

# ***Mahāyāna Contemplation of No-Self: A Separate Exposition on Pre- and Post-Enlightenment***

A Lecture by Master Xiao Pingshi

## **Preface**

The attainment of Buddhahood is unique to the *Mahāyāna*. It is not found in the Two-Vehicle Bodhi and is unknown to the noble sages who follow cultivation in the Two Vehicles. The Two-Vehicle Bodhi primarily focuses on the contemplation of the aggregates, sense fields, and elements. The actual cultivation includes the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. The observation and contemplation of the Buddha Dharma in these practices are based on the four foundations of mindfulness. However, the World-Honored One had already tacitly spoken of the sign of reality of the dharma realm and the ultimate state of the remainderless nirvana when He lectured on the Two-Vehicle Bodhi. However, the sages of the Two Vehicles—those who still had “something to learn” and those with “nothing left to learn”—could not understand the implications and therefore could not comprehend the truth. Only when they decided to turn their minds to the *Mahāyāna* did the World-Honored One enable them to fully understand and realize the contents thereof so that they could become great bodhisattvas of the *Mahāyāna* Dharma in the Great Vehicle.

However, the Path to Buddhahood was already lost in the Dharma-ending age, and none of the Buddhist masters could understand it. The dharma expounded in Venerable Yin-shun’s work, *The Way to Buddhahood*, is an example. The content of this work deviates from and is completely irrelevant to the true Path to Buddhahood. Yin-shun’s teachings encompass the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka propagated by the Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism, the Tantric tradition, to be exact. The essence of these

doctrines is a form of the non-Buddhist view of annihilationism based on the fallacious view of uncausedness. It is purely conceptual proliferation based on meaningless speculation and runs completely counter to the Path to Buddhahood.

The central tenet of the Path to Buddhahood is the practice and realization of knowledge-of-all-aspects. These take place in the fundamental mind of all phenomena in the dharma realm—the mind consisting of the sign of reality—the eighth consciousness, in which all seeds of wisdom are stored. All phenomena of the mundane and supramundane worlds arise due to the fundamental mind entity—*tathāgatagarbha* (storehouse consciousness)—of a sentient being and the immeasurable and innumerable seeds stored within it. Thus, the *tathāgatagarbha* gives rise to the dharmas of the five aggregates, the twelve sense fields, and the eighteen elements. The dharmas of the eighteen elements and the innumerable seeds stored in the *tathāgatagarbha* subsequently give rise to all phenomena of ordinary beings and saints in the ten dharma realms. From these phenomena, various kinds of uncompounded supramundane dharmas will manifest further. For this reason, it is said that the sign of reality of the dharma realm is the inherently intrinsic *tathāgatagarbha* mind of all sentient beings—named *ālaya*-consciousness at the level of ordinary beings.

The *ālaya*-consciousness is precisely the eighth consciousness—the reality-suchness—to which all enlightened Chan practitioners have attained awakening. However, since ancient times, there have always been Chan practitioners who have attained realization but do not fully understand the Path to Buddhahood and follow the incorrect and shallow teachings of those whose awakening is either false or superficial. Thus, they fall prey to the notion of wild Chan. They blindly repeat what others have said and always claim that “enlightenment denotes attainment of ultimate Buddhahood.” Yet, they fail to investigate or examine the truth as recorded in the sutras, which states that many great bodhisattvas become awakened but do not immediately attain Buddhahood. As a result, they put forth various assertions that contradict the Buddha’s teachings, which have misled Buddhist learners in the past and in the present Dharma-ending age.

All these aforementioned shortcomings stem from the inability of the Chan practitioners described above to truly comprehend the exact state of the Chan school's realization and to know how and where to correctly position their practice and realization pertaining to the wisdom of *prajñā*. Furthermore, they misunderstand or misjudge the stages of practice and realization of *prajñā* in the third turning of the Dharma Wheel, not knowing that the discourses presented in the sutras during this turning are on the training in the higher wisdom of knowledge-of-all-aspects undertaken by enlightened bodhisattvas on or above the First Ground. In addition, due to their misunderstanding of the stages of the Path to Buddhahood, they are unable to comprehend the correct sequence of practices on this path. Compounded by the fact that they cannot recognize and realize the hidden secret meanings of the *Āgama* Sutras, they instead believe and accept Yin-shun's and others' misinterpretations of the tenets of the *Āgamas*. They further develop various misunderstandings of their own and embrace the heretical views of the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka, as propagated by Tantric Buddhism. As a result, every step they take leads them further into fallacious views. Eventually, they even eagerly assist in spreading the heretical Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka views of Tantric Buddhism, thereby committing the gravest sin of undermining the true Buddha Dharma while believing they are vigorously protecting and spreading the true Buddhist teachings.

Although the true Chan realization is extremely important, it is also necessary to understand the substance of Chan awakening and its position in the practice and realization of the Buddha teachings to avoid the pitfalls of engaging in reckless "wild Chan" cultivation. Knowing its position, one can understand that the Chan enlightenment is merely the initial stage of the Path of Vision, which is based on the wisdom of *prajñā* of the Great Vehicle, and one who has reached that stage has yet to reach the Stage of Proficiency, where one attains an unobstructed understanding of *prajñā*. Practitioners who correctly understand this sequence of cultivation will, after awakening, begin the post-awakening cultivation they need to advance toward Buddhahood. Thereby, they will proceed to study various sutras sequentially and eventually start to learn from the Consciousness-Only Sutras expounded in the third turning of the Dharma Wheel, diligently investigating the Path to Buddhahood. They will

then gradually understand the correct stages of cultivation on the Path to Buddhahood and can gradually advance to the First Ground of the Stage of Proficiency. After reaching this stage, they will be able to shoulder the familial responsibility of the Tathāgata, devote their entire lives to refuting false views and manifesting the true Dharma, revive the lineage of the Buddhas, and thus become true sons of the Buddha who are in possession of the truth.

Upon attaining the First Ground, practitioners can cultivate and bring forth the even profounder and more wondrous knowledge-of-aspects, which will enable them to save and protect all sentient beings and completely destroy all seemingly right but actually incorrect views within the Buddhist community. As such, they can guide and protect a multitude of learners, leading them back to the true Buddhist path. Thus, there need not be any worry regarding the teachings left behind by the World-Honored One because they are upheld and protected.

Furthermore, bodhisattvas who have completed the First Ground can thoroughly understand the Two-Vehicle Bodhi and can explain in detail the path to liberation practiced and realized therein. They can also guide practitioners to practice and realize the Two-Vehicle Bodhi. This realization will inspire great aspirations in Buddhist practitioners, enabling them to overcome their fear of cyclic birth and death and to be willing to save and work for the good of all sentient beings throughout their future lifetimes. First Ground bodhisattvas can also correct the misconceptions and erroneous explanations of the Two Vehicles' practitioners about *Mahāyāna* dharmas to guide them back toward the correct *Mahāyāna* path.

Attaining all the aforementioned virtues is fundamentally rooted in first attaining Chan realization and the post-realization practice of *Mahāyāna* contemplation on no-self through the Three Stages of Worthiness and the Ten Stages of the Saints of the bodhisattva path. One must directly realize the state of no-self at each of these stages of cultivation and then correctly expound it to others so that all practitioners can understand the correct contemplation of no-self in the *Mahāyāna* Dharma. Understanding the differences in the contemplation of no-self between the *Mahāyāna* Dharma and the Two Vehicles will improve the wisdom or *prajñā* of already-

enlightened Buddhist disciples. It can also guide learners to recognize and rectify the erroneous views they acquired from researchers who study the Buddha Dharma merely as an object and without genuine practice. Therefore, the substance of the *Mahāyāna* contemplation of no-self should be made known to all Buddhist practitioners and enlightened beings, and it is for this reason that this book has been published.

The publication of this book can be traced to an invitation I received from the chairman of the Tainan Spinning Company to visit the Hou family ancestral hall in Beimen Township, Tainan, where I expounded the Buddha Dharma. The book contains the transcript of the impromptu speech I gave that day. At that time, I had no intention of giving a discourse on the Buddha Dharma, but upon the suggestion of my fellow practitioners, I agreed to give the talk. I also realized that the lack of clarity about the progressive stages of cultivation on the *Mahāyāna* Path to Buddhahood had a significant impact, so I suggested this topic on short notice. My fellow practitioners in Tainan then disseminated information about this event in the region, which led to the Buddha Dharma assembly.

I did not prepare a manuscript or outline before the aforementioned lecture due to a lack of time. Thus, I delivered the lecture in an informal, conversational manner, reclining comfortably in a soft leather chair provided by the ancestral shrine. What I said flowed directly from my mind for almost three hours. After my talk, the Dharma audience asked various questions about their Buddhist practice, all of which I answered on the spot. However, due to the strong echo caused by the sloping concrete roof of the ancestral shrine and the lack of sound-absorbing panels, the audio system caused significant reverberation, resulting in a less-than-optimal recording. Even more seriously, the wireless microphone used by the interviewees was not connected to the recording device, so their voices, distorted by the strong echo, were not clearly recorded. This remained the only minor flaw in an otherwise perfect Dharma event.

Members of the True Enlightenment Practitioners Association later transcribed the lecture recording, and fellow practitioners typed the final text without any changes. No embellishments were made—only minimal adjustments to make the spoken expressions smoother—before the text was printed and published. Therefore, what

you will read in this book is pretty much what my audience heard during my lecture. Readers will find an abundance of colloquialisms in this book, rather than a more elegant writing style. I did this intentionally because I wanted to faithfully portray the content of my talk and the circumstances in which it took place to illuminate the current landscape of Buddhism, which can serve as a testament to the future historical account of Buddhism. The faithful representation of the content of my talk in this book is also intended to reveal unreservedly the essence of *prajñā* wisdom and the knowledge-of-aspects for the benefit of present and future Buddhist learners.

Buddhist Disciple Pinshi at the Abode of Clamor

On the Day of Great Heat, 2002 CE

