that, even as a śrāvaka, the habits and skills of a bodhisattva still shine through in his practice; he was a great teacher himself and had many disciples. He did not live the reclusive life and did not practice purely in seclusion for his own benefit. So, even though śrāvakas aim for self-liberation, there is a whole spectrum of these practitioners, based on their practice in previous lives and the skills they have nurtured.

The other two types of bodhisattvas are true bodhisattvas, in that they follow the path from start to end. The main difference is in the speed with which they progress to realising the wisdom of non-attachment and emptiness. The first of these bodhisattvas are those who take a gradual and progressive path. They practice the Six Pāramitās diligently and accumulate boundless merits. Step by step they go forward, developing and strengthening their bodhicitta. Through their practice, they develop skillful means and eventually their wisdom deepens and matures, they realize that the three realms of existence are mere illusions and that all phenomena are empty in nature. Once they attain the stage of Non-returner, the eighth stage of the bodhisattva practice, they will no

longer move over to the other two vehicles. Their only direction is forward, towards Buddhahood. Our very own Śākyamuni Buddha is one such example. When he was still cultivating the bodhisattva practice, he was described as one that diligently progressed on the path, and over 91 great aeons, he finally completed the practices of the bodhisattvas and became a buddha himself.

The second type of true bodhisattvas refers to those who find instant attainment. Given their past cultivation and sharp wisdom, as soon as they hear of the Mahāyāna teachings, they immediately understand that all phenomena are immaterial and devoid of a permanent existence. They realize that all manifestations are empty and are non-obtainable and non-distinguishable. They gain the stage of Non-returner, and do not back away from the Bodhisattva Path as soon as they initiate their bodhicitta. With their wisdom of emptiness and non-attachment, they stride forward courageously towards Buddhahood. One example of this type of bodhisattva is Queen Śrīmālā, the daughter of King Prasenajit and Queen Mallika. The *Śrīmālā Devi Sūtra* (勝鬘經) recounts that King Prasenajit and Queen Mallika wanted to arouse their daughter's interest in the Buddha and his great teachings. They sent a messenger with a letter praising the infinite merits of the Buddha. Upon being introduced to the Buddha, Queen Śrīmālā was able to establish unshakeable faith in the Buddha and, as the time was right, the Buddha appeared before her and taught her the Dharma. Immediately after the teaching, she made ten great vows to practice the path always and the Buddha even gave her a prediction that she would attain Buddhahood.

3. An Awakened Mind Has No Attachments

So that is an overview of the three main paths in Buddhism. Now I'd like to turn to the second major section of the talk, focusing on important

ideals to bear in mind. The great masters of the past, the patriarchs whose wisdom still guides us today, have taught practitioners to awaken the mind by tackling the constraints on the mind. What are these constraints? They are none other than the mental defilements that pollute and obscure our minds.

There are countless defilements, but the main culprit is ignorance. Here we are not referring to stupidity or lack of knowledge. What we are referring to is the ignorance towards the truth about our own existence. We are talking about an innate attachment to our ego, and thus the concept of our possessions. Because we have the notion of “I” and “Mine”, we are constrained by them. If we are free from such attachments and do not cling to any belongings, then we can taste freedom from suffering. This is how the ancient patriarchs taught and guided practitioners toward liberation from cyclic existence.

So how do we tackle these defilements, in particular our ignorance? The patriarchs teach that the wise observe the three realms of existence. As they penetrate deeper, they realize that the Five Aggregates (or pañcaskandha) are mere illusions. Eventually, when they understand that there is no external object to cling to, the state of no rebirth is accomplished. There is no fast track or short cut to the path of awakening (bodhi). When the mind understands that the source of all is emptiness, it is like suddenly seeing the light at the end of a tunnel. We no longer experience states of gain or loss, past or present. The awakened mind clings to nothing. It understands the absolute truth and the empty nature of all things. A common simile used is the situation of seeing a piece of rope in a dimly lit room and mistaking the rope for a snake. Because one clings to this thought as real, subsequently other emotions and mental states arise, such as fear, worry, and these can lead to actions such as wanting to kill the snake before it bites us. But when suddenly the light in the room is turned on and one sees clearly that there is no snake, but only a piece of

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harmless rope, one no longer clings to the thought of a snake in the room, and thus becomes free from the fear and anxiety that afflicted the mind.

In our search for, and cultivation to realize, liberation, the penetration into the empty nature of all things consequently yields an understanding of true equality as differentiation between things all fall away. This is great wisdom! The awakened ones neither attach themselves to the three realms of existence nor nirvana. They realize that both are empty in nature. This wisdom of non-attachment allows these bodhisattvas to continue working in saṃsāra and ferry sentient beings to the shore of nirvana, because they do not attach to the concept that there is someone ferrying sentient beings to the other shore. In the same light, they vigorously cultivate the Six Pāramitās yet do not cling to the notion they will attain Buddhahood. The awakened mind will utilize expedient paths to help all beings. Beings of this character are the ones who have the spiritual foundation of a bodhisattva.

4. Self-reflection

The Buddha taught the Dharma according to the minds and capacity of beings at different times and locations. This also reflects the path of the propagation of the Dharma as well. That is, during different times in history, the teachings that prevailed and dwindled were influenced by the conditions of time and place. It is rather common for scholars and practitioners to classify a sūtra or teaching as belonging to the Great Vehicle or Two Vehicles. In fact, this is not the right way of classification. The proper way of classification depends on the practitioner's mind and aspiration. There are people who practice the Mahāyāna path, but do not attain the Mahāyāna goal of Buddhahood. Some move over to the Two Vehicles and some even give up Buddhism altogether to follow other beliefs. This is not uncommon.

As true practitioners, the point is that we should always examine our motivation and check if we are still on track, or whether we have gone astray unknowingly. We should regularly ask ourselves:

1. Am I practicing for the sake of freeing myself from rebirth? Or is it to ferry ALL sentient beings to the other shore?
2. Am I practicing a path that relieves only my suffering, or does it benefit others?
3. Am I on the path of the Six Pāramitās?
4. What have I realized?
5. Do I still have many attachments to phenomena and existence?
6. Has my mind made progress in understanding emptiness? And so forth...

Eventually, all sentient beings will become buddhas and realize the profound wisdom of the Great Vehicle. But before we come to that stage, we cannot classify ourselves as practitioners of the Great Vehicle simply because we are reading the sūtras classified as belonging to the Great Vehicle.

Previously we have looked at the Three Vehicle that can bring us to enlightenment. Now let us turn our attention to the implementation of the practices in each vehicle and how to incorporate them into our daily lives. Importantly we need to understand what mindset we ought to have.

5. We Can All Attain Buddhahood

This idea that, sooner or later, all beings can attain Buddhahood is very important. Some may find this hard to believe. If this were true, that would mean even evil people, like Hitler, can one day, in some future life,

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attain Buddhahood. However, as a Buddhist, we really need to look deep into the truth of this saying and what this means for our own cultivation and the way we interact with others.

Everyone in this world is different. There are those who are smart and those who are not so smart, there are the weak and the strong, the diligent and the lazy, the arrogant and the down-trodden, and many more. However, all these characteristics are relative states of being. It is our thoughts that distinguish what is faulty and correct. When we see certain behavior, our mind begins to distinguish what is kind and cruel. But the differences are never permanent. The differences between you and I should not be interpreted as either good or bad racial qualities, they should not be taken as fundamental differences in the natures of individuals. In Buddhism, the present differences between wise and ignorant, strong and weak, rich and poor, kind and cruel, and so forth, are intermediate states that we may experience as we cycle from one life to the next. They are not fixed or final. As long as we have not achieved the perfected state of enlightenment, we are all trapped in the ongoing process of cause and effect, reaping the results of past deeds whilst continually sowing the seeds for our future harvest.

If we do not strive to improve ourselves, eventually we will degenerate. If we exert effort towards goodness, we will progress and become better human beings. All humans have the capacity and innate virtues necessary to progress upward, to develop our goodness and to search for the supreme accomplishment. It is a matter of our willingness and diligence. If we work towards the goal, even if our pace is slow, we will finally attain the state of perfect enlightenment after many rebirths. If we are unwilling and slack off or indulge ourselves in worldly affairs, then Buddhahood will always be beyond our reach. Just as the Bodhisattva Sadāparibhūta said, “everybody will become a buddha”. In Buddhism there is no permanent sin, no permanent affliction and no permanent

degeneration. On the contrary, because all things are impermanent, we are all able to recover from delusion and ignorance to become awakened and enlightened. We can transform our defilements into purity. In this way, we should realize that the future always holds promise, goodness and joy. We should apply this idea to ourselves and to our perception of others. This life-view is positive and optimistic and allows us to have the confidence and motivation to overcome any difficulties without becoming disheartened.

From the perspective that all beings can achieve Buddhahood, this also means that all human beings are truly equal. Fully understanding the profundity of this and having faith in this teaching will enable us to avoid slighting others. What does “slighting” mean? Slighting others generally is a show of disrespect towards others. This may involve demeaning them with actions that are degrading, or insulting them with words and behavior that are derogatory. If one behaves in this manner towards others, this reflects a strong attachment to the competitive self, and also shows that the Buddha-potential remains buried deep down inside, under an enormous pile of arrogance. This may also manifest in self-centred actions and a tendency to bully others. This ignorant and unskillful mode of existence only alienates us from others, creating bad relations and reducing our circle of good friends and acquaintances. This intoxicating pride is a distortion caused by an erroneous view of the self. Unfortunately, this erroneous view of the self has been deeply ingrained in our hearts over countless lives. This in turn keeps us trapped in endless rounds of births and deaths.

One may think that a little disdain for others may not be very serious, but as practitioners we should be cautious because a little can sometimes develop into a lot. This can spiral into the concept that we are the master; the supposedly superior person; others should follow and accept our views and positions and so on. This may even lead us to undertake actions

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that sacrifice the welfare of others in the pursuit of our self-satisfying pleasures. Just as drops of water, as meagre as they may seem, over time, drop by drop, erode away rocks and stones.

A number of religious, political or ideological leaders have fallen into such a trap and consider their own religion, philosophy or movement to be the only one that represents the Truth. Accordingly, only those who believe in them, follow them, obey their directions and act upon their instructions, deserve to exist. Those who do not believe in them and do not follow them will be looked upon as if they are completely tainted and extremely evil, no matter how virtuous in actuality these non-believers may be. Because of the mere fact that they don't believe, they are guilty of treason and must be punished. For leaders that have fallen into this trap, they are fortifying their arrogance and self-conceit, but at the same time their mind is insecure, so they seek ways to remove all opposition. Such behavior harms themselves and others and brings no benefit to anyone. If we really do want to make positive steps towards purifying this world, and progressing our own cultivation, we need to be mindful so that we don't fall into this trap ourselves.

Sometimes the opposite occurs and our self-esteem reaches a low ebb. We place a degraded value upon ourselves, and view ourselves as inferior to others. In Buddhism, this is also a form of arrogance because, deep in our hearts, we refuse to acknowledge the success of others and cannot accept that others are better than us. The effect of this arrogance and inferiority complex generates negative states of mind such as tension, hatred, jealousy, suspicion, ill-will and so forth towards ourselves and others. In effect, the whole world—even ourselves—becomes our enemy. We hate others for being happy and successful, and we get frustrated at ourselves for being depressed.

So how can we keep check on ourselves so that we fall into neither

self-aggrandizement nor self-abasement? We need to always objectively reflect on our behavior and question our motives, just as I have said previously. We need to ask ourselves: are we really helping others or just helping ourselves? Are we sincerely praising others, or do we hold contempt inside? We need to learn to be our own examination officer, be unbiased and be honest with ourselves. Moreover, having attained the examination results, we need to take heed of the suggestions for improvement and not let the arrogance or inferiority complex continue to pull the strings.

If we always bear in mind and believe that all humans are equal, and that we can all attain Buddhahood, this is a valuable tool for eliminating our pride. There will be no disdain for others, regardless of whether their current behavior is respectable or disagreeable. As Buddhists, we ought to be open-minded, tolerant, respectful and kind towards others. Regardless of whether a person opposes Buddhism, has unorthodox beliefs, or does not believe in anything at all, we should not allow that person's shortcomings to blind us and assume that he or she is a completely bad person. Such a person may have a gentle personality, good behavior and excellent habits that serve society's needs well. Even if he or she is indeed evil, they will not be completely without a kind thought or behavior worthy of praise.

A clear example from Buddha's time is the disciple Aṅgulimālya. He had followed the wrong teachers and believed that if he killed one thousand people, he would attain liberation. Everyone feared and hated him, but the Buddha, seeing his innate wisdom and ability to truly attain enlightenment, used skillful means to convert him away from his erroneous views and practice. Under the Buddha's guidance, he did eventually attain liberation. In our modern times, politicians are a group of people that everyone loves to hate. No matter what they do, some groups in society will always criticize them. But are they really that bad? They too have friends and

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family that support them, so they must have something worthy of liking, and, from a Buddhist point of view, they too have the capacity to attain Buddhahood.

If we truly believe that all human beings will eventually and inevitably attain Buddhahood, our minds will naturally become tranquil and we will be more respectful and generous in our dealings with others. We will understand that our future is determined by our own behavior. If our behavior is good, we will progress and enjoy the fruits of our merits. If our behavior is evil we will degenerate and experience suffering. Our future really is what we make of it. We are our own creators. That is why the Buddha teaches us not to hate and not to be destructive with our thoughts, words or actions.

Buddhism teaches us to establish a sublime and virtuous personality. At the same time, we should be firm with ourselves and practice self-improvement. It teaches us to do good deeds for the benefit of others and to have patience and tolerance towards others. It also encourages us to be sympathetic towards the wicked. Do not despise those doing evil, but be patient with them and endeavour to assist them to turn away from that error, just as Buddha helped *Āṅgulimālya*. By perfecting our own personalities, we can gradually exert an influence upon others so that the inclination towards virtue and righteousness grow in their minds. So you see, following the Buddha's teachings gives us the confidence to walk a righteous path and to enter into a loftier and more accomplished situation.

Appreciating the beauty of this ideal enables us to understand why the Buddha wanted us to “not slight the unlearned” and “not slight those who offend us”. Everybody can attain Buddhahood. Those who are ignorant and confused may learn and gradually become more and more learned and virtuous. Those who commit offences against the precepts and rules are given the opportunity to confess and gradually cultivate moral

behavior. With such ideas in mind, we can establish sincere friendships with other people and not just take advantage of them. We should sow the seeds of true kindness and destroy the seeds of conflict. Learn to consider each other as equals, rather than thinking that we are superior to others.

With dedication to these ideas we can increase our compassion for others and strengthen our determination to assist all. In this way, we naturally move onto the Great Vehicle, the path of the bodhisattvas. As we cultivate the Six Pāramitās and develop our wisdom towards non-attachment, step by step, Buddhahood will begin to ripen within us. If we can extend this ideal to others and practice it well, society will enter a period of mutual understanding, mutual trust, mutual help, and enjoyment of great peace and happiness together.

You many think that this is just an ideal and that society cannot become peaceful! Such thoughts reflect our inability to understand this profound truth. If we do not set a high goal, we will achieve very little. If our goal is high, even if we don't achieve 100 per cent, 80 per cent is still very good. Just like studying for an exam—if you only aim for a pass mark of 60 per cent, you may only achieve 50 per cent or even fail! If you aim for 100 per cent and study hard, it is possible to get 100 per cent and, even if you don't, you may get 80 per cent, which is still much better than 50 per cent, right?

The Bodhisattva Sadaparibhuta used to say, 'I would never slight you, you shall all be buddhas'. This is a saying of everlasting and perfect truth. With this saying I shall end this series of talks and hope that it can inspire you all to courageously choose the path to liberation that best suits you.

Chapter 4

Spirit of the Mahāyāna

Talk at CUNY, August 2014

This talk was also presented in 2014. In this year, I was invited to give a talk at The City University of New York (CUNY). As this was just a single talk, I decided to present this teaching from Venerable Yinshun's "Lectures on the Śrīmālādevī Sūtra". Queen Śrīmālā's ten great vows are truly inspirational.

1. Introduction

Good evening. It is nice to see so many have chosen to spend their night here listening to the Dharma, you all are very wise! Today I would like to talk about the spirit of the Mahāyāna, and highlight what it means in practice, using Queen Śrīmālā's ten great vows.

Firstly, I'll like to share with you this saying, which I feel fully embodies the spirit of the Mahāyāna practice. I have translated it from the Chinese and it means: "*To purify and tame the body and mind, and bring benefit to all sentient beings*".

This saying has two levels. On the personal level, we should develop ourselves so that our actions and speech are pure, wholesome and ethical.

In essence, we should make ourselves a better person. No one is perfect, so there is always room for improvement. On a social level, we need to also bear in mind the wellbeing of others and endeavour to bring benefit to all beings. So the spirit of the Mahāyāna practice encompasses our own personal development as well as the development of our society. So how or where do we begin? I would like to use Queen Śrīmālā's ten great vows to show how we can bring the spirit of the Mahāyāna into our lives.

2. Brief Background on Queen Śrīmālā

Queen Śrīmālā was the daughter of King Prasenajit and Queen Mallika. In the *Śrīmālādevī Sūtra* (勝鬘經), it recounts that King Prasenajit and Queen Mallika, who were devout disciples of the Buddha, wanted to arouse their daughter's interest in the Buddha and his great teachings, so they sent a messenger with a letter praising the infinite merits of the Buddha. Upon reading the letter, Queen Śrīmālā was able to establish unshakeable faith in the Buddha and, as the time was right, the Buddha appeared before her and taught her the Dharma. She then made ten great vows to practice the path always. Queen Śrīmālā's ten great vows are something we can all learn from and, if we reflect on them in detail, we can see that they all accord with the spirit of the Mahāyāna.

3. Inspiration from Her Ten Great Vows

When I first read these vows, I was very moved by the compassion, determination and faith underlying them. All her ten vows begin with the promise to uphold these practices from now on until she attains enlightenment, which refers to Buddhahood in this case. To be able to make such a promise is a sign of her determination and faith in the teachings of the Buddha and her compassion towards all sentient beings.

As some of you may know, in the Mahāyāna teachings attainment of Buddhahood takes a very long time and spans hundreds and thousands of lifetimes.

Following in her example, in our daily lives, we can also try to make vows, within our current capacity. For example, vow to do at least one good deed each day, or vow to tackle a certain bad habit, vow to learn a new skill etc. Making vows has the effect of planting within us the seeds for future success in our practice. It also helps to change our mindset from “I can’t do” into “I will do” or “must do”. Of course, the goal of our vows should be wholesome and lofty. If we keep going like this, then one day, maybe even in this life, we can have the courage to adopt Queen Śrīmālā’s vows as our own.

For this short talk I will only cover the main points of each vow. But I do encourage you all to read through all her vows and reflect on them deeply, as they are all very beautiful. If you would like to read up in more detail these ten great vows, and the sūtra itself, there are two English translations that I know of. One is from the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai (BDK), translated by Diana Paul, titled *The Sūtra of Queen Śrīmālā of the Lion’s Roar*. Another is from Alex and Hideko Wayman, titled *Lion’s Roar of Queen Śrīmālā*. I have consulted both versions in preparing for this talk. The vows presented below are largely quoted from Diana Paul’s translation, with some of my own minor amendments here and there. Now let’s look at her vows and how we can try to practice them ourselves and fulfil the Mahāyāna spirit.

Vow 1—Morality

Her first vow is:

(1) I will not violate the discipline, even in thought.

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What this means is she vows to uphold the Buddhist precepts with upmost purity. She won't even think a bad thought; even more so, she won't carry out any bad deeds that create harm, either by bodily actions or speech. Some people uphold the precepts and don't carry out bad deeds but, in their minds, they may still get angry and curse others or indulge in impure thoughts.

Vowing to keep one's mind pure is a great gift to all beings, the gift of no harm and fearlessness. If you know a person will not harm you, not even in their thoughts, then you need not fear them, this is the precious gift of fearlessness.

For our own practice, we should aspire to uphold this vow. It may seem impossible for some at this moment, but if we work at it step by step, we can divide and conquer! First we start by learning the precepts and progressively upholding them. For lay practitioners, Buddha set forth the Five Precepts, and these can expand to the Eight Precepts, or even the Ten Precepts, if one takes on short-term monastic retreats. Let's take a quick look at the Five Precepts, which are (1) no killing, (2) no stealing, (3) no sexual misconduct, (4) no lying and (5) no taking of intoxicants. These precepts are really a guide for uplifting our human character. They are not purely something for Buddhists. In other words, you don't have to be Buddhist to live by these wholesome ways.

When we talk about keeping the precepts, we first learn to tame our actions and speech, and mental activities. We will fall back along the way, that is natural, but if we persist, eventually we can become more pure and morality becomes a habit. One who is habitually moral will not violate the discipline, even in their thoughts. How wonderful it would be if everyone was habitually moral in mind, actions and speech!

Vow 2—Respect

In her second vow she says,

(2) I will have no disrespect toward the venerable elders.

Venerable elders can include our teachers, parents, seniors and so on. These people have kindly shared with us their knowledge or skills, which in turn enrich our own character; for this, we should be grateful and respectful towards them. Respecting others means to have consideration for their feelings, wishes, rights or traditions. Our actions and behavior should acknowledge and value others rather than belittle them.

Vows 3 and 4—No Hate or Jealousy

Her third and fourth vows are very important and very much needed at this present time. She vows,

(3) I will not hate living beings.

(4) I will not be jealous of others.

Hatred and jealousy are vices that erode humanity. They eat away at our compassion and can lead to acts of violence and destruction, bringing much suffering to others and ourselves. We see this with all the fighting and wars that are happening today. If humans can put down this hatred and jealousy, can you imagine what this world would be like!

Sometimes when you come across a person or a group of people that you dislike, it is hard to control the negative emotions that arise inside. But if we know that our temper is not so good, we can try to learn ways to tame it and tone it down. In the midst of anger and jealousy, we can say or do things that hurt others, and often we end up regretting it ourselves. If we put in effort to control our temper, reduce hatred and jealousy, we will

definitely be much happier and the people around us will also share in the benefit.

How do we tackle hatred and jealousy? Compassion, kindness and patience are the key! Compassion and hatred are the exact opposites, just like light and darkness. Where one exists, the other cannot. So if you fill your mind with compassion and kindness, it will be very hard for hatred to take hold. Patience is also needed because, in trying to control our temper, sometimes we become impatient with ourselves, and when we think it is too hard or impossible, we may want to give up! But try to be patient, give yourselves time to change for the better. The whole process of purifying our minds and behavior takes time. Indeed, in the Mahāyāna teachings, it takes many lifetimes to perfect ourselves, so patience is very important!

Vows 5 and 6—Generosity

Her first four vows focus on self-purification, which then flow on into her actions and speech; we see this in the remaining vows. In her fifth vow she says,

(5) I will not be stingy although I have little sustenance.

Following this, in her sixth vow she says,

*(6) I will not accumulate property for my own benefit.
Whatever I receive will be used to assist living beings who are
poor and suffering.*

I don't know if you have met such people, but I have observed that for some people, charity is only something they think about when they feel they have enough, or are secure. This is not bad; at least they do give rise to the thought of helping others. But in comparison, someone people who

themselves are poor are still very willing to do charity or help others. It is obvious which of the two has greater virtues.

This virtue of generosity can help to build many good karmic relations between sentient beings; this is the type of wealth we should be seeking. Moreover, if we practice generosity sincerely, it can also help to erode attachment to our possessions and ourselves, which means we experience less pain when we have to part with things we cherish.

Vow 7—Four All-embracing Virtues

In terms of benefiting others, I feel that her seventh vow is a practical guide we can use. She vows,

(7) I will practice the Four All-embracing Virtues (giving, kind speech, beneficial deeds, and cooperation). I accept all living beings with sincerity, never tiring, and without prejudice.

The Four All-embracing Virtues can be practiced by anyone, anywhere and at any time.

Giving does not have to be material; we can give by lending a helping hand, offering an ear to hear someone out, providing a shoulder to cry on, and so forth.

Kind speech can be as simple as having good manners, saying “please” and “thank you”. Or it can be more deep, in terms of giving encouragement, good advice and refraining from saying things that cause harm or incite hatred and so on.

Beneficial deeds bring forth the compassion and kindness in our hearts and turn them into actions. Really get out there and do things that benefit others and make others truly happy. In the process you will often find

yourselves filled with happiness too.

Lastly, there is cooperation. This is the key to reducing arguments and nurturing harmony. Cooperation in a workplace is different to cooperation in the home, among friends and so forth. Although at times there are different positions of authority, we can practice respect for others and their position, as well as work together in a manner that reflects equality. And this is how we can manifest cooperation. Sometimes we need to take the lead and do it responsibly; sometimes we need to listen and follow others, and do it respectfully.

In the Mahāyāna spirit, the practice of the Four All-embracing Virtues aims to bring true benefit to sentient beings. The mind-set accompanying this practice is just as her vows stipulate—do it with sincerity, never tiring and without prejudice.

Vow 8—Helping the Destitute Without Attachment

Now let us turn to her eighth vow, which I find very moving.

(8) When I see living beings who are lonely, imprisoned, ill, and afflicted by various misfortunes and hardships, I will never forsake them, even for a moment, for I must bring them peace. Through my good deeds I will bring them benefits and liberate them from their pain. Only then will I leave them.

Here she clearly identifies those who need help the most: beings that are lonely, imprisoned, ill and facing many hardships. This essentially means anyone who is suffering, whether mentally or physically or economically, she will help them and never give up on them until they find peace and happiness again.

This may sound very lofty and we may say, “I can’t do that”, but we can!

Some people are very proactive and seek out ways to help others. For example, they volunteer at charities that provide services to the elderly, homeless, etc. or even approach their local nursing homes and offer to come and talk to the residents, play games with them, give them some company and attention, make them feel appreciated. But if we don't have that much energy or time, we can still practice this vow by being prepared and willing to help when the situation arises. For example if our family members or friends fall sick, we can give them a helping hand, look after them or their children, or help them with household chores if they are injured. Little things like that we can do if we put our mind to it.

Here I would like to point out that the term imprisoned does not have to relate to jail. Of course, if we have the skill and ability to help people in jail turn over a new leaf, that is wonderful. But if we don't have those skills yet, imprisoned can also be interpreted as those who feel trapped or are trapped in a difficult situation. Trapped can also relate to animals. I know in Australia there are animal shelters that always welcome volunteers to come play with the animals, like taking the dogs for a walk—otherwise the dogs have to stay locked in their kennels. Can you see what I'm trying to express? If there are people or sentient beings out there that we know need help, we should try our best to help them, or find someone who has the skill and ability to help them.

The end of this vow also highlights an important Buddhist practice, non-attachment. We see this in her last sentence, when she says, “Only then will I leave them”.

In the Mahāyāna teachings, as we progress we also need to learn to let go. After we help someone and they are free from their sufferings, we too need to learn to move on. You may think that this is easy to do, but sometimes we can get very attached to the people or beings we help, so when the time comes to part, we find it hard to let go. Being able to let go

will help reduce the sadness that comes with separation. An example is a friend I know who volunteered to help train a guide dog. After a year with the dog, he became very fond of it and was very sad when he had to return it to the guide dog association. But on a happy ending, the dog failed the test because it was too playful, so my friend was given first option to take it back as a pet; of course he jumped at that offer!

Vow 9—Subduing Destructive Behavior

Her last two vows, numbers 9 and 10, are very long, so I will only talk about them partially.

(9) When I see those who hunt or trap animals, slaughter, or commit other such offences against the precepts, I will never forsake them. When I obtain the ability [to teach all beings], I will restrain those who should be restrained and assist those who should be assisted wherever I see such living beings.

In her ninth vow, she focuses on changing people's destructive behaviors, namely acts of killing or violations against the precepts. From this, we can see the spirit of the Mahāyāna does not give up on beings, even if they have done bad things. For some, they don't even realize what they are doing is wrong. For example, when we say killing is bad, many immediately think of murderers. But we fail to think about the local butcher and fishmonger; they make a living out of killing each day, and it is legal. Then you have those involved in game hunting; they kill for fun, chasing and hunting down wild animals. Can you imagine the fear these animals experience and the injuries they may suffer during the hunt, and then the pain at the point of death?

Queen Śrīmālā says she will restrain those that need to be, and assist those that need it. If we look deeper, restraining someone from committing acts

of killing and harm brings benefit to both the doer and the victim. By restraining the doer, they can reduce the amount of bad karma they create, which means less suffering in their future. For the intended victims, they get relief straight away because the danger of harm is no longer there. The spirit of the Mahāyāna incorporates equality; when we talk about benefiting others, this includes humans and other beings. Where we can, we should try to reduce the amount of harm that humans inflict on other animals too. We can even take this further and extend it to include the environment.

On another important note, we see in this vow that she recognizes her present abilities are limited, so she vows that when she does have the ability, she will do this. Likewise, it is important that we know our own abilities and although at times we should challenge ourselves so that we can progress, we should avoid getting in over our heads. That means we need to recognize what level we are at: are we in a position to help, are we capable of helping? Sometimes we need to step back, otherwise we can make the situation worse, or end up being the one that needs help. A classic example is rescuing someone drowning in water. If we have the ability, then yes, jump in and get them out. If we don't, we should call for help, otherwise we may end up drowning as well.

Vow 10—Never Forgetting the Dharma

In this last vow we are shown the chain of events that could happen if we forget the True Dharma.

*(10) I accept the True Dharma, never forgetting it. Why?
Because those who forget the Dharma forget the Mahāyāna
and the perfections (pāramitās), thus losing aspiration for the
Mahāyāna. If one does not aspire to the Mahāyāna they will
not be able to transcend the level of common people.*

Chapter 4

Here she is referring to the Ultimate Truth; only by awakening to and fully penetrating this Truth does one become a buddha. Thus, by embracing it and not forgetting it, she is referring to the goal of Buddhahood. If she loses sight of her goal, she will not have the motivation or the aspiration to practice the path. If she doesn't practice the path of the Mahāyāna and cultivate the perfections, she will not reap the fruit of Buddhahood. Hence she explains that, "if one does not aspire to the Mahāyāna they will not be able to transcend the level of common people".

Here perfections refer to the Six Pāramitās, which are the practices of giving, morality, tolerance, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. If one cultivates the Six Pāramitās, this is planting the seed. When these are perfected, one reaps the fruit of Buddhahood. If one loses sight of the goal of Buddhahood, then the motivation to practice is not there, making it hard to transcend the level of the common people. Here the term "common people" is not meant to be derogatory; it is just that, from a spiritual aspect, the common human life is full of suffering and imperfections, while the level of the buddhas is pure, peaceful, calm and perfect.

In her final vow, she is affirming the underlying force to keep her on the Mahāyāna path, that is, the goal of Buddhahood. Only by holding tight to this vision does one continue to live and breathe the Mahāyāna spirit, continually making themselves a better person, as well as bringing benefit to others. The ultimate benefit is to also help others to become perfect, to become buddhas.

4. Conclusion

I went through the material quickly, but I hope that you can see the spirit of the Mahāyāna and the path to Buddhahood is one that is filled with virtues, goodness and purity. If we can incorporate this spirit into our lives and spread it into the community, it will be of much benefit to everyone. Finally, I'd like to end this talk with the saying that I started with: *“To purify and tame the body and mind, and bring benefit to all sentient beings”*.

May we all be able to purify ourselves, our actions, speech and thoughts; and in doing so, may we be able to bring benefit to all beings.

Chapter 5

Outline of The Way to Buddhahood

Bodhi Monastery Dharma Retreat, July 2015

In 2015, I decided to focus my efforts on Venerable Yinshun's renowned text, "The Way to Buddhahood". This book captures the whole practice of Buddhism and is packed with valuable knowledge and insights. In this particular year, I spent the time reviewing the structure of the whole text and the chapters within so that the audience can get a birds-eye view of this lengthy piece of work. Only by understanding the structure will we be able to see the path of practice clearly.

1. Introduction

Hello and welcome again to the annual Dharma Retreat at Bodhi Monastery. For the past two years, I have presented on Venerable Yinshun's ideal of Humanistic Buddhism, which, in a nutshell, grounds the practice of Buddhism here on this earth, in this human form. The path that Venerable Yinshun promotes aims to harness the unique qualities that humans possess, which is the best way to progress on the Bodhisattva Path and to ultimately achieve Buddhahood.

Although we have discussed the ideal of Humanistic Buddhism, for many of you, this path may still be unclear, especially in terms of how to

practice and realize it for ourselves. Some may wonder if there is a guidebook, like a street directory, or GPS system, that they can rely on. I think the answer is “yes”, in his famous work, *The Way to Buddhahood*.

Venerable Yinshun’s Purpose in Writing *The Way to Buddhahood*

Here, I would also like to point out that this is the only text that Venerable Yinshun wrote himself, covering almost all the Buddha’s teachings. All his other works are commentaries on the sūtras and exegesis, so they are explaining the works of others. This text fully represents his thinking on Humanistic Buddhism. More importantly, it was his aim to provide a clear guide so that practitioners can find the proper path of practice.

The Way to Buddhahood systematically reveals the Buddha’s teachings to guide beginners towards the attainment of Buddhahood. In addition, the reason Venerable Yinshun composed *The Way to Buddhahood* was also to help practitioners comprehensively learn all of the Buddha’s teachings that are still available. This is because in the context of Chinese Buddhism there are miscellaneous teachings available, which may have brought about confusion. This issue is not new and some masters have tried to address it in the past. Venerable Yinshun’s response to this dilemma culminated in his unique work, *The Way to Buddhahood*.

For some people, this book may be considered a text that teaches very simple topics, or is regarded as a little encyclopaedia with a lot of information on various fields within Buddhism. Yet Venerable Yinshun’s true aim behind this book is much deeper and more meaningful. It completes and complements his promotion of Humanistic Buddhism by providing a practical guide that all practitioners, from beginners to advanced learners, can consult and rely on.

Outlining this Year's Talk

For this year's series of Dharma talks, I would like to share with you the depth and beauty hidden in this wonderful and resourceful text. I know that quite a few Dharma study groups have studied this text, or are studying this text, or are thinking of studying it. So for some, this series of Dharma talks would provide an alternate perspective on the text as well as some revision lessons. For those currently studying the text or planning to do so, I hope that these Dharma talks will provide you with a clearer understanding of how the many topics in the text all fit together under the umbrella of Humanistic Buddhism.

My plan is to point out the macro structure of the text, with a particular focus on the Preface and chapters 1 and 2. As for chapters 3, 4 and 5, which cover the Five, Three and Great vehicles, I will go over these briefly due to time limitations. I hope that by taking you through the structure of the text, you can become more familiar with the way this guidebook is laid out and also be able to identify major themes and how they link together, as Venerable Yinshun intended. Only in this way can we gradually see the underlying meaning in this text and benefit from the teachings.

With all of Venerable Yinshun's writings, if we pay careful attention we can see that there is a rational, logical and beautiful structure to the whole layout of his works. Understanding the structure of Venerable Yinshun's works greatly improves our ability to penetrate more deeply into the treasures that are contained within. Often when we pick up a book, we get too caught up in the details and we overlook the structure, or greater picture. So in this year's talks, I will aim to clarify the structure of *The Way to Buddhahood*, and hopefully the process will also assist you to identify both the macro and micro aspects of Venerable Yinshun's texts in future.

Before we begin, I would like to point out that most of Venerable Yinshun's works are yet to be translated into English, but *The Way to Buddhahood* does have an English translation. This translation was done more than ten years ago. However, for my talks I have relied on the Chinese text and performed a separate translation myself. So if you are using the current English version, it may not be immediately comparable as the use of terms may vary.

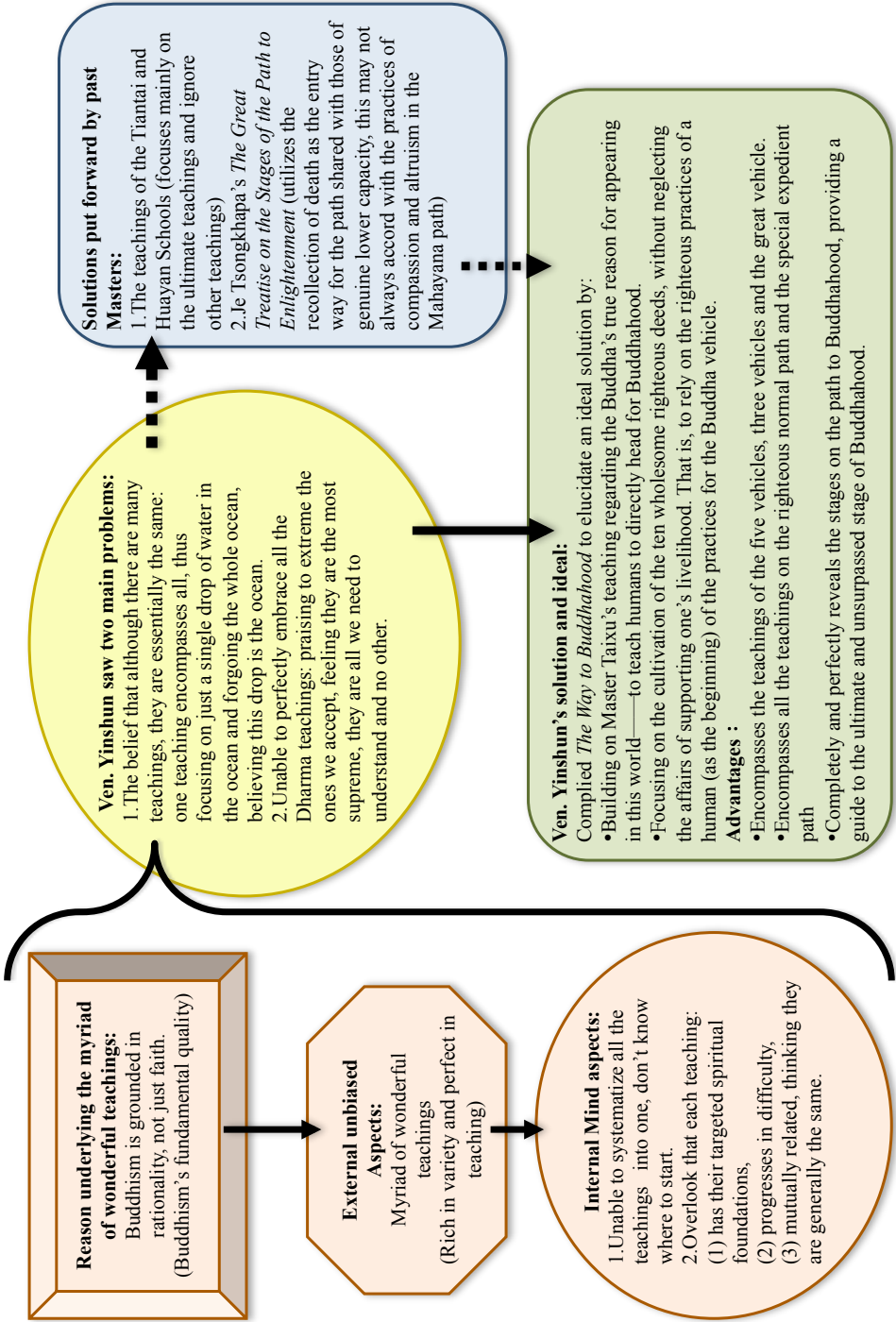
So, after that long introduction, let us begin exploring this wonderful text!

2. Explaining the Preface of the Book

As with every book, the Preface is very informative. I always enjoy reading the preface of a text because it brings me closer to the author, like listening to their story in person.

At the end of the Preface, in the last paragraph, Venerable Yinshun tells us about the making of this book—from 1954 to 1959 was when he crafted this piece of work. Due to his busy schedule, he was not able to work on it full-time, but even when he was not able to work on it, it was always in the forefront of his mind and he would regularly think about how to improve and perfect it. This clearly highlights the importance Venerable Yinshun placed on this work. If it were just some short teachings to fulfill his duties at the monasteries he was residing in, I doubt it would have taken so long and required so much effort to write, amend, revise and perfect the work. So, given that this text was so special to Venerable Yinshun, we should go beyond the surface and see the deeper meaning behind it. In this way, we can truly appreciate the Dharma that Venerable Yinshun is sharing with us. I have mapped out the main issues presented in the Preface (see *Mindmap of Ven. Yinshun's preface in "The Way to Buddhahood"*, below).

Mindmap of Venerable Yinshun's Preface in *The Way to Buddhahood*



From this mindmap, at the top centre, in the yellow circle is the crux of the problem that provided the impetus for Venerable Yinshun to write this book. Venerable Yinshun observed two main problems facing Buddhists, in particular those who were looking to cultivate the Mahāyāna path. Both problems arise due to the vast amount of teachings available.

Two Problems Buddhists Fall into and the Consequence

The first problem is the thinking or belief that even though there are numerous teachings available, they are all essentially the same. As a result, people with this thinking select one teaching, and assume that it encompasses all the other teachings. In doing so, they forgo the other teachings and focus only on a particular teaching. So, they take a drop of water from the ocean and say this is the ocean. The consequence of doing this is that they miss out on the great variety of teachings that the other drops of water in the ocean contain.

The second problem practitioners face is the inability to embrace all the Dharma teachings perfectly. By nature, people tend to favor one thing over another and this also applies to our practice. Some practitioners strongly praise the teachings that they understand and accept, thus creating a mentality that these are all that they need. As a result, they just sweep aside all the other teachings.

Both problems lead practitioners to select only a section of the available Dharma teachings and neglect or even reject the rest. This consequence can be looked at from three perspectives. From the perspective of the practitioner themselves, one single teaching may be sufficient to get to the other shore, to reach nirvana. But from the perspective of a bodhisattva, it is taught that we need to learn many different skills, which in turn become our resources for helping and liberating the myriad of sentient beings. If we only learn one set of teaching and forgo the rest, then it also means

that we limit our ability to help others, which goes contrary to the bodhisattva vows. From an even broader perspective, that of Buddhism as a whole, by neglecting the other teachings and focusing only on one or a few teachings, this means that the different capacities of sentient beings will not be fully catered for.

Investigating the Source of These Two Problems

So, having seen these problems, Venerable Yinshun traced back to try and find the source. This we can see in the light brown sections on the left-hand side of the mindmap. In his research, Venerable Yinshun concluded that the two main factors behind this situation were:

1. the external manifestation of the many different sets of teachings available, and
2. the internal mental capacity, or lack of capacity, to systematize all the teachings logically and rationally.

In this regard, people generally failed to appreciate that the different teachings had a different target audience and catered to their different spiritual foundations. In addition, the teachings are mutually supportive while progressing in difficulty. Unable to see these subtle links between the teachings, people were inclined to assume that the teachings are generally the same.

However, Venerable Yinshun did not stop here. Having concluded that internal and external elements lead to the two main problems we see in the yellow circle, he further investigated why it was that there were so many different teachings available. The answer to this, Venerable Yinshun found, was grounded in the fundamental quality of Buddhism. Buddhism is not purely a faith-based religion; it is also grounded in rationality. It is this unique and fundamental quality of Buddhism that

brought forth the many wonderful teachings available. In reaching this conclusion, Venerable Yinshun used this as the starting point of the Preface.

So, as you can see, the light brown sections on the mindmap reflect the background information about what Venerable Yinshun believed to be the force behind the problems he saw. Understanding the causes, he then tells us the problems and then moves on to explaining the solution. This then brings us to the remaining two objects on the mindmap: the light blue and green rectangles on the right-hand corner.

Looking at the Solutions Provided by Other Masters

Here Venerable Yinshun delves deep into the solutions provided by past masters. The information and explanation provided is so detailed that, for some readers, this inadvertently becomes a trap, because one gets too bogged down in the detail and they begin to lose sight of the story that Venerable Yinshun is telling. Essentially, Venerable Yinshun is acknowledging that the problems he saw are not his unique discovery. Buddhist masters of the past also realized this problem and in their wisdom, tried earnestly to present a solution to help practitioners.

Solutions of the Tiantai and Huayan Schools of Chinese Buddhism

The Tiantai and Huayan schools of Chinese Buddhism developed their solutions based on the Perfect Teachings. Given that the final goal was Buddhahood, their teachings focused heavily, and even solely, on the Perfect Teachings; all other teachings were simply ignored. Here “Perfect Teachings” refers to the texts that completely and perfectly taught about the Truth and were generally suited to advanced practitioners. Thus, the teachings of the Śrāvakas, and the other Mahāyāna sūtras were regarded

as not perfect and simply swept aside. This created the problem that no one would admit that they are of a lower capacity and so everybody wanted to practice the higher capacity teachings. Yet the reality is that different spiritual foundations required different teachings, and not all would be able to directly penetrate the Truth via the Perfect Teachings. This approach would benefit some, but not all. This was an actual situation that arose as a result of over-emphasis on the Perfect Teachings.

A Solution From Tibetan Master Je Tsongkhapa

Turning to Tibetan Buddhism, the renowned teacher Je Tsongkhapa wrote a famous piece of work, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, known in Chinese as *Pútídào cìdì guǎnglùn* (菩提道次第廣論). This text aimed to provide a map and guide to practitioners as well. In it, Master Tsongkhapa utilizes the recollection of death as the entry point of the first stage for practitioners. This entryway is a shared practice with those of genuine lower capacity. Here we are talking about those with the spiritual foundations that are inclined to seek better future lives. The use of the recollection of death, if skillful, can lead them to progress and develop diligence. But it can also have the undesirable effect of bringing forth a deep sense of loathing towards the world, and thus they seek liberation quickly. This may not always accord with the practices of compassion and altruism in the Mahāyāna path, which requires bodhisattvas to remain in the world to continue the work of helping sentient beings.

Venerable Yinshun's Solution

These solutions from the ancient masters may have suited their respective eras, but Venerable Yinshun considered they were not suitable for our present era, as the times have changed. Venerable Yinshun compassionately sought to figure out a way to improve on these past

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solutions so they suit the present era. His ideal solution, the large light green rectangle on the bottom, thus builds upon the wisdom of the ancient masters as well as designing a solution to suit the general populace of our present era.

Venerable Yinshun's ideal stemmed from the influence of his eminent teacher, Master Taixu, who taught that the Buddha's true reason for appearing in this world was to teach humans to rely on this human form to directly head for Buddhahood. In terms of practice, the aim is to perfect the human character via cultivating the Ten Wholesome Deeds, but at the same time the affairs of supporting one's livelihood is not neglected. In this way, both spiritual and economic factors are addressed.

In terms of teachings, Venerable Yinshun's method encompasses all the teachings of the Five, Three, and Great vehicles, as well as the righteous normal path and expedient path. This is in recognition of the fact that beings at different stages of their spiritual development benefit from different teachings, and some with unique inclinations may require the special teachings of the expedient ways. There is no one size fits all approach. Moreover, even though the commentaries may refer to higher and lower capacities, these are more reflective of the different stage of one's practice. Those of lower capacity are so because they have only just begun their path; as they progress, they too will eventually become advanced and be able to penetrate the higher capacity teachings.

Taking this view that the path to Buddhahood is progressive, Venerable Yinshun's solution reveals clearly how to start with this human vehicle and then gradually progress to the attainment of Buddhahood. At each stage, the corresponding practices suited to one's ability are outlined and the path reveals the mutual support that the different teachings provide. The initial entry-level teachings support and inspire the higher-level teachings, and the higher-level teachings are attainable only with the

entry-level teachings as foundation. Just like how primary school education forms the basis of high school education and so forth.

In this way, Venerable Yinshun's ideal resolves the problems that he saw facing practitioners. His solution embraces all the righteous teachings, systematically orders them according to the stage of one's development, and draws out the mutual and progressive relation of the teachings. Therefore, practitioners now have a guide they can consult when facing the myriad of teachings and, with this guide, they can navigate through the teachings and practices, with the ultimate aim of reaching Buddhahood.

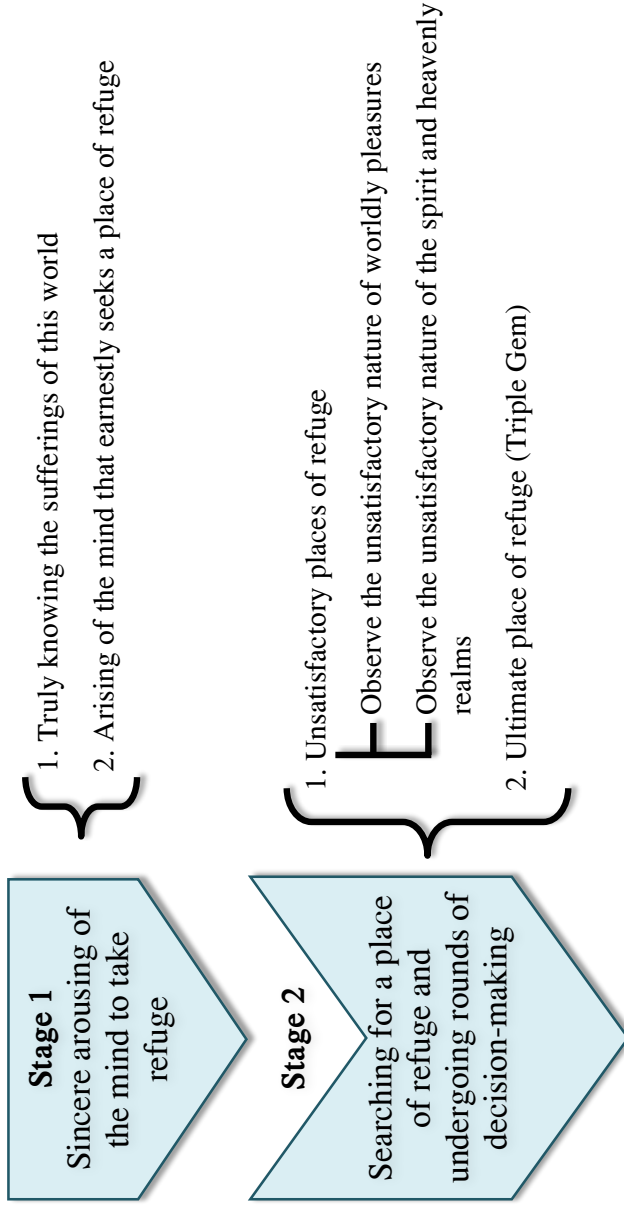
3. Chapter 1— Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem

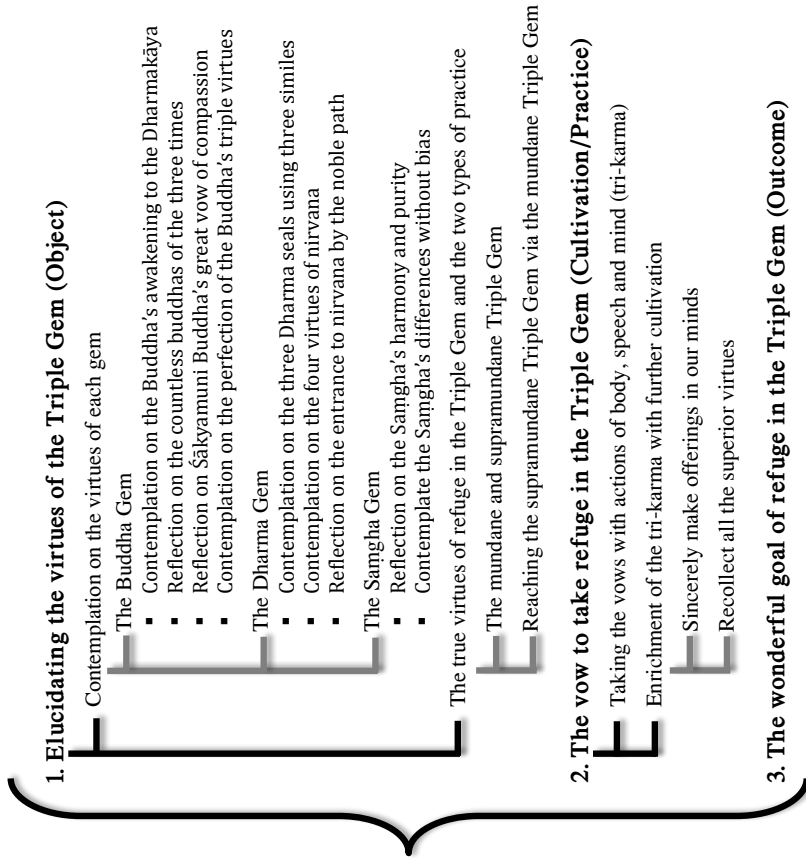
First, let us go through the whole structure of Chapter 1 so that you can become more familiar with it. Remember, it consists of an important opening paragraph, which I have defined as a yellow box at the top, then there are a total of four stages. Each stage builds upon the previous stage.

- ◆ Stage 1 focuses on the sincere arousing of the mind to take refuge.
- ◆ Stage 2 talks about the process of the search for a place of refuge.
- ◆ Stage 3 is the main focus of this chapter, reflected by the fact that it contains the most content. Here the focus looks at the stages of practices and virtues of the Triple Gem.
- ◆ Stage 4 looks at the essence of taking refuge, namely the matter of faith and vows, and its true meaning, which is the importance of self-reliance.

Chapter 1 – Development of Faith and Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem

Chapter 1 Section 1 – Defines what is meant by the way to Buddhahood and states clearly the principle is based on the *Lotus Sūtra*'s teaching that all Dharmas lead to the one path/goal.

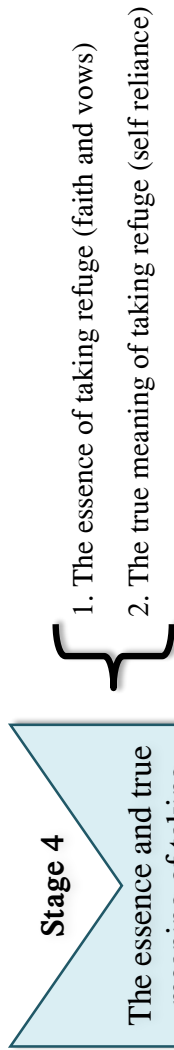




Stage 3

The stages of practices and virtues of taking refuge in the Triple Gem

Chapter 1 – Development of Faith and Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem



Section 1—Defining the Way to Buddhahood

Now let us look at the structure of Chapter 1 in detail. At the start of Chapter 1, there is an important introductory paragraph. This is symbolized by the yellow box at the very top. Though short, this introductory paragraph provides a concise definition of what is meant by the way to Buddhahood. Here, Venerable Yinshun defines it as “the method that leads to Buddhahood, the right path is ‘the Way to Buddhahood’”.

What this means is that, although it may not be easy, it is certainly possible to cultivate oneself from a human state, where one possesses few merits and no wisdom, to the attainment of the unsurpassed state of Buddhahood. To do so, we must follow the right path that leads to Buddhahood. That is, we must undertake the proper practices that lead to Buddhahood. Moreover, as different beings possess different spiritual capacities, the Buddha taught different paths. Although there are many different paths, they all have the one purpose of leading beings to Buddhahood. This profound principle is likened to various types of waterways, which all inevitably flow into the ocean. This teaching is based on the *Lotus Sūtra* (法華經) and is the foundation upon which Venerable Yinshun wrote this text. It is his belief that all beings can attain Buddhahood, if we follow the way to Buddhahood.

Stages 1 & 2—the Search for a True Place of Refuge

After this introductory paragraph, the text begins to use the traditional style of verse and commentary. So the starting point for the path begins with the search for a true place of refuge. This is Stage 1, where the mind earnestly seeks to take refuge in something. This yearning arises from a deep understanding that there is no true happiness in this world and that everything in this world ultimately brings forth suffering. Therefore, the

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mind seeks to find a true place in which it can take refuge. Without a deep understanding of the suffering in this world, one will always feel that life is not bad and will not seek a way out.

This then leads onto Stage 2, where one begins to search for their refuge. There are two main realms that humans turn to. One is the material world; thus the verses say:

積聚皆銷散	<i>Accumulation of wealth will disperse,</i>
崇高必墮落	<i>Fame and status can be lost,</i>
合會要當離	<i>All gatherings end in separation,</i>
有生無不死	<i>Where there is life, death is unavoidable,</i>
國家治還亂	<i>Good governance will become unstable,</i>
器界成復毀	<i>The world forms and decays,</i>
世間諸可樂	<i>[Of] all the joys in the world,</i>
無事可依怙	<i>None can be a place of refuge.</i>

Having thoroughly searched the material world for a place of refuge, one realizes that nothing there is everlasting. Fame and high status can be lost as conditions change, life brings with it death, a country that is stable can become unstable, even the world (which seems eternal) actually undergoes formation and decay. Realising that there is nothing in the material world that can be a true place of refuge, one then turns to the spiritual realm, looking to the spirits, the heavens, the various religions and so forth. Thus, the verse says:

鬼神好兇殺	<i>Ghosts and spirits delight in violence,</i>
欲天耽諸欲	<i>Devas of the desire heavens indulge in desires,</i>
獨梵依慢住	<i>The individual Brahma god is self-absorbed,</i>
亦非歸依處	<i>Neither are these true places of refuge.</i>

When looking beyond our world to the heavens and the spirits, one with a rational and clear mind will also see that these beings, which may seem to

be supernatural and almighty, are not perfect in character. As one continues to search, looking for a place of refuge that is pure, undefiled and worthy of devotion, ultimately one will realize that the Triple Gem is the only true place of refuge.

Stage 3—Practice Component of Chapter 1

At the end of Stage 2, one decides that they would like to take refuge in the Triple Gem; however, there is still some uncertainty, as one's understanding of the Triple Gem is shallow. This then leads to Stage 3, which is also the main practice component Chapter 1 is trying to highlight. From the flow chart, you can see that the content devoted to this stage makes up the bulk of Chapter 1. Venerable Yinshun uses the common set of three to bring out this stage. The set of three I am talking about includes object (境), practice (行) and outcome (果) .

Object—Learning about the Triple Gem

First is the object. What this means is that the focus here is really to find out more about the Triple Gem—to really get to know why they are the only true place of refuge. So, to start, one contemplates the virtues of the Triple Gem one by one. To be properly able to contemplate the virtues of the Buddha, Dharma and saṃgha, it all begins with learning about them from wise teachers, or reading Dharma texts—in our modern day, even via YouTube and so forth. Through our efforts to learn about the Triple Gem, we are able to fully appreciate the merits and virtues of the Triple Gem.

The Buddha Gem's Dharmakāya

Concerning the Buddha Gem, there are namely four aspects, which are reflected in the verses as follows.

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正法以為身 *The true Dharma is their body,*
淨慧以為命 *Pure wisdom is their life,*
智月朗秋空 *Their wisdom is like the full moon illuminating the*
 autumn sky,
禮佛兩足尊 *Homage to the Buddha, most honorable among bipeds*
 (humans).

The first aspect is in terms of the ultimate Truth. A buddha, unlike any other being, has fully penetrated and realized the Truth. Through countless lives of cultivation and practice, a buddha, through their own efforts, attains complete and perfect awakening. A buddha is one who has realized the Truth and is the manifestation of the Truth, which is called the dharmakāya.

Buddha Gems of the Three Time Periods

三世佛無量 *Buddhas of the three time periods are countless,*
十方佛亦而 *So too are the buddhas of the ten directions.*

The second aspect is in terms of the myriad of buddhas throughout time and space. Although attaining Buddhahood is a great feat, it is not impossible and since time immemorial there have been buddhas appearing in the world. In our present time, in the realms of the ten directions there are buddhas currently teaching the Dharma, and going forward into the future, there will be more buddhas appearing as a result of beings who accomplish the way to Buddhahood. This is a lofty and worthy path that others have followed and that we too can follow.

The Buddha Gem of Our Present World

悲願來濁世 *His compassionate vows brings him to this impure world,*

禮佛釋迦文 *Homage to the Shakyamuni Buddha.*

The third aspect narrows down the focus to the Śākyamuni Buddha, who is the closest to us among the buddhas of the three time periods and ten directions. It is he who came to our world, practiced the path, and attained enlightenment as a human. It is he who then taught the Dharma, so that we can also follow in his example and footsteps.

The Buddha Gem's True Meaning

智圓悲無極 *Perfect in wisdom, with compassion that is boundless,*

斷障無餘習 *They cease all defilement, not even a trace is left.*

三德等究竟 *The triple virtues are equal among the buddhas,*

方便示差別 *But by skillful means, they appear with different manifestations.*

The fourth aspect is to truly contemplate what it means to be a buddha. What virtues do they possess? There are three main virtues that essentially encompass all the virtues. One is that their wisdom is profound, deep and perfect. Two is that their compassion has no end. Three is that they have purified themselves of all defilements without leaving any remnants. Having perfected both virtues and wisdom, they are able to skillfully appear with different manifestations to benefit different beings. This is why a buddha is a gem in whom we can truly take refuge.

So you see, Venerable Yinshun skillfully teaches us to reflect on the Buddha Gem in terms of the dharmakāya, the multiple buddhas through time and space, the buddha we know and also the essence behind the concept of a buddha. Only by thoroughly reflecting and understanding the

magnificence of the Buddha Gem can we devote ourselves to it wholeheartedly and realize that it is a true place of refuge.

Now we move onto the Dharma Gem.

Dharma Gem—the Dharma Seal of Impermanence

The Dharma Gem has three main aspects we should contemplate. As the Dharma refers to the ultimate Truth that is beyond form and description, Venerable Yinshun skillfully uses similes here to point out that we can penetrate the Dharma via the Three Dharma Seals of impermanence, non-self and nirvana.

丘井空聚落	<i>The well is dry and the village empty,</i>
朽故寂無人	<i>[The well] is dilapidated and [the village] without dwellers.</i>
彼岸林泉樂	<i>On the other shore lies the lush forests and springs.</i>
禮法離欲尊	<i>Homage to the Dharma, most honorable in ending defilements.</i>

Here I would like to take some time to explore these similes, because I feel they are very profound. First, the dry well is used to highlight the dharma seal of impermanence. How does this simile work? Venerable Yinshun utilizes the story of a person who falls into a dry well. At the bottom of the well are four poisonous snakes, waiting eagerly for the person to fall down. The person avoids falling to the bottom by clinging onto some vines, yet there is a mouse gnawing away at the vine, so at any minute the person may fall. While in such a precarious situation, the person looks up to see some honey dripping from a beehive on the vine. Forgetting his dangerous situation, all he thinks about is how to get hold of the honey, even at the risk of being stung by the bees! This reflects the situation of all beings. Due to our karma, we roam in the wilderness of life and death. The vine is like our life force. The mouse is like impermanence;

with each breath our life comes closer to its end. The four snakes represent the four elements of earth, fire, water and wind, when these become imbalanced they can bring on illness and even death, just like the bite of a poisonous snake. The honey is the happiness arising from indulgence in our desires, while the bees are like the fruition of suffering that follows. Humans are just like this; delighting in the meagre joys of desire, they disregard the suffering that cyclic existence and impermanence brings. They are totally unaware of the great suffering of life and death.

Dharma Gem—the Dharma Seal of Non-self

The next simile is the empty village. The story behind this is that there is a person escaping from persecution, they come across an empty village and want to rest a night before continuing on. But then a voice tells them, “Keep running! This village is inhabited by thieves who will harm and even kill”. As this person continues to run, they come to the border of the country and face a large river; looking into the distance, they can see the other shore does not belong to the king that is persecuting them and there are lush green forests. That place is truly safe. Thus, with all their might they forge ahead and swim across the river. Only in this way can they truly escape and find a place to rest.

This story reflects a practitioner who is seeking liberation from the claws of Māra, but some fail at the hands of the six senses. The empty village is like our sense faculties. The average person thinks that inside there is a true “I”, but in truth this “I” does not exist. It is only because the sense faculties come in contact with the sense objects (the environment) then the sense consciousness arises. Just like thieves, the sense consciousness pervades the sense organs and give rise to greed, anger and many other defilements. In this way, they steal our virtues and some even fall to the lower realms as a result. Therefore, one who seeks liberation from Māra’s

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web must not stay; they must continue to run until they truly find a safe place.

So, for practitioners, as we cultivate the path we must not allow the sense faculties to delude us—only by crossing the river of life and death can we be free from Māra’s web and reach nirvana. Here in nirvana we can truly experience the stillness and joy of no birth or death.

The Three Dharma Seals are: all conditional existences are impermanent, all dharmas are without a permanent self, nirvana is truly peaceful and joyous. These are also the three great truths of the Buddha-dharma. Nirvana is attained through the seals of impermanence and non-self; this is the refuge of all the sages, thus they pay respect to the gem of the Dharma. Just as worldly beings can gain some control over their desires through the cultivation of meditation, the sages of the Three Vehicle attain nirvana with wisdom, which is the ultimate liberation from all desires. Hence, the Dharma is described as the honorable one that ends defilements.

Dharma Gem—the Dharma Seal of Nirvana

Nirvana is also the goal of the Three Dharma Seals. Therefore, Venerable Yinshun further explains that we need to understand the virtues of nirvana, otherwise we will not arouse the motivation to seek it. So, he tells us to contemplate the four virtues of nirvana in the following verse.

正法妙難思	<i>The true Dharma (nirvana) is wonderful and inconceivable,</i>
善淨常安樂	<i>Wholesome, pure, permanent (beyond the nature of time) and joyful.</i>
依古仙人道	<i>Following the [Noble Eightfold] path of the ancient sages,</i>
能入於涅槃	<i>It is possible to reach nirvana.</i>

Nirvana is something to be experienced, so it is truly inconceivable and beyond description. But to help us understand it, the Buddha tells us that it is a place that is pure, wholesome, beyond the nature of time, joyous etc. These are the qualities that we can expect when we reach nirvana.

Now that we know there is such a wonderful place that is free from suffering, is it possible to get there? Yes indeed! There is a path; the Noble Eightfold Path is the way to get there. This path reflects the Dharma and only the Dharma can help us make it across the ocean of cyclic existence—that is, to end our defilements and thus enjoy the peace of nirvana. This is why we pay homage to the Dharma and why it is one of the gems we can truly take refuge in.

Samṅha Gem

Last comes the samṅha gem. Here Venerable Yinshun draws our attention to two aspects; one is the ideal samṅha, and the other is the worldly samṅha, which may not be ideal. The samṅha is the harmonious community that practices the path the Buddha taught. Although it commonly refers to the monks and nuns, in a wider sense it can also include the lay followers. In the ideal samṅha, there is true harmony among the practitioners. Given that the underlying aim of the practice is to purify ourselves, within an ideal samṅha there is purity and wholesome conduct because everyone upholds the precepts with sincerity. This is the ideal samṅha, which may not be so easy to find in our worldly realm, because humans are not perfect (yet). This is why we can see that some samṅha communities are not so harmonious and/or pure in conduct. Seeing this, we may sometimes feel disgust or contempt towards such samṅhas. Therefore, Venerable Yinshun teaches us an important second contemplation, which is to treat all the samṅha communities equally. That is, we should try to look upon them as if they were ideal samṅhas. This is not to ignore their shortcomings; rather, it is to cultivate in our own minds

the virtue of humility and respect towards any saṃgha and its members. Although some saṃghas may not be perfect at present, they are contributing to the continuation of the Dharma teachings through their practice, and will one day improve as their practice progresses.

The Mundane and Supramundane Triple Gems

After spending time learning about the Triple Gem, Venerable Yinshun points out that in our practices we also need to realize that there are two types of Triple Gem. One is mundane and the other is supramundane. This point is captured in a half-verse:

三寶真實德 *The true virtues of the Triple Gem,*
無漏性清淨 *Are undefiled and pure in nature.*

This half-verse reveals the supramundane Triple Gem and explains that it is pure and undefiled. To access or connect with the supramundane Triple Gem, we must rely on the mundane Triple Gem, which is the Buddha, Dharma and saṃgha that we can make contact with in our world. Only through the mundane can we reach the supramundane. In this way, both Triple Gems ensure the continuation of the Buddha-dharma; thus the second half of the verse says:

化世真亦俗 *To transform the world, we ought to rely on both the*
 mundane and supramundane Triple Gems,
佛法得長存 *Thus the Buddha-dharma can long remain.*

The Practice and Goal of Taking Refuge in the Triple Gem

At this point, remember the set of three: object, practice and outcome. Here the section relating to the object draws to a close. Based on the volume of content in this section, one should keep in mind that Venerable Yinshun considers this aspect very important. Without knowing fully the

object, it is impossible to persist with the practice and there would be negative consequences for the attainment of the outcome. So, after fully studying the object one must progress to the stage of practice and cultivation. That is, one must undertake the path and not just remain at the stage of knowing. We have to walk the path and move forward on it. So in terms of taking refuge in the Triple Gem, the practice and cultivation aspects consist of two elements.

The first is the ceremonial practice of taking refuge. This involves the actions of our body, our speech and our minds. The ceremony can be simple or elaborate, depending on one's conditions. But, in essence, it will require the practitioner to wholeheartedly accept the Triple Gem as their refuge. This is the action of mind. The actions of body and speech are manifested through prostration to the Triple Gem and recitation of the vows to take refuge in the Triple Gem.

The second element is the ongoing taking of refuge through the actual implementation of the path and, in particular, the practices of making offerings to the Triple Gem continually in our minds, and to recollect the Triple Gem's virtues again and again. Do not think that this practice is no big deal. The teachings of the bodhisattva path highlight that, even having reached the Ten Bhūmis—that is, the final ten stages prior to Buddhahood—the great bodhisattvas still make offerings to the Triple Gem and recollect their virtues at every opportunity possible. Why is this practice so important? This is because the Triple Gem is the anchor for our practice and cultivation. If we lose sight of our refuge and their teachings, our foundation weakens and we will easily stray from the right path.

So, the practice of taking refuge consists of the initial ceremony and this is then followed up by continual devotional practices towards the Triple Gem.

The third element in the set of three is the outcome or the goal. If one clearly understands the object and puts into practice the teachings, then the goal will come within reach. This goal is none other than the joy and peace of liberation from the sufferings of the world, liberation from cyclic existence, and entrance into the state of nirvana.

Stage 4—True Meaning of Taking Refuge

Here Venerable Yinshun not only draws this chapter to a conclusion but, importantly, draws our attention to the essence and true meaning of taking refuge. Unlike some faith-based religions, taking refuge in the Triple Gem is grounded in both rationality and faith. The faith component encompasses the emotive side of human nature, where we devote ourselves to something that is truly lofty and worthy of devotion. This is underpinned by the vows to take refuge in only the Triple Gem and to follow its teachings and example. The rational side is reflected in our own efforts and practice to follow the path, purify ourselves and perfect our wisdom so that we ultimately merge as one with the Triple Gem.

So, as worldly beings we start off with defilements and imperfections, but look up to the Triple Gem as our refuge. Gradually, with practice, the distance between the Triple Gem and ourselves gets smaller. When we become pure and perfect, we truly unite with the Triple Gem.

How to Use This Structure to Review Our Own Practice

From a practice aspect, we can use the structure of Chapter 1 to review if our faith in the Triple Gem has waxed or waned. If it has waxed, it means our foundations are firm and we should continue with our practice and move forward.

If it has waned, then we go back to the earlier stage of practices and check which ones we have neglected and try to strengthen that area. Perhaps we

have lost sight of the great virtues the Triple Gem possesses, or even lost sight of the sufferings in this world! I hope that you can begin to see how practical this text really is. It is not just a concise encyclopaedia, with many Buddhist terms and concepts; in actual fact, it is a carefully planned-out guidebook to help us steadily progress on the way to Buddhahood.

4. Chapter 2—Entrance via Learning the Dharma

Overview of the Chapter

Having looked at the structure of Chapter 1 briefly, if you are interested I do encourage you to read the book for yourselves because what I can provide here is but a summary of the main points. In this section, we move onto Chapter 2, titled *Entrance via Learning the Dharma*. This chapter teaches us about preparing the mind. The main teaching here is to emphasize the correct mentality and attitude towards learning the Dharma and cultivating it continually. Although this is the shortest chapter of the whole book, it is still extremely important. This chapter explains the foundations for how to prepare ourselves mentally, how to find good teachers, and how the many different types of teachings link together. Like Chapter 1, the structure of this chapter comprises four stages.

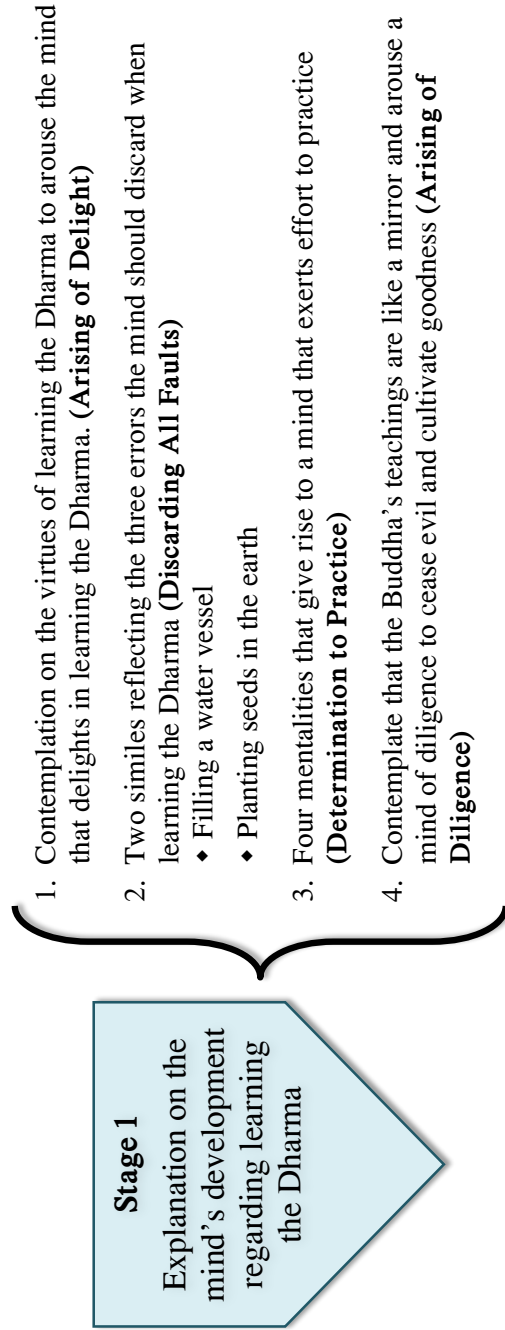
Summary of the Structure

Stage 1 explains the mind's development towards learning the Dharma. Stage 2 takes us into the realm of the good spiritual guide or the good teacher, the *kalyāṇamitra*, which is very important because good teachers help us to get to the final goal. Stage 3 deepens our understanding about the rarity of being able to learn the Dharma so that we do not let this opportunity go to waste. Finally, Stage 4 explains the differences in spiritual foundations, leading to

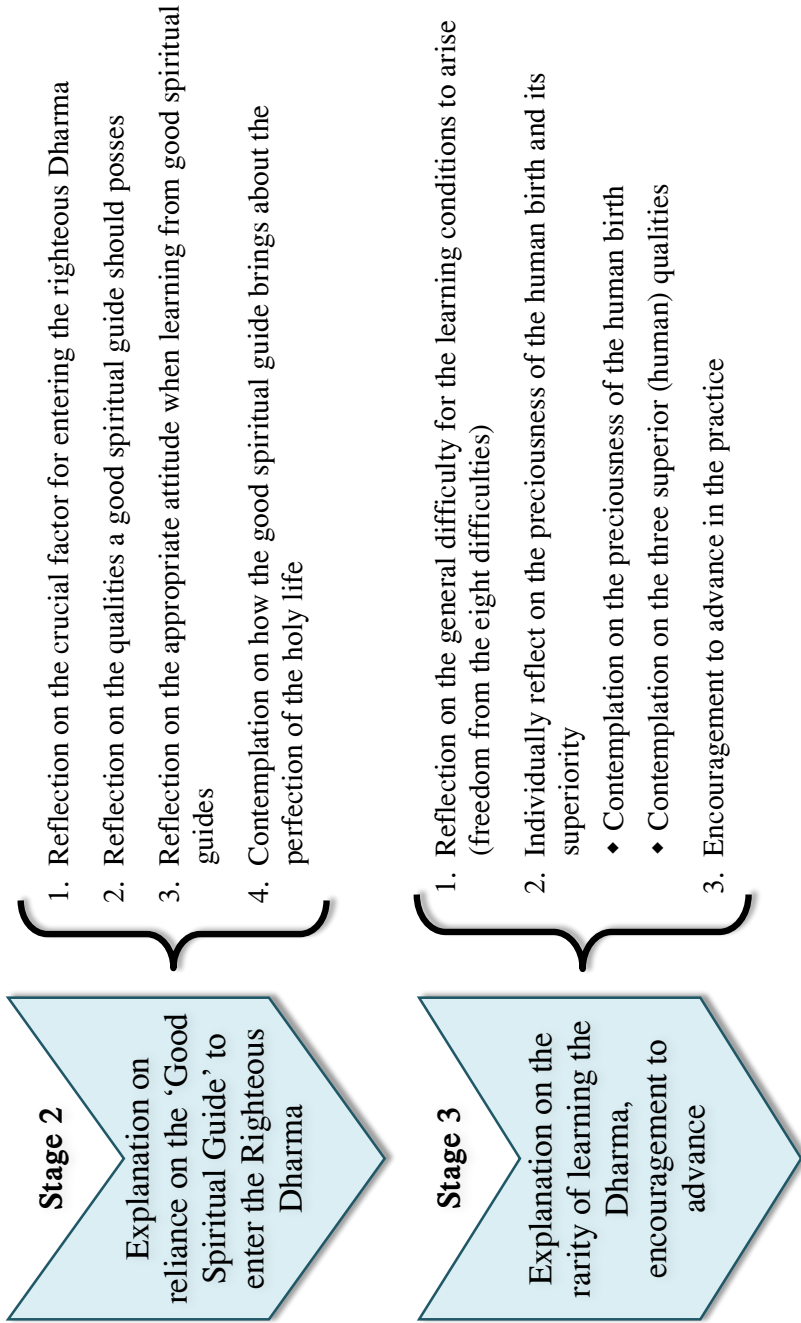
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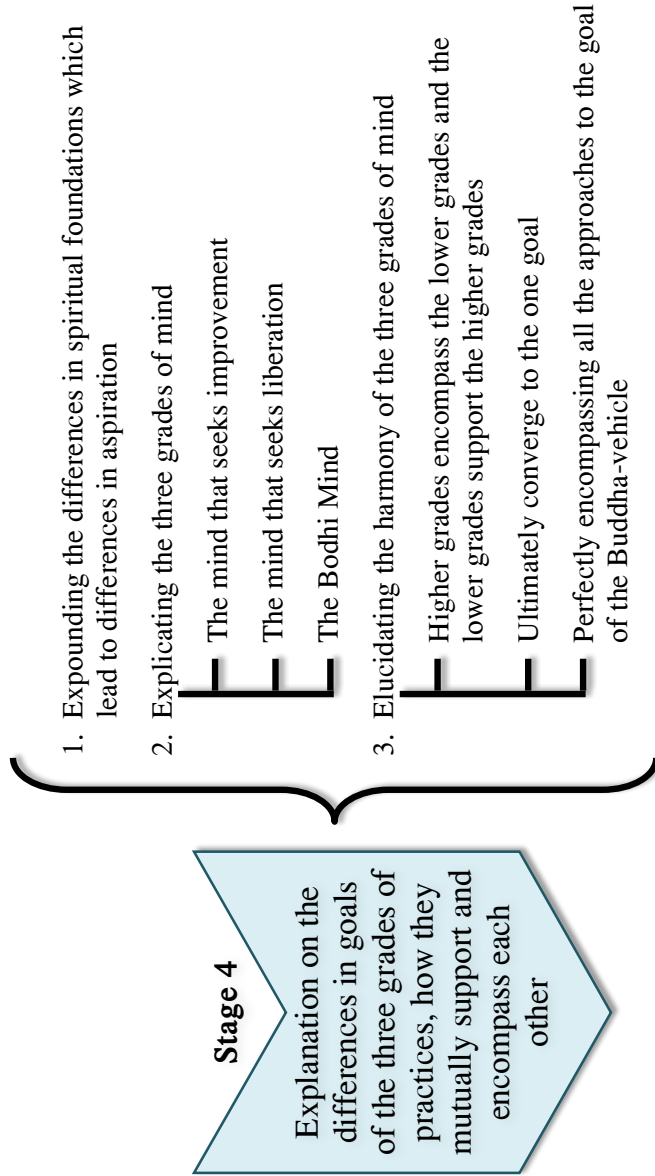
different goals and also how these different paths mutually support and enhance each other.

Chapter 2 – Entrance via learning the Dharma



Chapter 2 – Entrance via learning the Dharma





Stage 1—Developing the Mind

Stage 1 in this chapter aims to prepare the mind so that it is receptive to the teachings and develops the qualities that continue the momentum for long-term study of the Dharma. Venerable Yinshun begins by explaining how our minds work in relation to wanting to learn the Dharma. This aspect is important because, from a practical point of view, if we don't have an interest in learning we will not put in the time and effort to learn and practice. So, understanding how to excite the mind's interest in learning and maintain that momentum is paramount for our progress on the path. Here Venerable Yinshun presents four progressive developmental aspects of the mind, which are also the qualities or mindsets that provide a firm foundation for the long-term study of the Dharma.

The first is the same as in Chapter 1, where we needed to be well acquainted with the object. Back there it was the Triple Gem. Here, the focus narrows down to the benefits of learning the Dharma. Through contemplation and reflection on the merits of learning the Dharma, we arouse delight in our minds, which makes us want to learn. That is to say, we develop an aspiration to learn. So, what are the merits and virtues of learning the Dharma? This is revealed in the first verse of Chapter 2.

Virtues of Learning the Dharma

- 由聞知諸法 *From learning [the Dharma] we come to know all dharmas,*
- 由聞遮眾惡 *From learning [the Dharma] we can subdue all evil,*
- 由聞斷無義 *From learning [the Dharma] we can discard meaningless [practices],*
- 由聞得涅槃 *From learning [the Dharma] we can attain nirvana.*

There are many Dharma teachings and only by learning the Dharma can

we gradually learn about the different types of dharmas: what is good and bad, what is pure and not, what accords with the Truth and so forth. If we persist in our learning of the Dharma, then it is possible for us to perfect our right view (正見) and understand the Dharma as a whole. This is to develop our wisdom.

The right view concerning the Righteous Dharma also encompasses knowing what is right and wrong. By following the wholesome teachings and abandoning unwholesome activities, we will be able to subdue and eradicate all evils. This turns our karmic path towards brightness and virtues. These virtues accordingly further support our cultivation of the path.

In addition, through the learning of the Righteous Dharma, we also become aware of which practices are meaningful and which are not. There are many so-called spiritual practices in this world, but only the Righteous Dharma can help us find out the right practices to undertake. For example, in India ascetic practices are many and varied. Although they may help one to develop deep levels of concentration or tolerance etc., they are unable to fully liberate the practitioner from the sufferings of cyclic existence. So, “meaningless” here refers to whether a method of practice can culminate in liberation, in the Buddhist sense. If we know the limits of a certain practice and use it as a temporary measure to remedy a certain obstacle, then that is fine. Thus, from learning the Dharma we will be able to differentiate between practices and be able to discard that which is not beneficial to our progress. This will save us time barking up the wrong tree!

Last, the most important virtue of learning the Dharma is the ultimate attainment of nirvana. Through learning the Dharma, we become clear as to how to practice and what to avoid and so forth. All these help us to progress on the path and eventually we will reach the peace, stillness and

bliss of nirvana.

When one fully realizes the virtues of learning the Dharma and the value in it, delight and yearning for it will arise. Just as when we see something we really like, we try hard to get it and protect it, so when the mind aspires to learn the Dharma, it will then take action.

Erroneous Mindsets towards Learning the Dharma

At this point, Venerable Yinshun is careful to point out the potential erroneous mindsets one may develop towards learning the Dharma. Avoidance of these errors is paramount for our ability to learn and progress in our studies and cultivation. Venerable Yinshun skillfully applies the similes of filling a water vessel and sowing seeds to highlight this point.

如器受於水	<i>Like filling a vessel with water,</i>
如地植於種	<i>Like planting seeds in the earth,</i>
應離三種失	<i>One should discard the three errors,</i>
諦聽善思念	<i>Listen carefully, contemplate and reflect on the</i>
	<i>Dharma.</i>

When listening to the Dharma, there are three erroneous mindsets that we must avoid; otherwise they will undermine our efforts to learn the Dharma.

Simile of a Water Vessel

Just like a cup or pot that can hold water, if the vessel is upside down it will not be able to hold water at all. In this instance, it is reflecting a mind that is unwilling to learn. If the vessel has a crack, then any water that goes in will leak out. This is like a mind that is scattered and not attentive when listening. In both instances, the pure waters of the Dharma cannot

flow into the vessel, or even if they do, they will seep out eventually and nothing remains. As a result, there is no difference between hearing and not hearing the teachings. The third error is reflected in a dirty vessel. Any water that goes in it will become contaminated and unusable. This is very important to remember and avoid. This situation occurs if our minds have pre-conceived (erroneous) ideas, or hold bias or suspicions. Such a mindset will distort whatever pure Dharma we hear. We do not hear the Dharma for what it really is, and our understanding or interpretation of the Dharma will become deviant.

Simile of Sowing Seeds

To further emphasize these three errors, another simile of sowing seeds is used. First, if seeds are planted in sand and on rocks, rather than soil, they will not germinate and grow. This is to point out that, when we listen to the Dharma, we should plant the teachings in the rich fields of our mind.

Second, if the seeds fall onto areas with noxious weeds, even if they manage to sprout, they will not be able to grow big and tall due to suffocation from harmful weeds. Here it tells us that, when we listen to the Dharma, we must ensure it does not get mixed up with other teachings, for then we will not be able to understand the teachings properly and benefit fully.

Third, even if the seeds fall onto rich fertile soil that is free from noxious weeds, if they lie on the surface and are not buried into the soil, then more likely they will be eaten by birds. Thus, if we do not persist and deepen our study through continual contemplation and recollection, then what we learn remains superficial and will eventually be forgotten.

So, with these two similes Venerable Yinshun gives us a timely reminder that to learn the Dharma properly and efficiently, we need to listen carefully and wholeheartedly, contemplate and reflect on the teachings

continually, and recall the teachings to mind without letting them be forgotten.

Simile of Illness and Treatment

After having aroused the aspiration to learn the Dharma and working carefully to avoid the three erroneous mindsets, we then need to develop a determination to practice. Here a half-verse explains:

病想醫藥想 *Knowing we are ill, seek out a doctor and remedy,*
殷重療治想 *Knowing the severity, take great heed of the treatment.*

Determination to do something comes from knowing its importance, and here Venerable Yinshun uses the simile of illness and treatment to highlight this point. We should know or regard ourselves as being sick; only then will we seek out a doctor and remedy to cure our illness. Being caught in the cycle of life and death is the greatest illness that afflicts us. Physically, this is manifested in old age, sickness and death. Mentally, this illness infects our minds with greed, hatred and ignorance. However, meeting with the Buddha is like finding a skillful doctor who can provide real treatment. We should, therefore, follow the doctor's prescription and undertake the treatment to completion. To make determination arise is the meaning behind this simile!

What this means is that after hearing the Dharma, we need to put it into practice, just like getting a doctor's prescription—we then need to take the medicine and follow the instructions about what we can do and can not do, and what we should eat and should not eat, and so forth. Only by following the doctor's orders can we be cured of our illness. At times, we may want to slack off, but if we can arouse diligence in the mind, then we can counteract our laziness. In terms of our practice to purify ourselves, this means we need constant self-reflection: how much merit have I cultivated, how many defilements have I subdued and eradicated... With

honest self-reflection, like looking at oneself in a mirror, we can delight in our progress and see where we need to put in more effort. Thus, the second half of the verse says:

隨聞如說行 *After listening, follow up with implementation,*
佛說法如鏡 *The Buddha said, the Dharma is like a mirror.*

Stage 2—The Good Spiritual Guide (*Kalyāṇamitra*)

What we have covered is Stage 1 of Chapter 2, which focuses on preparing the mind, cultivating a mind that aspires to learn, a mind that is free from errors, a mind that is determined, and a mind that is diligent.

Next we move to Stage 2, which introduces the other side of the learning equation, the teacher, the good spiritual guide, the *kalyāṇamitra*. Here again there are four aspects. The first two items focus on the teacher, while the last two bring the focus back onto the practitioner's attitude and mindset. Regarding the good spiritual guide, the verse says:

趣入正法者 *To enter the righteous Dharma,*
應親近善士 *One must approach good teachers*

To be able to enter the vast ocean of the Dharma, one must rely on good spiritual teachers and guides. Therefore, one must approach them sincerely. Even for the bodhisattvas that have reached the final ten stages before Buddhahood, these great bodhisattvas continue to adorn the buddha lands. In essence, this is still the practice of approaching good teachers, and what better teachers are there than buddhas! To help us identify good teachers, Venerable Yinshun outlines five qualities that a good spiritual guide should possess. These are listed in the second half of the verse:

Five Qualities of a Kalyāṇamitra

證教達實性 *Accomplished, versed in the teachings, penetrated the Truth,*
悲愍巧為說 *Compassionate and eloquent.*

Now let's look at these five qualities in a bit more detail. The first quality is to be “accomplished”. Here it refers to having personally practiced and accomplished the training of pure precepts, meditative concentration, and development of true wisdom. This also implies that one has awakened to the Truth, whether partially or completely.

The second quality is to be well “versed in the teachings”. This refers to having such vast knowledge and deep understanding of the sūtras that they are able to expound the teachings and guide learners to the Great Path.

The third quality is they have “penetrated the Truth”, which refers to deeply understanding the Truth, or the Dharma. This may have resulted from developing profound wisdom, or from thorough study and contemplation of the teachings.

The fourth quality is they must be “compassionate”. This is an important quality as this ensures that the teacher is purely motivated by altruism. Therefore, their teachings and instructions will be sincere and only with the student's interest in mind. They are not teaching for an ulterior motive of self-benefit.

Last is the quality is that they must be “eloquent”. A good teacher should possess skillfulness in teaching, in particular eloquence in speech. This way, the students can easily understand the instructions and be able to benefit from the teachings.

If we can find a teacher that possesses all of these five qualities, then we are certain to make good progress if we learn from them with the proper mindset, as previously explained. Unfortunately, such a teacher is rare and hard to come by. Thus, Venerable Yinshun teaches us that if we can find someone who possesses even a fraction of these qualities, they are still a worthy teacher whom we should approach.

Mentality towards the Teacher

So, in Stage 2, having drawn our focus to the good spiritual guide and given the rarity of meeting a perfect teacher, Venerable Yinshun instructs us on the mentality we should maintain when studying with our teachers, whether they fully meet the five qualities or not. In a half-verse, Venerable Yinshun says:

觀德莫觀失 *See their virtues not their vices,*
隨順莫違逆 *Follow in accord, do not disobey.*

When we find a teacher who has Dharma they can teach us, we should not go fault finding. Rather we should focus on their virtues instead of their weaknesses; after all, only the buddhas are perfect. In this way, we can maintain respect and reverence towards our teachers and be more willing to listen and follow their instructions. This brings us to the next mentality; that is, to follow in accordance with their Dharma teachings rather than to ignore or go against the teacher's advice. The whole aim of approaching teachers is to learn from them, so if we do not follow and practice what they teach us, then we gain no benefit at all. Moreover, if we go against the grain of what they teach us, we may in fact be doing ourselves more harm, regressing on the path rather than progressing.

The last aspect of Stage 2 requires the practitioner to reflect more deeply upon the gratitude for our teachers, we should know that it is because of meeting with good spiritual guides that we are able to complete the

practice of purity. Once, Venerable Ananda claimed that a good spiritual guide helps us get halfway along the path. The Buddha immediately corrected him and stressed that good spiritual teachers help us get all the way. Without the teachings from good teachers, it would be extremely hard to accomplish the path, so we should always be respectful and honor our teachers. Therefore, the second half of the verse says:

佛說滿梵行 *Buddha said [they are essential for] the perfection of
pure conduct*
學者應尊敬 *Therefore students should pay reverence and respect.*

This completes Stage 2. Now a quick recap: Stage 1 looks at our minds and the attitude towards learning the Dharma. Stage 2 looks at the good spiritual teacher and our attitude towards them. Next we move onto Stage 3, which brings the mind to a broader scope to reflect on the rarity of being able to learn the Dharma and to value our human birth.

Stage 3—Rarity of the Human Form and Hearing the Dharma

The contents in this stage reveal and highlight the essence of Venerable Yinshun's promotion of Humanistic Buddhism. It brings out the uniqueness and value of being human. As a human that is able to be in contact with the Dharma, we seldom realize how rare this situation is. Although we have met with the Dharma or grew up in a Buddhist family, you may think it is not that special. But here we are taught to look at things objectively, from the perspective of sentient beings as a whole, of which humans are only a tiny part. The Buddha teaches us that the human form, good teachers and the Dharma are hard to come by. These are reflected in the eight obstacles that we must avoid:

- 離彼三途苦 *Avoidance of the sufferings of the three lower realms (1-3),*
- 不生長壽天 *Avoidance of rebirth in the longevity heavens (4),*
佛世生中國 *In an era with the Buddha (5), being born in the right place (6),*
- 根具離邪見 *Complete functional body (7), a mind free from erroneous views (8).*

Rebirth as a human is not easy. Within saṃsara there are also the three lower realms, which consist of the hells, hungry ghosts and animal realms. In the hells and hungry ghosts realms, the suffering endured is so great that they are unable to turn their attention to the learning of the Dharma and the cultivation of the path. For the animal realms, they physically and mentally are unable to listen to and absorb the Dharma teachings. And then there are heavens above, where the lifespan is long and the experience of pleasure is so alluring that it is very difficult to arouse interest in learning and studying the Dharma. So the realms above and below are not conducive to the learning of the Dharma.

However, even when we have the fortune of a human rebirth, we face the external obstacles of the right time and place. We may be born in a time when the teachings have all disappeared, or in a place where the teachings are not available. Apart from external obstacles in the human realm, there are also internal obstacles. This refers to our own physical capacity—whether we are physically able and whether our minds are free from bias and deviant views. For most, if not all of us here, we are very fortunate to be free from these eight obstacles, but the reflection does not end here.

We are taught to reflect even more deeply to understand that in the cycle of life and death, not only is the human form hard to come by, it also has the three superior qualities of memory or recollection, pure conduct and

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diligence. These qualities are not found even in the heavens and they are essential to learning the Dharma. Therefore, the verse says:

生死流轉中 *In the cycle of life and death,*
人生最難得 *Human rebirth is hardest to attain,*
憶梵行勤勇 *Recollection, pure conduct and diligence,*
三事生諸天 *Are the three qualities that surpass the heavens.*

Given the rarity in meeting with the conditions that allow us to learn the Dharma and practice it, Venerable Yinshun therefore encourages us to seize the opportunity and not let it go to waste. Thus the verses says:

難得今已得 *Having attained [human form that is] so rare,*
精勤修法行 *One should diligently cultivate and practice the*
 Dharma.
莫使如寶山 *Do not be one who enters a treasure trove,*
垂手歎空歸 *And leaves empty-handed with despair.*

So Venerable Yinshun draws Stage 3 to a close with a simile of having found a treasure trove, yet leaving empty-handed without gaining any benefits. The treasure trove reflects this human rebirth that is complete with all the conditions for learning the Dharma and practicing the path. We leave empty-handed if we whittle away our time and let this human life pass without making any progress in our practice.

Stage 4—The Different Paths of Practice

So you see, stages 1, 2 and 3 of Chapter 2 are all aimed at building up our mental understanding, aspiration, determination and diligence towards learning the Dharma and avoiding the faults that can obstruct our learning. In sum, there are four stages in Chapter 1 and three stages in Chapter 2, making a total of seven stages where the focus is just on preparing and developing a firm, conducive and unshakeable mental foundation for the

study and continual learning of the Dharma and the undertaking of the path.

By this stage, one should now have made up their mind to practice, and it is here that one begins selecting which path. Remember that there are many paths and many teachings in Buddhism. Here Venerable Yinshun begins the explanation of the main paths of practice, which make up Stage 4 in Chapter 2. This stage is also a bridge to the following chapters, which focus in detail on the different spiritual paths, their practices and their interrelationships.

Now let us look at the choices one face in terms of which path is suited to them. Venerable Yinshun describes this with a half-verse:

聞法而發心 *Having listened to the Dharma, aspiration develops,*
隨機成差別 *Due to different capacities, variations will arise.*

The different paths are categorized into three main types. One is the entry level, where the spiritual capacity of practitioners is not so strong. These practitioners only seek more happiness and wellbeing in this life and future lives and do not see the urgency to liberate themselves from life and death. Second is the intermediate level, where their spiritual capacity is stronger. These people see the suffering and inadequacies of cyclic existence. They arouse the mind of liberation and diligently seek to free themselves from saṃsara. Third is the advanced level, where their spiritual capacity is very strong. These people not only see their own suffering, they also see the suffering of others and so arouse both compassion and the bodhi mind, seeking the ultimate happiness of Buddhahood. This is summarized in a verse and a half:

Chapter 5

下求增上生 *Beginners seek to improve their lives*
現樂後亦樂 *Both present and future happiness.*
中發出離心 *Intermediates arouse the mind of liberation,*
涅槃解脫樂 *[Seeking] the joy of liberation, nirvana.*
最上菩提心 *The highest is the bodhi mind,*
悲智究竟樂 *[Seeking completion of] compassion and wisdom, [and*
the attainment of] the ultimate joy.

Although human beings in their quest for the Dharma are split into three categories, these different groups are not exclusive. Rather, they are mutually interrelated and mutually supportive of each other. The practices of the entry level make up the foundation for the intermediate and advanced levels; thus, the higher levels actually build upon and encompass the previous levels. We need to look upon them as stages along the one path because, ultimately, all the paths converge toward the same goal. Thus, we should know that along this path we must not remain at the entry or intermediate levels, yet, at the same time, we do not discard them either. By perfectly encompassing all these approaches, we can move forward on the Buddha Vehicle. If we fail to recognize the interrelationship of the many paths, we may unknowingly defame the true Dharma, creating bad karma that can obstruct our practice and progress. It is here that Venerable Yinshun closes Chapter 2 with the final verse:

不滯於中下 *Do not linger in the lower levels,*
亦不棄中下 *Do not discard the lower levels,*
圓攝向佛乘 *Perfectly embrace all and aim for the Buddha Vehicle,*
不謗於正法 *Do not slander the true Dharma.*

So for a short chapter, we can see that there is much wisdom in it.

5. Chapter 3—The Five Vehicle Path

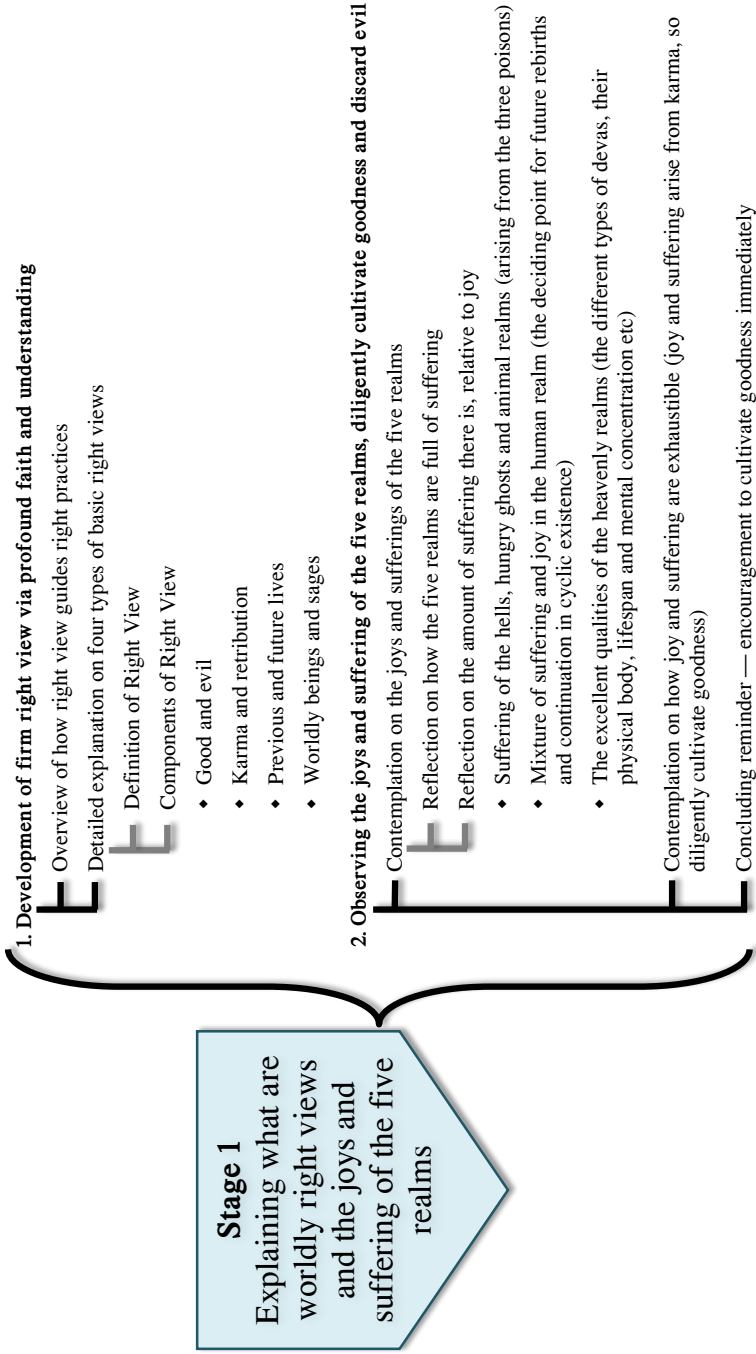
Hello and welcome. I'd like to congratulate you all for making it through to the last day. Today will be a marathon! I hope to cover the rest of the text, chapters 3 to 5, so I will not be able to go into as much detail as I have done for the last three days. Hopefully you can still get a good overview on these important chapters and see Humanistic Buddhism as Venerable Yinshun envisioned it.

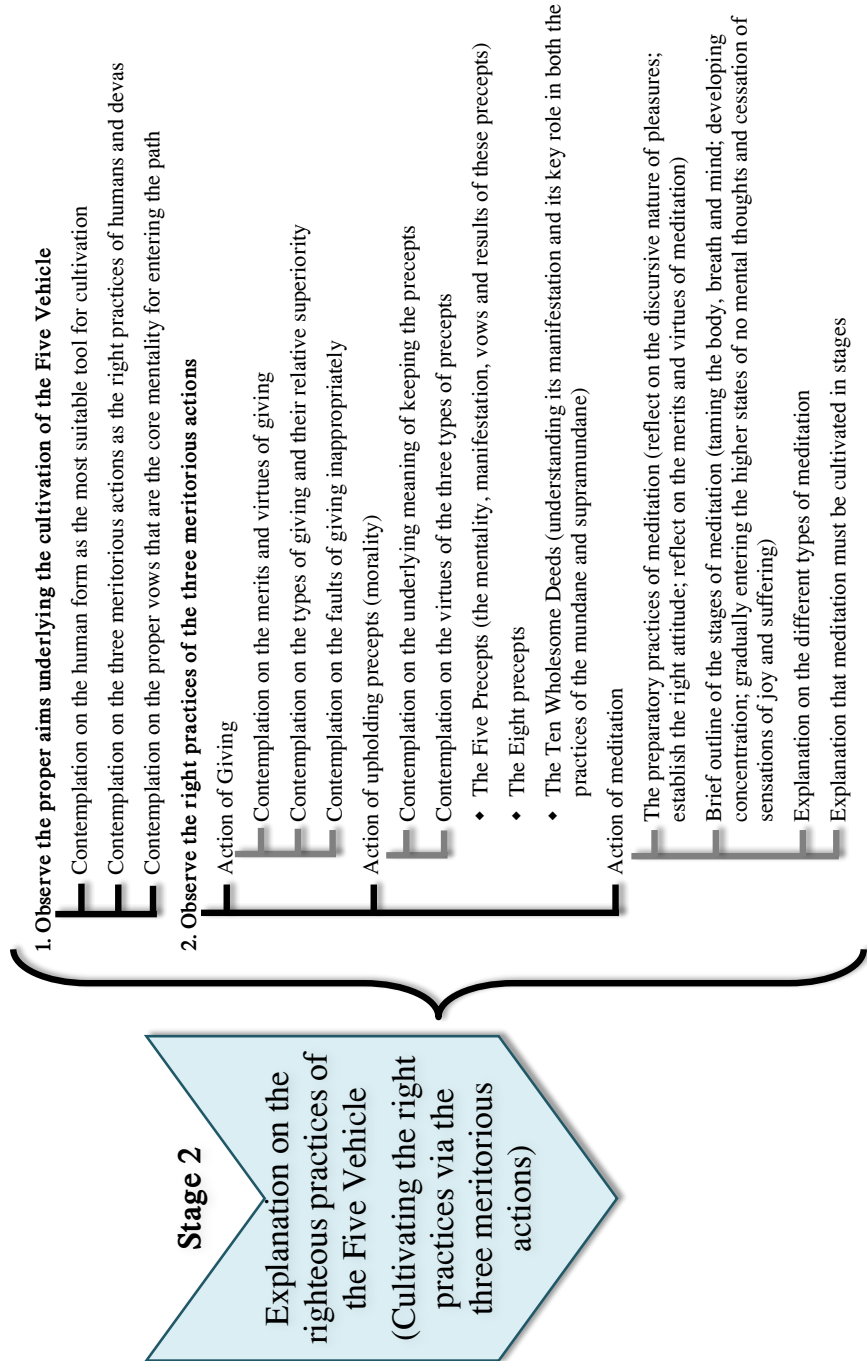
At the end of the last talk, the issue of which path to take was touched on. No matter whether one begins at the Five, Three or Great vehicle path, all these paths can lead to Buddhahood as they are mutually supportive and enhancing. Differences arise because each practitioner's progress varies. So, let us begin by looking at the foundational teachings of the Five Vehicle path, which is the main focus of Chapter 3.

This chapter contains two sections. In Section 1 there are three stages and Section 2 has two stages, so in total there are five stages in Chapter 3. Section 1 explains the normal path, which is so called because it is the major or most suitable path for many people. Section 2 touches upon the expedient paths, which cater to beings with special needs. Given that the normal path is the more universal path, the majority of this chapter is devoted to explaining this path.

Chapter 3 – Explanation of the normal and expedient path of the Five Vehicle

Chapter 3 Section 1 – Normal Path (the righteous practice of heading to Buddhahood)

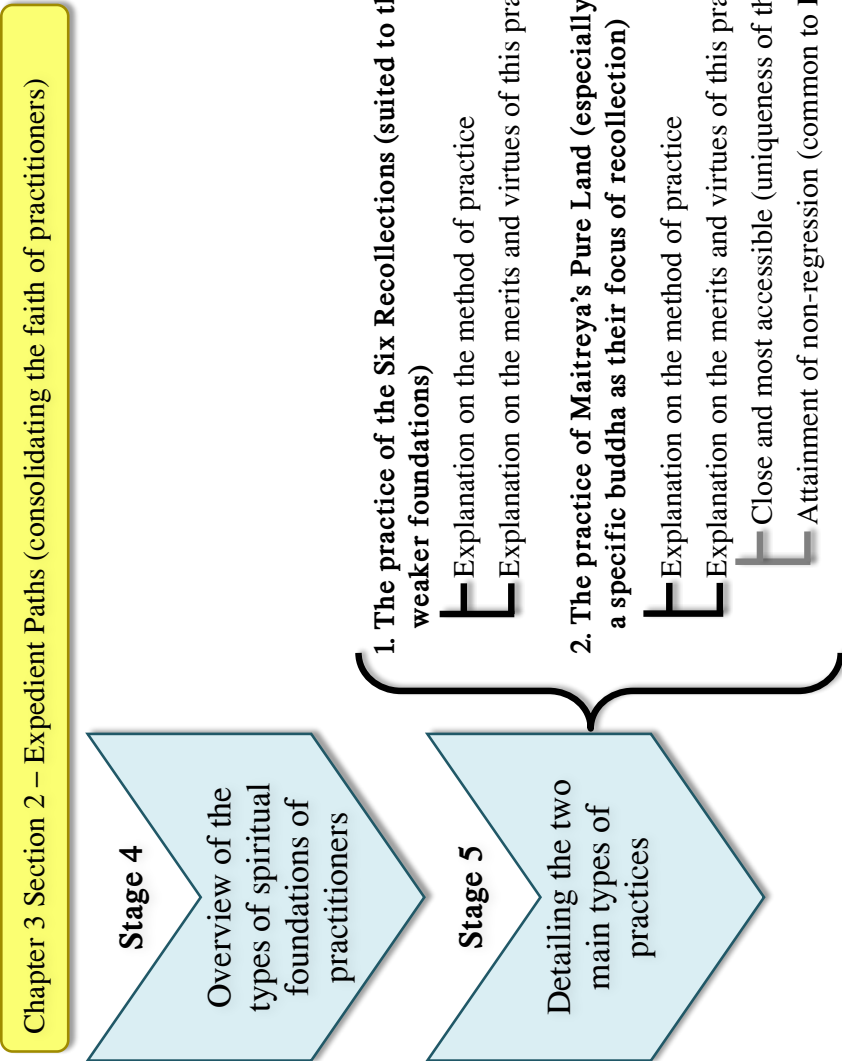




Chapter 3 – Explanation of the normal and expedient path of the Five Vehicle



From a human to Buddhahood, we rely on the practice of upholding precepts, that is the cultivation of morality.



Section 1—Normal Path

Stage 1—Importance of Establishing Right Views

Right view is our eyes along the path of practice. Without it, we will not see clearly which direction to head and may stray without knowing. An important element of right view is a firm understanding of cause and effect, to know that there really is equality in terms of good begets favorable results and bad begets suffering.

The sufferings of the hells, the bliss of the heavens and the different realms in between are all a result of our own karmic deeds. Therefore, in order to ensure a brighter future for ourselves, we must diligently cultivate goodness and morality, and abandon all that is harmful.

Stage 2—Practices of Giving, Morality and Meditation

Stage 2 looks at the types of practices undertaken in the Five Vehicle path. Here the main focus is to draw out the three meritorious practices, so called because they result in merits and virtues. These three practices are the practice of giving, the practice of developing morality, and the practice of meditation. Within each of these practices there are proper ways to go about them and improper ways. Only if they are done properly and righteously do they count as meritorious practices.

These three practices of giving, morality and meditation help us uplift ourselves in terms of merits, virtues and mastery over the mind. Merits, virtues and mastery over the mind are requisites for the ongoing practice and progression on the path to the intermediate and advanced levels. Some may think these practices are simple or basic, but they are essential to establish ourselves on the path firmly.

Stage 3—Core Practice of the Five Vehicle is Morality

However, among these three practices, in Stage 3 Venerable Yinshun draws out the practice of developing morality as what he considers to be the core practice of the Five Vehicle and Humanistic Buddhism. As a human seeking to perfect themselves to the state of a buddha, it is imperative to develop morality. This means we should uphold the precepts and enhance this practice more and more as we progress. If we cannot uphold the fundamental precepts of the Five Vehicle, then the purity of the higher levels is impossible.

This draws to a close Section 1 on the normal path.

Section 2—Expedient Path

Stage 4—Overview of This Path

Next in Section 2 Venerable Yinshun makes mention of the expedient paths. These teachings are especially for those who are weak. Therefore, expedient paths are taught to cater to their situation. The verses here explain:

心性怯畏者	<i>For those whose minds are timid or have fear,</i>
佛說應修念	<i>The Buddha says they should practice recollection,</i>
繫念佛法僧	<i>Recollect sincerely the Buddha, Dharma, saṃgha,</i>
戒施天功德	<i>And the merits of morality, giving and the heavenly realms.</i>

Here, those whose minds are timid or have fear are understood as having weakness. They may worry that they cannot undertake the bodhisattva practice over the many lives and aeons, so expedient paths are used to allay their fears. In terms of expedient paths, there are two main types that Venerable Yinshun details.

Stage 5—Two Main Practices

Practice of the Six Recollections

One practice method is the Six Recollections, which essentially is to recall to mind the virtues of the Buddha, Dharma, saṃgha, morality, generosity and the heavenly realms. Recollection of the Triple Gem has the many benefits explained in the earlier talks, including increasing faith, determination and understanding. Recollection of morality, generosity and the heavenly realms aim to comfort one's mind and give assurance that they will be born in the heavenly realms and enjoy the bliss there on account of the virtues and merits accumulated from practicing morality and generosity. By always reflecting on the qualities and virtues of these six aspects, one's mind associates regularly with these virtuous teachings and one's faith becomes stronger.

Practice of Maitreya's Pure Land

The second method of practice is Maitreya's Pure Land. This practice is especially for those who require a specific buddha to focus on in order to help them allay their fears and develop their faith and courage to practice. This practice is especially for those who think they cannot undertake the many lifetimes of practice. The Pure Land method assures them if they can attain rebirth in a pure land, they will not regress on the path.

Now that, in a nutshell, is the structure of the third chapter on the Five Vehicle path. Having the foundational practices of this vehicle, as one progresses, they may be inspired to proceed to the higher vehicles.

6. Chapter 4—Three Vehicle Path

Overview of Sections 1 and 2

So, in Chapter 4 Venerable Yinshun outlines for us the path of the Three Vehicle. Again in this chapter there are two sections. Section 1 is like an introductory explanation on the essential core to the practice of the Three Vehicle. Section 2 is where all the details of this essential core are fleshed out. So I will head straight to Section 2 now.

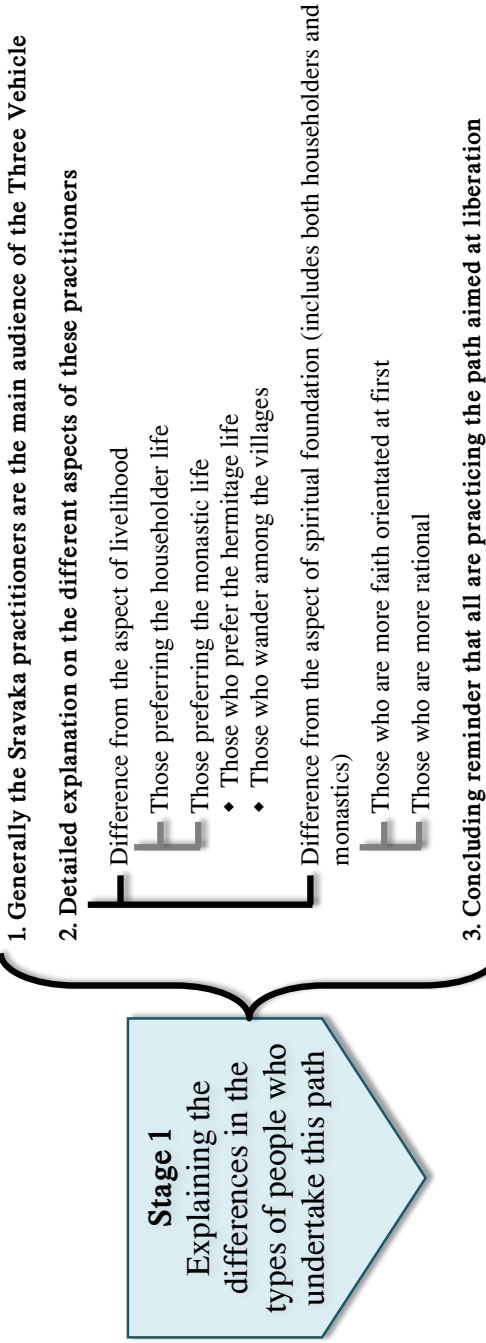
Section 2 Substructure

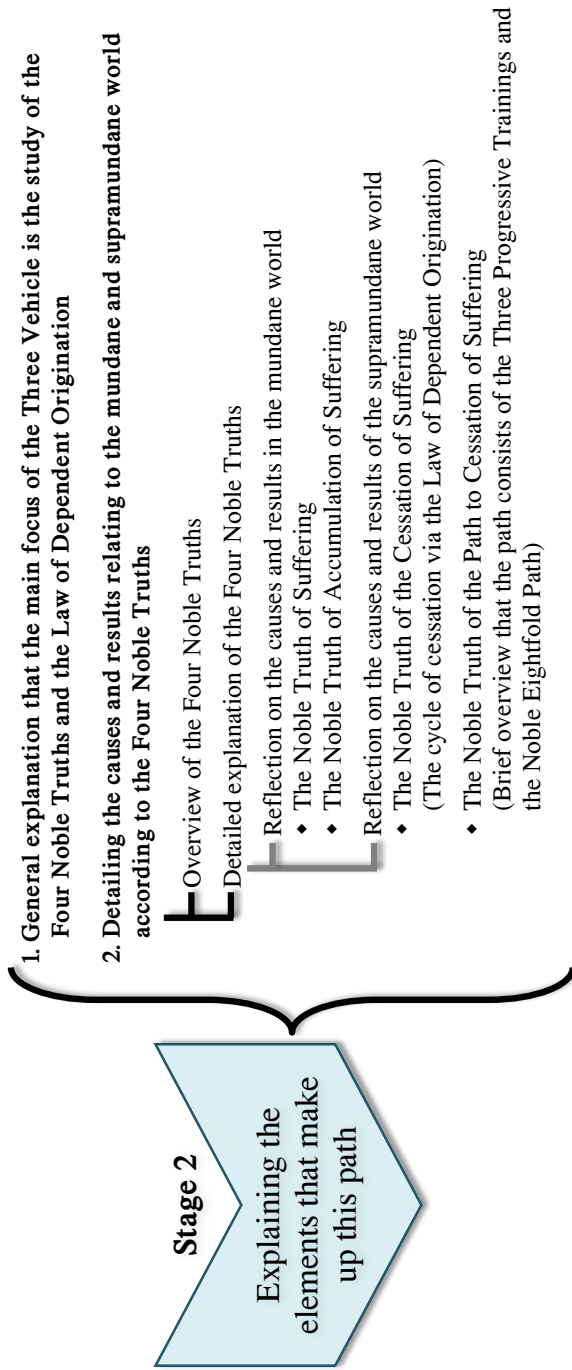
In Section 2, there are three main parts and these again follow the principle of the set of three back in Chapter 1. Part 1 relates to the object to be known and encompasses stages 1–2. Part 2 explains the methods using three stages and Part 3 has two stages looking at the outcome or goal. So, across the two parts there are a total of seven stages.

Chapter 4 – Explanation on the essence and stages of practice of the Three Vehicle

Chapter 4 Section 1 – The essential core to practicing the path of the Three Vehicle

Chapter 4 Section 2 – The stages of practice in the Three Vehicle
Part 1 – Knowing the object clearly

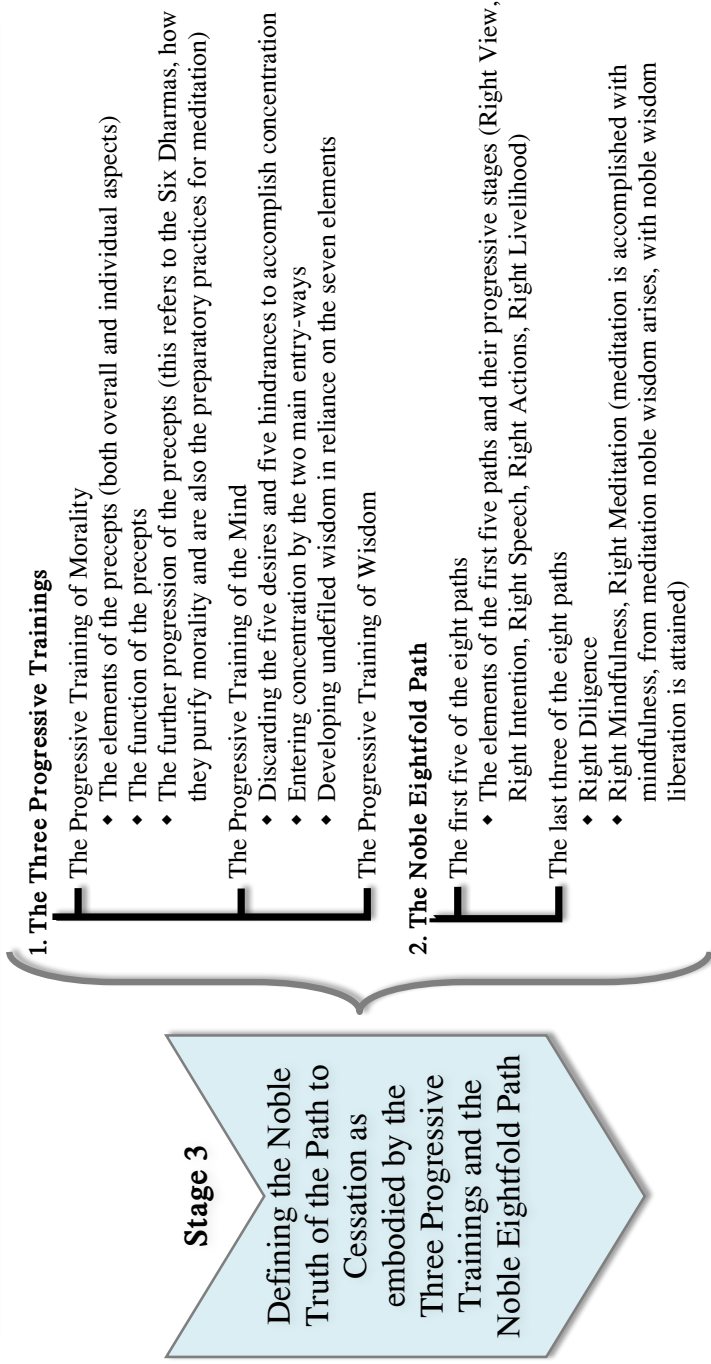


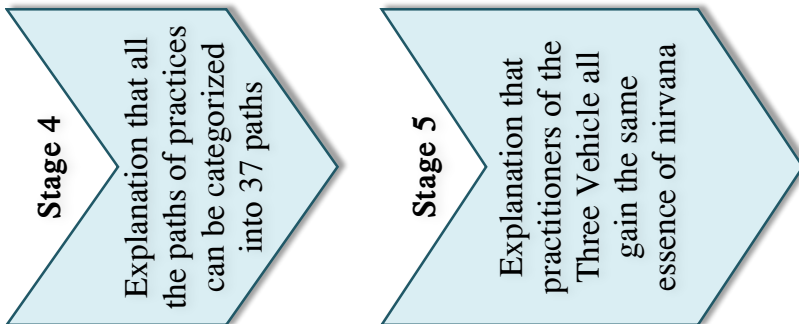


Chapter 4 – Explanation on the essence and stages of practice of the Three Vehicle

Chapter 4 Section 2 – The stages of practice in the Three Vehicle

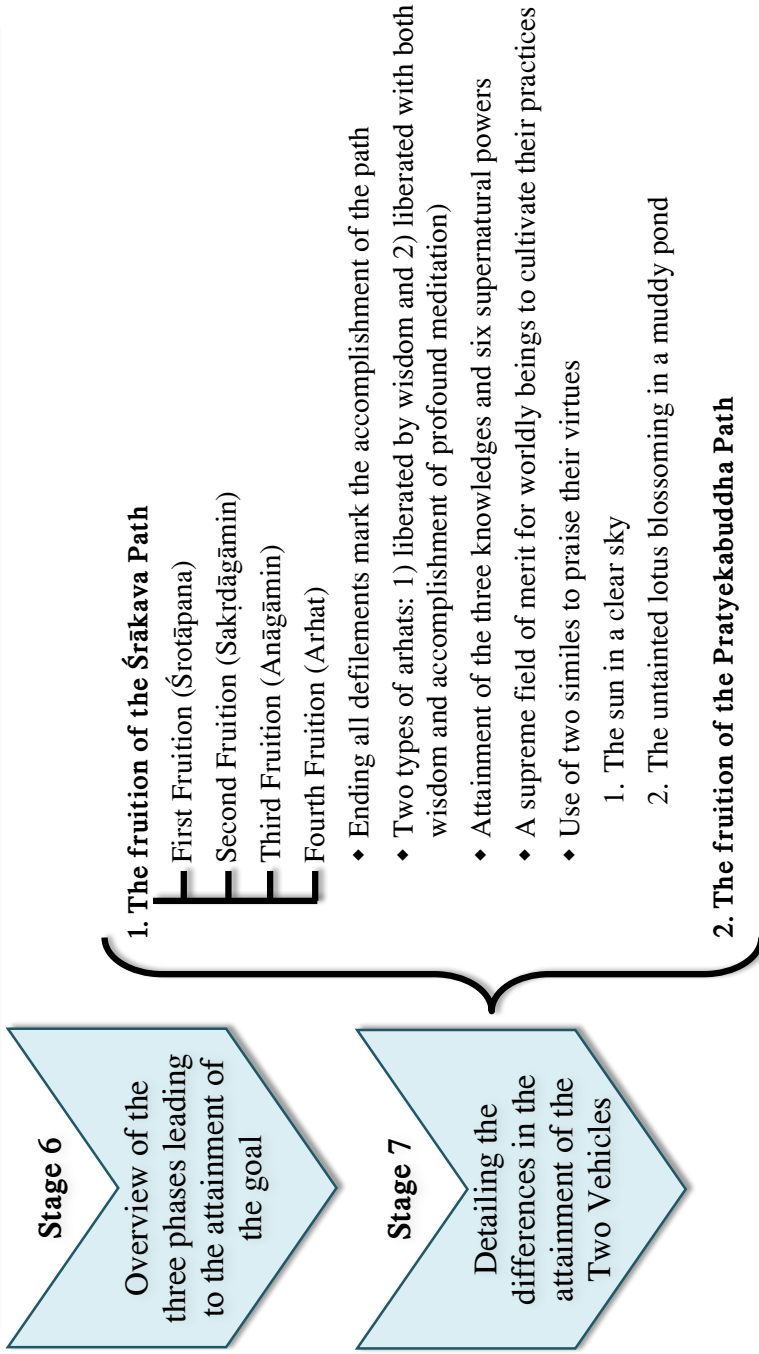
Part 2 – The method of practice (explanation of the Three Trainings & Noble Eightfold Path)





Chapter 4 – Explanation on the essence and stages of practice of the Three Vehicle

Chapter 4 Section 2 – The stages of practice in the Three Vehicle
Part 3 – The goal or fruition of practice



Part 1—Object

Stage 1—Types of Practitioners

Now we start with Part 1, Stage 1, regarding the object to be known. The first thing Venerable Yinshun encourages us to do is to understand who are the practitioners of the Three Vehicle and what are their different qualities. The key point of understanding this is to respect the different types of practitioners. This is because he observed that some practitioners slight others when their Dharma practices differ from their own. The more we can understand others' practices, the more respect we will have towards them.

At the outset, Venerable Yinshun makes clear that this path is targeted to those with the inclination of the śrāvaka. Śrāvakas are the hearers or listeners who seek liberation immediately from the sufferings of this world after hearing and understanding the Buddha's teachings. These types of practitioners can also be looked at in terms of their choice of livelihood and their choice of location for dwelling. From the aspect of livelihood, some of these practitioners prefer the householder life; in other words they remain as lay devotees but follow the path. Some prefer the monastic life and so renounce the home life and enter the saṃgha community. Among those that enter the saṃgha, they are further split into two types. One prefers the solitude of the hermit life and so they retreat to the forests, while the other prefers to stay in the monastic community and also wander among villages for alms and to spread the teachings.

There is yet another perspective to categorize the practitioners of the Three Vehicle. This categorization is based on their spiritual inclination. At the beginning of the path, regardless of the choice between being a householder or monastic practitioner, some people are more faith-inclined and some are more rational. Catering to their spiritual inclination, the

Buddha taught them practices that harnessed this inclination so they could enter the practice of the Three Vehicle. Over time, as their practice develops, their spiritual foundation in both faith and wisdom grows and both aspects become equally strong and firm. But, regardless of how they enter the path, the final goal is the same, the goal of liberation.

Stage 2—Principle Teachings of the Three Vehicle

So that was Stage 1, understanding the object in terms of the types of practitioners of the Three Vehicle. In Stage 2 of Part 1, the aim is to understand the principal teaching underlying this vehicle. For these practitioners, the focus here is on the Four Noble Truths. Through this principle, one can understand how the cycle of life and death arises and also how to be liberated from it. So in terms of knowing the object, the two stages relate to the practitioners and the principal teachings in this vehicle. This brings Part 1 to a close.

Part 2—Method

Stage 3—Three Progressive Trainings and the Noble Eightfold Path

Following on is Part 2, which focuses on the methods of practice, and here there are three stages. The main practice method of this vehicle revolves around the Three Progressive Trainings and the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Three Progressive Trainings refers to the progressive training of morality, concentration and wisdom. The term “progressive” is placed as an adjective to stress that each of these trainings provides the essential foundation for progression or advancement into the next training, starting from morality, progressing to concentration and then advancing to wisdom. Here, I would like to make a mention of the Six Dharmas in the progressive training of morality. These six are covered in the verses:

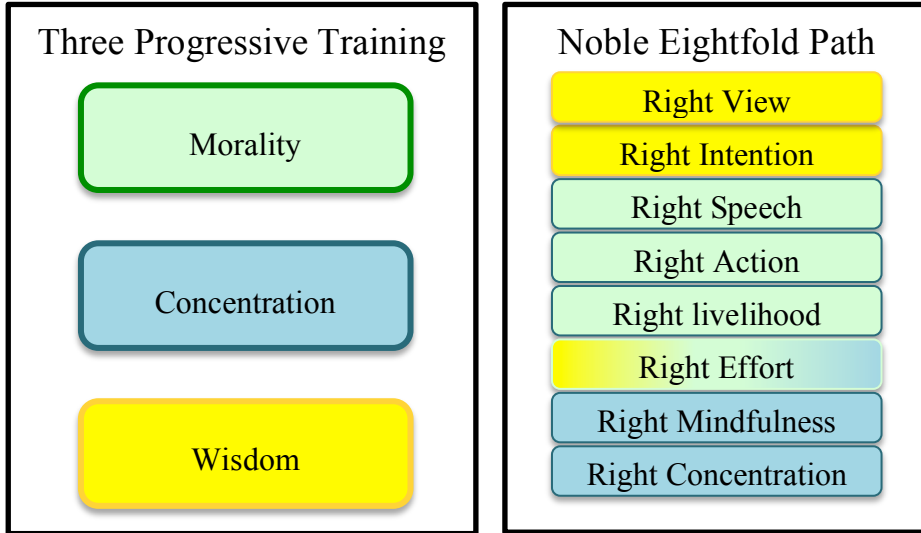
密護於根門	<i>Guard our sensory faculties well, (1)</i>
飲食知節量	<i>Moderate our food intake, (2)</i>
勤修寤瑜伽	<i>Cultivate the discipline of wakefulness diligently, (3)</i>
依正知而住	<i>Abide in right attentiveness, (4)</i>
知足心遠離	<i>Contentment (5) and with the mind free from meaningless matters (6)</i>

These six practices are extremely useful and we can practice them right now in our daily lives. These practices help us enhance our ability to maintain the precepts and are also pre-requisite practices for meditation, which is the training of concentration.

The Noble Eightfold Path is also included in the Fourth Noble Truths and it teaches us how to purify our actions of body, speech and mind. The Three Trainings and the Noble Eightfold Path are not exclusive of each other. They can be regarded as different ways to categorize the practices of how to purify behavior. The Three Trainings is more concise, but then can be expanded into the Noble Eightfold Path. This is better understood using the following diagram.

The color coding indicates the stages in the Noble Eightfold Path that corresponds to the Three Progressive Trainings. What is unique here is that Venerable Yinshun teaches that right effort, or diligence should be applied to all the trainings.

Diagram 1. Matching the Three Progressive Trainings to the Noble Eightfold Path



Stages 4 & 5—Thirty Seven Practices Conducive to Enlightenment and How All Methods Lead to Liberation

In Stage 4, this method is further expanded into the Thirty Seven Factors Leading to Enlightenment. The last stage in this part is Stage 5, which explains that no matter which methods one applies in their cultivation of the Three Vehicle path, they all lead to the same essence of liberation—that is, all attain the same nirvana, even though the paths taken may vary to some degree. This ends Part 2 on the Method.

Part 3—Goal of the Three Vehicle

Stage 6—Phase of Sowing, Germination, Fruition

Last comes Part 3, which talks about the goal of the Three Vehicle. Here there are two final stages. Stage 6 is a general overview of the three phases leading to the attainment of the goal, which is to plant the seed, let it ripen and then reap the fruit.

Stage 7—Fruition of the Two Vehicle

Stage 7 is the detailed explanation on the differences of the fruition of the Two Vehicles, with a particular focus on the vehicle of the śrāvakas, who are the main focus of this practice. Venerable Yinshun describes their ultimate attainment using the simile of the sun in the sky, which is clear and bright, and the untainted lotus growing from a muddy pond. These symbolize the arhats, whose mind is like the sun and whose activities in daily life being of purity like the lotus.

End of Chapter 4

This ends the whole chapter on the Three Vehicle. After covering the components of the object, method and goal, hopefully you can start to get a better understanding of the Three Vehicle practice from the aspect of the types of practitioners, its main principle and methods of cultivation and the goal that can be attained. Now we move to the final and most challenging chapter in this whole text, the *Unique Doctrines of the Mahāyāna*.

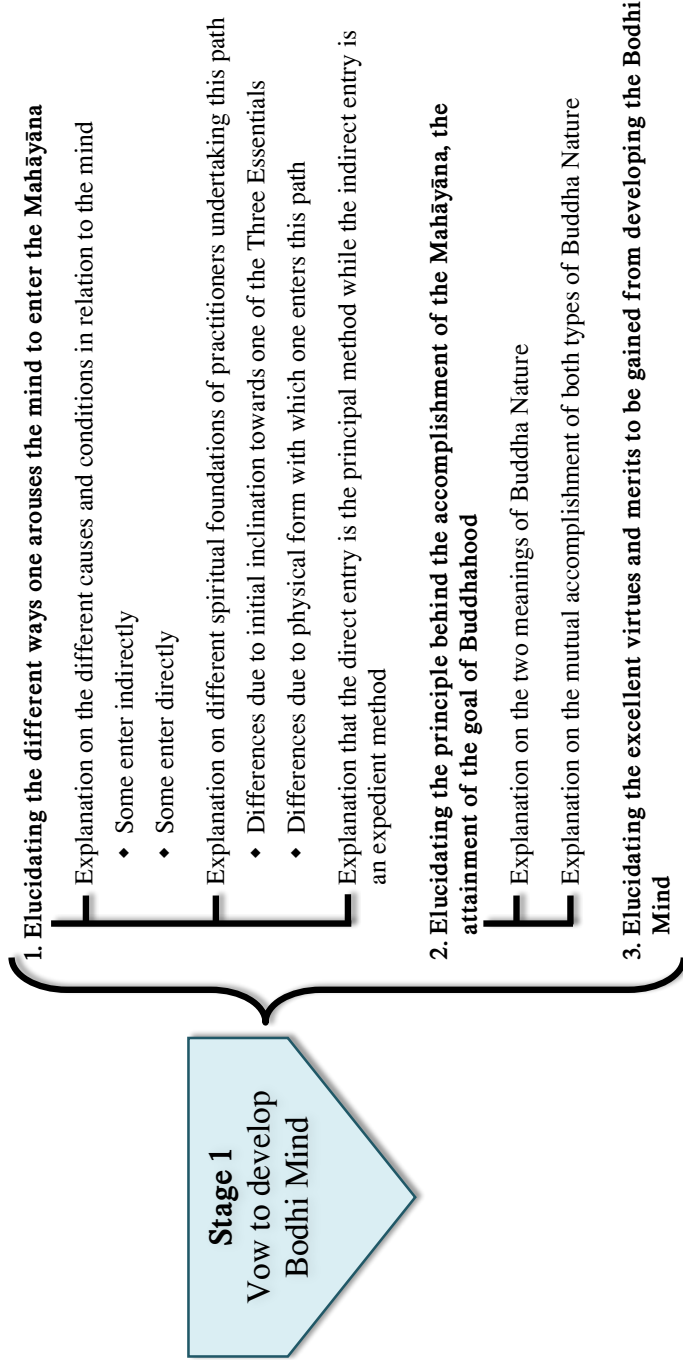
7. Chapter 5—Unique Doctrines of the Mahāyāna

In Chapter 5, again there are two main sections. The first section contains three parts and, in summary, they explain why the Mahāyāna or the Great Vehicle is so great. This greatness is due to its unique and unexcelled doctrines and practices. This is the main focus of this chapter and it is also the chapter in the whole teaching with the most content. The second section also explains why the Great Vehicle is so great, but the perspective is from its ability to embrace all practices; this essentially embodies the principle that all practices can lead to Buddhahood.

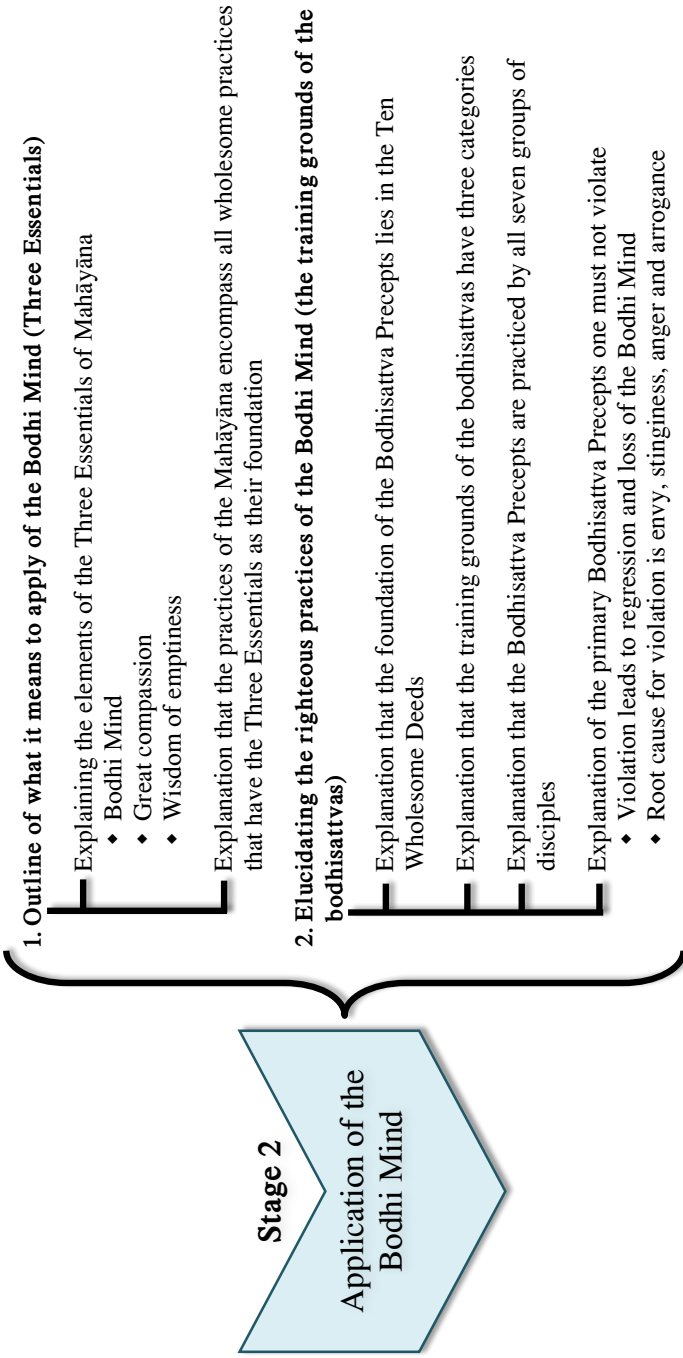
Section 1 here has the most content and is grouped into three parts. Again these follow the set of three and look first at the object to be known, which in this case is the bodhi mind. Part 2 moves onto the methods and the practices of the Bodhisattva Path and the path of progression. Last, Part 3 looks at the goal in terms of the three bodies of a buddha. Section 2 is much shorter and so is not split up further into parts or stages.

Chapter 5 – The Unique Doctrines of the Mahāyāna

Chapter 5 Section 1 – Defining the greatness of this vehicle based on its unexcelled practices
Part 1 – The vow and determination to practice this path lies in the cultivation of Bodhi Mind



Chapter 5 – The Unique Doctrines of the Mahāyāna



Chapter 5 Section 1 – Defining the greatness of this vehicle based on its unexcelled practices
Part 2 – Distinguishing the stages of practice via the Six Pāramitās and the Four All-embracing Virtues

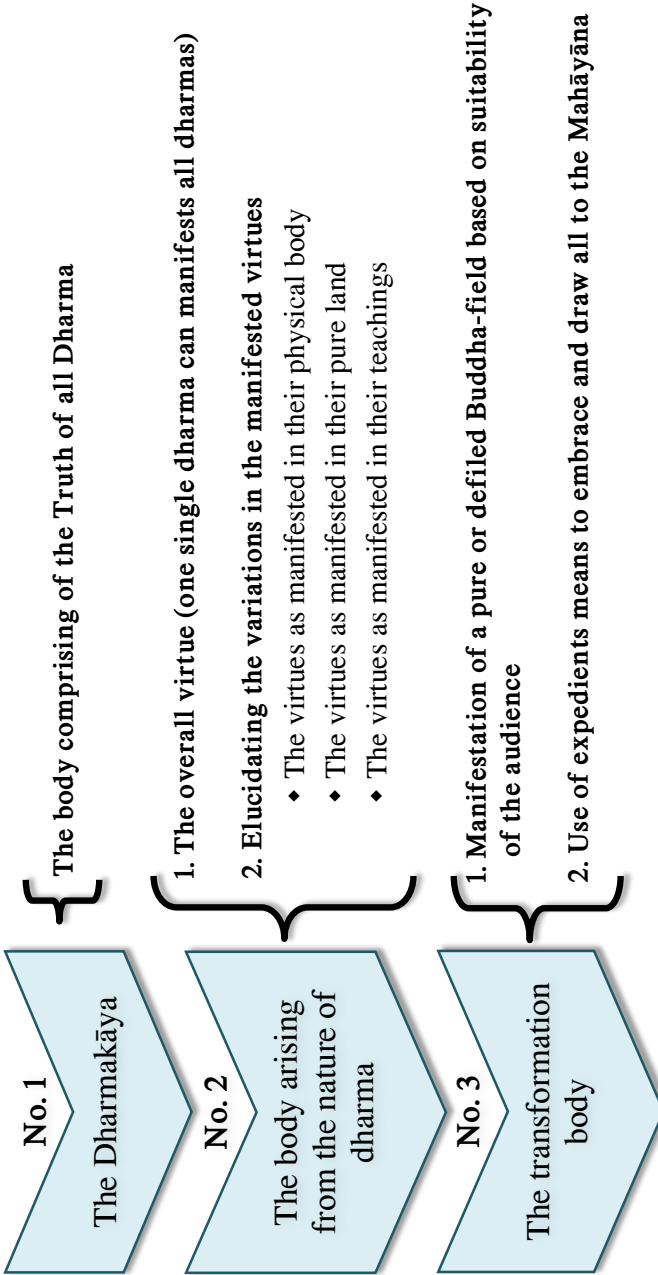
Stage 3
Overview of the Six Pāramitās and Four All-embracing Virtues

Stage 4
Detailed explanation of the elements of these practices

- 1. **The grades of the Bodhi Path**
 - Detailed explanation on the Six Pāramitās
 - ♦ The first three pāramitās of giving, morality, tolerance
 - ♦ The fourth pāramitā of diligence
 - ♦ The final two pāramitās of concentration and wisdom
 - Brief explanation of the Four All-embracing Virtues
- 2. **The stages of progress**
 - The different stages in the bodhisattva practice
 - ♦ The stages and their respective time duration
 - ♦ The differences in duration due to spiritual foundation
 - The ultimate fruition of Buddhahood

Chapter 5 – The Unique Doctrines of the Mahāyāna

Chapter 5 Section 1 – Defining the greatness of this vehicle based on its unexcelled practices
Part 3 – Praise of the fruition of Buddhahood by means of the three bodies



Chapter 5 Section 2 – Defining the greatness of this vehicle based on its ability to embrace all (every practice can lead to Buddhahood)

Section 1

Part 1—Object

Stage 1—Bodhi Mind

Now starting at Section 1 Part 1, Venerable Yinshun dedicates some time to explaining the elements of the bodhi mind. Thus, I have further split the content into two stages. In Stage 1, Venerable Yinshun shows us the different conditions leading to the arising of the bodhi mind, which again reflects the different spiritual foundations of sentient beings. The other elements he spends some time elucidating are the theory, principles and the virtues of arousing the bodhi mind.

Stage 2—Three Essentials and Ten Wholesome Deeds

Next in Stage 2, Venerable Yinshun details the Three Essentials of the Mahāyāna, which are bodhi mind, great compassion, and wisdom of emptiness; all practices undertaken with these Three Essentials as foundation can be regarded as practices of the Great Vehicle. Having explained the three minds, he then briefly explains what are the practices of the bodhisattvas; namely, the Ten Wholesome Deeds, which are the foundation of the bodhisattva precepts. While on the path, there is the danger of regressing, so, to end Stage 2, Venerable Yinshun specifically points out that if one gives up the bodhi mind, they fundamentally fail in the practices of the Bodhisattva Path. In addition, envy, stinginess, anger and arrogance are the main causes leading one to violate the bodhisattva precepts, which will disqualify one from being a bodhisattva. So we need to reflect regularly to see if these four damaging defilements have arisen and to counteract them quickly if they have.

Part 2—Method

Next, in Part 2, the topic moves into detail on the methods of practices. Here there are two stages. Stage 3 provides an overview of the main practices, while Stage 4 goes into detail explaining various aspects of these practices.

Stage 3—Practices of the Six Pāramitās and the Four All-embracing Virtues

The main methods of practice for bodhisattvas are the Six Pāramitās and the Four All-embracing Virtues. These practices are the core focus of the bodhisattva way, as they help the bodhisattvas to purify themselves as well as establish the skills to guide others and build good karmic relations with other beings.

Stage 4—the Path of Progression

In Stage 4, Venerable Yinshun outlines the stages of progression in the practice, their time duration and, importantly, makes clear that the duration is linked to one's spiritual foundation. For those who are weaker, it will take longer and vice versa. But regardless of time and spiritual foundation, if one persists diligently, the final goal is still Buddhahood.

Part 3—Goal: Three Bodies of the Buddha

Dharmakāya

This then moves us into Part 3, which looks at the goal of Buddhahood from the aspect of the three types of bodies. The first body is the dharmakāya. This refers to the Truth of all dharmas, which is still, non-arising, and equal without differentiation. In terms of the virtue of benefiting beings, Venerable Yinshun likens this to the mani pearl, which is magnificent and yet has the ability to fulfil all wishes.

Body Flowing from Dharma Nature

The second body is the body that arises from the nature of Dharma. Here, the focus is directed to explaining the manifestations coming from the nature of Dharma, including the pure lands, the appearances of the buddhas and their teachings. Although, in the ultimate sense, all buddhas are equal, yet from the perspective of their manifestations, there are differences in their teachings, their disciples, their pure lands and so forth. All these fall under this second body.

Transformation Body

The last body is the transformation body, which refers to the various types of manifestations and expedient means used by the buddhas to teach sentient beings, based on the different capacities of sentient beings. This in particular refers to the body in which they appear to sentient beings. At times they present different external appearances in order to approach and guide sentient beings; these are all the Buddha's transformation body.

Closing Remarks

So, having arrived at Buddhahood, this brings us to the end of the marathon for this year's Dharma talks. I know that it may be a bit of information overload, but if you use the flow charts as you read through *The Way to Buddhahood* at your own pace, I believe that you will be able to see the whole structure and meaning deep inside of this wonderful text.

Moreover, there are also sub-sections in the text for which you can also try to draw up the structure yourselves. This is a good form of self-training, which will enhance your skills in reading Venerable Yinshun's works. Thank you for coming on this journey with me and I hope that you all progress on your path smoothly.

Chapter 6

Unique Doctrine of the Mahāyāna

Bodhi Monastery Dharma Retreat, July 2016

This year, 2016, I continued to focus on Venerable Yinshun's text, "The Way to Buddhahood", by introducing the final chapter of the book, which is also the most complex. Public teachings on this chapter are not common and this chapter alone usually takes a whole year at Buddhist college. I never intended to complete the whole chapter in one Dharma retreat. The explanation of this chapter continues in 2017.

1. Introduction

Good day, and welcome to the Dharma retreat for 2016. For some of you this may be your first time; I hope that you enjoy this experience. For others, I see some familiar faces, which is a good sign that you enjoyed the previous retreats.

Last year I outlined the structure of Venerable Yinshun's important text, *The Way to Buddhahood*. By showing the structure of each chapter, the aim was to show how the different sections all fit together and thus provide insights into the messages that Venerable Yinshun is trying to convey.

However, given the breadth of the text and the limit of only four lessons, I

Chapter 6

focused on the first few chapters and went through the last chapter very briefly.

This year my aim is to focus on Chapter 5, *Unique Doctrines of the Mahāyāna*. This chapter is very extensive and profound. Due to the volume of information contained in it, this also makes it the most difficult chapter to get a handle on. From my study of this text over the years, I would like to share with you my insights so that you can have a guide to help you navigate through this important chapter in a systematic way and, more importantly, see Venerable Yinshun's teachings clearly.

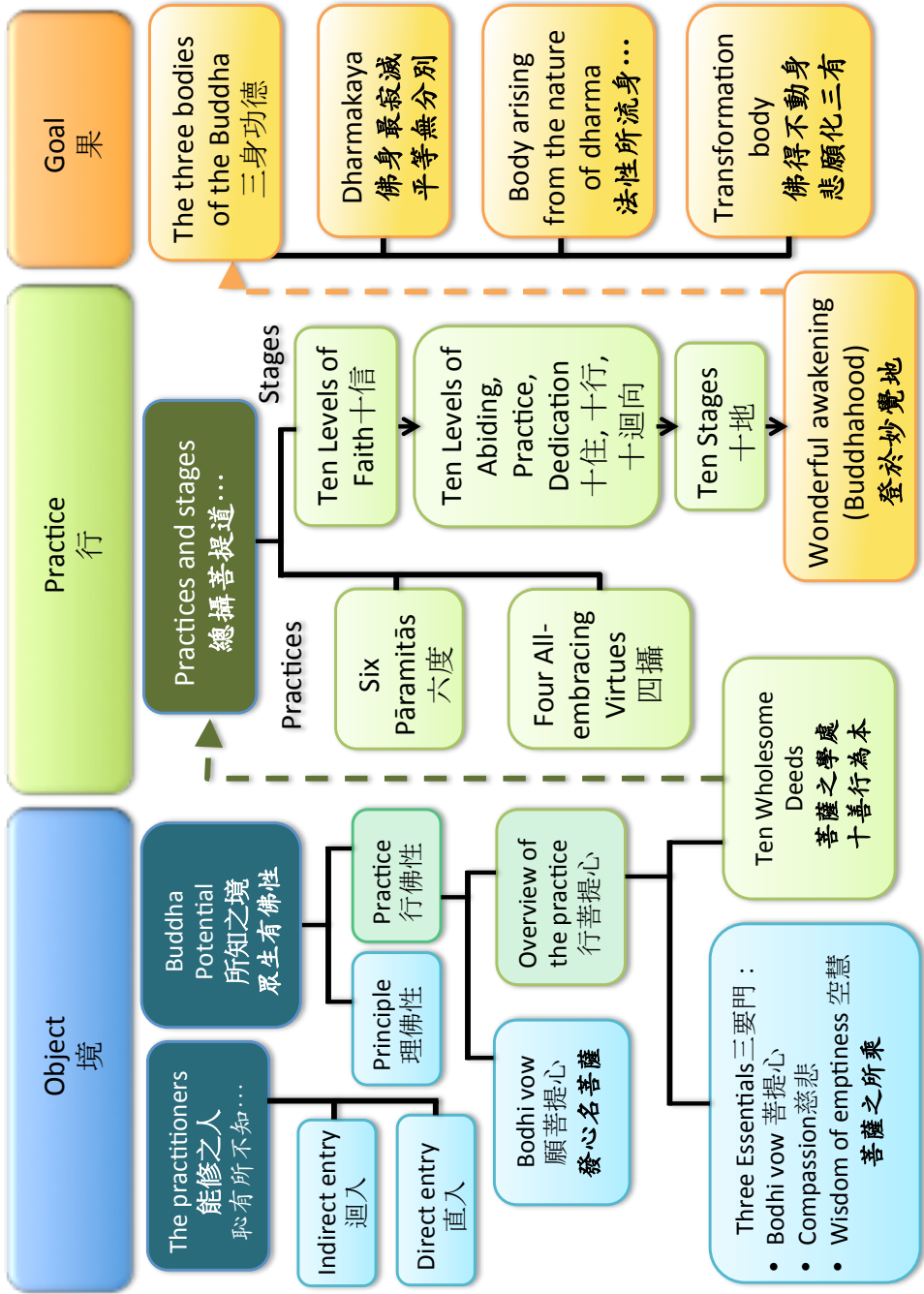
Overview of the Talks

For this year's talk, I will spend the lessons explaining the overall structure of the chapter and highlight the corresponding verses so you have some markers to reference. We will look at the practitioners of the Mahāyāna and elaborate in-depth on the main topic that lies at the heart of this chapter, which I have translated as Buddha Potential. Last, I will move into the core practices of the bodhisattvas.

2. Structure of Chapter 5

This year, I have adjusted the mapping of Chapter 5 using the common theme of the set of three, which are Object 境, Practice 行 and Goal 果. As you can see, on Map 1, I have used different colors for each of the set of three. Blue relates to the Object and reflects principles and theories that we need to know and make clear in our mind. Green stands for practices, the things that we need to actually cultivate and do. Last, the gold color is the final goal, which is attainable with the convergence of the principles and practices.

Map 1—Structure of Chapter 5, *The Way to Buddhahood*



In Chapter 5 there are a total of 89 verses. The first eleven verses cover the section on Object, which largely focuses on Buddha Potential. We must be aware that there are two aspects to Buddha Potential; one relates to the principle of Buddha Potential and the other relates to the practitioners. First, let us briefly look at the practitioners. Venerable Yinshun begins Chapter 5 with three-and-a-half verses to explain the various ways sentient beings may enter into the Mahāyāna path.

Practitioners Aspect of Object—Ways to Enter the Mahāyāna

Entry via Śrāvakayāna Practice

恥有所不知 *Remorseful after knowing one's wisdom is imperfect,*
恥有所不能 *Remorseful after realising one's abilities are*
 inadequate,
恥有所不淨 *Remorseful after discovering one still has impurities,*
迴入於大乘 *So the śrāvaka practitioners turn to the Mahāyāna.*

This first verse describes the sages, namely the śrāvaka practitioners. Although these practitioners may begin their cultivation on the Śrāvakayāna, somewhere along the way—it could be early on in the practice, or even after entering parinirvana—they realize that the attainments of the Śrāvakayāna, be it in terms of wisdom or other abilities, are still inadequate in comparison to the buddhas. As a result, they develop a deep sense of shame and remorse for they now know they have misperceived the Śrāvakayāna to be the ultimate. And only with such a deep sense of shame and remorse can they arouse the mind to turn away from the Śrāvakayāna and continue to practice on the Mahāyāna.

Entry via the Mahāyāna Practice

The second verse teaches us that there are those who enter the Mahāyāna directly. These are sentient beings that make the bodhi vow to walk the Bodhisattva Path and achieve Buddhahood from the very start. The second verse says:

不忍聖教衰 *Can't bear to see the Buddha's teachings decline,*
不忍眾生苦 *Can't bear to see beings in suffering,*
緣起大悲心 *Thus arousing the mind of great compassion,*
趣入於大乘 *One decides to enter the Mahāyāna.*

There is an important point to note here. A practitioner whose bodhi vow is strong and firm must have the motive embedded in great compassion, otherwise their determination is not strong enough and they may regress along the way. So how does this great compassion arise? There are two main reasons provided in the verse.

One situation is when the great teachings of the Buddha face the peril of destruction. One can't bear to see the great teachings decline. They know that these teachings are righteous and truly able to benefit sentient beings so, with an aim to protect the Dharma, great compassion arises and they make the bodhi vow. The other situation is when one sees sentient beings afflicted with suffering, one seeks ways to help and relieve this suffering. After searching around, they finally realize that only by learning and practicing the Buddha's teachings and accomplishing Buddhahood can they truly help sentient beings gain ultimate relief from suffering. On account of this, great compassion arises and they make the bodhi vow.

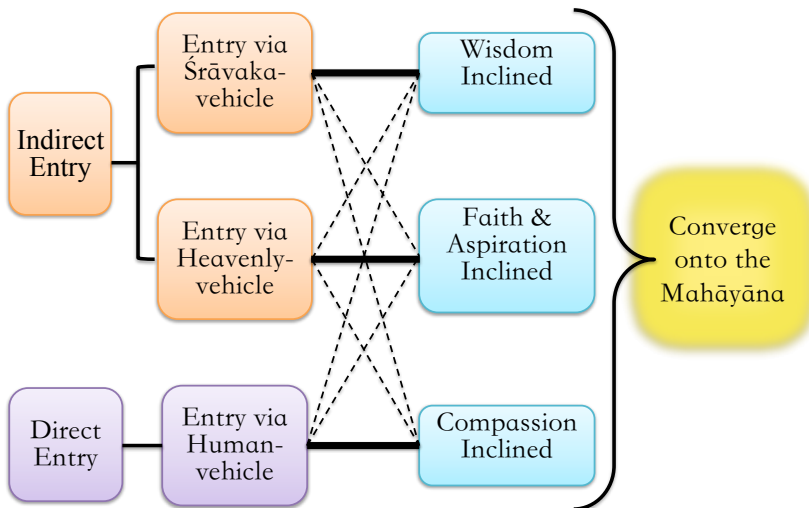
So the first two verses categorize practitioners based on whether they enter the Mahāyāna using a direct or indirect way. Following this, in the third and fourth verses, Venerable Yinshun looks at entry to the Mahāyāna based on the type of cultivation used at the start.

Entry via Different Initial Practices

或以信願入 *Some enter via faith and aspiration,*
或智或悲入 *Some enter via wisdom or compassion.*
或以聲聞入 *Some enter via the Śrāvaka Vehicle,*
或天或人入 *Some enter via the Heavenly or Human vehicles.*
趣入大乘者 *Those who decide to enter the Mahāyāna,*
直入或迴入 *Enter either directly or indirectly.*

First, Venerable Yinshun begins with the Three Essentials to highlight the possible entryways. Then he also looks at entry into the Mahayana from the aspect of the different vehicles. Here, vehicle relates to the type of body and related practices a practitioner is more inclined to use for their cultivation at the start. But no matter which vehicle or which essential is employed as the entry to the Mahāyāna, the entry method can be divided into two categories: direct and indirect entry. Here I'd like to share with you a map drawn up by Venerable Yinshun that reflects these verses.

Map 2—Different Entryways to Buddhahood per Venerable Yinshun's Chart



As you can see, there are the direct and indirect entryways. The Śrāvaka and Heavenly vehicles are indirect entries and the Human Vehicle is a direct entry. These different types of vehicles are matched to the Three Essentials to reflect the tendencies of the different types of practitioners. For instance, those entering indirectly via the Śrāvaka Path are more likely to be inclined towards the virtue of wisdom and begin with Dharma-based practices as their port of entry. But this is not a hard-and-fast rule, hence there are dotted lines linking to the other two essentials of faith and aspiration, and compassion. These dotted lines are to show that some śrāvaka practitioners can be inclined to these other essentials at the start. But, generally speaking, the characteristic of śrāvaka practitioners is that they are more inclined to focus on wisdom when they begin their practice. With this understanding, you can then interpret the rest of the chart accordingly. But no matter which entryway is taken, they will all converge back onto the Mahāyāna in the end.

Venerable Yinshun makes this statement based on the theory that there is only one Great Vehicle in the practice of Buddhism, and thus all indirect paths are a form of expedients to cater to different spiritual capacities. Do note that there are various theories about whether practitioners can return to the Mahāyāna or not. This chart is simple and reflects the verse. Later you will see that each of the Śrāvaka, Heavenly and Human vehicles all have elements of direct and indirect entry when we look into the details. Here I will end the brief explanation on the practitioner aspect of the Object. We will go into this in more detail a little later. Now let us begin to look into the fundamental topic of Buddha Potential, which is the driving force behind this whole chapter.

Buddha Potential Aspect of Object

Buddha Potential is something we have to understand clearly and thoroughly; it is the object that must be known. So how can we know it

clearly? Well, there are many aspects to Buddha Potential, as you can see from Map 1. Buddha Potential not only covers the object aspect, it links to the practice and goal aspects of the set of three. This means that all the elements flowing from Buddha Potential on Map 1 are born from the teaching on Buddha Potential. If we can clearly understand all these aspects, then we will be clear about the object of Buddha Potential. Venerable Yinshun begins to explain Buddha Potential with the verse:

眾生有佛性 *Within sentient beings, there is Buddha Potential.*
理性亦行性 *[It has two aspects:] the principle and the cultivation.*

The teaching that within every sentient being there is Buddha Potential is a very important teaching in the Mahāyāna. Buddha Potential refers to the essence or characteristics of being a buddha. Just like gold ores possess traces of gold mixed in with other natural matter like dirt and stone. The gold is not so obvious but, with effort, all the dirt and other material can be removed and pure gold can be extracted. Similarly, the teaching on Buddha Potential highlights that, even though sentient beings possess defilements and are caught up in the cycle of life and death, they also possess traces of a buddha. On this issue of Buddha Potential, I will discuss this in more detail later. Here I would like to continue with the overview of the chapter and how it relates to Buddha Potential.

Principle Aspect of Buddha Potential

From Map 1 we can see that Buddha potential possess two aspects. Here “principle” refers to the principle of emptiness, and “practice” refers to the practices leading to Buddhahood. Venerable Yinshun uses the Mādhyamaka or Middle School teachings to explain this aspect. The Mādhyamaka School puts forth that all phenomena are without self-nature. The definition of self-nature is that the phenomenon must be entirely independent, permanent and have complete self-control. Because there is

no object that possesses all three elements, therefore the Mādhyamaka School says that all phenomena do not have self-nature. No self-nature is otherwise known as the nature of emptiness. And it is exactly because all dharmas are not fixed, they are without a permanent self-nature, that there is the possibility for sentient beings to become buddhas. Hence the nature of emptiness is also Buddha Potential.

However, just because it is possible to become a buddha does not make you a buddha straight away! The principle merely explains that there is the possibility for sentient beings to become buddhas. So how do we make that possibility a reality? This is the importance of the other aspect of Buddha Potential—practice. There must be the accompanying application and practice. The cultivation side is what makes the principle turn into reality. That is to say, only through cultivation and practice can one realize this Buddha Potential and become a buddha. So the potential is there for every sentient being to attain Buddhahood, but whether every being can become a buddha will depend on whether they put in effort to practice.

Practice Aspect of Buddha Potential

Under “practice”, again, this splits into two branches. One branch relates to the overview of the practice and the other branch relates to the bodhi vow. The next verse focuses on these practitioners, the bodhisattvas.

發心名菩薩 *Those who initiate the bodhi mind are called
bodhisattvas,*

眾生之上首 *They are the foremost among all beings.*

世出世功德 *The virtues of the mundane and supramundane,*

悉由菩薩有 *All arise on account of bodhisattvas.*

Remember that having Buddha Potential does not make one a buddha immediately; likewise, it does not make one a bodhisattva automatically.

Only after someone makes the bodhi vow can they be called a bodhisattva. That is, a bodhisattva initiates the mind of bodhi; vows to walk the Buddha's Path and aims to fully realize their Buddha Potential. This point highlights the importance of the aspiration for bodhi. The last two lines summarize the merits and virtues of the bodhisattvas. In effect, all virtues in both this mundane world and the supramundane are possible on account of bodhisattvas. This concept may be a bit hard to grasp, I will elaborate on this point later.

The Three Essentials

The other branch is the overview of the practice. Here Venerable Yinshun provides an overview of the practices that are to be undertaken when someone makes the bodhi vow. Again, this branch is further split into two points to reflect the principle and practice element. In terms of the principle element, a bodhisattva must understand that there are Three Essentials, and all three must be cultivated and perfected in order to accomplish Buddhahood. These Three Essentials are the bodhi vow, great compassion and wisdom.

菩薩之所乘 *The vehicle of the bodhisattvas,*
菩提心相應 *Accords with the bodhi mind,*
慈悲為上首 *Has compassion as its foundation, and*
空慧是方便 *Uses the wisdom of emptiness as skillful means.*

This next verse explains how the Three Essentials work together in the bodhisattva practice. Bodhi vow embodies the elements of faith and confidence in the virtues of the buddhas as well as the aspiration to achieve the state of Buddhahood. In a nutshell, faith and confidence in the buddhas' virtues and believing they can bring true benefit to beings will help one to aspire to the state of Buddhahood. With this aspiration comes the resolution and determination to realize Buddhahood, which then

impels one to practice diligently. Great compassion is the core of the bodhisattva practice and must be the foundation upon which our thoughts and actions arise. That means the underlying motive and driving force behind everything a bodhisattva does must stem from great compassion. Wisdom refers to true insight into emptiness. Having this wisdom means that we can apply it as a skillful means to ensure that it complements compassion. Therefore, the works of bodhisattvas to benefit sentient beings are motivated by compassion and guided by wisdom.

依此三要門 *If all practices are skillfully cultivated,*
善修一切行 *In accordance with the Three Essentials,*
一切行皆入 *Then all practices will transform into,*
成佛之一乘 *The One Vehicle that leads to Buddhahood.*

This verse summarizes the importance of the Three Essentials. They are like the guiding principles for a bodhisattva and they must be cultivated together. When all three are present, then any practice will become part of the bodhisattva practice. Without them, the practices cannot lead to Buddhahood. Now we move over to the “practice” side to see what are the things that a bodhisattva ought to do. This brings us to the last item under the aspect of “Object”.

Overview of Practice

Main Practices

菩薩之學處 *The bodhisattvas’ basis of training,*
十善行為本 *Is grounded in the Ten Wholesome Deeds.*

Venerable Yinshun’s style is to introduce with a summary and then follow on with the details. So the summary is this last point under the “Object”, which also links to the beginning of the “Practice” side, which provides the details. Here he introduces the Ten Wholesome Deeds, which are the

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overarching practices that encompass all of the bodhisattva practices. From Map 1, you can see that there are two major components to the “Practice” section. One is the “Practices” component, which discusses the core practices for bodhisattvas. The other is the “Stages” component, which explains the progressive stages a bodhisattva passes through, all the way until Buddhahood. Again you can see the stage of wonderful awakening or Buddhahood is the same golden color as the “Goal” section, which is the link from “Practice” to the “Goal”. The verse that brings out these two aspects is as follows.

總攝菩提道 *All the practices of the Bodhisattva Path is summarized
in,*
六度與四攝 *The Six Pāramitās and Four All-embracing Virtues;
漸入於諸地 *Bodhisattvas progressively cultivate the path through
the stages,*
圓滿佛功德 *And ultimately accomplish the perfection of Buddha’s
virtues.**

Remember the Ten Wholesome Deeds are like the umbrella set of practices for a bodhisattva, covering the behaviors of actions, speech and mind. Building upon the Ten Wholesome Deeds are the Six Pāramitās and the Four All-embracing Virtues. This section on practices will be discussed in detail later on. The second half of the verse explains the stages, which in essence reflect how well the bodhisattva has cultivated these virtues. As the stages progress, this means the virtues are strengthened and refined until they become perfect at the stage of wonderful awakening.

This verse plays an introductory role to the subsequent verses and their contents, which actually make up the majority of Chapter 5. The following verse begins the important and epic teaching on the Six Pāramitās and begins with the pāramitā of giving.

身及諸受用 *With our bodies and all that we have,*
三世一切善 *With the wholesome dharmas accumulated from past*
 lives,
為利諸眾生 *For the sake of benefiting all sentient beings,*
無惜而行施 *Without any reservation, these should be offered as*
 gifts.

Stages of Practice

Out of the 89 verses in Chapter 5, 56 verses (or two thirds) relate to the Six Pāramitās and the Four All-embracing Virtues. So you can see that Venerable Yinshun’s main focus in this chapter is really to teach us about the practices a bodhisattva should undertake. Without practice, we will never realize our Buddha Potential. The “Stages” aspect begins with and is summarized in the following verse.

初修菩提心 *When beginning to cultivate the bodhi mind,*
習行十善業 *The practice should be on the Ten Wholesome Deeds.*
成就心不退 *After accomplishing the state of non-regression [from the*
 Mahāyāna],
入於大乘道 *One can truly be regarded as entering the Mahāyāna.*

After the long and detailed discussion on the Six Pāramitās and Four All-embracing Virtues, Venerable Yinshun discusses the stages briefly, starting at the Ten Levels of Faith.

Ten Levels of Faith

These ten levels of faith are to be cultivated with the bodhi mind as the main focus. The aim of the practices in this stage is to establish faith, aspiration and confidence in the Mahāyāna such that it becomes unshakeable. Sounds easy, but these ten levels alone can take up to 10,000 aeons! During this stage, because faith is not firmly established yet,

bodhisattvas can regress from the Mahāyāna, so for those whose minds are weaker, to protect their aspiration for the Mahāyāna, the Buddha also expounded the expedient path of entry via the Heavenly Vehicle, such as the Pure Land method. The aim of these expedients is to utilize the conducive environment of the pure lands to help establish firm and unshakeable faith.

Thirty Levels of Prerequisites

以諸勝解行 *Through the practices of faith and understanding [in the Buddha's teachings],*
廣集二資糧 *A bodhisattva accumulates two kinds of prerequisites;*
經一無數劫 *This requires the length of one countless aeon,*
證入於聖位 *And then the stage of the great beings is attained.*

So, having established firm faith the bodhisattva reaches the “stages of prerequisites”, which on Map 1 correlate to the Ten Levels of Abiding, Ten Levels of Practice and Ten Levels of Dedication. The purpose of these thirty levels is summed up in the line “A bodhisattva accumulates two kinds of prerequisites (廣集二資糧)”. During the stages of prerequisites, the practitioner accumulates the important provisions of merit and wisdom. This point also marks the beginning of the three great aeons of practice for the bodhisattva, after which, Buddhahood is accomplished. So we are almost there!

These different levels of abiding, practice and dedication each have a specific quality that is to be accomplished. In the ten levels of abiding, the aim is to establish a profound understanding on the nature of emptiness, such that there is no doubt whatsoever regarding this truth. Next, the Ten Levels of Practice stress compassionate deeds that benefit sentient beings; these practices also help develop wisdom. Last are the Ten Stages of Dedication, where the focus is on developing the insight into the sameness

of notional constructs and emptiness.

Ten Bhūmis

After passing through these thirty levels, “And then the stage of the great beings is attained (證入於聖位)”. Here, one enters upon the ten stages of the bodhisattva, also known as the Ten Bhūmis. These are the final ten stages before reaching Buddhahood. Often when we talk about the great bodhisattvas, it means that they are already in one of these bhūmis.

So, from the Ten Levels of Faith up to the Ten Bhūmis there are a total of fifty levels. Venerable Yinshun uses only two verses to encompass the first forty levels. For the Ten Bhūmis, the final ten stages, he devotes ten verses to explain them stage by stage. Here is the verse that describes the first bhūmi.

初住極喜地 *The great beings first abide in the stage of ultimate joy.*
生諸如來家 *This status is described as “birth into the Buddha’s family”.*
斷除三種結 *The three types of defilement have been severed,*
施德最增勝 *And the virtue of generosity is most superior.*

One by one Venerable Yinshun describes each bhūmi and its characteristics in terms of the virtue and aspect of wisdom that a great bodhisattva has developed. After passing through all Ten Bhūmis, the wonderful awakening stage is attained, which means that Buddhahood is accomplished. This is shown in the line:

登於妙覺地 *Ascending upon the stage of wonderful awakening.*

Goal of Buddhahood

So now we reach the final goal, Buddhahood! What is left now is the explanation on the goal. Here Venerable Yinshun uses the three bodies of the Buddha to explain the virtues and magnificence of attaining Buddhahood. The following verse explains the dharmakāya, which looks at the Buddha's virtues from the perspective of the ultimate truth:

佛身最寂滅 *The body of the Dharma is characterized by absolute tranquility and stillness,*
平等無分別 *It is equal among all buddhas and described as that which is indistinguishable.*
如彼摩尼珠 *It has the virtue that can wondrously benefit all beings,*
妙用利群生 *Just like the wish-fulfilling mani pearl.*

Next, the Buddha's body arising from the nature of Dharma is discussed over several verses, beginning at the lines:

法性所流身 *[The Buddha has] the body that arises from the nature of Dharma,*
念念現一切 *In which all phenomena manifest at every instance.*

Here the aim is to show how wonderful and inconceivable this Buddha's body is. The two lines are trying to capture the state that buddhas know all dharmas such as the virtues of the buddhas, the deeds of the bodhisattvas, śrāvakas and all the way down to worldly beings, covering both time and space etc....at every instance.

Last is the transformation body, which is discussed in the verse:

佛得不動身 *The body of the Dharma attained by buddhas is
absolutely still.*
悲願化三有 *Due to their compassion they [utilize the transformation
body to] deliver beings from the Three Realms,*
示淨或示穢 *The buddhas' lands may appear as pure or defiled,
咸令入涅槃 This is all for the sake of guiding beings to nirvana.*

Even though the dharmakāya is still and non-arising, the buddhas continue to deliver sentient beings from suffering through this transformation body. They manifest different types of lands, some pure, some defiled, all for the purpose of providing suitable places of practice to sentient beings of different capacities. The ultimate aim is to lead beings to Buddhahood and freedom from suffering.

Due to time, I can only cover this section on the goal very briefly. I hope that you now have a good understanding of the structure of Chapter 5 and its real purpose, which is to expound the practices of a bodhisattva.

3. Mahāyāna's Position Among the Different Paths

Section 2 above looks at the overall structure of Chapter 5. This section starts exploring in detail the teachings on the practitioners of the Mahāyāna and how they enter into the Mahāyāna path.

The Buddha taught many practices and these can be summarized into the Five Vehicle, Three Vehicle and One Vehicle paths. At the beginning of this chapter, Venerable Yinshun reviews the different paths of practice in Buddhism and where the Mahāyāna sits among these.

The Five Vehicle path is presented in Chapter 3 of his book. This path

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mainly focuses on the practices of the Human and Heavenly vehicles. Although these practices can help one to improve their fortunes in both this life and future lives by enhancing moral conduct, virtue and merits, ultimately they cannot lead to liberation from cyclic existence. The Human and Heavenly paths still have traces of defilement, which continue the cycle of life and death. Nevertheless, we should not belittle the Five Vehicle practices because such practices form the foundation that provides the stepping-stone for us to advance to the higher practices of the Three Vehicle or One Vehicle. And, it is these advanced practices that can lead to liberation from cyclic existence.

Next we have the Three Vehicle practices, which are focused on the Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddha vehicles. These practices do lead to liberation from cyclic existence in the three realms; however, they are still not perfect. Such practices cater to practitioners that are inclined towards self-liberation, so it is beneficial for the practitioner, but it does not develop great compassion in the practitioner to work for and benefit others. This is not to say that these practitioners are selfish and do not benefit others. They still teach the Dharma to others when the conditions arise, but they are not as pro-active, when compared to the efforts and aspirations of the bodhisattvas.

In sum the Human, Heavenly, Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddha vehicles, although good, are not perfect. So this brings us to the One Vehicle, also known as the Mahāyāna, Great Vehicle, Bodhisattva Vehicle or Buddha Vehicle. This is the only vehicle that will lead to the attainment of Buddhahood, which in Buddhism is the ultimate state of perfection. According to the *Lotus Sūtra*, the buddhas appear in this world purely for one great purpose, that purpose is:

- ◆ (開) to cause sentient beings to aspire towards the wisdom and insight of the buddhas;
- ◆ (示) to manifest the wisdom and insight of the buddhas to sentient beings;
- ◆ (悟) to cause sentient beings to awaken to the wisdom and insight of the buddhas; and
- ◆ (入) to cause sentient beings to enter the path of the wisdom and insight of the buddhas.

In other words, to bring sentient beings to awaken to and enter into the great bodhi of the buddhas.

Therefore, the true intention behind the Buddha's appearance in this world is to guide sentient beings onto the Buddha Path. This means to teach beings to develop a firm bodhi mind, undertake the practices of a bodhisattva and ultimately realize the fruit of Buddhahood. This is the intention of the Mahāyāna, and the true intention behind the Buddha's teachings.

Why the Mahāyāna is Great

At this point Venerable Yinshun briefly explains why the Mahāyāna is so great. The term Mahāyāna is Sanskrit and means Great Vehicle. What makes it so great? Well there are two aspects to explain why this path is "great". The first aspect is to look at it relative to other paths. The Mahāyāna is so far-reaching it encompasses all the practices of the Human and Heavenly vehicles, as well as the liberating practices of the Two Vehicle. It does not shun the practices of these other vehicles. Yet it also includes practices that are beyond them and unique to the Mahāyāna. According to Mahāyāna teachings, with the right aspiration and intentions, these other practices can become Mahāyāna practices. Therefore, on a

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comparative measure the Mahāyāna is superior to, yet encompasses all the other paths. Its accomplishment is the perfection of Buddhahood, while the other paths still have their imperfections. This is one reason why it is “great” or “mahā”.

The other aspect to understand why the path is “great” is because, in the ultimate sense, this path is unequaled. In fact, the Mahāyāna transcends everything, to a point where it really cannot be compared to anything anymore. To the same extent, its practices and teachings are so vast that it encompasses everything without exception. This is the Mahāyāna position and so in this respect there really cannot be any comparison, it is beyond relativity. But as we live in a world of relativity, the word *mahā* is designated for the purpose of helping sentient beings appreciate its greatness.

So you see, the Mahāyāna is both great and unique because it is superior to all other practices and is all-encompassing. It is taught in the Mahāyāna that the true purpose of the buddhas is none other than to guide sentient beings onto this Mahāyāna path. Therefore, after discussing in detail the practices of the Five Vehicle and Three Vehicle in the first four chapters of his book, Venerable Yinshun caps it off with a broad and deep discussion on the unique doctrines of the Mahāyāna in Chapter 5.

How Practitioners Enter the Mahāyāna

So, having established that the Mahāyāna is the Great Vehicle, Venerable Yinshun begins to explore the different pathways to enter the Mahāyāna. Although the bodhi mind is the cornerstone of Mahāyāna practice, due to the fact that sentient beings are different in personalities and habits, the causes that initiate the bodhi mind are also wide and varied. One must be clear about the reason for this variation, otherwise it may lead to inadvertent defamation towards others and bring harm to Buddhism. This

is why Venerable Yinshun begins this chapter by exploring the different ways practitioners can enter the Mahāyāna. He looks at these from several major aspects. One aspect categorizes practitioners based on whether they take a direct or indirect approach to enter the Mahāyāna. Another aspect categorizes practitioners based on their spiritual capacity. Venerable Yinshun points out that these two major aspects are also interrelated; that is, one's spiritual capacity will also influence whether they are more likely to be suited to direct or indirect entry ways. In the teachings of the Mahāyāna, regardless of whether the path taken is direct or indirect, the final goal is still the same: the perfection of Buddhahood. So Venerable Yinshun begins Chapter 5 with the following verse.

Indirect Entry

恥有所不知 *Remorseful after knowing one's wisdom is imperfect,*
恥有所不能 *Remorseful after realising one's abilities are*
 inadequate,
恥有所不淨 *Remorseful after discovering one still has impurities,*
迴入於大乘 *So the śrāvaka practitioners turn to the Mahāyāna.*

So you can probably guess he is starting with the indirect path of entry. This follows nicely from Chapter 4 on the Three Vehicle. Within the Three Vehicle, the main focus is on the śrāvaka practitioners. Although there are various debates about whether or not a śrāvaka practitioner can turn over to the Mahāyāna, here Venerable Yinshun relies on the *Lotus Sūtra's* teaching, which says that they can move from the Śrāvakayāna to the Mahāyāna. However, to do so, they must overcome a major obstacle. In the Āgamas, upon attaining the fourth fruit of arhat, practitioners state, “destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has

been done, there is no more coming to any state of being”⁷. Because these practitioners think the Śrāvaka Path is the ultimate, therefore they simply have no interest in the further practices of the Mahāyāna! At this point they think that they have reached the ultimate and there is nothing more to learn; and, since the Buddha is also an arhat, they are now equal with the Buddha so what more is there to do? To overcome this inertia, they must develop a deep sense of remorse and shame.

The deep remorse and shame relates to their mistake of believing that the Śrāvaka Path is the ultimate. Once they realize it is not the ultimate and with the Buddha’s guidance and encouragement, they then aspire to achieve Buddhahood. That is, they develop the bodhi mind and continue practicing. As the verse clearly states, the sense of remorse arises when they clearly see that they have shortcomings. These shortcomings relate to their wisdom, capabilities, and purity, when compared to the buddhas and great bodhisattvas.

Impetus for Moving to the Mahāyāna

Inadequacies in Wisdom

In terms of wisdom, some will realize that there are things they don’t know, yet the Buddha is fully aware. In the *Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra* there is an incident where the Buddha was teaching Dharma to Maitreya and other bodhisattvas; in this assembly, the arhats were unable to understand the Buddha’s teachings. Another story that highlights this weakness was when a person came to the Jetavana Vihara seeking renunciation. All the

⁷ Quote from Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Wisdom Publications, 2009).

arhats used their divine eyes to look back into his past and they could not find any wholesomeness, so they refused his request. This poor person sat crying at the vihara's gates until the Buddha passed by and asked him what was wrong. The Buddha did take him under his wings and gave him ordination. Not long afterwards, he managed to become an arhat. The other arhats were perplexed and asked the Buddha to explain. It turns out the arhats' wisdom could not see as far back into the past as what the Buddha could see. The Buddha explained that in one very distant past life, while being chased by a tiger, this person called out in desperation "Help me Buddha!" This one line is the cause that now ripens into his attainment of liberation. These examples reveal how the Buddha's wisdom is much more profound and vast, like comparing the light of a firefly to the sun.

Inadequacies in Capabilities

Now let's look at the difference in capability between the arhats and the Buddha (including the great bodhisattvas). In the sūtras, there is an instance where Śāriputra wails in despair because he knows clearly that, even though the arhats and the bodhisattvas are sons of the Buddha and they all attain liberation, unlike the bodhisattvas, he is unable to teach others how to attain Buddhahood.

In fact, when compared to the great bodhisattvas (let alone the Buddha) there are many things that the arhats are incapable of doing. These include the extent of extraordinary or super powers, as well as the ability to guide sentient beings to maturity so that they are able to embark on the Mahāyāna.

Inadequacies in Purity

Last is the realization that they still have some remnants of defilement; for buddhas, these remnants have been eliminated. These remnants of defilements are very weak and so do not cause the arhats to fall into cyclic

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existence. This aspect may be a bit hard to fathom; how can arhats still have remnants of defilements? From the sūtras, Venerable Yinshun provides some cases to highlight the subtle remnants of defilements of the arhats.

One time, at an assembly where the heavenly musicians, the gandharva bodhisattvas, were present, they played heavenly music as an offering to the Buddha and praise of the Dharma. At this gathering, when the senior monk Mahākāśyapa heard the bodhisattva's music, he actually began to dance with joy and delight. This is remarkable given that he is the foremost in the practice of asceticism. He later admitted that although he is untouched by sensual worldly pleasures, the sublime joy of the bodhisattva's dharma is something that still moves him.

Another case involves the senior monk Śāriputra. At one time when he was with the Buddha, some birds approached and, as they passed by the shadow of Śāriputra, these birds still had a little bit of fear and anxiety. However when they passed by the Buddha's shadow, they felt completely safe, at peace and free from all fear. Again, this shows that the arhats still have some remnant defilement when compared to the purity of the Buddha.

The reason for these remnant defilements is because in the Śrāvaka practice, the aim is liberation from cyclic existence, not complete perfection. So although they work hard to end the coarse defilements that lead to existence, in terms of these subtle remnant defilements, which do not obstruct liberation from cyclic existence, these are not actively brought to an end. So I hope you have a clearer understanding of what is meant by remnant defilements of the arhats. A common simile for these remnant defilements is the wine barrel. Even after the wine has been emptied out, the smell still lingers in the barrel. This lingering smell is like the remnant defilements.

In comparison to worldly beings, the arhats are very pure and worthy of our utmost respect. But in comparison to the buddhas and great bodhisattvas, they still have some imperfections. For bodhisattvas, both the coarse and subtle defilements must all be eliminated.

Time of Transition

For the śrāvaka practitioners, they must realize that the Two Vehicle path is not the ultimate path in order to make the move over to the Mahāyāna. This realization can occur at different stages of the practice. Some śrāvaka practitioners make the move in the early stages of their practice, even before attaining any fruit. Some practitioners make the turn after attaining the fruition of the sages, that is, having attained the first fruit or higher. Indeed, the *Lotus Sūtra* teaches that some arhats make the hard turn back after entering parinirvana. When they do make the turn back to the Mahāyāna, with the Buddha's skillful guidance they then make the bodhi vow and begin the bodhisattva path, undertaking practices that benefit themselves and others.

Direct Entry

This path of the śrāvaka is an indirect entryway into the Mahāyāna. It is not the main entry. The direct entryway is actually the more common way. This direct entry begins from the state of an ordinary human who then makes the bodhi vow and aspires to attain Buddhahood.

Now let us look closer at the conditions that can give rise to the bodhi vow. For one group of practitioners, they aspire to attain Buddhahood mainly because of their admiration for the Buddha's marvellous virtues, or because they admire the profundity of the Dharma, or purely because of encouragement from good friends.

Conditions that Give Rise to Bodhi Vow

For some people, when they see a buddha in person or hear a buddha's voice when he gives Dharma teachings, they are so touched and inspired they immediately think of wanting to become a buddha. Or it could be from seeing the buddha and his assembly of bodhisattvas, all so pure and magnificent, it makes them want to be one of them. In short it is because of the personal contact with the buddhas and bodhisattvas that these people aspire to become a buddha themselves. Another cause for the arising of the bodhi mind, after the buddha has entered parinirvana, is when people learn the Dharma from a bodhisattva or read the Dharma teachings themselves. They become inspired by the Dharma and so make the bodhi vow. Then there are some who initiate the bodhi vow on account of encouragement to do so by wise teachers.

The whole purpose of the Bodhisattva Path is captured in the common saying, “to seek the Buddha Path and to deliver all sentient beings from suffering”. These three causes that I have just put forth for arousing the bodhi mind, all fall under the first part of the saying—to seek the Buddha Path (上求佛道). However, as the saying highlights, apart from seeking the Buddha's Path, there is also compassion for sentient beings. Therefore, if the element of compassion is missing, then the aspiration for Buddhahood is imbalanced and there is a real danger of regressing.

Arising of Compassion with Wisdom

In fact, the element of compassion is crucial; the sūtras teach that bodhisattvas are born only from compassion and not from any other virtue. In other words, the bodhi mind is born from compassion. So how then does compassion arise? The second verse answers this question.

不忍聖教衰 *Can't bear to see the Buddha's teachings decline,*
不忍眾生苦 *Can't bear to see beings in suffering,*
緣起大悲心 *Thus one arouses the mind of great compassion,*
趣入於大乘 *And decides to enter the Mahayana.*

In one situation, the aim is to protect the Dharma and ensure that it remains in the world. Often these are times when there is no Buddha and the spread of the Dharma has become mixed in with other worldly and/or heretical teachings, such that the Dharma begins to deteriorate. As a result, the Dharma that prevails cannot fulfil the task of helping sentient beings be free from suffering. However, these bodhisattvas-to-be know that the true Dharma and the Triple Gem are very precious and virtuous. The true Dharma is the force behind the continual flow of wholesome practices in this world and beyond. Importantly, they know the true Dharma is the only thing that can bring sentient beings to liberation from suffering. So when they see the teachings enter into a state of decline, great compassion wells up inside them and this motivates them to seek Buddhahood and make the bodhi vow.

The other situation is sparked off when these bodhisattvas-to-be see sentient beings in all sorts of pain and suffering; this is especially so during times of war, civil unrest, natural disasters and so on. Great compassion arises inside them and they want so much to help these beings, but their skills and resources are inadequate. They try to build up their capabilities, and finally they realize that only the perfection of Buddhahood can equip them with the skills to help sentient beings and themselves. And so they make the bodhi vow.

In the first situation, the inclination is more towards the protection and preservation of the Dharma, while in the second situation the inclination is towards the saving of sentient beings. What we need to be clear about here is that, in both situations, wisdom and compassion are both present.

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The bodhisattvas clearly discern and investigate which is the true path (wisdom) and the motivation boils down to benefiting sentient beings (compassion). Only when the bodhi vow is born from great compassion will an ordinary person be able to enter the Mahāyāna and stride forth firmly.

If we reflect on these two situations of the deterioration of the Dharma and the suffering of sentient beings, both are prevalent in our modern day and age. So this is the right time to develop our compassion and make the bodhi vow!

Entry Based on Different Spiritual Capacities

So far we have looked at how practitioners enter the Mahāyāna directly and indirectly. There is another way to look at how people enter the Buddha Path, and this is by their spiritual capacity. This is reflected in the half-verse:

或以信願入 *Some enter via faith and aspiration,*
或智或悲入 *Some enter via wisdom or compassion.*

Here, Venerable Yinshun is looking at the personal characteristics of the practitioners and how this influence the way they enter the Mahāyāna and the practices they start off with. In the path to Buddhahood, there are the Three Essentials of bodhi vow, great compassion and wisdom. All three must be cultivated and only when these are perfected is Buddhahood accomplished. However, for new bodhisattvas, in the initial stages it is natural and unavoidable that they will be more inclined to practices that focus on one or two of these essentials, yet this inclination does not neglect the cultivation of the remaining essentials.

Spiritual Capacity Aligned with the Three Essentials

The practices for those who are wisdom-inclined include investigating the Dharma teachings, reading, reciting and recollecting the teachings, contemplating the teachings and so on. With the wisdom they accumulate, they are like a shining light that can bring brightness to themselves and others. These are the wisdom-inclined bodhisattvas, who focus more on listening to the Dharma and contemplation of the Dharma to cultivate wisdom in order to advance themselves and teach others. Their spiritual capacity is comparable to the śrāvaka practitioners that focus on Dharma-based practices.

There are many practices for those who are more inclined to faith and aspiration. Here I will just point out a popular practice, that is the Pure Land practice. These people are inclined to accumulate the merits and virtues of the Buddha. They delight in this and aim to go to Amitābha's pure land to undertake their Mahāyāna practices and training. These types of bodhisattvas are the faith-inclined and are comparable to the śrāvaka practitioners that tend to focus on faith-based practices.

For those bodhisattvas that are compassion-inclined, their practices revolve around sentient beings and how they can help them be free from suffering and be happy and so on. This quality is unique to the Mahāyāna and there is no comparable practitioner in the Two Vehicle.

What I have described is the situation at the initial stages of the path; due to the habitual inclination of different practitioners the entryway that suits them best will also vary. This habitual inclination transfers over to their spiritual practice, and the influence can still be seen even at the advanced levels. For example, the Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva is known for great compassion, Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva is known for wisdom, and the Samantabhadra Bodhisattva is esteemed for his ten great vows and so on.

Spiritual Capacity Aligned with the Three Poisons

Another aspect of personal characteristics that influences the choice of entry method is based on the three main defilements (the Three Poisons). Those whose defilement of anger and frustration is stronger, generally belong to the practitioners inclined towards wisdom-based practices. Practitioners whose cravings and desires are stronger generally belong to the group that are inclined to compassion-based practices. And those whose ignorance is more prevalent tend to belong with those that prefer to engage in faith-based practices.

Table 4. Personal Characteristics and Spiritual Capacity

Personal Characteristics		Direct Entry into the Mahāyāna	Indirect Entry via Śrāvaka Vehicle
Wisdom	Anger	Wisdom-inclined bodhisattvas	Dharma-based practitioners
Compassion	Cravings	Compassion-inclined bodhisattvas	Unique to Mahāyāna
Faith and Aspiration	Ignorance	Faith-inclined bodhisattvas	Faith-based practitioners

Up to now we have looked at direct and indirect entry into the Mahāyāna based on habitual inclinations and how they relate to the Three Essentials. Now we look at the second half of verse, which distinguishes entry modes

based on the type of body or the vehicle used.

Entry via the Types of Vehicle

或以聲聞入 *Some enter via the Śrāvaka Vehicle,*

或天或人入 *Some enter via the Heavenly or Human vehicles.*

Mahāyāna sūtras teach that the Śrāvaka Vehicle, Heavenly Vehicle and Human Vehicle are the three ways to enter the One Vehicle. Venerable Taixu further elaborates on this by pointing out which of these vehicles are more suited to which time period.

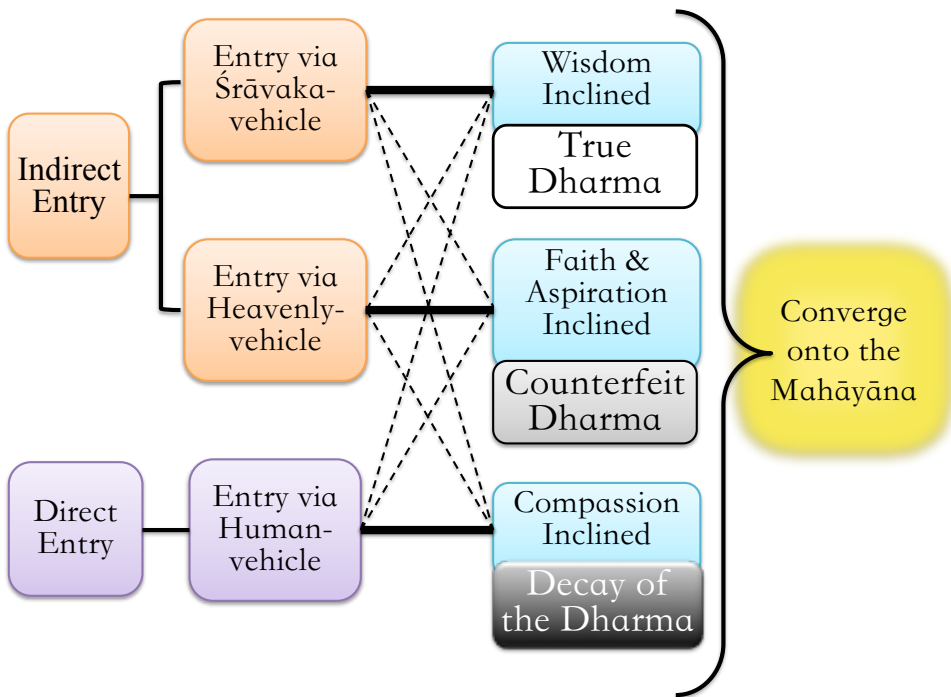
The Buddhist timeline outlines three major time periods. The first is the period of the True Dharma, when the Buddha's teachings are pure and flourishing. Venerable Taixu points out that, in this period, people rely on the Śrāvaka Vehicle more to enter the Mahāyāna. The second period is when the counterfeit of the True Dharma appears. During this time, Venerable Taixu says that the reliance is more on the Heavenly Vehicle to enter the Mahāyāna. The last period is the decay of the True Dharma. The Buddha has long since passed away and the Dharma teachings are in decline. During this last period, Venerable Taixu explains that the Human Vehicle is the best way to enter the Mahāyāna.

Direct and Indirect Entry in the Different Vehicles

The following is a simple chart showing the links between the direct and indirect entry and how the different vehicles and Three Essentials are related to the Buddha Path. What I have added today is Venerable Taixu's time periods.

I mentioned that Map 2 was a simple chart that matches the verses. Now we go into the detail to see how all three vehicles contain both elements of direct and indirect entry into the Mahāyāna.

Map 2.1. Different Entryways to Buddhahood per Venerable Yinshun’s Chart with Venerable Taixu’s Time Periods



The Śrāvaka Vehicle is considered an indirect path of entry. However, there are a few practitioners whose capacity is extremely sharp. Although they manifest as a practitioner on the Śrāvaka Path, deep inside they have already made the bodhi vow. These practitioners need not rely on the Buddha’s guidance or expedient teachings; on their own account, they have settled themselves onto the Great Vehicle. In the Buddha’s times, one such example of course is the Maitreya Bodhisattva, who appears as one of the śrāvaka sages in the Buddha’s saṃgha.

The Heavenly Vehicle is also predominantly an indirect way of entry. Within this vehicle there are two main paths. One path seeks heavenly rebirth and so they practice with the aim to be like the celestial beings, or

the rakśas and yakśas and so forth. After attaining these forms that have super-abilities and very long life spans, subsequently they begin to cultivate the bodhisattva practices. This is an indirect entry into the Mahāyāna.

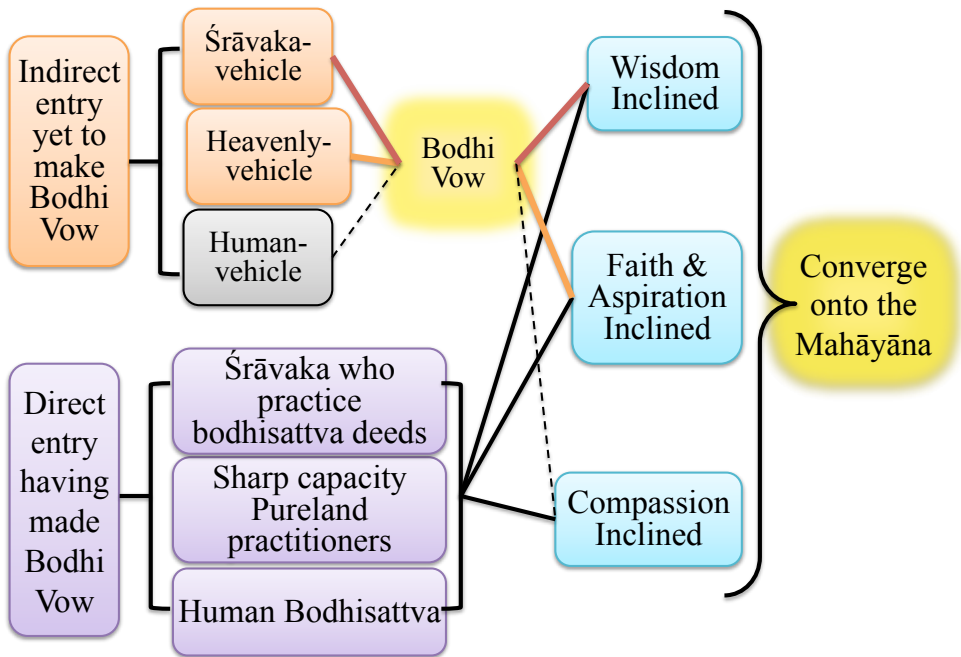
The other main Heavenly Path is where practitioners seek a pure abode and so the focus is to gain rebirth in a pure land. After reaching a pure land, with its conducive environment and the skillful guidance of a buddha, they begin to study and practice the Mahāyāna. This is still an indirect entry, because the initial aim was purely for a pure abode that is even better than the heavens. However, within this group, again there are some with sharper spiritual capacities who have long since begun to learn the Mahāyāna teachings. They understand the Dharma and have developed the bodhi mind. For these practitioners, once they reach the pure land, very soon they fully awaken to the Truth and return to this saha world to undertake bodhisattva practices.

So, although practitioners of the Śrāvaka and Heavenly vehicles predominantly take an indirect path, among them there are some with sharp capacity that can be considered as taking a direct entry into the Mahāyāna. This is because they already have inside them the bodhi mind while they practice these paths.

The Buddha made available these indirect entry paths to cater to these practitioners and their desires for the tranquility of nirvana or the bliss of the heavens and so on. These paths are not without their dangers, because some do get lost on the way. They may seek immortality and liberation and forget the greater achievements of the Mahāyāna. For these practitioners, the path to Buddhahood can be extremely long and winding. However, without these expedient teachings, they would never make it onto the Buddha Path, so these teachings do have their function and worth.

The Human Vehicle is considered a direct entry. When people make the bodhi vow and practice the Ten Wholesome Deeds in this human realm, they are directly embarking on the Mahāyāna. This path does not forgo the righteous human practices of morals and ethics; rather, the practice incorporates worldly deeds that benefit others and society. As long as these deeds are carried out with the bodhi mind, they are the practices of a bodhisattva. On the surface, these practitioners are very much like the good people found in other faiths. But remember, the *Lotus Sūtra* teaches that buddhas appear in this world purely for one great purpose, that is to teach and guide humans to awaken to and enter the wisdom of the buddhas. Therefore, to aim for Buddhahood using the Human Vehicle is well suited to our present era and accords with the Buddha’s intentions perfectly.

Map 2.2. Direct and Indirect Entryways for All Vehicles



Map 2.2 extends Map 2 to incorporate the details of direct and indirect entry and how they link to the different vehicles and Three Essentials. No matter whether the path taken is direct or indirect, according to the *Lotus Sūtra*, all paths will lead to Buddhahood eventually. The differences in the paths are just to cater to the different spiritual capacities of different beings. This ensures that all beings are able to enter into the Mahāyāna one way or another.

Here I end the discussion on the different types of practitioners and how they may enter the Mahāyāna. Next we move into the important topic of Buddha Potential.

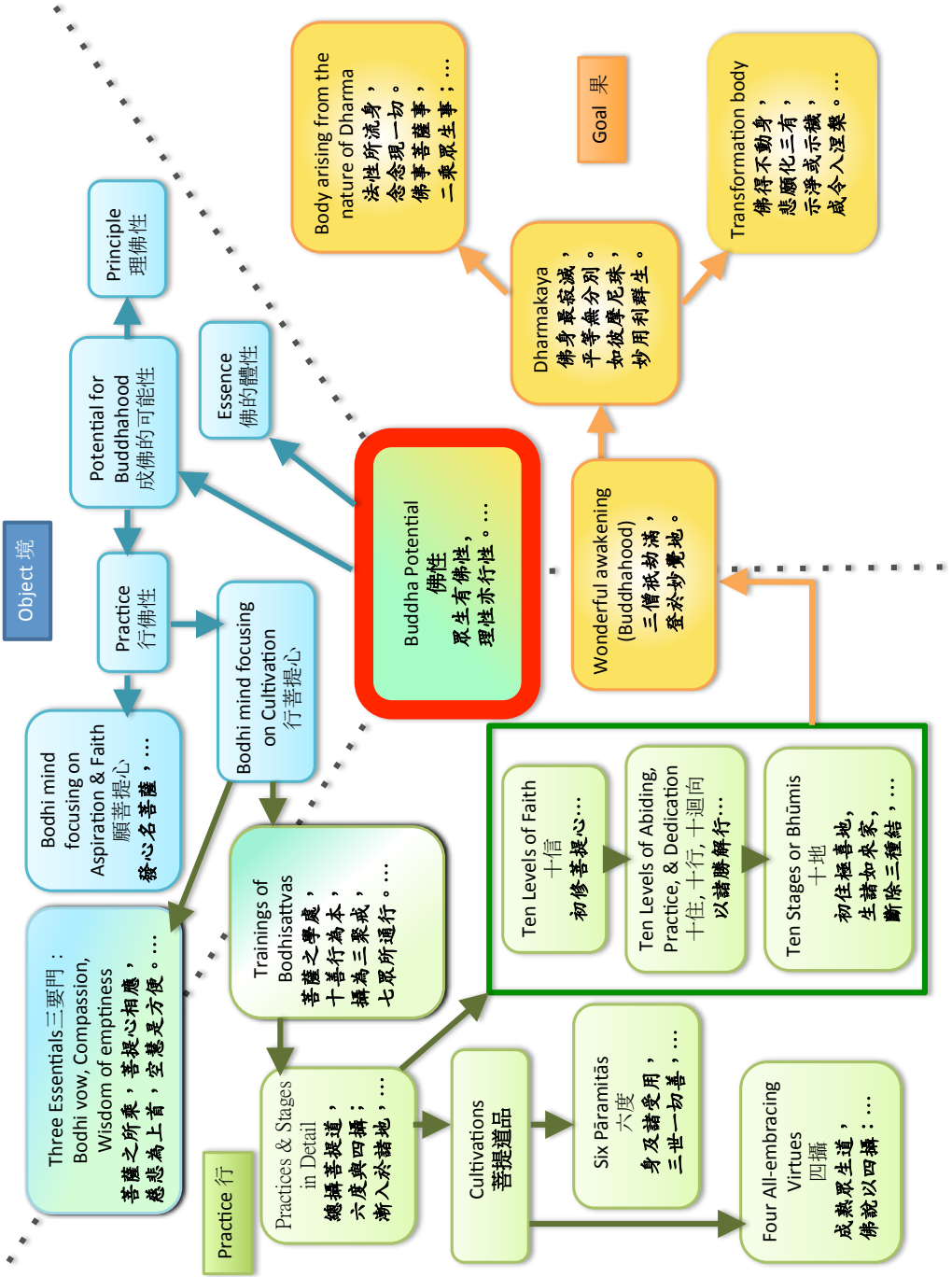
4. Buddha Potential

At the beginning I showed you Map 1, which presented the structure of Chapter 5. Map 3 is the new view I'd like to show you. It may look messy at first glance, but it actually reflects the importance of Buddha Potential. As the talk progresses we will move through Map 3 and, hopefully, by the end you will understand Venerable Yinshun's teaching on Buddha Potential.

Overview of Buddha Potential

So the place to start is the centre—Buddha Potential—of Map 3.

Map 3. Importance of Buddha Potential



In the book, this section on Buddha potential begins with the verse:

眾生有佛性	<i>Within sentient beings, there is Buddha Potential.</i>
理性亦行性	<i>[It has two aspects:] the principle and the cultivation.</i>
初以習成性	<i>Initially they begin with practices to establish firm habitual qualities [of a bodhisattva].</i>
次依性成習	<i>Then based on these habitual qualities they continue to develop.</i>
以是待修習	<i>Thus it is actually through cultivation,</i>
一切佛皆成	<i>That all can develop and become buddhas.</i>

At the very beginning it states: “Within sentient beings, there is Buddha Potential”. This statement that all beings have Buddha Potential is the crucial foundation on which the Mahāyāna teachings proclaim that all sentient beings can become buddhas. This is the significance of Buddha Potential. Because all beings possess it, therefore all beings can become buddhas. So you may be wondering, what exactly is Buddha Potential?

Two Meanings of Buddha Potential

Venerable Yinshun explains that there are two meanings to Buddha Potential. If we look at Map 3 these two meanings are captured in the boxes titled “Essence” and “Potential for Buddhahood”.

Meaning 1: Essence (Common Definition)

The essence of Buddha Potential here refers to the nature of Buddhahood, or the characteristics of a buddha. As you can see, it is situated very close to the border with the goal of Buddha Potential. At this point, the essence of Buddhahood is not fully realized, so it does not belong entirely to the goal section, but it is closely related. This essence of a buddha can be

found in ordinary beings. Remember the gold ore simile? Although the gold in the ore is not so obvious to the naked eye, with smelting and refining, pure gold can be extracted by removing all the impurities. If there was no gold at the start—say you had a lump of coal—then you would not be able to extract gold, no matter how hard you tried. Of course, with today’s scientific technology, it is possible to create gold from things that are not. This would require physical chemistry to engineer the gold atom, but the cost of doing so and the radioactive by-products would make the whole project very undesirable.

Even though ordinary humans are caught up in the cycle of birth and death, with all its impurities, this does not mean we are completely void of Buddha Potential; that is, we do have some characteristics of a buddha within us. At the moment, we are like gold ore in the ground, all dirty, but with refining we can reveal the pure precious gold inside. So, when we read about teachings that say sentient beings innately have Buddha nature, or that beings originally possess the superior qualities and virtues of a buddha, or even that sentient beings are buddhas, these are simply different ways to bring across this teaching on Buddha Potential. It is because ordinary humans possess this Buddha Potential that, with exertion of effort to practice, Buddhahood can be achieved. This teaching is one that is positive. It is easily understood and generally accepted by ordinary people; this is why it has become a mainstream school of thought in Buddhism.

Meaning 2: Potential (Profound Definition)

Now let us turn to the other meaning of Buddha Potential, and you will understand why I chose to translate the term 佛性 as “Buddha Potential”

rather than “Buddha Nature”. Buddha Potential refers to the potential or possibility for ordinary beings to become buddhas. This is referring to the actual cause that allows ordinary humans to attain Buddhahood. This is the deeper and profound meaning of Buddha Potential, which for some people is not as easily understood or accepted, compared to the first meaning of essence, where the qualities of a buddha are said to be innate.

In Map 3 you can see that this second meaning of Buddha Potential branches into two elements, the principle and the practice. Here Venerable Yinshun uses a quote from the *Lotus Sūtra* to explain the principle and practice aspects underlying the potential for ordinary beings to become buddhas.

諸佛兩足尊	<i>All buddhas are the most venerable among humans,</i>
知法常無性	<i>They realize that all dharmas invariably are without self-nature,</i>
佛種從緣起	<i>And the seed of Buddhahood arises from causes and conditions,</i>
是故說一乘	<i>Therefore they teach the One Vehicle path.</i>

In this verse, the two elements of principle and practice are revealed. Venerable Yinshun explains these two aspects using the teachings on emptiness by the Middle School or Mādhyamaka School.

Principle of Emptiness

First let us look at the principle underlying the definition of potential for Buddhahood. The Middle School teachings assert that all phenomena, all dharmas, are without any fixed and true self-nature. This is the way things just are. From past to present and into the future, all dharmas will be such;

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they have no self-nature. This quality of no self-nature is essentially the teaching on emptiness. Emptiness is also the state of no birth or cessation, no rising or falling, which is really the state of nirvana. This principle of emptiness, or no self-nature, is what Buddha Potential refers to. So no self-nature, emptiness and Buddha Potential are the same thing when looking from the aspect of principle.

If all dharmas are not empty and without self-nature, then this would mean that everything is fixed with a permanent unchanging nature. If this was really so, then ordinary beings are real, and their nature is just that: an ordinary being with defilements and impurities. If this were fixed, then it would mean that we would forever remain as ordinary beings, with all our imperfections. This would also imply that nothing can be brought to an end. So everything that exists, all our defilements and impurities, cannot be broken off. And everything that does not exist yet, such as purity, awakening and nirvana, cannot be developed. In short, this would mean nothing can be cut off and nothing can be cultivated. More directly, that would mean Buddhahood is not possible. This would be a very sad and disturbing situation for all of us!

Fortunately, things ARE empty. There is no fixed nature, so it is absolutely possible to turn impurity into purity, ignorance into wisdom, and, importantly, ordinary people like you and I can become sages. So you see, this principle of emptiness, having no self-nature, underlies the reason why things can be either pure or impure, people can be ordinary or sages. This is also the underlying principle for why there is potential for ordinary humans to become buddhas. The great teacher Nāgārjuna succinctly captures this in a half-verse:

以有空義故 *Owing to the principle of emptiness,*
一切法得成 *All dharmas can be established.*

So you see, the principle of emptiness is the principle underlying the potential for Buddhahood; this is the profound meaning of Buddha Potential. This characteristic of emptiness pervades all things and this emptiness is also the ultimate Truth. This nature of emptiness is what we must rely on in order to develop purity, awaken, and attain full realization. Only by realising the Truth can we become a sage. Now, can you see how the principle or potential for attaining Buddhahood is based on emptiness? Emptiness is the main cause that offers ordinary humans the possibility to attain Buddhahood. This emptiness pervades all phenomena, and yet it does not accord with ignorance and defilement. Rather, it accords with virtues that are undefiled and pure. In order to help ordinary beings to understand or accept this profound meaning, this nature of emptiness is presented as Buddha nature, as the Tathāgatagarbha, and so there are teachings that say the Buddha's wisdom and virtues are innate and so forth. It is exactly because this nature of emptiness pervades all phenomena without exception and bias, so, it is said that all sentient beings can become buddhas.

Practice Element

However, what is important to note is the word “can”. This principle of emptiness does not equate to a definite “will” become buddhas. The reason lies in the other element of potential for Buddhahood, which is the element of practice. As you can see from Map 3, it is this element that completes the possibility for Buddhahood. The practice element of potential for Buddhahood refers to the actual undertaking of the practice

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and making the bodhi vow, which is also the seed for Buddhahood. This is the same as the teaching in the School of Consciousness-only, which explains that the seed of Buddhahood is created from the impressions left in the mind by listening to the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha's teachings are pure because they flow from the Truth. If we go back to the verse from the *Lotus Sūtra* that says “The seed of Buddhahood arises from causes and conditions,” this is exactly referring to this element of practice.

So to recap what we have covered so far, the potential for Buddhahood has two elements. One is the Truth that all dharmas are empty in nature; this is the supporting principle. The other element is the cause or seed for Buddhahood, which is only possible with practice, which comes from listening to and relying on the guidance and teachings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. The two elements of principle and practice are in complete alignment. Because of emptiness, things can arise from causes and conditions—dependent origination. Therefore, with practice, Buddhahood is possible. If things were not empty, then causes and conditions cannot give rise to anything and no matter how hard you practice, it would all be in vain.

When Prince Siddhārtha was under the Bodhi tree, it was by repeatedly investigating this link between emptiness and dependent origination of all things that he fully penetrated this Truth and attained Buddhahood. This is the basis underlying the teachings that say all beings have Buddha Potential. So if we go back to the verse as our reference, the first two lines have been elaborated on.

眾生有佛性 *Within sentient beings, there is Buddha Potential.*
理性亦行性 *[It has two aspects:] the principle and the cultivation.*

The next two lines focus on the practice and what results from it. The lines are:

初以習成性 *Initially they begin with practices to establish firm
habitual qualities [of a bodhisattva].*
次依性成習 *Then based on these habitual qualities they continue to
develop.*

Although the principle of emptiness concludes that all beings have Buddha Potential, the element of practice clearly shows that attainment of Buddha Potential requires effort, it is dependent on causes. So the possibility is there for everyone to become buddhas, but whether it is realized or not will depend on whether the causes are established and the conditions to nurture the cause are sustained.

Practice: Bodhi Mind and Accumulation of Virtues

So now let us turn to this element of practice, given its importance. This practice of Buddha Potential has two important features. The first is the bodhi mind, also known as the seed of Buddhahood, which focuses on the aspiration and faith aspect. The other important feature is the accumulation of all the virtues that accord with the bodhi mind, and this focuses on the cultivation aspect. So when the *Lotus Sūtra* says “The seed of Buddhahood arises from causes and conditions”, it is referring to the practice of Buddha Potential with these two important features of bodhi mind and accumulation of virtues.

The *Lotus Sūtra* provides a great story to highlight how this bodhi mind

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comes about. There was once a person who got drunk, and while he was drunk, his good friends and relatives placed a precious pearl in his pocket and they sewed it on well so that it would not be lost. However, being drunk he was unclear about what happened and after he woke up he continued with his life. Times became tough and he wandered around begging for food and help. All this time he had no idea that he had a precious pearl, which could have saved him from poverty. When he met with his friends again, they were perplexed about why he was in such a bad state when they had given him that precious pearl.

So, this story parallels how we would develop the bodhi mind. Being caught in the cycle of life and death, being ignorant etc., is like being drunk and not able to see things clearly and understand things properly. The buddhas and bodhisattvas are like the good friends and relatives that cared for us when we were drunk. They bestowed on us the precious pearl, which symbolizes the bodhi mind. From listening to their teachings we can develop the bodhi mind, the seed for Buddhahood. If we put in effort to practice and nurture this bodhi mind then we can reap the benefits of it, which ultimately is the accomplishment of all the Buddha's virtues. If we waste it and do not practice further, we are like the drunken man, going around begging for food, not knowing about or not utilising the precious pearl that was given to us. So you see, this pearl is a gift, it is not something that we are born with. This I would like to stress, because some teachings use this story to explain that Buddha Potential is innate, it is something we originally possess. But a closer reading of the story clearly shows that this is not so. It is something that is given and, more importantly, something that has to be nurtured. If we make use of this precious pearl, that means we exert effort to practice, we become a

worthy receptacle to hold the Mahāyāna teachings. By doing so, all sorts of virtues can arise, including the fruit of Buddhahood. This whole process can be divided into two main stages.

The first stage is the development of the bodhi seed, and the second stage is the nurturing of this seed. What this means is that, initially, we have to develop the bodhi seed inside us. This can arise from conditions such as seeing the buddhas, listening to the Buddha's teachings, and making great vows to consolidate our determination for the Mahāyāna. This is like planting a seed. So we must try hard to engage in conditions that help us to plant this bodhi seed deep and firmly in ourselves. Once we acquire this seed and plant it well, then it will not be lost. So even acquiring the bodhi mind is something that has to be worked on. At first, one's aspiration for the bodhi mind may be weak and keep on wavering; that type of a bodhi mind is not strong enough to support the attainment of Buddhahood. So to strengthen the bodhi mind we need to put in effort and continually listen to the Dharma and develop our determination. So this first stage is focused on developing the bodhi mind and strengthening it so that it becomes stable and firm.

Once the bodhi mind is strong and firm, the next stage is the nurturing of this seed. Now that we have this bodhi seed, with continual practice, we can gradually help this seed to grow and give rise to the pure virtues of Buddhahood. As we practice, these pure virtues will develop from the initial level to the intermediate level and then to the advanced levels. This is how the purifying virtues of the Mahāyāna can be established and become strong and powerful. So over time, with persistent practice, once these undefiled and pure virtues are well-established, they not only form

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the causal seed for Buddhahood, they also become a part of the qualities of a buddha. This is how the bodhi seed transforms into the nature of a buddha, which reflects how an ordinary person develops to attain Buddhahood. The last two lines of the verse say:

以是待修習 *Thus it is actually through cultivation,*
一切佛皆成 *That all can develop and become buddhas.*

These two lines affirm the above teachings on emptiness and Buddhahood. Based on emptiness there is the potential for all beings to become buddhas. However, whether a being remains in the cycle of birth and death, or whether they become a sage—become a buddha—it all boils down to practice and cultivation. If a person puts in effort, energy and determination to practice, if they follow the Mahāyāna teachings and practice accordingly, then, no matter who they are, it is possible for them to attain Buddhahood. If no effort is exerted, practice is lacking, then even with the potential to become a buddha, they will remain as an ordinary worldly being for as long as they do not practice. So, we should reflect on ourselves and ask: “Have I developed the bodhi mind? Is my bodhi mind strong and unwavering? Have I nurtured my bodhi mind? Am I making good progress? And so on.” Remember when reading Venerable Yinshun’s texts, always reflect and apply the wisdom he is sharing with us.

Importance of Bodhi Mind

Given the importance of practice and how it all starts with the bodhi mind, Venerable Yinshun takes care to elaborate on developing the bodhi mind and making it strong. Remember that the seed of Buddhahood is the bodhi

mind; it is the starting point for embarking on the Mahāyāna. But to initiate this bodhi mind, we need to understand its qualities clearly and in detail. Thus, Venerable Yinshun begins by explaining the significance of bodhi mind for bodhisattvas, and then he goes deeper to reveal the preciousness of bodhisattvas, which effectively reveals the value of bodhi mind.

發心名菩薩 *Those who initiate the bodhi mind are called bodhisattvas,*

眾生之上首 *They are the foremost among all beings.*

世出世功德 *The virtues of the mundane and supramundane,*

悉由菩薩有 *All arise on account of bodhisattvas.*

Virtues of Bodhi Mind

First, a bodhisattva can only be called a bodhisattva if they make the resolution to walk the Buddha Path; that is, they must initiate the bodhi mind; they must make the bodhi vow. This is reflected in the line:

發心名菩薩 *Those who initiate the bodhi mind are called bodhisattvas,*

Even though Buddha Potential abides in every being, it does not mean that all beings automatically are a bodhisattva. It is only after making the bodhi vow that one becomes a bodhisattva.

Definition of Bodhisattva

This term bodhisattva comes from Sanskrit and it is a combination of the words “bodhi” and “sattva”. Bodhi means “perfect wisdom” or “enlightenment”. Sattva means “sentient being”. So the common

interpretation is that a bodhisattva is a sentient being who seeks great bodhi, or perfect enlightenment. Venerable Yinshun provides another interpretation. Bodhi, or perfect wisdom, reflects the practitioner's aim of seeking the Buddha Path, that means to seek enlightenment. Next, sattva reflects the audience that the practitioner vows to help. Therefore, the meaning of bodhisattva is someone who aims "to seek the Buddha Path and to deliver all sentient beings from suffering".

Once someone has made the resolution to walk the Mahāyāna path, they can be called a bodhisattva. Technically speaking, this term can be used to describe practitioners of all stages on the Mahāyāna; from the beginners who have just initiated the bodhi mind but with little skill and wisdom, all the way up to the great bodhisattvas who are coursing through the final ten stages, and even those who are just about to become buddhas. All these Mahāyāna practitioners can be referred to as bodhisattvas.

However, when Buddhists hear the term bodhisattva, straight away they think of the great bodhisattvas like Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva or Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. This honorific title tends to be associated with those bodhisattvas that have achieved the higher stages. This is why the ordinary person, who has just initiated the bodhi mind, tends not to call themselves a bodhisattva. This sign of humility is a good quality.

Preciousness of a New Bodhisattva

However, one should know that, even though a person has only just made the resolution to walk the Buddha Path, "They are the foremost among all beings". Even though these newly initiated bodhisattvas have not accumulated much merit and virtue, and presently are lacking in skills and

wisdom, at this very initial stage these bodhisattvas are still well respected by the sages of the Śrāvaka Vehicle. In the sūtras there are four very clever similes to reflect the loftiness of these new bodhisattvas.

One simile is that of a newborn prince, more specifically a crown prince. Although the baby prince is very young, due to his royal lineage, even as an infant he is respected by the senior court officials. The second simile is that of a lion cub. Lions are known as king of the jungle and their cubs, even though still young, already instill fear in the other animals. Have you seen the Disney movie *Lion King*? Remember the scene when Rafiki the wise baboon holds up the new lion cub on Pride Rock and all the animals bow and look up in awe? Just imagine something like that. The third simile is that of a mythical bird called the kalavinka. It sings beautifully and, even before it hatches from the egg, its voice is unrivaled by other birds. In the Northern Chinese tradition, this bird is said to sing the sounds of the Dharma in Amitābha's Pure Land. The last simile is the new moon. Although it is just a slim crest of the moon, already it draws admiration from people gazing up at the night sky.

All these similes for the new bodhisattva highlight that although they are young they can become strong and powerful when they are older or fully developed. So for bodhisattvas that have only just initiated the bodhi mind, they are precious and worthy of respect because they will become buddhas. This is why even the sages of the Śrāvaka Vehicle respect and honor new bodhisattvas. Here we are talking about newly initiated bodhisattvas. For the advanced bodhisattvas that have developed great skills, helped innumerable sentient beings and accumulated boundless merits, needless to say they are very worthy of our respect and admiration.

So this is the meaning behind the line “They are the foremost among all beings”.

Bodhisattvas are the Source of All Virtues

世出世功德 *The virtues of the mundane and supramundane,*
悉由菩薩有 *All arise on account of bodhisattvas.*

These next two lines go even deeper to explain the true value of bodhisattvas and why we should honor them sincerely. This also highlights the virtues of the bodhi mind, which is the foundation of the bodhisattvas. All the wholesome dharmas, the virtues and goodness in both the mundane realm and the supramundane realm, arise purely because of bodhisattvas. What this means is that bodhisattvas are the source for all virtues and wholesome practices. How is this so? Take the virtues of the worldly realm; these are expounded by bodhisattvas in different lives, whether born from karma or via transformation. They take on various leadership roles and teach sentient beings about morality, righteous laws, ethics and so on. Thus, they help to establish worldly virtues and moral conduct. In terms of the supramundane virtues and practices, only buddhas can teach the Śrāvaka Path, providing expedient means to enter the Great Vehicle. Buddhas and all their virtues are only possible due to the accomplishments of bodhisattvas. Can you see now how the goodness and virtues of this world and beyond all stem from bodhisattvas?

Bodhi Mind is the Foundation of Bodhisattvas

But where do bodhisattvas come from; what makes them a bodhisattva? The answer is the bodhi mind. This is why in the Mahāyāna sūtras the virtue of the bodhi mind is praised extensively and referred to as “the seed of all virtues of the buddhas”. Only by fully appreciating the value of the bodhi mind will we aspire to initiate and develop our bodhi mind. This brings us to the next thing we need to be clear about, and that is how to initiate and develop the bodhi mind.

Initiating the Bodhi Mind

The essence of the bodhi mind can be captured in the saying, “to seek the Buddha Path and deliver all sentient beings from suffering”. This is also known as the bodhi vow. If we expand on this vow, we arrive at the universal four great bodhisattva vows, which are:

眾生無邊誓願度

1. *Sentient beings are countless, I vow to liberate them all.*

煩惱無邊誓願斷

2. *Defilements are countless, I vow to end them all.*

法門無邊誓願學

3. *Dharma practices are countless, I vow to learn them all.*

無上佛道誓願成

4. *I vow to accomplish the unsurpassed way of the buddhas.*

At the very start, we should aim to establish the aspiration and make these vows. Knowing how valuable and wonderful the bodhi mind is, we need to aspire to it and initiate it. But the bodhi mind does not happen by chance. It comes from self-effort to nurture the conditions for its establishment and development. So where do we target our efforts?

Bodhi Mind Comes from Compassion

Well, the bodhi mind is derived from loving kindness and compassion. By nurturing our loving kindness and compassion, we will be nurturing the conditions for the arising of the bodhi mind. So how then can we nurture compassion? Compassion and loving kindness can be nurtured by reflecting on our parents. They have given us so much love and care; they sacrifice themselves to ensure we are safe and happy. From this we should instill a deep sense of gratitude that wants to repay our parents. Gradually we take it further, to treat all beings as if they were our parents and long to repay them for their kindness. Ultimately, from this practice we would want to be able to treat our loved ones and our enemies equally. Of course, by this stage a true bodhisattva would no longer view others as enemies, even if some people may treat them poorly.

Another way to develop loving kindness and compassion can be to empathize with others and take them to be the same as oneself. So we help and benefit other beings in the same way we would help and benefit ourselves. This is especially for those whose compassion for others is weak and so they think they are unable to help others. By viewing and treating others as they would do themselves, slowly they can realize they are capable of helping others. As compassion slowly develops in this way, they should then broaden the boundary to the point where, if they can't help others practically, at least they would be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of helping others.

So these are two methods taught by Venerable Yinshun for cultivating compassion with the ultimate aim of developing bodhi mind. These compassion-based practices share common grounds with other faiths such

as Confucianism, which teaches people to practice benevolence and forgiveness. However, when we develop loving kindness and compassion with the aim of initiating and developing our bodhi mind, as our practice matures and the virtues of bodhi mind become more and more refined and perfect, we will begin to see the superiority of the bodhi mind.

In the Mahāyāna, given the lofty goal of Buddhahood, we must aim for the Bodhisattva Path. To do this we must arouse the bodhi mind, which is born from loving kindness and compassion. So if we want to aspire to the Mahāyāna, we must be sure to consolidate the foundation of bodhi mind with diligent effort and practice.

The Three Essentials

What has been discussed above relates to the aspirational aspect of bodhi mind. At this point, the bodhi mind has been developed, but this is only the beginning. Just as important, we now need to put it into practice and allow this lofty aspiration to come through into our actions and behavior. So, we move onto the long hard yards of cultivation. When we begin to talk about the types of practices that bodhisattvas undertake, first and foremost we must look at the three core elements or the Three Essentials that make up the foundation of the bodhisattva practice.

Bodhisattva Vehicle Vs Buddha Vehicle

For the practitioners on the Two Vehicle path, whether they are in the causal stage of practicing or whether they have accomplished the fruit of arhat, they are called śrāvakas or pratyekabuddhas. This title remains the same before and after the attainment of liberation. For the Mahāyāna,

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there is a difference between the causal stage and the fruit. When the focus is on the practice in the causal phase, the term Bodhisattva Vehicle is used. When the focus turns to the attainment of Buddhahood and all its virtues and so on, the term Buddha Vehicle is used. What this implies is that the complete path of the Mahāyāna incorporates the deeds of the bodhisattvas and the virtues of the buddhas; both the deeds and virtues need to be accomplished and perfected.

Now let us look at the way to Buddhahood from the aspect of the causal phase. Starting from the state of an ordinary person, the bodhisattvas rely on this vehicle to enter into the great bodhi of the buddhas. This is the vehicle that helps bodhisattvas journey into the great ocean of the Buddha's wisdom. On this journey, no matter what type of practices they are learning and undertaking, there are Three Essentials that must always be present.

How the Three Essentials Underlie Every Action

For example, when undertaking the deed of giving, the act of giving must accord with the bodhi mind. Here, “accord” means that the purpose behind giving is for the sake of fulfilling the bodhi vow. This vow is none other than to seek the Buddha Path and deliver all sentient beings from suffering. This is the first essential. Next, the whole driving force, the motivation to carry out this giving, is purely from compassion. This is the second essential. Last is the wisdom of emptiness, which must be employed as skillfulness so that there is no attachment to the giver, gift and receiver. If this skillfulness were missing, that would mean there is attachment to some or all parts of this act of giving. Without this

skillfulness of wisdom, the bodhisattvas will not be able to work towards liberation and the wisdom of the buddhas. So, in summary, all bodhisattva deeds must have the underlying goal of bodhi mind, which means to fulfil the bodhi vow. All the deeds are to be motivated by compassion and guided by the wisdom of emptiness. When all Three Essentials are present in the practices undertaken, then no matter what type of practices they are, whether they are worldly wholesome deeds or the wholesome deeds of the sages, all these deeds become practices of the Mahāyāna and will be able to lead to the fruit of Buddhahood.

When I talk about deeds of the worldly and the sages, it may be a bit vague for some people, so here I'd like to summarize what these deeds include.

Worldly Wholesome Actions

Worldly wholesome practices include actions falling under the Five Precepts, Ten Wholesome Deeds, and the Three Meritorious Activities. The Five Precepts are no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no improper speech, and no taking of intoxicants. The Ten Wholesome Deeds are made up of three wholesome bodily actions (no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct), and then four wholesome speeches (no lying, no harsh speech, no divisive speech and no idle speech) plus the three mental trainings of no greed, no hatred and no ignorance. The Three Meritorious Activities are giving, upholding precepts and meditation. So practices that develop these aspects fall under worldly wholesome deeds. These deeds are wholesome because they nurture virtues and merits and avoid harm to oneself and others. If these are practiced with the Three

Essentials as the foundation, they transform into the bodhisattva practices.

Wholesome Actions of the Sages

The wholesome deeds of the sages are wholesome because they lead to purity and liberation from cyclic existence. These practices include the training of the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination, the Three Progressive Trainings (precepts, meditation and wisdom), the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Thirty Seven Practices Conducive to Enlightenment. In addition, there are the practices that the Mahāyāna especially focuses on, such as the Six Pāramitās, Four All-embracing Virtues, 108 types of samādhis, practice of the 42 Syllables and so forth. All these practices, be they worldly or beyond, can be regarded as practices of the Mahāyāna IF they have the Three Essentials as foundation. Without the Three Essentials, or if an essential is partly missing, then none of these practices belong to the Bodhisattva Vehicle, and they cannot lead to Buddhahood. That is why the verses say:

菩薩之所乘	<i>The vehicle of the bodhisattvas,</i>
菩提心相應	<i>Accords with the bodhi mind,</i>
慈悲為上首	<i>Has compassion as its foundation, and</i>
空慧是方便	<i>Uses the wisdom of emptiness as skillful means.</i>
依此三要門	<i>If all practices are skillfully cultivated,</i>
善修一切行	<i>In accordance with the Three Essentials,</i>
一切行皆入	<i>Then all practices will transform into,</i>
成佛之一乘	<i>The One Vehicle that leads to Buddhahood.</i>

The main focus of the Mahāyāna is to guide people to Buddhahood, starting from the human Vehicle. That is why it places emphasis on (1) the great bodhi vow, which is the highest of all aspirations, (2) loving

kindness and compassion, which is the extension of kindness to all without exception and bias, and (3) wisdom of emptiness, which is the ultimate wisdom to guide all practices.

The Three Essentials are effectively the refinement and perfection of the unique human qualities of recollection, pure conduct, and perseverance. In other words, the whole practice of the Mahāyāna is to uplift and purify these human qualities so that they become more and more well-rounded and ultimately become perfect. Upon attaining the perfection of Buddhahood, the essential of bodhi mind becomes the dharmakāya, the Buddha's body of Truth. The essential of compassion transforms into the Buddha's virtue of perfect liberation. And the wisdom of emptiness becomes the Buddha's virtue of prajñā. So, the secret treasures of the Buddha are none other than the development of human virtues such that these virtues become most pure, they become perfect. This is the true meaning behind the Mahāyāna.

Now, keeping in mind that all practices must be grounded in the Three Essentials, Venerable Yinshun now takes us to have a look at the main practices for Bodhisattvas. He outlines these practices in the following verse.

菩薩之學處 *The bodhisattvas' basis of training,*
十善行為本 *Is grounded in the Ten Wholesome Deeds,*
攝為三聚戒 *Is comprised of the three sets of cumulative precepts,*
 and
七眾所通行 *Is applicable to bodhisattvas of the seven groups.*

When we look at the complete path of the bodhisattva's training, from start to finish, the whole course is really the process of cultivating the

bodhi mind. However, this bodhi mind is intangible and the only way we can see it is through the manifested actions and behavior of bodhisattvas. The aspirational aspect of bodhi mind is manifested in the taking of refuge. Unlike the Five Precepts and the monastic precepts, which are taken for this present life only, when we aspire to take refuge in the Mahāyāna, the commitment is from now until the attainment of Buddhahood. You may wonder how is this refuge in the Mahāyāna different to the common refuge in the Triple Gem? The Mahāyāna's refuge is the buddhas, the Dharma and the saṃgha of bodhisattvas. Note that the saṃgha of bodhisattvas refers to the great bodhisattvas that have attained the state of non-regression; this means they have passed the eighth bhūmi.

By taking refuge in the buddhas and great bodhisattvas, it means we look upon them as our role models, and just as they do, aspire to dedicate all our merits and wholesome virtues to the fulfilment of unsurpassed bodhi. So, like the buddhas and bodhisattvas, we vow “to liberate all those who have not yet been liberated, to awaken those that have yet not awakened, to settled those who have not yet settled into the Mahāyāna, and to cause those who have not attained nirvana to attain it”. This vow is very lofty but, in essence, it is just the highest and purist form of the vow to protect life, which is commonly recited as part of the Triple Gem Refuge ceremony. So you see, the act of taking refuge is the manifestation of our faith and aspiration. With the arising of sincere faith and aspiration the precepts are also acquired. Therefore, after taking refuge it is natural to then take the precepts. Ceremonially, taking refuge and the Five Precepts are separate events. However, the precepts are just an exposition of the vow that we make when taking refuge. So, in the full sense of taking refuge, precepts are required. They are like the two sides of the one coin.

Hence, when the Triple Gem Refuge is conducted, it is important that the Five Precepts are also upheld. Traditionally, one would take refuge and also take the precepts. However, under the Buddha's skillful and continual guidance, which takes into account the spiritual capacity of different beings, at times special exemptions are made and the practitioner is allowed to take refuge without taking the precepts. Likewise, in taking Mahāyāna refuge, some make the bodhi vow but do not actually undergo the ceremony to take the bodhisattva precepts. Do note that these are special cases and, as the practitioner progresses, in due course they will take up the precepts as they mature into the practice. The sūtras say that bodhi mind relies on proper practices to become firm and solid; if proper practices are absent, then bodhi is unattainable. What this means is that Buddhahood is not attained solely with faith and vows. That is why, after making the bodhi vow, we need to uphold the proper practices of a bodhisattva in order to progress. These proper practices are encapsulated in the training of precepts.

Just as there are precepts for the monks and lay people, there are also precepts for the bodhisattvas. The bodhisattva precepts are founded on the Ten Wholesome Deeds. The training of the bodhisattvas, from the initial phase all the way up to the advance levels of the Ten Bhūmis, focuses their cultivation on the Ten Wholesome Deeds. As the bodhisattva moves forward on their path, the practice of these Ten Wholesome Deeds becomes deeper, more profound and more far-reaching. For example, the practice of no ignorance yields the attainment of profound wisdom. The practice of no hatred results in great compassion that extends without limit, and the practice of no greed results in the achievement of countless deep meditative states, or samādhis.

Just as the Mahāyāna path is termed Bodhisattva Vehicle and Buddha Vehicle, depending on which aspect is emphasized, so too the bodhisattva precepts have different names depending on which aspect of the practice is emphasized. The bodhisattva precepts have an alternative title, the Three Sets of Cumulative Precepts. As the name suggests, there are three different categories of precepts. The first is the category of Vinaya or “Regulations”. This category of precepts stresses the cessation of evil and harmful deeds; like our legal system, they provide detailed listings of prohibitive laws. The second category is the “Precepts of Embracing Goodness”, which stresses the accumulation of all deeds that are wholesome and good. The third and last category is the “Precepts for Benefiting Sentient Beings”, which stresses the aspect of bringing relief and benefit to all beings. Collectively, these three categories make up the Three Sets of Cumulative Precepts. So, in a nutshell, the bodhisattva precepts aim to eradicate all evil, undertake all that is good, and bring benefit to all beings.

Relationship of Bodhisattva Precepts to Other Precepts

Within the śrāvaka practice, the Vinaya or regulations among the different groups of practitioners are different. The regulations vary for laypeople and monastics. Then, within the monastic regulations, they vary between males and females, and novices and fully ordained practitioners. This is different to the Mahāyāna bodhisattva precepts. Apart from a few regulations that have minor differences between monastic and laypeople, generally the regulations in the bodhisattva precepts are the same for all.

When we want to take the bodhisattva precepts, first we must take the

respective Śrāvakayāna precepts, and then we take the bodhisattva precepts. So, effectively, we uphold both sets of precepts. That means for a layperson, they first take the Five Precepts to become an upāsaka (male follower) or upāsikā (female follower). Then they further take the bodhisattva precepts. In this case, they are known as an upāsaka bodhisattva, or upāsikā bodhisattva. Similarly, for a novice, they would take the śrāmaṇera (male novice) or śrāmaṇerī (female novice) precepts and after that they take the bodhisattva precepts, thus becoming a śrāmaṇera or śrāmaṇerī bodhisattva. So for those who have received full ordination, they can become bhikṣu bodhisattvas or bhikṣunī bodhisattvas, the process is similar.

The Source of the Bodhisattva Precepts

As the bodhisattva precepts were transmitted to China, several versions came across and are still available today. These are summarized in the table below.

Table 5. Comparison of Bodhisattva Precepts Still Extant

Bodhisattva Precepts	Major Precepts	Minor Precepts
Brahma Net Sūtra	10	48
Upāsaka Precept Sūtra	6	28
Yogācāra Bodhisattva Precepts	4	43

One version of the bodhisattva precepts is found in the *Brahma Net Sūtra*, which contains ten major precepts and 48 minor precepts. Within the

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Upāsaka Precept Sūtra it records that there are six major and 28 minor bodhisattva precepts. Last, in the *Yogācāra Bodhisattva Precepts* there are four major and 43 minor regulations. Among these three different versions, there is little variation in the contents of the major precepts; however, the minor precepts do vary quite a bit. Now you may wonder how can there be no difference between the major precepts when one lists ten, another lists six and yet another lists only four! Remember that one takes the Śrāvakayāna precepts before taking the bodhisattva precepts, so where there are overlaps in the precepts, some versions of the bodhisattva precepts omit these, while some repeat them. So, when you look at the major precepts from the Śrāvakayāna and Bodhisattva combined, their contents are essentially very similar.

Actually, the bodhisattva precepts are also mentioned in other sūtras. The textual records indicate that there is a specific body of text outlining the regulations of the Bodhisattva. However, these texts have been lost over the centuries. What we have available today is the bodhisattva precepts that are annexed to certain sūtras.

Now let us turn to look at the major regulations within the bodhisattva precepts. Here, Venerable Yinshun covers only the most significant of the major regulations that are found in all the texts relating to this issue. These are captured in the verse:

退失菩提心 *Just a thought of giving up the bodhi mind,*
嫉慳與瞋慢 *Or being envious, miserly, angry and arrogant,*
障於利他行 *Will obstruct altruistic deeds,*
違失大乘戒 *And all lead to disqualification as a bodhisattva.*

First and foremost is the bodhi mind. We have discussed at length the

importance of bodhi mind, making the bodhi vow and so forth. Here when we look at the regulations, it is also recorded in many Mahāyāna sūtras that bodhi mind is a precept to be upheld. Remember that the vow underlying bodhi mind is to “seek the Buddha Path and deliver all sentient beings from suffering”. So, looking at this as a regulation, if ever the thought of no longer wanting to liberate sentient beings arises, or if one becomes weary and seeks the fruits of the Śrāvaka Path or the pleasures of the heavenly and human realms, thus forgoing the bodhi vow, this is considered a violation of the precept comprising the bodhi mind. The bodhi mind is the fundamental precept of the bodhisattvas and, for Mahāyāna practitioners, we need to pay special attention to protecting our bodhi mind.

As mentioned before, some major bodhisattva precepts are also found in the Śrāvakayāna precepts, such as no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying and so forth. However, there are some major bodhisattva precepts that are unique to the bodhisattva practice. Although there are some variations within the different sūtras on this topic, there are four major precepts that are found consistently in all available texts. These four major precepts are against envy, miserliness, anger and arrogance. Venerable Yinshun uses the *Yogācāra Bodhisattva Precepts* to explain these four major bodhisattva precepts.

First is the precept against having envy. If a bodhisattva, for the sake of attaining fame, status, fortune et cetera, becomes envious of others and employs methods that defame others while praising themselves, this is a violation of this precept. Second is the precept against being miserly. If a bodhisattva possesses wealth, be it in terms of Dharma knowledge or

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material gains, and due to being miserly and stingy they refuse to give to those who come and seek assistance, this is a violation of this precept. Third is the precept against harboring anger and hatred. When anger is very strong, it can lead one to scold and harm others, even if a person comes to seek repentance and forgiveness for a past wrong. Harboring anger can lead a bodhisattva to reject the repentance and continue to hold a grudge. This is a violation of this precept. Fourth is the precept against arrogance. If a bodhisattva has no humility and thinks highly of themselves, this arrogance can lead them to carelessly propagate seemingly genuine Dharma teachings, but actually these teachings are not the true Dharma. Moreover they may also defame and criticize those who do provide true Dharma teachings. Such behavior is a violation of this precept. The consequence of violating any one of these four major precepts is revealed in the following lines.

障於利他行 *Will obstruct altruistic deeds,*
違失大乘戒 *All lead to disqualification as a bodhisattva.*

This means that such violations will obstruct a bodhisattva from carrying out good deeds that benefit others and so on. In addition, the violation of any one of these precepts disqualifies the practitioner from being a bodhisattva. This is very similar to the Śrāvakayāna monastic precepts. If a monk or nun violates any one of the major precepts, they are expelled from the saṃgha and no longer qualified to be a monk or nun. And for the rest of this life they are not allowed to re-take the monastic precepts. Violation of the major bodhisattva precepts is similar, except that the precepts can be taken again. In other words, once the bodhi mind has been initiated and the bodhisattva precepts acquired, it can never be lost.

Uniqueness of the Bodhisattva Precepts

Violations of the bodhisattva precepts represent a temporary regression. This means that the bodhi mind for the time being loses its function and potency, but it is still there and can be revived. So if one has made a violation, we should be honest about it, repent and take the precepts again following the proper methods and procedures. In this way, we can breathe new life back into our bodhi mind, renew our bodhi vow and allow it to function as it should.

So you see, once a person has made the bodhi vow and taken up the bodhisattva precepts, even if they regress to the Śrāvaka Path or, worse still, fall into the three lower realms of the hells, hungry ghosts and animals, inevitably they will rely on the purity and goodness of the bodhi mind to return to the Mahāyāna and attain Buddhahood. This clearly shows that in the Mahāyāna there is nothing more important than the bodhi mind.

So this is where I conclude this year's talk. Although we have only covered the blue Object section in Map 1 and touched a little on the green Practice section, I do hope that the principles elaborated in these talks help you to understand the groundwork and foundation for embarking on the Bodhisattva Path. If we can get our foundations well established and solid, then moving onto the green section of Practice will be a piece of cake! This is why I have decided to focus this year's Dharma talks on this blue area. I sincerely hope that these teachings from Venerable Yinshun can help you to progress steadily on your chosen path.

Chapter 7

Pāramitās of Meditation and Wisdom

Bodhi Monastery Dharma Retreat, July 2017

In 2017, the English Dharma retreat took on an exciting change. With the assistance of several other venerables, collectively we were able to present the material in Chapter 5 of “The Way to Buddhahood” in more detail. The team effort focused on the Six Pāramitās and even employed Venerable Yinshun’s other related works. I was in charge of the last two pāramitās: meditation and wisdom.

1. Introduction

Good morning everyone! I hope you all are well and got a good night’s sleep. The invisible force of causes and conditions has once again culminated in this wonderful gathering. For any new friends that are joining us for the first time, I hope you find this useful and enjoyable.

First, I’d like to briefly recap how much we have covered concerning Master Yinshun’s famous teaching, *The Way to Buddhahood*. In 2015, I began to focus my presentations on this wonderful teaching. Back then I presented the whole structure of the book and the structure of each chapter. I also outlined the purpose of the book and tried to explain how to use the book as a guide in our practice. If we know how to use it well, it is like having a teacher by our side all the time. However, due to time

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limits the main focus was on the first few chapters of the book.

Then last year, in 2016, I began a more detailed focus on the last chapter, *Unique Doctrines of the Mahāyāna*. At that retreat, I tried to explain the detailed structure of Chapter 5 and focused on the important issue of Buddha Potential. Remember there are two key aspects to Buddha Potential. One is the principle that all beings can become buddhas. The other is the practice that must be undertaken in order to realize that potential. You must know by now, Buddhahood doesn't just happen.

Last year I only covered the blue section, on “Object” (see Map 1 in Chapter 6 of this book). Chapter 5 of *The Way to Buddhahood* is taught at Buddhist college over a whole year, so we will not finish it all in this retreat. Just like the Lord of the Rings trilogy, only better, you will have to wait till next year for the next installment.

For this year's talks, I will continue exploring this chapter and pick up where I finished last retreat. The focus this time is on the Six Pāramitās, which falls under the green section on practice. Fortunately, I have the help of Venerable Zheng Ren and Venerable Shi Yi. They will be presenting the first four pāramitās, and I will present the pāramitās of meditation and prajñā. Venerable Yan Rong will present on the topic of prajñā from Master Yinshun's other teachings to complement the presentation on the pāramitā of prajñā. So you are very lucky this year as we have a team effort in play, just for you all.

2. Pāramitā of Meditation and Wisdom

The verse that signals the start of the teachings on the pāramitā of meditation and prajñā is:

三乘諸勝德 *All the superior virtues of the Three Vehicle,*
悉由定慧生 *Are accomplished on account of concentration and*
wisdom.

Here, Venerable Yinshun’s use of the word concentration refers to the meditative state of tranquility. Wisdom, of course, refers to insight. In Buddhism, the use of the word meditation encompasses many states of concentration and insight. Please keep this in mind.

Dhyāna, Tranquility, Prajñā and Insight

Regarding meditation, the Chinese term it relates to is *chán nā* (禪那), which comes from the Sanskrit term *dhyāna*. Dhyāna is translated as quiet or calm contemplation. Apart from dhyāna, there is also the Sanskrit term *samādhi*. Samādhi is translated as quietude, stillness etc. The sūtras explain that quietude is “the mind being focused on a single object” (心一境性) **and** “this inner mind-state is sustained” (內心相續). As we will discuss further down, dhyāna and samādhi are specific to certain types of meditative states and do not apply to all meditative states.

In this talk, the word tranquility is used to refer to this state of sustained and sole focus on a single object. This is a level of meditative concentration that can develop true wisdom.

Now we turn to the word *prajñā*, which is often translated as wisdom, but incorporates the concept of insight. The nature of insight is to differentiate and discern. The Sanskrit word is *vipaśyanā*, which is also translated as discernment. Some people misunderstand and think that just having clarity is the same as having discernment or insight. Clarity, or having a clear mind, does not meet the definition of insight as explained in the sūtras. The sūtras say that discernment is, “discernment with righteous contemplation, with deep contemplation, with thorough investigation,

with all pervading refined investigation”. Therefore, the unique quality of insight is the ability to discern and differentiate based on proper and extensive contemplation and investigation. As you will learn in Venerable Yan Rong’s talk, there are different categories and types of prajñā. Here in particular, insight refers to: insight into and realization of emptiness.

Defining Dhyāna and Samādhi

In the bodhisattva practice, as well as the śrāvaka practice, tranquility and insight are in perfect harmony and are inseparable. Thus, both have to be cultivated. When the two are in good balance, they become powerful. Where meditative states possess both concentration and wisdom, the terms dhyāna or samādhi are used as part of their names. For example in the śrāvaka practices you have the Samādhi of Emptiness and the Dhyāna of Ultimate Truth. In the Mahāyāna there are the Śūraṅgama-samādhi and the Tathāgata-dhyāna.

So remember, dhyāna and samādhi only refer to special meditative states where there is both concentration and wisdom.

Distinction between Wisdom and Concentration

Do note, even though concentration and wisdom are inseparable, they are not identical. From the perspective of practice, there is a difference between the characteristics and function of the two. This can be clearly understood by looking at the practices of the Three Progressive Trainings and the Six Pāramitās. These two sets of practices distinguish between meditation and wisdom. In the Three Progressive Trainings you have the trainings of morality, meditation and wisdom. In the Six Pāramitās you have generosity, morality, tolerance, diligence, meditation, and prajñā. So you see, the aspects of meditation and wisdom are clearly separated.

For a practitioner of Buddhism, it is imperative to understand clearly the distinction between concentration and wisdom, otherwise one will mistake concentration for wisdom. You may think, what’s the big deal? Let me share with you a story to highlight the importance of knowing the difference.

In a treatise, there was a monk who practiced diligently and he gained the fourth dhyāna. In this state, everything ceases temporarily. His defilements were so subdued he mistook them to be eradicated and concluded he had become an enlightened arhat. However, at the time of his death, he could see his next life, which is not possible for an arhat. This led him to think that the Buddha’s teachings were false, so anger and resentment arose and he denounced the practice. As a result of the intense negativity of his mind state at the point of death, he fell into the lower realms and lost the human form. This is such a pity!

Concentration and wisdom are central to all Buddhist practices, that is why the *Samḍhinirmocana Sūtra* says, “one should know that all the virtues of the śrāvakas, or the bodhisattvas, or the buddhas, as well as the virtues of the mundane and supramundane world, are the result of attaining śamatha [tranquility] and vipaśyanā [insight]”.

When cultivating concentration and wisdom, we must know the proper order. Hence the verse says,

修習止觀者	<i>When cultivating tranquility and insight,</i>
應先修習止	<i>One should first cultivate tranquility,</i>
止成觀乃成	<i>With its accomplishment then insight is possible,</i>
次第法如是	<i>This is the order for accomplishing these practices.</i>

Here, Venerable Yinshun now uses the terms tranquility and insight instead of concentration and wisdom in the verse. This indicates that it is a specific state of concentration and a certain type of wisdom that is

actually the focus of our practice.

“When cultivating tranquility and insight, we should first cultivate tranquility”. This is not to say that one must fully accomplish tranquility first, and then move on to practice insight. In fact, practices of tranquility and insight are mutually beneficial. Before achievement of tranquility, there are different kinds of insight or wisdom, such as the wisdom from listening and learning the Dharma, and the wisdom from contemplation of the Dharma teachings. What this really means is that we must make good progress in the cultivation of tranquility, then the development of insight practice will be well supported. Without a good foundation in tranquility, the cultivation of insight will be flawed.

In the sūtras, each time they talk about tranquility and insight or dhyāna and prajñā, it is always the case that they will first explain dhyāna and then comes prajñā. When we actually cultivate tranquility and insight, you will understand for yourself how these practices follow a natural sequential order. Given this order, I will first talk about the cultivation of the dhyāna pāramitā and then cover the prajñā pāramitā.

3. Dhyāna Pāramitā

Benefits of Attaining Tranquility

The half-verse that marks the beginning of the dhyāna pāramitā is:

依住堪能性 *Tranquility gives rise to strength and endurance,*
能成所作事 *And one courageously progresses to complete all tasks.*

First and foremost, with anything we undertake we need to understand what its underlying aims are, what is its purpose. As the verse indicates, the practice of meditation will result in the attainment of tranquility.

When the mind is able to remain focused, concentrated and tranquil, it can accomplish many meaningful and beneficial tasks. Therefore, there is a Chinese saying, “With a mind that is trained to stay focused, then nothing is impossible!” This is not hard to understand. Just reflect on when you have carried out tasks with a relatively focused mind compared to when your mind is scattered or half-hearted. Which scenario usually yields the better result?

When the cultivation of tranquility achieves the state where the mind calmly settles on the mental object AND is able to sustain this focus for a long time, then bliss and peace is initiated in the body and mind. The body and mind becomes enlivened, while being at ease. It becomes filled with the strength to do good and depart from evil. This also highlights the problem of our mundane state. Normally the minds of ordinary beings are in a scattered state. Consequently, the strength to resist temptations, the discipline to tame afflictions, and the will to undertake good deeds are all very weak. It always seems that the intention is there, but the energy is missing to follow through. This situation also applies to the physical body. Even in times of good health and fitness, there will be instances where we feel weak and irritated, similar to the situation of having chronic illness, where the body and mind feel burdened, sluggish, and feeble with no energy. It is as if we are rowing a boat against the current and it is taxing on both our body and mind.

When cultivating tranquility, if we can abide in right meditation, we can then rely on this calm and settled mind to develop strength and endurance. This means from the physical and mental bliss we experience from tranquility, the body and mind develops energy and diligence. As a result, things that were thought to be impossible and unbearable become viewed in a totally different light. For practitioners, the attainment of tranquility allows the body and mind to develop bliss, peace, virtues and even superhuman powers. With these qualities we can then delve deep into the

Dharma, and become more adept in undertaking the many deeds that benefit sentient beings. So I hope you can start to see the importance of cultivating tranquility.

Five Obstacles and Eight Remedies

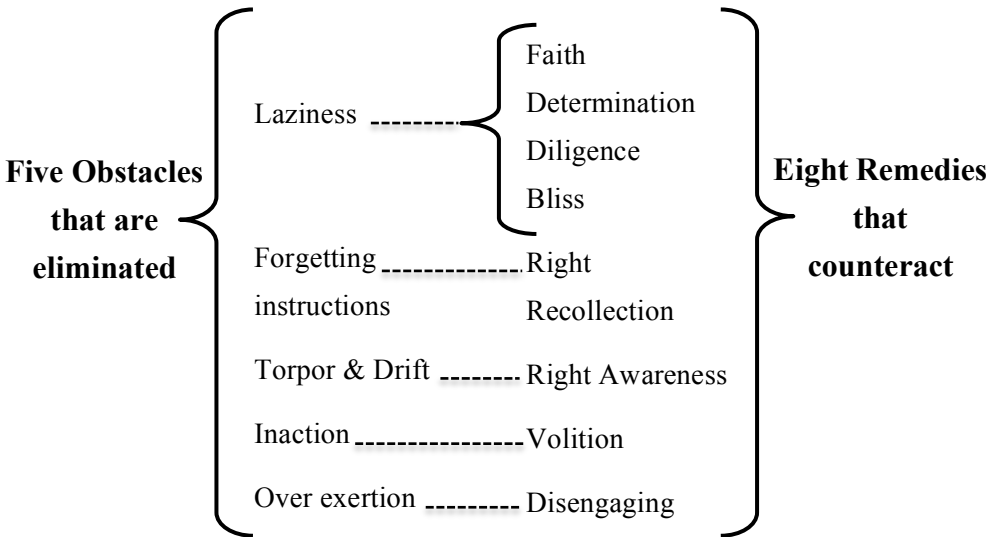
Now I am sure most of you will know practicing meditation is not without its obstacles. That is why the half-verse says:

由滅五過失 *For the sake of eliminating the five obstacles,*
勤修八斷行 *One diligently practices the eight remedies.*

Here, I would like to point out that in Chapter 4 of *The Way to Buddhahood*, it talks about the preliminary practices as part of the process of practicing meditation and wisdom. That followed the important stepped process of training in the precepts, meditation and wisdom, and there is a discussion about obstacles and how to overcome them. The obstacles that are discussed here in Chapter 5 are not the same as the obstacles in the preliminary stages discussed in Chapter 4. Here, it is assumed the practitioner has already practiced meditation for a while and faces specific obstacles that prevent them from attaining tranquility. There are five key obstacles of interest, and they are laziness, forgetting the instructions, torpor and drift, inaction, and over-exertion.

Fortunately, there are eight remedies that can counteract these five obstacles. The eight remedies are faith, determination, diligence, bliss, recollection, right awareness, volition, and disengaging. When the five obstacles are eliminated, the mind will attain tranquility. Here is a diagram that shows which remedy is used for which obstacle.

Diagram 2. Five Obstacles and the Eight Remedies



Now let us look these remedies and how they overcome the various obstacles. Do take note of this because it is directly related to our practice. It is like a check-sheet for us to check on our meditation, recognize when these obstacles arise and how to deal with them.

Obstacle of Laziness and Its Four Remedies

The first obstacle is covered in the half-verse:

懈怠為定障 *Laziness is an obstacle to the practice of meditation,*
 信勤等對治 *Faith, determination, diligence and bliss are the*
 remedies.

I cannot stress this enough. Laziness is the GREATEST obstacle to the practice of meditation! Why? Because laziness is the lack of resolve to undertake good deeds. It includes having a half-hearted attitude and being slack. This will inhibit us from being diligent.

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Tranquility is a superior virtue that can only be accomplished with practice. This requires faith, patience, continual and regular practice in order to succeed. Therefore, from start to finish, laziness is the greatest obstacle to the practice of meditation. If we are half-hearted or slack about practicing meditation, we will never get it! The only way around this is to apply the remedies of faith, determination, diligence and bliss. That means all four must be put to work, you do not just apply one or another. Here is how they work.

Remember laziness obstructs diligence, therefore diligence can also counteract laziness. In terms of practicing meditation, diligence is a longing to practice it. The mind becomes determined to cultivate meditation and attain the virtues of meditation, the determination should be so strong that failure is not an option!

So where does this deep longing and determination come from? It comes from faith. This faith is a firm belief in the virtues of meditation. Among these virtues, it is important to have strong faith in the bliss and ease that arise in the state of tranquility.

This state of bliss is where the mind and body becomes courageous, and it causes the body and mind to enter into a new state of being. Apart from faith in these virtues, we also have to believe that meditation can be accomplished with practice. This faith also includes the conviction that we ourselves can really practice and succeed. When we have this strong faith, it becomes the foundation for determination. With determination we will practice diligently and not be lazy. Laziness will affect us throughout all stages of practice. It gets more subtle as we advance. At the beginning it is very obvious and we need to pay special attention to this, otherwise our practice will never really take off.

Obstacle of Forgetfulness and the Remedy of Right Recollection

正念曾習緣 *Right recollection connects to familiar objects,*
令心不餘散 *And causes the mind to not wander elsewhere,*
明記不忘念 *Clearly recalling [the object] and not forgetting it,*
安住而明顯 *Calmly settle [on the object] and maintain clarity.*

The minds of sentient beings are normally in a state of scatteredness or torpidity. When it is alert and clear, it is often scattered and chasing many objects. When the mind is calm it tends to become torpid and fall asleep. A mind that is torpid lacks clarity and is weak without power. A mind that is clear, alert but scattered is like a flame in the wind that flickers about, which is little use. That is why we should cultivate meditation.

When cultivating tranquility, the main aim is to settle the mind onto a single mental object, keeping it calm and also clear. To do so we need to rely on right recollection. Right recollection causes the mind to latch onto a single mental object, just like a rope that binds the mind to the object so that it does not wander off elsewhere.

The Mental Object for Meditation

Now when we talk about mental objects for the purpose of meditation, it cannot be just any object. Object means a mental image of something that was previously encountered, so it is a past familiar object. It cannot be something that is pure fantasy and conjured up in your mind. For example, if you are using the method of recollecting a buddha as your meditation practice, then first thing is to find an image of a buddha you like. This could be from a picture, statue etc. Then you observe that image carefully and thoroughly. Next when actually practicing your meditation, bring up the mental image of that buddha. Make that buddha's image appear in your mind. This is what is meant by "a past familiar object" that becomes

your mental object of focus. The process is the same if you use the method of recollecting impurity, or light etc. If you use an imaginary object that you think up yourself, your practice to develop tranquility will not be successful.

How Right Recollection Counteracts Forgetfulness

Right recollection counteracts the fault of forgetting the noble teachings. Noble teachings refer to the instructions and expositions on the Dharma by the Buddha, bodhisattvas, arhats and great teachers. This also includes the instructions on meditation. When we forget the instructions, it also means we lose our way in terms of practice. By taking the noble teachings as the object of focus, each thought stays with the teachings and does not forget them. This prevents the mind from turning elsewhere or wandering off. By not forgetting the teachings, we can apply them during the meditation practice. For example, when obstacles arise, we can recall the instructions and apply the remedies as needed. Gradually the mind will settle down as we become more skillful in our meditation. But remember, a mind that is tranquil must have both clarity and focus with regard to the mental object. If you fall in to the situation where there is focus and no clarity of the mental object, the mind can lose interest and become torpid.

Some Misunderstandings Regarding the Need for an Object

There is also another fallacy to be aware of. Some people think that when I practice, I do not behold any object. I do not differentiate. The mind does not need to settle onto a single object, and yet I can still practice and make achievements in meditation. This is obviously a misunderstanding! Even if they do not attach to any image and their minds do not differentiate, they still need to have a level of understanding towards their practice. Only then can they single-mindedly undertake the practice. So in their case, the practice becomes the mind's object of focus. Take, for

example, some Chan Buddhist practitioners; they bring to mind the question, “who is recollecting the buddha?” Or “who is carrying around this corpse?” With these questions they give rise to a great ball of doubt. This method is slightly different to what has been discussed so far, but the aim is the same: to cause the mind to settle and focus onto one point, and weaken the influence of many other discursive thoughts. So although there is no image for an object, it is now replaced with a question. Do you understand?

Criteria for the Mental Object

The mental object of focus chosen for meditation is not fixed for everyone. But at the same time it cannot be any old object. There are two main criteria determining what objects can be used. So the verse says:

聖說是所緣 *The sages teach that this object of focus,*
能淨惑障者 *Must be able to tame and remove defilements,*
或順於正理 *It also accords with the ultimate Truth,*
能向於出離 *And is able to direct one towards liberation.*

The first criterion is that the object must be able to tame and/or eradicate defilements. Meditation is achieved through the practice of removing defilement, so if an object is able to help you subdue your defilements and stop them from arising, this is an object that meets this criterion. Focusing on such an object will help you to develop right meditation. Such objects can include impure objects that help some people to detach from lust and desire. Another object is compassion, which counteracts anger and hatred and so on. If an object does the reverse and stimulates or increases your afflictions and desires, such as sensual form, enemies, meaningless things and so on, then these objects will lead you astray, and you will be very lucky if you do not go crazy!

The second criterion is that the object must accord with the righteous

doctrines. There are five objects that fit this criterion. These objects are the Five Aggregates, the Eighteen Elements, the Twelve Fields, dependent origination, and knowing what is the true cause and what is not—these are the five types of objects that accord with the righteous doctrines and are able to eliminate ignorance regarding the Truth.

Objects of focus can be both mundane and supramundane. Objects that are most worthy of being adopted in our meditation are those that can direct us towards liberation and the ending of our defilements. In terms of the supramundane object, the one that can end defilement is the principle of no self, the teaching that all dharmas are empty in nature. In the Mahāyāna the most common objects of focus are the breath and the Buddha.

Obstacles of Torpor and Drift, and the Remedy of Right Awareness

覺了沈與掉 *Being alert to the existence of [subtle] torpor or drift,*
正知不散亂 *Rely on right awareness to prevent [the mind being] scattered.*

At this stage of our meditation, with the application of right recollection, the mind is drawn together and settles on the object of focus. Here, we need to rely on right awareness to eliminate the faults of torpor or drift. The torpor and drift we are talking about here is NOT the same as the very coarse type of drowsiness and excitement at the beginning levels of practice. At the start of our meditation practice, the monkey mind wanders all over the place or falls into a dim and lax state. These coarse and intense faults are totally not in accord with the cultivation of tranquility and they are easy to detect. These are not the torpor and drift we are talking about here. What we are talking about here is the state where recollection has settled the mind onto the object, but one still needs

to be “alert” to subtle “torpor and drift” because they still prevent you from attaining tranquility.

Drift belongs to the defilement of greed. It is an attachment to pleasurable objects. When it arises, the mind gets carried away by distractions and starts drifting off with them; hence I have used the word “drift”. Sometimes it is translated as excitement or scatteredness.

Torpor belongs to the defilement of ignorance and is a feeling of sluggishness of both the body and mind. This weakens the mind’s ability to focus on the object and the clarity of the object starts to fade.

To detect these subtle occurrences of torpor or drift, we need to rely on right awareness, that is, to be alert. If one fails to be alert, they may think that their meditation is stable when it really is not. The result is that they will stall in their practice and will not progress further. If this persists, then over time they will even regress in their meditation practice. Therefore this issue is very important! One of the renowned Chan masters of our present era use to talk about a pool of dead water, meaning that the students appear to be still, but there is no life to their meditation, it is not getting them to the desired outcome. This is not an ideal situation to be in for a meditation practitioner. So how do we detect subtle torpor or drift?

As long as right recollection settles the mind onto the object, and the mind continues to recollect the object, this constant attentiveness and care will give rise to “right awareness”. Then, when the first signs of subtle torpor or drift begins to develop, this awareness will help you to detect that the object becomes not so steady and focus is a little out. At this point of your awareness, you investigate the object and bring it back to clarity. Sort of like an SLR camera—when the vision is blurry, you turn the ring to focus and make the vision clear again. Another sign of subtle torpor and drift is when the mind becomes weak and its energy and vigor is diminishing. At

this point, one then investigates the quality of the mind, not the object! You apply the necessary actions to invigorate the mind so that it becomes strong again. In this way, by recognising subtle torpor and drift early and apply the proper remedies, you can prevent the mind from becoming scattered and unfocused.

Obstacle of Inaction and the Remedy of Volition

為斷而作行 *For the purpose of eliminating [subtle torpor/drift] one exerts effort,*

切勿隨彼轉 *Being careful not to be lead away by them.*

Having become aware of the existence of subtle torpor or drift, there is the danger that we just let them be, or do not put in effort to deal with them. This could be because the torpor or drift is more intense and not easily eliminated. This fault of “inaction” requires volition to counteract it. Volition works to stimulate the mind and its object so that we exert effort to deal with the torpor or drift that arises. What type of effort is required?

If torpor and drift are not so intense, when the signs of torpor arise you should apply methods to enliven the mind so that it becomes clearer and stronger, or you can practice visualization of wholesome objects to energize the mind. If the signs of drift arise then calm the mind so that it relaxes, or use the practice of settling the mind to prevent it from drifting further. When torpor and drift is more intense, you can consider applying special methods such as recollection of light and luminosity, or recollection of your bodhi mind or using other delightful yet virtuous objects. Once the torpor and drift is eliminated, you revert back to the original object of focus and continue to settle the mind on that object and maintain clarity.

Obstacle of Over Exertion and the Remedy of Disengaging

滅時正直行 *After eliminating [torpor and drift] continue practicing directly,*

斷於功行失 *This avoids the fault of over exertion.*

After you detect subtle torpor or drift and have applied a method to eliminate it, the mind regains stability and focus. At this time we should know to let go and stop exerting effort. You just simply allow the mind to steadily continue with the practice. This is called disengaging. This is like riding a horse. When the horse veers to the left, you pull the reins to the right. When the horse adjusts back to the centre, you disengage from pulling the reins and let loose, just holding gently and allowing the horse to travel straight. If you keep pulling to the right, then the horse will start to veer right. Now do you see the fault of over exertion?

Volition helps you to engage in effort that brings the mind back into focus and clarity, while disengaging helps prevent over exertion that will lead the mind to lose focus and clarity. After all the faults are eliminated and there is no over exertion, this indicates that the mind will soon attain tranquility. So you are almost there! Just need a little more patience!

Summary

This brings the explanation on the five obstacles and eight remedies to a close. Let us quickly summarize what we have discussed. At an earlier stage, when laziness takes hold, we need to apply the four remedies. These are faith in the benefits of meditation, which then spurs on determination and diligence to work towards the goal of meditative bliss. Next there is right recollection to help us recollect the object and the teachings so we can draw on them in our practice. Then there is right awareness to help us guard against subtle torpor and drift. Finally, there is volition and disengaging to help us know when to exert effort and when to

let go so that we can guide the mind towards stability, focus and clarity.

This whole process of meditation is encapsulated in the nine stages towards tranquility. This is the path that all meditation practitioners travel, so let us go through these nine stages and take note of the important areas for our practice.

Nine Stages Towards Tranquility

Venerable Yinshun summarizes the nine stages in two verses:

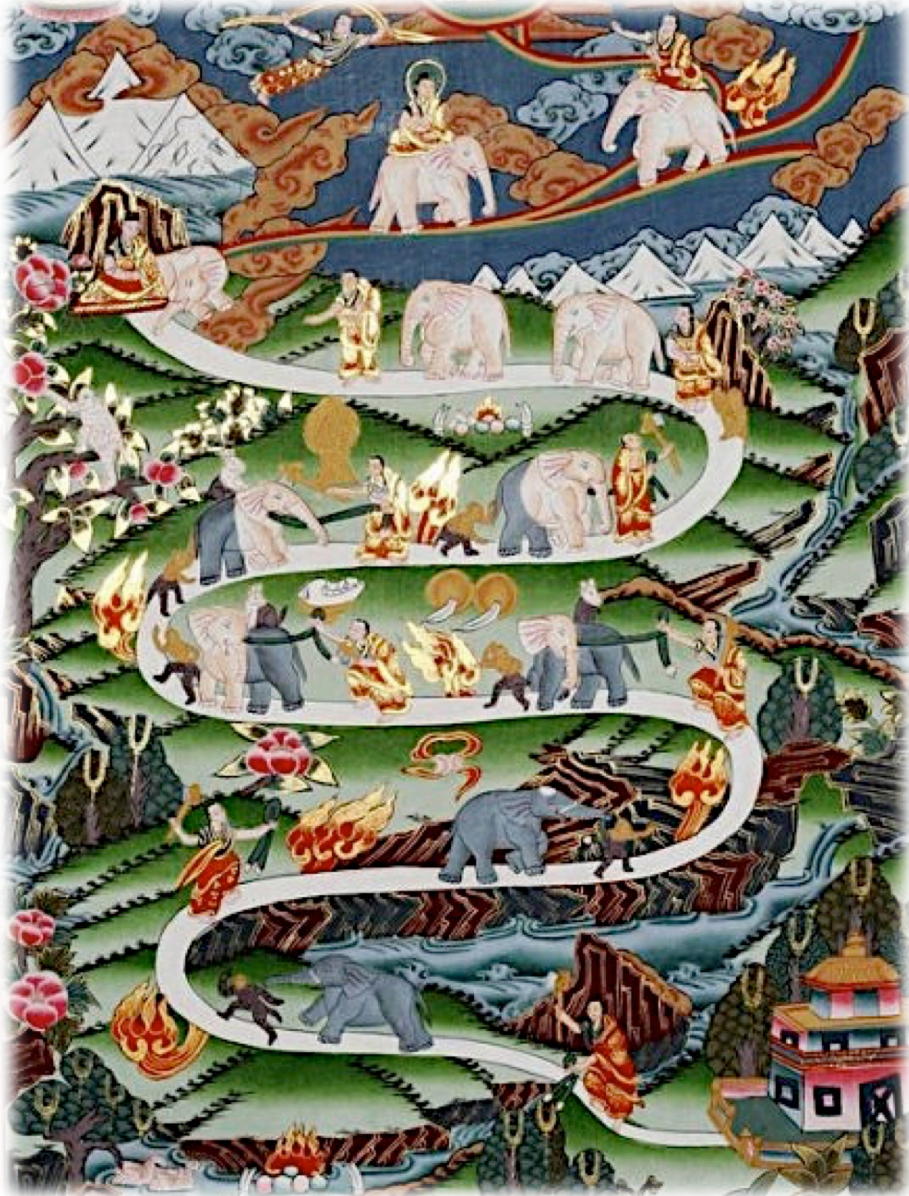
內住亦續住	<i>There are the stages of turning inward and continuation,</i>
安住復近住	<i>Then the stages of calming and staying nearby,</i>
調順及寂靜	<i>Next the stages of taming and stillness,</i>
次最極寂靜	<i>After that is the stage of deep stillness,</i>
專注於一趣	<i>Then the stage of single-minded focus, and</i>
等持無作行	<i>The stage of equipoise with no more exertion.</i>
聖說止方便	<i>When the sages teach methods for tranquility,</i>
不越九住心	<i>All fall within the scope of the nine stages towards tranquility.</i>

Diagram 3, over, is a common picture used to depict the nine stages.

Venerable Yinshun captures all nine stages beautifully in the two verses. These nine stages cover the initial point of drawing the mind together up until just prior to attaining tranquility. Sometimes you will see it as ten stages and the tenth stage is the attainment of tranquility.

Diagram 3. Nine Stages Towards Tranquility

(Source: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_631c31220102e7cg.html)



Stage 1—Turning Inward

We start the journey of meditation at the monastery, which represents listening to the Dharma and learning the right teachings. As you develop your understanding and faith, then you develop the determination to practice and progress. This is part of the first stage of turning inward to look at the mind and practice meditation. Normally, our mind tends to wander outwards. Confucians call this letting the mind go wild, just like chickens and dogs that are let loose and don't know when to return home. At this stage of turning inward, the aim is to bring the mind to settle onto an inner object of focus and not to wander externally.

See in the picture the flame? That represents the amount of effort that is needed. The elephant is the mind and the dark monkey represents excitement that distracts the elephant to wander. Note here the elephant is all grey, representing the defiled mind with torpor and no concentration at all.

Stage 2—Continuation

After practicing for a while, the racing mind slows down somewhat. Only then can the mind settle on to the mental object without wandering off too quickly. To get here, we need to continually practice by using recollection to bind the mind to the object.

In the picture, you can see that the flame of effort is still strong. At this point the five desires can still distract the mind, but the elephant is no longer running after the monkey wildly and the top of the elephant's head has turned white. The monkey also becomes slightly lighter in color. This reflects the reduction in torpor and excitement; in other words, calm has begun to develop.

Stage 3—Calming

Even though the mind can continue to settle on the object, there are still intermittent periods where recollection is lost and the mind wanders off. However, with continued practice, in the stage of calming we are able to immediately become aware and quickly draw the mind back to the object of focus before it wanders too far off. Only after reaching this stage can the mind be regarded as settling down.

In the picture, you can see that the elephant is now closer to the monk and the rope of recollection is now fastened onto the elephant. The elephant looks at the monk, symbolising the process of recognising distractions. The flame of effort is still strong, but the calmness increases, as seen in the white face of the elephant. Here, because calm is developing, the picture also has a rabbit. This rabbit symbolizes subtle torpor; as calm develops we sometimes fall into a state of “spacing out” and we must recognize this potential pitfall and not mistake it for calm.

Stage 4—Staying Nearby

Next is the stage of staying nearby. This is where your skill is even more developed. The mind is able to maintain longer periods of time where there are no distracting thoughts, and it does not wander off. This is because as soon as a distracting thought arises, you are able to become aware and take swift action to subdue it. In this way, the mind is able to settle onto the object of focus and not wander too far away; hence, it is called staying nearby.

In the picture, you can see that the elephant is almost half white. This means the training of the mind is approaching midway towards tranquility. The flame of effort is still strong, but the rope begins to loosen around the elephant’s neck because it is more obedient. It stays closer to the monk.

Stages 1 to 4 Draw the Mind to the Object

In the preceding four stages, the work to be done is really just to draw the mind towards the mental object and break the habit of being scattered and wild. So these four stages reflect the effort of calming the mind. In these stages, although defilements are not mentioned, the ten distractions are still there. The ten distractions are the five desires of forms, sounds, aromas, tastes, textures, and the three poisons of greed, hatred and ignorance, along with the male and female form. These can cause the mind to wander off. When the concentration of the mind gets very strong it can be used in the next two stages to begin addressing these defilements and subduing them.

Stage 5—Taming

At the fifth stage, the mind has begun to settle down and the practitioner comes to realize the virtue of concentration and understand the faults of “desires”. Therefore, the ten distractions no longer entice the mind to wander off. With the power of a settled mind, our desires are subdued and the mind becomes gentle and tamed.

In the picture you can see that the excited monkey is no longer leading the elephant and instead it is the practitioner that leads the elephant. Effort and diligence to keep settling the mind on the object is still required here, but the mind is no longer influenced by the external distractions.

Stage 6—Stillness

Although the enticements from external objects are tamed, the internal enticements are not. These internal distractions are the five obstructions, inappropriate thoughts and emotions. The five obstructions are greed, hatred, torpor, drift and doubt. Note this is not the same as the five obstacles I spoke about earlier. Inappropriate thoughts and emotions are

usually about our country, family, home town, immortality, sensual desires, rage, harm and so on. These internal distractions can be tamed with the virtues gained when the mind achieves stillness. At this stage, the mind is still; however, this stillness is like the stillness of the night where there is no sound at all. It is not the stillness of nirvana.

In the picture, you can see that the elephant now follows the monk obediently and the monk doesn't even have to look at the elephant. Calm develops even more and the rope of recollection is at the ready, but only if necessary. This implies that at this stage, our ability to maintain focus on the object should be much longer.

Stages 5 & 6 Tame External and Internal Distractions

In stages 5 and 6, the external and internal distractions are dealt with, but they are not eradicated permanently. Like grass under a rock, they can still grow back when the rock is removed.

Stage 7—Deep Stillness

From stage 6 you move into the stage of deep stillness; here, the concentration of the mind is powerful enough that when any inappropriate thought is about to arise, it is immediately done away with before it even takes hold. Therefore, in this stage of deep stillness, it is very difficult for defilements to arise in the mind.

In the picture you see the monk is walking behind the elephant, this reflects the mind being tamed and being allowed to continue forward with little exertion. The rabbit of subtle torpor is gone because, at this stage, we only need to keep watch for subtle distractions, but otherwise not much exertion is needed. This is like a shepherd looking after his flock from a distance.

Stage 8—Single-minded Focus

When one reaches the eighth stage of single-minded focus, the mind is now settled and no longer disturbed by the internal and external unwholesome factors. The mind approaches the stage where it is well balanced, moving straightforward, focused and clear. The mind can settle onto the object continually and without any interruptions. It does this in a natural and spontaneous manner.

In the picture, you can see that the elephant is all white now and the monk need not look at the mind, it just follows obediently. The monkey is gone completely, symbolising the full taming of distractions.

Stage 9—Equipoise with No More Exertion

Last is the stage of equipoise with no more exertion. This stage is where single-minded focus is even more advanced. Your skill is mature and no longer requires additional effort; there is “no more exertion”, yet focus is spontaneous, natural and continually settles on the object without being disturbed. When the practice of tranquility reaches this stage, you are almost about to achieve tranquility.

In the picture, this is shown as the monk sitting in meditation and the elephant resting beside him.

Attaining Tranquility (Stage 10)

When the mind attains the ninth stage of spontaneously resting, by maintaining this clarity and focus, you will attain tranquility as the final result of passing all nine stages. This is reflected in the monk riding on the elephant. After attaining tranquility, there are two options. Can you see the two rainbow paths in the diagram? One is the worldly path, where further worldly mediation is practiced and you move into the deeper

meditative states. The other path is to use the focus, clarity and power of the mind to begin insight meditation to permanently cut off defilements with the sword of wisdom and gain liberation. This is the path of the sages. This is seen in the picture of the monk riding the elephant back down the rainbow to face the defilements and destroy them for good.

Marks of Attaining Tranquility

So, if the ninth stage is not tranquility, how do you know when you have attained it? Venerable Yinshun tells us that the attainment of tranquility must have these following qualities: bliss and joy is able to arise in both the body and mind. At first there is a sensation of rapture that fills the whole body to its core. After the physical rapture subsides, a wonderful and subtle sensation of bliss and joy settles in and flows throughout the body. This gives the body and mind stamina and stimulates diligence. The mind easily and effortlessly settles onto the object of focus. The presence of all these qualities marks the attainment of tranquility.

From here, after deciding to exit from the state of tranquility, whether you are walking, standing, sitting or lying down, there will be a lingering force from the bliss and tranquility. It makes you feel as if you are still in the state of tranquility. If you then focus the mind without any distractions, you can enter tranquility very quickly and the bliss of body and mind will arise. The sensation of bliss and joy continues and becomes stronger with each entry into tranquility.

Remember the white elephant; when tranquility is reached and defilements are subdued, this indicates that the mind is aligned with purity, so unwholesome tendencies should not arise so easily. Sometimes you hear stories of so-and-so who claims they have reached such-and-such a dhyāna. But then, as soon as they get off the cushion, they get into a heated argument with someone. This brings into question whether they

have attained the type of tranquility the Buddha intended. There is right tranquility and deviant tranquility; always observe which path you are on.

Summary

So these are the nine stages towards tranquility and the marks of tranquility. Everyone travels this path in their meditation practice, however it will vary for different people. The duration of each stage and the methods and remedies to apply will depend on each person's spiritual capacity and habitual tendencies. The importance of knowing this path is that you should reflect constantly and objectively to see where you are at, and what else you need to do, in order to progress. Otherwise you may be applying effort when you should relax or allowing subtle distractions to develop when you should take action and so forth. Use this like your GPS. Remember that Venerable Yinshun's teachings are meant to be used, not just a pretty picture to look at.

Given the time constraints, I will end the talk on the dhyāna pāramitā here. Next we move into the exciting and challenging pāramitā of prajñā!

4. Prajñāpāramitā

Defining Prajñā's Virtues

The verse that marks the start of this section declares outright:

般若波羅蜜	<i>Prajñāpāramitā,</i>
最尊最第一	<i>Is most noble and superior!</i>
解脫之所依	<i>Liberation depends upon it,</i>
諸佛所從出	<i>All buddhas are born from it.</i>

So what exactly is the meaning behind prajñāpāramitā that makes it so

praiseworthy and great? In the Buddha-dharma there are countless virtues, and each one has unique qualities that are worthy of praise. However, prajñā undoubtedly has a special characteristic that makes it especially important. This special characteristic is the essence of the Buddha-dharma itself.

Possessing prajñā denotes the difference between an ordinary being and a sage, as well as the difference between worldly dharmas that are defiled and the dharmas that are beyond this world, which are undefiled. Without prajñā there would be no liberated sages and no undefiled virtues. Therefore, prajñā is the precise quality that makes the Buddha-dharma superior to worldly teachings. Prajñā is the core foundation of the noble practices that can lead to liberation; that is why the verse says “Liberation depends upon it”, meaning that the sages of all Three Vehicle, whether they are an arhat, pratyekabuddha or a buddha, all depend on prajñā to gain liberation from the cycle of life and death.

So, given that prajñā is the mother of the sages from the Two Vehicles and also the buddhas and bodhisattvas, does it differ among the different vehicles? Well, this will depend on which perspective we view prajñā. From the broad sense of giving rise to liberation, then prajñā is a practice commonly cultivated by all three vehicles. There are two common similes used to bring across this message. They are the simile of space and the three types of animals crossing a river.

The simile of space tells us that from the perspective of realising the nature of emptiness, what the śrāvaka practitioners realize is like the space in the cavity of a single pore. What the buddhas and bodhisattvas realize is the space found in the universe. So from this viewpoint, there is no difference in the essence of what is realized. Space is space, whether big or small.

With the simile of the rabbit, horse and elephant crossing a river, only the elephant can touch the riverbed. This highlights the difference in depth of realization between the practitioners of the Three Vehicle, but no matter whether they touch the riverbed or not, they all enter the same river and make it across that river to the other shore.

So from this broad meaning of *prajñā*, the wisdom of insight among the different sages can have differences in terms of the depth of penetration, but the core essence is the same. However, if we look at *prajñā* from the profound meaning, only bodhisattvas possess *prajñā*. The simile here is a woman who marries a king and gives birth to the crown prince. This means that the mother's noble status depends on the child. Based on this, *prajñā* must accord with great bodhi, in order to give birth to a crown prince. This means *prajñā* is unique because only its child, the crown prince, will become king in future. Bodhisattvas born from *prajñā* will become buddhas in future. Do you understand? This *prajñā* has great compassion as its motivation and is adorned by the virtues of the first five *pāramitās*. So this queen has great compassion, generosity, morality, patience, diligence, mastery over the mind and wisdom. With all these excellent qualities, *prajñā* is able to embrace and guide all virtues so that they become directed towards Buddhahood. As such, *prajñā* is solely possessed by the bodhisattvas; it brings about Buddhahood.

Instructions on Developing *Prajñā*

Prajñā is important to all who want to attain liberation. So how do we go about getting this thing called *prajñā*? Venerable Yinshun uses the following verse to bring this instruction.

現證由修得 *True realization relies on the accomplishment of practice,*

修復由思聞 *Practice in turn relies on contemplation and learning;*

善友及多聞 *Good spiritual guides and broad learning,*

實為慧所依 *Are truly the foundations for cultivating wisdom.*

Regarding *prajñā*, there are two main categories. One is the transcendental *prajñā* and the other is the mundane *prajñā*. True *prajñā* is the “realized” *prajñā* that comes from practice—this means *prajñā* is something you personally experience. When the Buddha experienced the Truth and attained *prajñā*, it was something that the world had not known about before. So, naturally, there was no word in the worldly language that can truly reflect it. So what should the Buddha call it?

In Sanskrit, *prajñā* means knowledge and also means wisdom that can discern. The Buddha was very skillful. He taught and guided sentient beings to use this discerning nature of mundane wisdom and gradually develop their wisdom towards the profound. Ultimately, practitioners will be able to surpass the mundane wisdom and realize the Truth, just as he did. So this realization is initiated by relying on the discerning nature of wisdom. Even though the Buddha’s realization was not something that had existed in the world before, the Buddha taught us to rely on mundane *prajñā* to achieve transcendental *prajñā*. So this realization of the Buddha was consequently named *prajñā*.

The Three Wisdoms: Learning, Contemplation, Practice

It is important to bear in mind that this transcendental *prajñā*, which is attained from practice, is not something that worldly wisdom, knowledge or intelligence can be compared to. Transcendental or true *prajñā* depends on the wisdom from the accomplishment of practice. This wisdom from practice is the wisdom of insight that is supported by concentration. This

means meditative practices are required to train the mind to be able to focus for extended periods of time, without any distractions. So practice includes both samādhi and vipaśyanā practices.

When embarking on samādhi and vipaśyanā practices, we must not go about this in a disorganized manner. “Practice” does not mean to practice blindly. These practices must be supported by the wisdom of contemplation. This means that the object of focus for the practice of insight is chosen only after deep contemplation and investigation of the Dharma. In other words, we need to understand clearly the Dharma’s meaning and instructions, be aware of the different stages and methods and so forth.

This wisdom of contemplation, in turn, must have a solid foundation in the wisdom of learning. Nāgārjuna teaches that “learning” means “to learn from the buddhas, or from the disciples, or from the scriptures”. So some of you should now see, this progress is no other than the Three Wisdoms. Starting with the mundane wisdom of learning, then onto contemplation, then practice and finally transforming into the transcendental wisdom of realization or true prajñā.

Three Wisdoms and Three Prajñās

Thus, a more complete presentation of this path should include the final stage of realization. In total, there are four types of wisdom: the wisdom of learning, contemplation, practice and realization. These four types of wisdom are related to the three prajñās. Sometimes you will come across the term three prajñās, which are linguistic prajñā, investigative prajñā and true prajñā. Table 6 shows how the four wisdoms match up with the three prajñās.

Table 6. Matching the Three Prajñās with the Four Wisdoms

Three Prajñās	Four Wisdoms
Linguistic Prajñā	Wisdom of Learning
Investigative Prajñā	Wisdom of Contemplation
True Prajñā	Wisdom of Practice
True Prajñā	Wisdom of Realization

The wisdom of realization is the true prajñā that is realized and experience. It is absolutely beyond description. The wisdom of practice aligns to investigative prajñā, while the wisdom of learning corresponds to linguistic prajñā. As for the wisdom of contemplation it has characteristics of both linguistic prajñā and investigative prajñā. The reason is because it can either rely on language or not rely on language.

Importance of Good Spiritual Guides and Broad Learning

This path of progress may seem straight forward: learn, contemplate and practice. However, as you all will be aware, it is not easy to cultivate prajñā on your own. That is why the second half of the verse says:

*善友及多聞 Good spiritual guides and broad learning,
實為慧所依 Are truly the foundations for cultivating wisdom.*

Associating with good spiritual guides and wise people, in the stage of learning, is very important. The ultimate good spiritual guides are the

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buddhas and great bodhisattvas; however, given our present situation we may need to consider lowering that standard just a little. In Chapter 2 of *The Way to Buddhahood*, Venerable Yinshun outlines the five qualities of a good spiritual guide. These qualities are the virtue of realization, the virtue of teaching, possessing knowledge of the true Dharma, having compassion and the skill of eloquence. We don't have time to cover them here, but you can get more details in the English translation if you have a copy.

Here I would like to clarify the meaning of broad learning. There are two important points to remember about broad learning. First, broad learning does not equate to having extensive knowledge of everything. According to the Śrāvakayāna teachings, learning about impermanence and non-self is broad learning. Therefore it is said, “if one lives for a century yet does not understand the teaching on birth and death, then it would be better to live for a day and understand this teaching”. Within the Mahāyāna teachings, broad learning is to learn about the nature of emptiness, no birth and no cessation, just like what is taught in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. Therefore, those with broad learning refer to practitioners that are able to penetrate deep into the Truth. It is these people that we should associate with, as they are truly good spiritual guides.

The other important point is that broad learning includes listening to and reading the Dharma. Among the Three Wisdoms, the wisdom of learning incorporates the Dharma practices of listening to the scriptures, reading and reciting them, explaining the scriptures to others and so on. In other words, these practices rely on language to reveal the Truth. Some practitioners mistakenly think that because the ultimate truth is beyond words, therefore the wisdom of learning is redundant in the cultivation of prajñā. This way of thinking is contrary to the Buddha-dharma and will lead one to drift away from the Buddha's teachings. Even though the wisdom of learning is important and compulsory, it is still only the initial

stage. In the process of developing wisdom, we must rely on the wisdom of learning as our foundation to progress into the wisdom of contemplation, practice and then ultimately attain realization. Without the correct instructions from the wisdom of learning, the latter stages of contemplation and practice would be baseless. That means the practitioner would not know what remedies to apply, which practices are appropriate, and what stage they are at and so forth. Remember earlier I said that practice should not be carried out blindly.

Studying the Prajñā Scriptures

So for us starting on the practice, which scriptures should we study? The verse teaches us that:

般若本無二 *Prajñā is essentially non-dual,*
隨機行有別 *Differences manifest due to different capacities.*
般若諸經論 *All the scriptures and exegeses on prajñā,*
於此最親切 *Are therefore the most close and dear.*

Given that the aim is to develop prajñā, or wisdom, it sort of goes without saying that the Buddha’s teaching on prajñā is the main body of scriptures to study. In the prajñā teachings the Buddha relies on the law of dependent arising to reveal the ultimate nature of all dharmas. By means of learning, contemplating and practicing these prajñā teachings, we are cultivating insight. With true insight, realization can be achieved. From the perspective of the essence of prajñā, which is the actual thing to be realized, this essence is beyond duality. It is without differentiation. What all the great bodhisattvas partially realize and what all the buddhas perfectly realize are one and the same essence. This sameness is described in the scriptures as “breathing through the same nostrils as the buddhas of the ten directions”.

Prajñā Teachings and Practices Have Variations

Since the essence of what is realized is the same, some may assume that the teachings in the prajñā scriptures and the practices to cultivate insight are also the same. This is not the case. The teachings and practices do have variations because the capacities and interests of sentient beings are not identical. So, even though we are all interested in Buddhism, you are not identical to me, and I am not exactly the same as you. The Buddha “accommodated” for our differences when he taught the Dharma. Therefore, within the prajñā teachings there are different teachings and methods available. Even when the Buddha teaches the exact same scripture, because the way you and I think and contemplate are not exactly the same, our understanding and interpretation of the teaching will also differ. This difference will translate into variations in the object of focus, method, sequence and so on for each practitioner. In addition, on account of the way teachers transmit the teachings to disciples and students, this developed into the different schools of Buddhism.

In summary, although the essence of prajñā is beyond duality, given the differences in spiritual capacities, within the Buddha-dharma we can see that there are different teachings to suit different capacities. Moreover on account of the different interpretations for the same teaching, this is why some scriptures have multiple commentaries. These factors contribute to the arising of different schools of training.

Two Truths: Conventional and Ultimate

諸佛依二諦	<i>All buddhas rely on the conventional and ultimate truths</i>
為眾生說法	<i>As a means of teaching the Dharma to sentient beings,</i>
依俗得真諦	<i>Rely on conventional truth to attain the ultimate truth,</i>
依真得解脫	<i>Rely on the ultimate truth to attain liberation.</i>

This verse clearly tells us that “All buddhas rely on the two truths as a

means of teaching the Dharma to sentient beings”. The two truths are the conventional truth and the ultimate truth, which are also called worldly truth and the transcendental truth. You will also hear other names, such as the mundane and supramundane truths. These all refer to the two truths. This teaching on the two truths is the core insight of prajñā.

Conventional Truth

Regarding the worldly truth, conventional truth or mundane truth, it incorporates sentient beings and our physical and mental aspects. It also incorporates the myriad of things in this world that are related to sentient beings, such as the environment. All these are called dharmas. In the minds of sentient beings, material things are perceived to be real objects, and consciousness is a real mental activity. Each dharma, whether material, physiological, or mental, internal or external, has defined cause-and-effect relationships. From these relationships, it is possible to discover principles to harness matter, cultivate and tame the body and mind, and even to govern a country. These principles appear to be true and are universally accepted. All of these fall under the conventional understanding of the world and these are regarded as the conventional truth.

Within the conventional truth there are also varying degrees of profundity. Some conventional truths are deep and harder to understand, while some are easier to understand. For example, material things like wood and stone are objects that everyone can see and easily comprehend. On the other hand, things like atoms and electrons are visible only with the use of scientific instruments, so they are harder to comprehend. Similarly, this present life is what everyone can see and make contact with. But past and future lives are harder to perceive and would require the divine eye in order to see it. Therefore some conventional truths are harder to understand and even accept.

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Nevertheless, common worldly understandings appear so real that most do not question it. However, is this commonly accepted reality the ultimate truth? No it is not. As our knowledge develops, we discover things that disprove what were once thought to be true. For example the atom was thought to be the smallest particle of matter that was unable to be further divided or penetrated. Yet now it is understood that the atom is also a compound of electrons, protons, neutrons, which in turn are made up of quarks. Who knows, in future they may find that quarks can be further divided into other dharmas! Another example is color, such as green and yellow. Color was once believed to be solid, but now we know it is a result of different light waves.

The Buddha taught about the three realms of existence, the Six Destinies, Five Aggregates, Six Sense Consciousnesses, defilements, karma, suffering, and so on... all these are actually explaining the conventional truth.

The Buddha, with his full awakening, knows that whatever sentient beings experience, the so-called reality of the world is actually illusory and not real—that is why it is called worldly. Everything arises and manifests on account of many causes and conditions. It is not the case that each object truly exists independently on its own. For all these apparently real phenomena, the Buddhist teachings refer to them as notional constructs. That means things that we see and experience, both internal and external are all notionally constructed. They are made up of many components, and when these components come together, we give it a name based on our comprehension. That “thing” does not exist as a standalone object on its own. However, the erroneous mind mistakes what it sees and experiences, so it believes that things really are as such. From this, it is clear that the understanding of worldly people is unable to experience and reveal the truth of the world. This also highlights that worldly beings have the obstruction of ignorance.

Ultimate Truth

In order to see clearly the true nature of this world, sentient beings must break through the conventional way of understanding. The ultimate aim in the study and practice of Buddhism is to utilize insight into worldly realities and discover the errors in our conventional understanding. When we can see how worldly realities are not real, we can eliminate our ignorance. As our delusions melt away, the truth is revealed. The more we understand and penetrate the conventional truth of this world, eventually we will get to a point where we can experience the transcendental truth, which is a state beyond conceptualization, words and description. This absolute truth of the world is called the ultimate truth: it is a unique experiential state that is universally understood by the sages of Buddhism.

Relationship between the Two Truths

When we talk about the ultimate truth, do not imagine that there is a separate place or thing out there that is distinct from this worldly reality. When the Buddha taught the two truths, he pointed out that, apart from the universally accepted conventional reality, there is also the ultimate truth that is universally realized by the sages. This ultimate truth is also the true nature of all phenomena; it is not something that exists separate from this world. Therefore, to attain the ultimate truth, one has to rely on the “conventional truth”. This is the *prajñā* teaching on the two truths.

You may wonder, do we really need to study and practice *prajñā*? Well, as long as human beings are unable to penetrate the truth of this world, then humans will not be able to live in accord with the ultimate truth. The consequence of this discord is that our every move, our understanding, actions, and speech will be unable to harmonize with the ultimate truth. The realm of sentient beings, from the individual, to families, communities and countries, all the conflicts and suffering that exists are a

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result of this inability to accord with the Truth.

Sentient beings go from a past life to a present life and then onto a future life. This cycle of life and death, accompanied with endless suffering, is because of not being in accord with the Truth. This is the result of ignorance, delusional attachment and erroneous views. Therefore, the Buddha's aim of explaining the two truths and teaching people to practice *prajñā* was to help us realize the ultimate truth by means of the conventional truth.

Summary

With the attainment of *prajñā*, it is possible to “rely” on the experience of the “ultimate truth” to destroy ignorance and delusional attachment, and accord with the Truth. This is the “attainment of liberation” and progression towards Buddhahood. So, in summary, the practice of *prajñā* is to achieve the following:

- ◆ to experience the ultimate truth by means of the conventional truth,
- ◆ to see the ultimate truth through penetrating delusions, and
- ◆ to move from an ordinary being to become a sage.

The Method to Develop Prajñā

So we now know about the two truths, but how do we actually practice *prajñā*? That is the million-dollar question. Venerable Yinshun answers this in the following verse.

世俗假施設	<i>The conventional world is notionally constructed,</i>
名言識所識	<i>It is what common understanding can comprehend.</i>
名假受法假	<i>Notional by name, compound and nature,</i>
正倒善分別	<i>Understand there is reality and fantasy within</i> <i>conventional.</i>

Here I'd like to point out that the term "reality" used in the verse should not be interpreted as the ultimate truth. Here it is referring to the apparent reality of our conventional world, the life that we all experience and assume to be real. What the verse is trying to capture is that even the reality of this world as we know it, is also illusory and not real.

Notional Construct

The conventional state that we are accustomed to seems to be so real, therefore it obscures the Truth. In fact, this conventional state that sentient beings are conditioned to is merely a notional construct. This is not to say that there is absolutely nothing, or to mix things up and call an apple an orange. Notional construct means that everything we understand is dependent on many causes, conditions and relationships to bring it to existence. Due to this web of dependent conditions, the resultant dharmas are called notional constructs. In other words, objects exist notionally as constructed or designated things but, ultimately, they have no intrinsic self-nature. Therefore, everything in this world is notionally constructed.

If we can clearly understand that the conventional world is notionally constructed, then there is the possibility of getting glimpses of the Truth. What this means is that the way to reach the ultimate truth is by insight that penetrates through the notional construction and illusion of all worldly phenomena.

The problem for us ordinary beings is that our sense faculties, our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, comprehend things based on the conditioning from common states of understanding. Essentially, what people generally accept as true, we accept as true. In short, conventional understanding accords and flows with that which is universally accepted. Conventional understanding is not a result derived from investigating the ultimate truth and finding the true answer.

In the text, Venerable Yinshun uses several methods to teach us how to investigate the conventional world, in order to penetrate through to the ultimate truth.

Breaking through Notional Constructs

One method is to use the three categories of “notional by name”, “notional by compound” and “notional by nature”. These three can help us to peel away at the layers of the conventional world.

Notional by Name

Notional by name are objects that are easy to understand as being false. Here, the aim is to break or remove the attachment to the sense of reality in the name. For example, say we find this new species and call it a dog. Then, when talking about dogs we will think of this furry fellow. If we do not call it a dog and do not think about dogs, that cute furry thing still exists. It does not vanish because we do not think of or name it. Just like many of the “new” species of plants and animals that are discovered. It doesn’t mean that prior to their discovery, they didn’t exist at all! From these examples, I hope you can see that the name does not determine the existence of the underlying object.

Notional by Compound

Next, we come to notional by compound. Why is this called notional by compound? The reason is because the object is a result of compounding many causes and conditions together. Understanding this can remove the misconception that a compounded object is an independent unit. Take for example a human, which is a compounded phenomenon. When we think of humans, even if we have no name for them, we still think that this being really does exist. We do not think of them as a blob of muscles, bones, tissue, organs etc. It is quite hard to see that they too are notional

constructs. On this note, even though intrinsically there is no real human, this does not mean the constructed person cannot be found. Can you start to see how the truth doesn't obstruct or prevent the manifestation of dharmas?

Notional by Nature

Last, we come to the most difficult to penetrate, notional by nature. This is when we split something down to the smallest unit and assume it keeps that true nature. What this refers to is the basic element or cause that makes up sentient beings and the universe. Present knowledge points to quarks, electrons and so on. However, this smallest and basic element of matter is still a notional construct in the eyes of Buddhism because it too can change. Therefore, it is also a notional construct, and this is the most difficult to overcome.

Breaking through Worldly Reality and Fantasy

Another method is to use the reality and fantasy within the world. For example, in the awake and dream states, the way you interact with other people, in terms of language and actions, is likely to be different. Our behavior when awake is the so-called reality, which is affirmable by other people as real. On the other hand, in a dream, that particular state is unique to each person. Within conventional understanding, dreams are understood to be a fantasy that is not real. In fact, there are many other deceptions that our sense faculties and the mind can create; examples include the bending of a pencil in a glass of water, the effects of cataract on vision, the distortion when the mind harbors prejudice and erroneous views and so on. These types of deceptions are easier to comprehend.

On the contrary, the deception of this so-called reality is harder to understand. This includes the conventional understanding relating to normal physiological, psychological, and physical manifestations. This

requires the insight of prajñā in order to understand that the reality of this world is also a notional construct. That is why the Buddha uses the similes of fantasies such as reflections of the moon in water and the dream state to explain how the reality of this world is also a deception that is not real.

Systematic Analysis Employed by Science

Science attempts to figure out the origin of life and the universe by investigating the linear process of events: tracing back to the start. Many theories have been put forward, such as the Big Bang theory and, of course, the famous evolution theory of Darwin. From the perspective of dependent arising, science tries to investigate how many things compound together to become a new object. In the compounded object, they try to look for the compositional element that can be split no further. Then they try to figure out how does this compositional element come into existence and sustain itself?

If we take Darwin's evolution theory as an example, the search for the origin of life and the universe looks at the links between things and how they came about over time. Even though the scientific observations seemingly support the evolution theory and natural selection, there is a crucial flaw. This flaw is the pre-supposition that there is an origin. That means the questions they seek to answer are colored by their pre-existing assumptions that there must be an origin.

The problem with these scientific approaches is that the initial question is fundamentally wrong. When science traces back to a point where they can go no further, religion sometimes steps in and concludes that the origin is a god, a creator of some sorts. This then destroys the fabric of time, because there is no time before that creator. Why is time destroyed, you may wonder; time should have a past, present and future. With a creator, there is no past. Can you start to see how the original question about the

origin is flawed?

Science also tries to look for a true essence of the universe and investigate what exactly is this essence, how does it exist? How does this one element develop into multiple other elements? This is referred to as investigating self-nature. Self-nature is an independent body that is naturally as such, from the start to the very end, no matter whether it is the smallest, largest, very first or very last.

Buddhism does not provide an answer to these questions because this question is essentially one with no answer. This situation can be highlighted with the example of the infertile woman who is unable to have children. Although the woman has no children, someone still tries to find out what her children would look like; they postulate from the woman's physical appearance the color of the child's hair, eyes, skin and so on. All these questions and postulations essentially are irrelevant and unanswerable because there is no such child to be found. Do you understand now the problem with scientific methods?

Systematic Analysis Employed in Buddhism

In Buddhism, the Buddha teaches us to investigate the cause of suffering and then remove that cause to alleviate suffering or eradicate it altogether. Buddhism does not investigate the original cause of the universe, because it is something that simply does not exist. Trying to find it would be a futile endeavor. Just like the simile of a person shot by an arrow: having been wounded, their life is in danger and so they should seek the remedy to address their injury, instead, they demand to know who shot the arrow, what type of arrow was it, what material the arrow was made of, and so on. All of these questions about the arrow are not important in the scheme of their injury and whether they survive or not. Do you see the point?

The origin of the universe is something that has fascinated scientists and

philosophers for centuries, but have their answers helped them gain liberation from suffering? To cap off this year's talks, I would like to go through some important principles to keep in mind when investigating Dharma.

Principles for Investigating Dharma

This insight practice, which investigates the self-nature of things, must not possess a pre-determined view that thinks there must be something there. Rather, the process is really to dig deep to the very bottom of it all. Although this insight belongs to conventional understanding, it is a way to go against the grain of conventional knowledge. This insight accords with the ultimate truth and is directed towards the ultimate truth.

It is important to know that conventional understanding and the insight of prajñā perceive things differently. Therefore, the scriptures talk a lot about worldly affairs, yet in the practice of cultivating wisdom, this insight, which begins from learning, contemplation and practice, is solely focused on investigating self-nature. Only in this way can sentient beings thoroughly break through their fundamental ignorance, fully penetrate the truth of this world, and experience the ultimate truth.

So, this brings my Dharma talks for this year to a close. I know it must be information overload for some, but I want you to get full value from this retreat! Take in what you can and begin from there. Slowly and steadily, you can develop full understanding.

願以此功德，
普及於一切，
我等與眾生，
皆共成佛道。



I dedicate the accumulated merits

To all sentient beings.

May we all be able to realize

The noble path to Buddhahood.

Introducing Venerable Yinshun to the West

《介紹印順導師佛學思想至西方國家》

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