

From Bodhi Mind to Ultimate Enlightenment

“If we can observe the pure precepts, awaken to the bodhi mind, and are replete with practice and principle, we are in accord with the way of the great bodhisattvas. In the future, we will surely attain perfect enlightenment, truly benefiting ourselves and all others.”

Buddhism comprises the methods of gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment, as well as Mahayana and Theravada schools. The Theravada practitioner's aim is to attain arhatship, be freed from the three realms and attain liberation. The Mahayana practitioner concentrates on the Six Paramitas (or Six Perfections), benefits self and others, liberates all sentient beings, and broadly cultivates good affinities with others, until all virtues and merits are perfected in order to attain buddhahood. Mahayana and Theravada teachings, the methods of sudden enlightenment or gradual cultivation, or other Buddhist teachings, are all directed at the different capacities of sentient beings, using various expedient means. They are all based on the same principle—bodhi and nirvana, which are the ultimate aim of cultivation in Buddhism.

Since everyone's aspiration is different, his or her achievements also differ. Whether we wish to attain the fruit of the arhat, the pratyekabuddha, the bodhisattva, or the buddha; whether we wish to achieve samadhi, or the stages of non-regression— not regressing from our attainment, actions, or mindfulness—we need to work hard on our cultivation. If we wish to attain the Way by practicing meditation, we must be in accord with this pure mind, this unconditioned mind of wu-wei (無為, non-action), because the Way is not apart from the mind. When enlightened, this mind is the Way. Unenlightened, this mind is deluded.

In Buddhist cultivation, whether it is by principle or by practice, gradual cultivation or sudden enlightenment, the exoteric or esoteric school, we must follow two important principles: first, “bring forth the bodhi mind,” and second, “uphold the precepts of purity.” When we have achieved these, we will not let ourselves down in this life; even if we do not

attain enlightenment, we will attain the stage of non-regression. By strictly upholding the precepts, the three karmas of body, speech, and mind will be pure; we will attain the state of true emptiness and achieve arhatship. Furthermore, if we cultivate the Six Paramitas and other myriad practices, we will attain the fruit of the bodhisattva; when the bodhisattva way is perfected, we will attain buddhahood. Yet, all these practices are not apart from the bodhi mind and the precepts. Therefore, giving rise to the bodhi mind and upholding the pure precepts are the two most important factors in our cultivation.

The ultimate state of bodhi and nirvana

The bodhi mind is the awakened mind; it is the mind that is pure, lucid, undefiled, and the master of itself. It neither moves nor wavers, neither comes nor goes, neither arises nor perishes. A scripture says, “If we do not bring forth the bodhi mind in our cultivation, it is like farming without planting seeds.” If we diligently till the soil and plow the field, but do not plant the bodhi seed, how can we expect fruition from our cultivation?

The Perfection of Great Wisdom Treatise by Nagarjuna states:

The bodhisattva’s initial resolve,
Is to attain ultimate enlightenment.

“I will become a buddha”—

That is the bodhi mind.

So we can see that the most important thing in our cultivation is to bring forth the bodhi mind.

If we wish to attain this mind of purity, we need many auxiliary conditions to help us bring forth the bodhi mind. These conditions are the precepts. A difference between Buddhism and other religions is the upholding of specific precepts. If the rules of conduct are based on erroneous views, heterodox views, mistaking wrong causes for right causes, or misunderstanding the actual consequences of an action, then they will not bring about conditions for achieving nirvana.

What is nirvana? Nirvana is not death. It is the mind that has arrived at the highest and most tranquil state; it is the realization of emptiness. Yet, we must realize not only emptiness, but also the bodhi mind.

There are four stages of nirvana: “nirvana with residue,” “nirvana without residue,” “nirvana of non-abidance,” and “nirvana of pure, inherent nature.” In achieving “nirvana with residue” and “nirvana without residue,” we realize emptiness. In achieving “nirvana of non-abidance” and “nirvana of pure, inherent nature,” we realize the bodhi mind. Actually, all the different types of nirvana are states of this present mind, with the realization of emptiness in different degrees. It also matters how long one can maintain a mind of clarity and absolute stillness. If we can only maintain it for three minutes before the mind becomes drowsy or has delusive thoughts, then this bodhi mind is not unveiled very long.

The bodhi mind and nirvana are our highest aim. If we cannot yet realize this, the Buddha offers us some expedient means to calm our mind so that one is not in panic or fearful, and can find a temporary resting place. This is the Buddha’s compassion. However, if we truly wish to attain buddhahood, we must be awakened to the bodhi mind. The sutra says, “Only the buddhas can enter this door; the pratyekabuddhas and the sravakas cannot reach it.” This means that even if pratyekabuddhas and sravakas are as numerous as the grains of sand of the Ganges River, they cannot know the state of the Buddha. Why? Because the bodhi mind is the foundation of buddhahood; the bodhi mind is the seed of all buddhas. All the buddhas and bodhisattvas practiced for innumerable kalpas to give rise to this mind; then they worked diligently to swiftly attain ultimate enlightenment. The bodhi mind is the great mind that bodhisattvas, practicing Mahayana, must bring forth at the beginning. Therefore, it is extremely important to be awakened and to realize this mind.

Different degrees of enlightenment

What really is the bodhi mind? How do we bring forth the bodhi mind? The Diamond Sutra says, "The mind should act without any attachments." The bodhi mind is a mind of non-abidance. The Chan School says, "With sudden enlightenment of the original mind, one directly realizes buddhahood." This is the bodhi mind; it is our awakened inherent nature.

In the autobiographical section of the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, it is recorded:

One day, the Fifth Patriarch Hong Ren said to his disciples, "You have practiced under me for a long time. Today, write me a gatha (verse) to describe what you have learned and to show your understanding of the truth." The erudite Dharma Master Shen Xiu, who was the foremost instructor under the Fifth Patriarch, wrote the following gatha on the wall of the south corridor:

The body is a bodhi tree,
The mind a standing mirror bright.
At all times polish it diligently,
And let no dust alight.

This gatha seemed very sensible and meaningful.

At that time, the (future) Sixth Patriarch, as a disciple under Master Hong Ren, was working in the kitchen, splitting firewood and pounding rice. When he heard someone reading Shen Xiu's gatha, he had an insight and asked someone to write the following gatha right next to Shen Xiu's:

The bodhi is no tree,
Nor a standing mirror bright.

Since all is originally empty,

Where can any dust alight?

This means that, in bodhi (i.e. from an enlightened perspective), not a single thing or dharma can be grasped. Therefore, “The bodhi is no tree/Nor a standing mirror bright”—the bright mirror is our mind of absolute clarity and understanding; it is also absolute emptiness. “Where can any dust alight?”—everything is empty, so where can the dust alight? From these gathas, we can see that the realization of Master Shen Xiu was that of “gradual cultivation.” He had not yet truly realized the bodhi mind. But the Sixth Patriarch’s gatha was that of “sudden enlightenment.” There are different degrees of enlightenment. A cultivator may have “dozens of great enlightenments and thousands of small awakenings.” For example, when we sense that life is impermanent and resolve to cultivate the Way, it is only the beginning of enlightenment. After this awakening, we must continue to cultivate, because we have only realized impermanence or some principles of the phenomenal world; we have not fully realized the true nature of our mind. Therefore, we must persevere to attain great enlightenment in the future. Depending on a person’s level of enlightenment, the depth of truth they realize is different; therefore, the Dharmas that they speak also vary.

Even though the gatha written by Shen Xiu is of the gradual cultivation path, it can be a motto for most people. If they cultivate according to his method, they can still attain the fruits of the Way.

“The body is a bodhi tree/The mind a standing mirror bright.” If we wish to attain the Way, it is like planting a bodhi tree—there must be soil, water, sunshine, constant weeding, and tilling of the soil so that it can grow and blossom. Cultivating the Way is the same; we must regulate body and mind, and strictly and heedfully uphold the precepts so that the three karmas generated from the body, speech, and mind are pure. We must also diligently perform good deeds to increase merits. With sufficient merits, the necessities of life needed in aiding our cultivation will not be lacking.

“The mind a standing mirror bright.” This mind is like a bright mirror undefiled by dust and without bias. “When a Han comes, a Han appears; when a Hu comes, a Hu appears.” When an object comes, its image is reflected; when the object leaves, the image disappears. Likewise, the mind is not the least bit defiled; it is totally empty and bright, devoid of greed, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt, with no attachment to dharmas (all phenomena), no attachment to self—only this absolute mind is bright as a mirror. To reach this state, we must “polish it diligently.” How do we polish it? By examination, reflection, and contemplation, and by making amends for our offences—this is the method of gradual cultivation.

The gatha of the Sixth Patriarch elucidates the method of sudden enlightenment. “The bodhi is no tree/Nor standing mirror bright/Since all is originally empty/Where can any dust alight?” This is the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng’s state when he realized prajna, the wisdom of emptiness—that all dharmas are fundamentally empty, without subject or object; everything is cleansed and is in the state of perfect purity. This is what the Chan patriarchs mean when they say, “When a buddha appears, kill the buddha; when a demon appears, kill the demon.”

Why should we “kill the buddha when a buddha appears?” Here “a buddha” represents favorable circumstances. When we encounter favorable circumstances, we will develop cravings and attachments towards them. The mind will then create obstacles, inhibiting us from enlightening our mind and seeing our true nature. Therefore, during meditation, even if we see buddhas of the ten directions coming to stroke our heads, to prophesize our future attainment, we should not be overjoyed, because joy will perturb the mind, resulting in a mind trapped in birth and death. That would no longer be the still, pure, and lucid mind. “A demon” represents fearful situations. When we encounter fearful circumstances, we do not have to be afraid. We must reflect that “all appearances are illusory.” Bad circumstances arise from the perception of our own consciousness; they are illusive and unreal because all dharmas are ultimately empty.

Then what is “to kill”? “To kill” is “non-attachment”—do not cling to either good or bad circumstances; when they come, accept it; when they go, accept it. Continue to harbor right mindfulness, with clarity and mindfulness in every thought, be our own master everywhere; the bodhi mind will then manifest.

Therefore, whether it is gradual cultivation or sudden enlightenment, the aim is to attain the bodhi mind; only the methods differ.

Sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation are compatible

Since people’s capacities are different, methods for their practice—gradual cultivation and sudden enlightenment—also differ. Gradual cultivation means to enter the Way by practice, to realize the fundamental principle through perfecting our actions. Sudden enlightenment means to enter the Way by principle, to realize the fundamental principle first, and then perfect our actions. Sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation are compatible and complement each other.

Enlightenment through gradual cultivation is reached by going through various stages—from that of an ordinary person until all merits and virtues are perfected and one attains buddhahood. Like going to school, one goes through elementary school, high school, college, and all the way up to earning a doctorate, gradually climbing step by step. This is gradual cultivation.

“Sudden enlightenment” is to awaken to this present mind, this awareness, this bodhi mind, this pure and lucid mind, to awaken to the ordinary person’s inherent pure nature without any affectation; this is the wisdom of the tathagata, true suchness, the profound bodhi mind. When we are enlightened to this mind, we realize that the mind is Buddha; the mind is the Way. Once we are enlightened, based on the realization of the principle, whether we are in stillness or in motion, idle or busy, this mind is never clinging or confused; it is always clear and lucid, the master of itself; maintaining this state from enlightenment until the attainment of buddhahood. This is sudden enlightenment.

Actually, everyone has this mind. From the past to the present and to the future, everyone has it; everywhere in the world, men and women, young and old, rich or poor, noble or lowly, all have this mind that knows and is aware. Even though everyone has the original awareness, which is equal and absolute, neither lesser in the ordinary person nor greater in the saint, the manifestation of wisdom and compassion is very different. This is because the degree of each person's awareness is not the same. When there are afflictions, attachments, delusions, and erroneous views in the mind, our awareness is clouded and wisdom cannot manifest; therefore, to obtain a mind of purity and clarity, we must make diligent efforts in our cultivation.

In Buddhism, there are four levels of enlightenment—those of the sravakas, the pratyekabuddhas, the bodhisattvas, and the tathagata. These are the attainment of the saints. Their wisdom surpasses that of the ordinary person. For the ordinary person to reach the state of the tathagata, there are two methods: the first is “gradual cultivation,” the second is “sudden enlightenment.” Gradual cultivation is to practice the Six Paramitas—charity, moral conduct, tolerance, diligence, meditation, and prajna (wisdom). These are the vows and conducts of the bodhisattva. By perfecting merits and virtues of the Six Paramitas, one will reach the state of the tathagata. It takes three asamkheya kalpas (uncountable eons) to complete the gradual cultivation path. This is why the Buddha has kindly taught the sudden enlightenment method.

The Lesser Vehicle, Great Vehicle, and Ultimate Vehicle

There are many methods in practicing Buddhism. The Lesser Vehicle practices “eradicating afflictions.” The Great Vehicle (Maha-yana) “transforms afflictions.” In the Ultimate Vehicle, “afflictions are bodhi.” Each method is centered on the mind. In the end, they all enable sentient beings to attain unsurpassed complete enlightenment.

Those who practice the Lesser Vehicle take afflictions as real; therefore, they must exterminate them. They still have the concept of subject and object; therefore, there is still attachment to the dharmas. They only realize the emptiness of self and enter into partial nirvana.

Those who practice the Great Vehicle use the method of “transformation (of the mind)” because they understand that amid our afflictions, there is our inherent Buddha Nature. It is like forging steel from iron. The nature of steel is within the wrought iron. If we throw away the pieces of iron, we will not be able to refine the steel. Similarly, “there is no water besides the waves.” Therefore, in Mahayana, bodhisattvas cultivate the myriad good practices of the Six Paramitas. By benefiting self and others, they transform afflictions, and return to their pure inherent nature. Just as when we practice charity for a long time, we will naturally diminish greed. By contemplation of compassion, anger will naturally subside. When we are diligent in the cultivation of actions, speech, and mind, we can overcome sloth. When the mind is scattered and confused, we must use samadhi to overcome delusive thoughts. This is known as “transformation.” The last of the Six Paramitas is “prajna.” Prajna overcomes ignorance. Our mind is filled with ignorance and confusion; it easily forms attachments to the external environment. If we can reflect inward, without falling into dualism, without the concept of subject and object, and attain “triple emptiness,” we will attain prajna paramita. We can then face each encounter with clarity and mindfulness, thereby extinguish all our afflictions.

In the Ultimate Vehicle, we neither transform our afflictions nor extinguish them; our mind is originally pure and lucid. This mind is inherent in everyone; we do not need to seek it externally. This is the Chan School’s principle of “affliction is bodhi; birth and death (samsara) is nirvana.”

The bodhi mind is not found externally

The Diamond Sutra says, “All dharmas are equal; none is superior or inferior.” Whichever method we practice, in the end it returns to the bodhi mind. The bodhi mind is our fundamental mind and nature, our inherent

awareness. It is not bestowed by our parents, demons, spirits, a god, or even bodhisattvas. It is inherent in everyone. Therefore, the bodhi mind is most real and ever-present.

The bodhi mind is replete within us. If we look for it elsewhere, we will not find it. Just as a Chan patriarch said, “To move the mind is to err, to raise a thought is to stray.” As soon as we look for it, we lose it; it is like looking for an ox while riding an ox; we are already sitting on its back, but we do not know it. It is also like looking for a shadow at midday. At this moment, when you are listening to this teaching, the mind that does not raise a single thought is the profound and clear bodhi mind. A mind with no thought is the mind of total clarity, knowing, and awareness, without a single bit of delusion, drowsiness, or scattered thoughts. When we realize this mind that is unborn and undying, we attain enlightenment.

Once there was a female Chan practitioner who traveled all over the country to study the Dharma, scaling mountains to seek an enlightened teacher. Unsuccessful and exhausted, she finally returned to her native village. As she was leaning on the plum tree by the roadside to rest, she suddenly attained enlightenment and uttered the following verse:

Straw sandals treading cloud covered peaks

Seeking spring everywhere.

In vain, I returned

To the fragrance of plum blossoms—

On the treetops is spring in full glory.

“Spring” represents the bodhi mind. The poem describes a person who suffers great hardships to seek a wise teacher but still cannot attain enlightenment. However, when this mind is no longer seeking everywhere, when we let go of body and mind and come to a complete state of rest, we attain enlightenment. “In vain, I returned/To the fragrance of plum blossoms/On the treetops is spring in full glory.” When we smell the

fragrance of the plum blossom, we realize that the Way has always been here. This mind that can see and smell is ever-present.

The Venerable Po Lo Ti also said, “In the eyes it is the seeing; in the ears it is the hearing; in the nose it is the smelling; in the mouth it is the speaking; in the hands it is the grasping; in the feet it is the walking.” This awareness that sees the plum blossom and smells its fragrance is inherent in us. It is neither more in the saint nor less in the ordinary person. In those who have not attained enlightenment, it is not a bit less; in those who are enlightened, it is not a bit more. That is the bodhi mind.

Five kinds of bodhi

There is a Chan saying, “One may cultivate for billions of kalpas, but enlightenment takes only an instant.” Knowing this, we still need to strive everyday to bring forth the bodhi mind. To fully realize the bodhi mind, there are five stages: “give rise to the bodhi mind,” “taming the mind,” “awaken to the bodhi mind,” “progressive realization of the bodhi mind,” and “ultimate bodhi mind.”

The first stage is “give rise to the bodhi mind.” This means we make a great resolve to cultivate the Way, vow to realize the bodhi mind, attain buddhahood, and liberate all sentient beings. We constantly work in this direction: do no evil, perform all good, and purify our mind. Whether practicing gradual cultivation or sudden enlightenment, in motion or in stillness, busy or idle, our every thought must be clear and in command. We should adhere to Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha’s great vows, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara’s great compassion, Bodhisattva Samantabhadra’s great conduct, Bodhisattva Manjusri’s great wisdom, and incorporate these into our daily lives. This is the beginning of the bodhisattva way.

The second stage is “taming the mind”—this means we resolve to study hard, constantly examine and reflect inwardly, harbor a mind of repentance, and work to gradually gain control of our delusive thoughts and afflictions. For example, if we reflect and find that we have been angry, we can immediately subdue it and not create bad karma. If greed arises, we

can also detect it and subdue it. Or, as soon as sensual desires and lust arise, we immediately subdue them. This is “taming the mind.”

The third stage is “awaken to the bodhi mind.” Due to the power resulting from practicing “taming the mind,” we can finally attain awakening. “Awakening” is to awaken the deluded mind and see its true nature. When we see our original self, we will realize that our mind is inherent, unborn, and undying.

A Chan patriarch said, “The darkness of a thousand years is shattered instantly by a single lamp.” If we awaken to this present mind, always abide in right mindfulness, all our past karmic obstacles can be totally swept away. For example, after a thousand years in a dark room, if we suddenly turn on the light, the room is instantly filled with brightness. However if we lose our right mindfulness, it is like turning the light off; then everything will again be filled with darkness. Therefore, once we are enlightened, we still must constantly maintain right mindfulness in our daily lives, abide in pure awareness, be totally clear in every thought, and always be master of ourselves.

A Chan master once said, “When hungry, eat; when drowsy, sleep.” Also, “Eating all day, one has not chewed a single grain of rice; fully dressed, one has not put on a single thread.” What does this mean? It means to know yet not cling, and to firmly abide in right mindfulness. For example, when eating, do not daydream. The “knowing” that can differentiate among the sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy always exists. Do not overeat when the food is tasty, or complain when it is unsavory. Whether facing pleasant or unpleasant circumstances, we know yet do not cling, and do not give rise to greed or anger. This is to truly abide in right mindfulness.

The aim of cultivation is to attain right mindfulness. Right mindfulness is a mind of clarity and purity; it is liberation; it is the buddha. Right mindfulness is the monastery; it is the Pure Land. Therefore, “Hauling wood and carrying rice is the Way.” In our daily lives, in our eating, dressing, working, and moving, always maintain right mindfulness. Maintain the

existence of this “knowing” mind. Thus maintaining inner peace and rightful conduct in life is to cultivate the Way.

The fourth stage is “progressive realization of the bodhi mind.” After we know where our mind is, we must continue to practice after enlightenment, continue to abide firmly in right mindfulness, and maintain our pure awareness, so that ignorance is totally eradicated and the Dharma-body fully manifests. This process is the progressive realization of the ultimate bodhi mind.

After we have eradicated the last traces of ignorance, afflictions, and delusions, we arrive at “ultimate bodhi mind.” This is the perfection of our awareness and conduct, the perfection of benefiting others and ourselves. This is the ultimate stage.

The ten dharma realms are in this one mind

The most important thing in Buddhism is our mind. This present mind is replete with the ten dharma realms. Whether we remain deluded or will achieve enlightenment depends on the mind’s resolve. To give rise to the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance is to sink into the realms of hells, hungry ghosts, or animals. If we observe the five precepts, we will be guaranteed to return as humans in the next life—to dwell in the human realm. If we can further cultivate the ten virtues and uphold the precepts, our mind will be filled with virtuous thoughts and brightness, and we can ascend to the celestial realm and receive the reward of heaven. Practicing the Four Noble Truths is the realm of the sravakas. Contemplating the twelve links of dependent origination is the realm of the pratyekabuddhas. By committing to the great compassionate vow to benefit others, seeking the Buddha Way, liberating all sentient beings, and practicing the Six Paramitas, we immediately enter the realm of the bodhisattvas. Going one step further, we should cultivate non-cultivation, be mindful of no-mind, return to the source, and not give rise to a single thought; with total clarity, we enter into the dharma realm of the inconceivable. This mind is then replete with all things. “When one dharma realm manifests, nine other dharma realms fold.” One dharma realm means the true dharma realm; it is

the mind of all of you who are listening to the Dharma, not thinking of the past, present, or future, with total clarity in every thought, being master of ourselves at all times. When we are enlightened to this dharma realm, we enter the realm of the buddha.

“A building ten thousand feet tall begins on the ground level.”
Everyone’s mind, from beginningless kalpas, is filled with attachments and delusions, ignorance and erroneous views. Now we have the chance to listen to the true Dharma; it is the result of the merits from our previous virtuous roots. Therefore, we should treasure this opportunity. Buddhism embodies both practice and principle. In practice we must make efforts to cultivate the Way and uphold the pure precepts. To realize the (fundamental) principle we must bring forth the bodhi mind. If we have not yet given rise to the bodhi mind but still observe the pure precepts, in the future we will ascend into the heavens, or at least we will not descend into the suffering realms. If we can observe the pure precepts, awaken to the bodhi mind, and are replete with practice and principle, we are following the way of the great bodhisattvas. In the future, we will surely attain perfect enlightenment, truly benefiting ourselves and all others.