

The Contemplation of No-Self in Mahayana Buddhism

Preface

The way to Buddhahood can be found only in the Great Vehicle. It is absent in the Two Vehicles and is unknown to the noble persons pursuing the Two Vehicles. The Two Vehicles are limited to the observation and contemplation of phenomenal existence—the aggregates, sense fields, and elements. Their cultivation primarily uses the Four Foundations of Mindfulness[1] to realize the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination. The Buddha implicitly touches upon the ultimate reality (the essence of the remainderless nirvana) underlying this phenomenal existence in his teachings on the Two Vehicles. However, the disciples of the Two Vehicles—whether learners or adepts—have no insight into it. Only when they decide to pursue the Great Vehicle will the Buddha help them realize the ultimate reality, through which they can become great bodhisattvas in the Great Vehicle.

In this Dharma-ending era, the teachings about the way to Buddhahood have already been lost in most of the places, and the Buddhist “masters” of our time no longer have the correct knowledge of them. A case in point is Buddhist master Yin-shun. In *The Way to Buddhahood*, he presents teachings that deviate from, or are irrelevant to, the correct cultivation of Buddhahood as taught by Buddha Śākyamuni. On close examination of his doctrinal position, it is apparent that Yin-shun was essentially a proponent of the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka[2] philosophy espoused by the Gelug sect of “Tibetan Buddhism[3]”. This philosophy is a form of nihilism grounded in the theory that all phenomena are interdependently originated without the need for a fundamental cause. It is an idea born out of speculation and is at odds with the correct cultivation of Buddhahood.

The cultivation central to the attainment of Buddhahood concerns the knowledge-of-all-aspects[4], the knowledge of the myriad functional seeds stored within the fundamental mind. This fundamental mind and the immeasurable seeds it contains bring into existence the five aggregates, the twelve sense fields, and the eighteen elements that constitute a sentient being. When a sentient being’s eighteen elements have been fully generated, they will further interact with the seeds in the fundamental mind to directly and indirectly produce all ordinary or noble phenomena within the ten dharma realms of reality, which will enable the manifestation of all kinds of unconditioned supramundane dharmas. Thus, it is said that the ultimate reality of all phenomena is this inherently self-existing fundamental mind called the *ālayavijñāna*

(*ālaya*-consciousness) or *tathāgatagarbha*. All sentient beings owe their existence to their own *tathāgatagarbha*, which before awakening is given the name “*ālaya*-consciousness.” The *ālaya*-consciousness is precisely the eighth consciousness or the reality-suchness[5], to which all enlightened Chan practitioners have awakened.

Since ancient times, there have always been Chan practitioners who declare that “awakening means immediate attainment of the ultimate Buddhahood” soon after one has attained the direct realization of the *ālayavijñāna*. These newly “enlightened” practitioners have not developed a thorough understanding of the way to Buddhahood. They make this presumptuous and lofty statement because they have unwisely bought into the views of those whose awakening was either false or shallow and have failed to explore why many great bodhisattvas mentioned in the sutras did not attain Buddhahood immediately after awakening to the *ālayavijñāna*. As a result, they fell prey to wild Chan[6]. The deviant discourses they disseminated misled Buddhist learners of both their own time and the present day.

Practitioners fall victim to wild Chan usually for any of the following reasons: (1) they do not truly understand the content of Chan awakening and how this awakening should be positioned with respect to the cultivation sequence of *prajñā*, the wisdom regarding the ultimate reality; (2) they do not understand that the scriptural teachings associated with the third turning of the Dharma Wheel are discourses on the training in higher wisdom[7] of the knowledge-of-all-aspects undertaken by enlightened bodhisattvas on or above the First Ground of the Bodhisattva Path; (3) their understanding of the stages of cultivation in the Bodhisattva Path is incorrect; or (4) they are unable to comprehend and realize the Buddha’s implicit teachings of the ultimate reality in the *Āgamas*. Consequently, they adopt erroneous exegeses, such as Yin-shun’s exegesis of the *Āgamas*; become beguiled by the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka philosophy promoted by “Tibetan Buddhism”; or even become avid supporters of the propagation of the Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka. In doing so, they unknowingly commit the extremely grievous sin of undermining the Buddha Dharma, all the while believing that they are protecting and spreading it.

To guard against wild Chan and its undesirable consequences, Buddhist practitioners should understand that while attaining Chan awakening is highly important, it is equally crucial to acquire a thorough understanding of the content of Chan awakening and to which stage this awakening corresponds on the Bodhisattva Path. In the Great Vehicle cultivation of *prajñā*, Chan awakening corresponds only to the initial phase of the Path of Vision; it is a long way before the First Ground on the Bodhisattva Path, where proficient comprehension of *prajñā* is attained. Therefore,

after attaining awakening, practitioners with a correct understanding of this sequence of cultivation will begin to pursue the post-awakening cultivation they need to advance toward Buddhahood. They will study the sutras successively and eventually pore over the Consciousness-Only scriptures explicated during the third turning of the Dharma Wheel. With earnest investigation, they will gradually learn about the correct sequence of cultivation on the Bodhisattva Path and eventually reach the First Ground, also known as the “stage of proficiency.”

Once practitioners have reached the First Ground, they will be able to competently undertake the works of the Buddha’s lineage. As First-Ground bodhisattvas, they will take in the profound knowledge-of-the-aspects-of-paths^[8], which will allow them to refute some Buddhists’ specious views. They will devote themselves to the refutation of incorrect doctrines by contrasting these with the authentic Dharma, thus reviving the Buddha Dharma and abiding as the true “Buddha’s sons.” As such, they will guide all sentient beings and help deliver them from suffering and ignorance, and they will set Buddhist learners on the right course of cultivation. Thus, the Buddha’s teachings will be upheld and protected.

Moreover, bodhisattvas who have completed the First Ground can thoroughly comprehend the teachings of the Path to Liberation of the Two Vehicles. They can correctly expound the cultivation of the Two Vehicles and guide their practitioners toward attaining the fruitions of liberation. The realization of these fruitions will arouse great aspirations in Two-Vehicle practitioners, who will then be able to overcome their fears of cyclical birth and death and will be willing to commit themselves to working to benefit all sentient beings in the endless time to come. First-Ground bodhisattvas can also rectify misunderstandings of the Great Vehicle often held by adherents of the Two Vehicles, and in so doing, steer them toward the Great Vehicle.

It must be stressed, however, that none of the aforementioned extraordinary accomplishments are possible without first attaining Chan awakening and undergoing the subsequent practice of the Mahayana “contemplation of no-self” during the Three Stages of Worthiness^[9] and on the Ten Grounds along the Bodhisattva Path. It is the direct comprehension of no-self attained at each of these cultivation stages that enables bodhisattvas to correctly expound the “contemplation of no-self” in the Great Vehicle and to distinguish it from that in the Two Vehicles. The delineation of the contemplation of no-self in the Great Vehicle will enhance the *prajñā* of enlightened Buddhist disciples and help unenlightened disciples recognize and abandon the wrong views they have acquired from those who treat the Buddha Dharma as a research subject instead of practicing it. Given the utmost significance of the contemplation of no-self in the

Great Vehicle, this book was written to impart a clear understanding of it to both enlightened and unenlightened Buddhist disciples.

This book traces its origin to an invitation I received from Chairman Hou of Tainan Spinning Company to tour Hou's Ancestral Shrine. During the visit, I was asked to speak about the Buddha Dharma. This speech, given at Hou's Ancestral Shrine in the Beimen Village of Tainan, formed the basis of this book. I had no plan to give any kind of lecture on the Buddha Dharma on that occasion, and I agreed to do so upon the prodding of my fellow practitioners. As I had witnessed the confusion surrounding the sequence of cultivation on the Path to Buddhahood, I delivered my speech impromptu. My fellow practitioners from Tainan spread the news of my coming lecture in the greater Tainan area and made this Dharma gathering happen.

In other words, what you will read in this book is pretty much what my audience heard during my actual lecture on the same topic. Readers will find an abundance of colloquial expressions in this book instead of a more elegant writing style. I did this deliberately as I wanted to faithfully present the content of my speech and the circumstances in which it took place to shed light on the landscape of Buddhism today. The faithful presentation of the content of my speech in this book is also meant to unreservedly reveal the essence of *prajñā* and the knowledge-of-the-aspects-of-paths for the benefit of current and future Buddhist learners.

Buddha's son Pingshi,

On the day of Great Heat, 2002

At the Residence of Clamor

Footnotes:

[1] Four Foundations of Mindfulness: C. *Si nan chu* 四念處.

[2] Prāsaṅgika Madhyamaka: The "Middle Way" philosophy proposed by Buddhapālita in the fourth century. As it asserts that all phenomenal existences originate interdependently without a fundamental cause and denies the existence of the eighth *vijñāna* (a.k.a the *tathāgatagarbha* or the *ālayavijñāna*,

ālaya-consciousness), the origin of phenomenal existence, it contradicts the Middle-Way view established on the nature of the *tathāgatagarbha*, set forth in the sacred teachings of Buddha Śākyamuni.

[3] Tibetan Buddhism: Only the Jonang tradition that appeared in Tibet from the 12th to 17th century taught the doctrine of “other-emptiness” which is consistent with Buddha Śākyamuni’s teachings.

[4] Knowledge-of-all-aspects: C. *yiqiezhong zhi* 一切種智.

[5] Reality-suchness: C. *zhenru* 真如

[6] Wild Chan: C. *kuang chan* 狂禪 the wild overestimation of one’s attainment of awakening and Dharma knowledge.

[7] Training in the higher wisdom: C. *zengshanghuixue* 增上慧學.

[8] Knowledge-of-the-aspects-of-paths: C. *dao zhong zhi* 道種智.

[9] The Three Stages of Worthiness: C. *san xianwei* 三賢位; refer to the ten stages of Abiding (*shizhu* 十住), Practices (*shixing* 十行), and Dedication (*shihuixiang* 十迴向) in the Path to Buddhahood.

正覺